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Tiffany Funk

*University of Illinois at Chicago*, [tiffany.a.funk@gmail.com](mailto:tiffany.a.funk@gmail.com)

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## THE PROSTHETIC AESTHETIC: An Art of Anxious Extensions

Tiffany Funk

PhD candidate, Art History & MFA New Media

University of Illinois at Chicago

Ernest Jones, Sigmund Freud's personal biographer, paints a convalescent portrait of his friend in 1923. Jaw cancer required that a large part of Freud's palate be removed, requiring a fitted prosthesis for the remainder of his life [fig.1]. Jones recounts:

*The huge prosthesis... designed to shut off the mouth from the nasal cavity, was a horror; it was labeled "the monster." In the first place it was very difficult to take out or replace because it was impossible for him to open his mouth at all widely. On one occasion, for instance, the combined efforts of Freud and his daughter failed to insert it after struggling for half an hour, and the surgeon had to be fetched for the purpose. Then for the instrument to fulfill its purpose of shutting off the yawning cavity above, and so make speaking and eating possible, it had to fit fairly tightly. This, however, produced constant irritation and sore places until its presence was unbearable. But if it were left out for more than a few hours the tissues would shrink, and the denture could no longer be replaced without being altered.<sup>1</sup>*

It was with this enduring pain that Freud wrote his 1929 essay "Civilization and its Discontents". In its most famous passage, Freud writes: "Man has, as it were, become a

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<sup>1</sup> Jones gives a detailed account of the surgery itself and Freud's convalescence in his 1957 text *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work. Vol 3: The Last Phase 1919-1939* (London: Hogarth Press). David Wills, in his own text *Prosthesis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), gives considerable weight to Jones' relationship and correspondence to Freud, using this particular passage to find a bridge between what he calls "the propositions that constitute Freudian theory and an ill-defined series of projections that can easily be seen to grow out of it" (94). Here Wills defines psychoanalysis itself as "prosthetic," as Freud's later theory provides what he calls "speculative" theories that might be "swapped out" for better fitting hypotheses. While the metaphor is well-taken, this essay veers from Wills in that Freud's later work, especially *Civilization and its Discontents* (1927), is an attempt at hypothesizing extant culture as it relates to physical, phenomenal reality and technology. See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, from *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (W. W. Norton & Company: New York, 1995), 738.

kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on him and they still give him much trouble at times." Here we find evidence of the division between the conscious and subconscious, in the notion that the prosthetic extensions of man, though meant to blend seamlessly, sometimes prove ill-fitted, unmanageable, beyond control – perhaps, even with a kind of sentience and autonomy at war with our own.

The term "prosthetic" suffers wildly varied usage in psychoanalytical, medical, and media theories. Much of the difficulty in ascertaining how the "prosthetic" functions across disciplines derives from the sometimes parallel, and often antithetical definitions given for what it constitutes. The *October* theorists, most notably Hal Foster, play upon the readings of the prosthetic to illustrate certain trends in modernist and postmodernist artworks through predominantly psychoanalytical methodology, but largely ignore its common usage to denote the physicality of technological devices and cybernetic body augmentation and its social effects, subjects expounded upon at length by media and cybernetic theorists such as Marshall McLuhan, Gregory Bateson, Donna Haraway, and others. The ramifications of this confusion are enormous: it identifies the prosthetic as merely fetishistic, a result of trauma to the psyche; the prosthetic remains a disembodied presence that shifts from the corners of the id to ego, its emergence upon phenomenal reality remains confused or ignored; it broaches the subject of the body as the first prosthetic but ends there, without acknowledging how entering into a dialogue about our relationship with technology engages a meaningful critique of the modifications and extensions to it.

A critical synthesis of these ideas – the psychoanalytical and cybernetic – means an acknowledgement of the *physical* properties of the prosthetic and the fundamentally reflexive relationship it engenders. We must engage in a re-evaluation of prosthetics in contemporary aesthetics, bringing us closer to narrowing the uneasy gap between art historical and media discourse, ultimately enriching the formerly undervalued or mis-read artworks that attempt to explore subjectivities and their uneasy relationship with the body

and its various extensions. The historical trajectory of the prosthetic, the means and description of extension, stands as the place where the biological and technological share common, but anxious ground; its aesthetics describe the shifting of autonomies in our relationship with technology, and how perceived balances and imbalances disrupt the ego and define our autonomy.

For the purpose of this overview, I will concentrate on the crisis in autonomy as broached by Freud in his "Civilization and its Discontents", and how Marshall McLuhan's description of extension, as well as Giorgio Agamben's explanation of "The Apparatus," inform what I call the "Prosthetic Aesthetic," as exemplified in the *Technological Reliquaries* of artist Paul Thek.

The term "prosthesis" originates from the ancient Greek, first used in the English language in the context of linguistics; its root "pros" emphasizes the prosthetic as an extension of an existing word. The resultant term enacts an incorporation and refocusing of the original term toward more specific ends; in effect, the new term performs better in the circumstances for which it is needed.<sup>2</sup> The prosthetic – here in language, but also commonly in contemporary medical and media theory usage – is always, first and foremost, an adding, advancing, and giving power to that which it is extending.<sup>3</sup> It isn't until much later, in the later half of the 19th century, does the term "prosthetic" come to rest in the anatomical and medical models.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Etymological research of the term "prosthetics" has been completed by David Wills, in his text *Prosthetics*, and by Sarah S. Jain, whose article, "The Prosthetic Imagination: Enabling and Disabling the Prosthesis Trope" (*Science, Technology, and Human Values*, Vol. 24., Winter, 1999), performs an able analysis of prosthetics and Marxist theory (see footnote 6).

<sup>3</sup> The most notable model that further extends *prosthetics* as it relates to the spoken and written word comes from Jacques Derrida, most notably in his text *Of Grammatology* (Excerpt from "Of Grammatology." 1967. *Art in Theory: 1900 - 1990*. Eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. pp. 918 - 923).

<sup>4</sup> For more information on both early medical and Fordist models of prosthetics, see Sarah S. Jain, "The Prosthetic Imagination: Enabling and Disabling the Prosthesis Trope" (*Science, Technology, and Human Values*, Vol. 24., Winter, 1999).

It seems natural that prosthesis originates in the organization and creation of language, and the poetics of this origin were surely not lost on Freud. The acts of reading and writing constituted almost all of his time after his painful jaw surgery. Though the actual term has no real role in "Civilization and its Discontents," the concept of "autonomy" – and thus the idea of the "self" or a specified subjectivity – looms largely in Freud's work. Historian Gerald Izenberg makes a helpful leap in his text The Existentialist Critique of Freud: The Crisis of Autonomy by asserting Freud's theories within the context of biological determinism; here he is able to critique psychoanalysis' inadequacies while extending Freud's theories to existentialism, where theories of the unconscious translate to a "fle[ing] from its own freedom."<sup>5</sup> This is particularly relevant to "Civilization and its Discontents," as systems of control, such as apparatuses as religion, health, transportation, and communication, signal a collective retreat to standardization and enforced "normalcy." Izenberg reasons that Freud, as a great proponent of Darwin's theory of evolution, would naturally mean for his own work to extend to a deterministic biological model. The European reaction to these theories constituted not only an attack on Christianity, but more so a crisis in autonomy; while the individual might believe himself to operate autonomously, the unconscious drives that manipulate culture propagate more elaborate and varied systems that deny autonomous action.<sup>6</sup>

The question of technology and its relationship to autonomy dominates discourse from two notable examples from the 1960s, both of which are enjoying a certain resurgence in the present: Marshall McLuhan's 1964 text *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, and artist Paul Thek's series of sculptures entitled *Technological Reliquaries*. McLuhan's *Understanding Media* examines what constitutes the double meaning of prosthetics, as

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<sup>5</sup> Gerald N. Izenberg, *The Existentialist Critique of Freud: The Crisis of Autonomy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

<sup>6</sup> Izenberg's text ultimately leads to varied reactions from the existentialist philosophers Heidegger, Binswanger, Boss, and Sartre; though he admits that not all of the ideas stemming from psychoanalysis proved successful, he adequately reasons that the academic climate produced can be critiqued as a historical document that confronts the problems of modernism better than traditional rationalism and psychoanalysis alone.

simultaneously supplementing a deficiency and signaling deficiency in the object to which it is supplied. This, he explains, pertains to both prosthesis as psychic trauma, but also the physicality of media extensions: clothing as an extension of the skin, wheels as an extension of the foot, and electric technology as an extension of the central nervous system. Here McLuhan uses the concept of prosthesis to explain media's function as "any extension of ourselves."<sup>7</sup>

This, however, can only serve as a starting definition, as the elision of both "media" and the "prosthetic" – alongside the vast library of psychoanalytical discourse – tends to marginalize its usage in other contexts. As noted by Marquard Smith in her introduction to the collection *The Prosthetic Impulse: From a Posthuman Present to a Biocultural Future*, the majority of contemporary writings that broaching the subject of prosthetics define it as either fantastical or metaphorical to the detriment of the prosthetic as object.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Sarah S. Jain, medical and legal anthropologist, worries that this generality has caused a fundamental split between the medical and more technologically-minded researchers, ultimately causing a marginalization of disability discourse and the vast populations it hopes to serve.<sup>9</sup> Instead of focusing on the individual with varied abilities, research tends toward normalization, or excising the unwieldy biological human element entirely to opt for robotic or machinic processes. In this way, the idea of everyday, social prosthetic usage becomes further marginalized, despite the excitement of prosthetic possibilities within engineering and computing research.

I propose that the prosthetic describes a *specific relationship within and between* the jurisdiction of the apparatus. Giorgio Agamben describes the *apparatus*, or Michel Foucault's *dispositif*, in his seminal text "What is an Apparatus?" as "anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure

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<sup>7</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Routledge, 1964), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, "Introduction," 2.

<sup>9</sup> Jain, "The Prosthetic Imagination: Enabling and Disabling the Prosthesis Trope" (Science, Technology, and Human Values, Vol. 24., Winter, 1999), 49.

the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings. Not only, therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, juridical measures, and so forth... but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and – why not – language itself..."<sup>10</sup>

The apparatus forms the hierarchical power structure that creates subjectification. The apparatus stands in opposition to the living beings within its power structure.

In this way, the "apparatus" differs from the prosthetic in that much of Foucault's, and thus Agamben's, definition ultimately defines "enclosures," that which living beings must operate within. The prosthetic does not necessarily constitute the mechanisms of "vast space(s) of enclosure," but lives within it, and is defined by its relationship with it. The prosthetic is always an object with finite, definable characteristics. Though often complex, and perhaps as vast a system as can be imagined – the operations and wide-reaching capabilities of the internet, for example – the prosthetic maintains at its very core a physical, manipulable and quantifiable existence. Even when a prosthetic relationship might be only defined by its physical characteristics on the molecular or quantum level, or depend upon the free-flow of electrons, these physical traits are subject to tangible, physical reality, can be measured, perceived, or sensed in one manner or another, and are subject to entropic processes. In fact, it is these entropic processes which form the crux of Freud's dismay within "Civilization and its Discontents," literally and metaphorically wearing upon him bodily and psychically.

It follows then that the prosthetic never maintains a stable and unchanging state, but instead we can understand its role as that of a catalyst that begins a reflexive process that continuously transforms both its user and itself *ad infinitum*. Instead of stagnant entrapment inside of enclosures, the prosthetic relationship is fundamentally reflexive, where both object and user continuously define each other. These prosthetics allow the

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<sup>10</sup> Agamben, "What is an Apparatus?" in *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, Stanford: Stanford University Press (2009),14.

artist to imagine new ways in which objects combine with bodies to challenge existing power structures, placing themselves in new liminal spaces free from assumed limitations, economically, geographically, politically, and culturally. This is not to negate the existence of the apparatus, but to identify how prosthetics in all their forms provide the opportunity for creative rebellion, should we choose to accept it. These attempts to explore prosthetics, and these changing relationships, are what I've called "The Prosthetic Aesthetic."

Paul Thek's *Technological Reliquaries* of the 1960s provide fascinating visual evidence of how the prosthetic can be understood in both psychoanalytical, as well as cybernetic terms. Thek, though Brooklyn-born and New York-based throughout much of his career spanning the 60s, 70s, and 80s until his death from AIDS-complications in 1981, during his lifetime showed more often in Germany than in the U.S. In fact, it wasn't until 2010 that he posthumously enjoyed a well-reviewed retrospective of his work in the U.S. at the Whitney Museum of American Art, entitled *Paul Thek: Diver, a Retrospective*.<sup>11</sup>

Thek was raised Catholic and spent much of his life battling with dogmatic ideals and his drive toward self-purification. In 1966, after a particularly life-changing trip to the Palermo Catacombs, Thek remarked, "We accept our thing-ness intellectually, but the emotional acceptance of it can be a joy."<sup>12</sup> This statement highlights Thek's interest in dissolving the conceptual boundaries between the body and that which is conceived as apart from it – the body, continually portrayed by Thek as simply a transitory vessel for living, exists beyond the "soul," or the ego, that inhabits it.

Unfortunately, his *Reliquaries* often fell prey to ill-formed humor and criticism for being too literally representational, at odds with the dominant Minimalist tendencies of his contemporaries. *Warrior's Leg* (1966-1967) was identified as a commentary on the role of the U.S. in the Vietnam conflict, the severed leg strapped into a Roman warrior's *caligae*. Though the piece is sanitized by its placement within a Plexiglas vitrine, the gore protruding

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<sup>11</sup> See Lynn Zelevansky, et. al., *Paul Thek: Diver, A Retrospective* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Gene R. Swenson, "Beneath the Skin," *ARTnews* 65, no. 2 (1966). p. 66.



from the calf recalls a recent battle, the wax eerily duplicating the glistening viscera of a fallen soldier [fig. 2].

However, the materiality of Thek's *Reliquaries* betray a far more nuanced interpretation of how the technological and the biological meet. In comparing Robert Gober's 1990 sculpture *Leg* to Thek's *Warrior's Leg* certain questions come to the fore [fig. 3]: primarily, what does the plexiglass surround signify, and how does that constitute a "technological" reliquary? How is it that Gober's surreal amputation, which Hal Foster notes as a "readymade diorama", "distanced" from its audience, meaningfully departs from Thek's *Leg*, despite the similar literal subject and medium?<sup>13</sup> How is Gober's *Leg* "distanced", while Thek's is so very present, despite its encasing? Is it merely the juxtaposition of historical context - the 1990s versus the 60s - or is the question of technology and its relationship to the viewer - our prosthetic relationship - what gives Thek's sculpture its power?

First we examine the plexiglass as merely a container for the flesh, a redundant gesture that mimics the white cube gallery that in turn surrounds it. However, a close look at Thek's *Untitled* from 1966, another of his *Technological Reliquaries*, defies this thought: here, the plexiglass is colored a sickening fluorescent chartreuse, undeniably manufactured in comparison to the tortured flesh within [fig. 4]. But even the unidentifiable mound of flesh takes on a strange technological sheen. The flesh is waxy, shiny like petroleum, extruded like plastic. Here, the plexiglass case and waxy, shiny "flesh" elide. Just like the medieval reliquary, the inner contents is echoed by the outer, and vice-versa. Here, Thek's own admittedly religious model of inquiry becomes especially relevant. Perhaps, here, the "delusion" of religion dictated by biological determinism decomposes, just as the corpses of Palermo merge with the catacombs that surround them. The wax and plastic lumps of "flesh" bond with their plexiglass containers, echoing the gallery as well as our "fleshy" place within it. Our biological being swims about in architectural containers as the wax, its

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<sup>13</sup> Foster, "An Art of Missing Parts," 137. Originally from "Interview with Richard Flood," in Lewis Biggs, ed., *Robert Gober*, Liverpool and London: Serpentine and Tate Galleries, 1993)

vitrine, the gallery and the gallery-goers, are all reflected within the same technological-organic system. The relationship emphasized here is fundamentally prosthetic, problematizing the discourse of what we usually define as technology versus biology.

As emphasized by McLuhan, the blurred line between men and the materialism of the commodity - here, staged as Thek's vitrine - sets up a prosthetic system in which social relations are determined by the material relations between commodities, ultimately alienating men from one another and from themselves. N. Katherine Hayles, in her text *How We Became Post-Human*, explains that the cybernetic definition of "reflexivity" depends upon feedback loops that incorporate the element involved in its own creation; basically, a preoccupation with autopoiesis, or, "self-creating". This relationship, "the circularity of its organization that makes a living system a unit of interactions," notably caused mathematician Norbert Wiener, the founder of cybernetics, consternation; were we really, he asked, ready to admit to the collapse of a hierarchy that privileged human insight, biology, ingenuity, autonomy?<sup>14</sup> McLuhan, however, was more than willing to take that leap. His famous dictum, "The medium is the message," indicates a symbiotic relationship between the medium and its content; however, McLuhan also famously stated that "the medium is the message," insofar as it works us over, saturates us, and molds us even as we are molding it. It is the very nature of the medium itself that changes society.

Thek's *Warrior Leg* forms the reciprocal part of a dialogue that actively responds to our presence in the gallery space, engaging in the creation of a new prosthetic relationship. It can also serve as a model for how to engage with varied contemporary works that remain marginalized within art historical discourse, despite their undeniably popular allure; one such example is the popular yet often critically ignored work of Matthew Barney [fig. 5].<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> N. Katherine Hayles provides a full history of the development of cybernetics, and the gradual emphasis on both *reflexivity* and *emergence* (and thus self-organization) in its second and third waves, in her text *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> James Elkins, amongst other art historians, is vocal in his dislike of the spectacular works of artists such as Barney, which may partially explain the theoretical and critical aversion to his work.

Its medium incorporates not only the Plexiglass, latex, the molded beeswax and wire that constitutes its structure, but the gallery itself, the phenomenal time and space in which it inhabits. The *Leg* is molded by the artist, but the gallery molds its audience; the parallel of the *Leg* and its viewer - the biological system staring down another biological system - begs the question, just whom, here, is encased, and for whose protection? If we, as just one element in this reflexive system, can call ourselves autonomous, can not the pulpy flesh within the vitrine also assert its autonomy against our own?

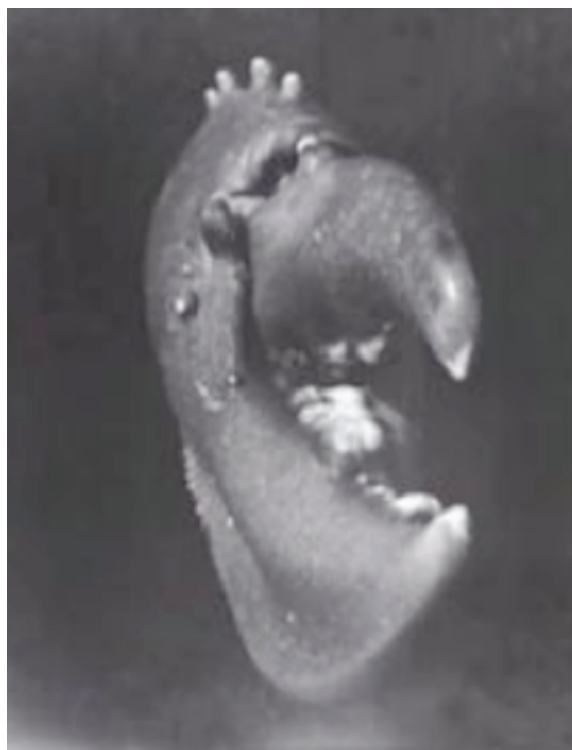


Fig. 1: Freud's jaw prosthesis - image from The Freud Museum photographic archive in London, accessed online at <http://www.freud.org.uk/>



Fig. 2: Paul Thek, *Warrior's Leg*, 1966-1967, wax, metal, leather, and paint, collection of the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington D.C



Fig. 3: Robert Gober, *Untitled Leg*, 1989-90. Beeswax, cotton, wood, leather, and human hair, collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 4: Paul Thek, *Untitled* (from the series *Technological Reliquaries*), 1966; wax, metal, acrylic, collection of the Museum of Modern Art in Vienna



Fig. 5: Matthew Barney, *Oonagh MacCumhail: The Case of the Entered Novitiate*, 2002, detail; internally lubricated plastic, cast urethane, cast thermoplastic, prosthetic plastic, stainless steel, acrylic, earth, and potatoes in polyethylene and acrylic vitrine, collection of the Art Institute, Chicago.

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