

## THE PROSTHETIC AESTHETIC: An Art of Anxious Extensions

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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. 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.

It was with this enduring pain that Freud wrote his 1929 essay "Civilization and its Discontents," or *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (translated more appropriately as "The Uneasiness in Culture"). In, arguably, its most famous passage, Freud writes: "Motor power places gigantic forces at [man's] disposal, which, like his muscles, he can employ in any direction... Man has, as it were, become a 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 Freudian division between the conscious and subconscious,

in the notion that the prosthetic extension of man, despite the best intentions, often proves ill-fitted, unmanageable, beyond control; perhaps, even with a perceived sentience and autonomy at war with our own.

This term, the “prosthetic,” has since suffered wildly varied usage in psychoanalytical, medical, and media theories, and 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. So much of current art historical theory depends upon predominantly psychoanalytical readings of the prosthetic to illustrate certain trends in contemporary artworks, 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, Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, 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 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. Freud’s phrase “prosthetic gods” is not merely referencing psychic trauma nor virtual signifier, but material artifacts marking autonomy, ability and disability, amputation and extension. The prosthetic, as the means of this 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. A synthesis of these ideas – the psychoanalytical and cybernetic – and thus a re-evaluation of prosthetics in contemporary aesthetics, brings us closer to narrowing the uneasy gap between art historical and media discourse, and greatly enriches the formerly undervalued or mis-read artworks that attempt to explore subjectivities and their uneasy relationship with the body and its various extensions.

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 informs what I call the “Aesthetic Prosthetic,” as exemplified in some of the sculptural works of artist Paul Thek.

#### prosthetics and delusional autonomy

The term “prosthesis” originates from the ancient Greek *prósthētos* (πρόσθετος), first ported into the English language in the 16th century in the context of linguistics; its root “pros” (πρός, translating as “adding, furthering, advancing, giving additional power”) emphasizes the prosthetic as an addition to, or rather the 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. 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. It is at least two centuries later when the post-classical Latin *protheticus* appears in medical journals referring to replacement of body parts. It is notable that the majority of the early medical uses

of the term come from U.S. patents related to marketing artificial limbs to the wounded during the Civil War. These new prosthetic limbs, dependent upon the most recent advancements in medical technologies, chart an attempt to come closer to the actual lost limb rather than the earlier attached counterparts, such as the peg, or the hook - replacements that were both made to spec as well as decidedly not intended, nor deemed prosthetic at the time.

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." This is particularly relevant to "Civilization and its Discontents," as systems of control, such as religion, but also vast technological systems of 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 fully autonomous action.

*Two relics from the 60s*

The question of technology and its relationship to autonomy might lie in two notable examples, or "relics," from the 1960s, both of which are enjoying a certain Renaissance 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* (completed between 1964 and 1971). McLuhan's Understanding Media examines what constitutes the double meaning of prosthetics, as simultaneously supplementing a deficiency and signaling deficiency in the object to which it is supplied. In opposition to the definition of prosthesis as psychic trauma, McLuhan stresses 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."

However, as technology extends the central nervous system, McLuhan explains that "... such amplification is bearable by the nervous system only through numbness or blocking of perception." Thus McLuhan asserts that a process he terms "autoamputation" accompanies any extension of media. By classifying electric technology as a prosthetic extension, McLuhan combines Marxist theories of industrial alienation with Freudian theories of subconscious extensions. McLuhan's "electric nervous system" echoes Freud's depiction of the prosthetic God resonates with implications of both physical and psychological amputation and extension.

Thek's *Technological Reliquaries* sometimes fell prey to ill-formed humor and criticism for being too literally representational. *Warrior's Leg* (1966-1967) was easily 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 from the calf recalls a recent battle, the wax eerily duplicating the glistening viscera of a fallen soldier.

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: 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? 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 vs. 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 an almost sickening fluorescent chartreuse, undeniably manufactured in comparison to the tortured flesh within. 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; for example, the reliquary bust of Charlemagne is shaped in his likeness, the fragments of skull embedded within. The anatomical likeness reflects that of the spectators who pilgrimage to view the relic, and the opulence of its casing shares the same relationship as the architecture of the cathedral and the dogma that asserts that the complicated and extraordinary body houses the even more opulent undying soul.

Here, Thek's own admittedly religious model of inquiry becomes especially relevant. Thek was raised Catholic and spent much of his life battling with dogmatic ideals and his drive toward purification through self-flagellation and other extreme forms of penance. In 1966, after a particularly life-changing trip to the Palermo Catacombs with photographer friend Peter Hujar, Thek remarked, "We accept our thing-ness intellectually, but the emotional acceptance of it can be a joy." 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. 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/plastic lumps of "flesh" merge 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 vitrine, the gallery and the gallery-goers, are all reflected within the same technological/organic system.

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? 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. 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 sickly yellow vitrine also assert its autonomy against our own?

## new media and the prosthetic aesthetic

This staging of Thek's *Reliquaries* provides a springboard for observing the subsequent new media explosion in the later half of the 20th century and the current 21st. Using Thek as a model for further inquiry into what might constitute prosthetic art, or the prosthetic aesthetic, we can encounter marginalized artworks in more meaningful ways. Here we can begin to imagine how these works actively engage the viewer, not merely on a psychoanalytical level, but also through the physical reflexive prosthetic relationship it stages. We can begin to interrogate how technology, and thus the prosthetic, creates us.

As in the example of psychoanalysis, much of these theories need not stay confined to psychic or subjective models. The use of prosthetic theory, and furthermore prosthetic aesthetics, as a means to bridge the perceived gap between technology and subjectivity proves one such vehicle to bring art historical research into dialogue with both scientific and medical models. By including a critical theory of prosthetic aesthetics in a dialogue with contemporary art and subsequently the whole of art history, we can better understand our complicated, but undeniable historical relationship with technology that addresses ability and disability, amputation and extension.