Verge of Collapse: The Pros/thesis of Art Research

Charles R. Garoian
Penn State University

This article explores \textit{prothesis} as a metaphor of embodiment in art-based research to challenge the utopian myth of wholeness and normality in art and the human body. Bearing in mind the correspondences between amputated bodies and the cultural dislocations of art, I propose \textit{prothetic epistemology} and \textit{prothetic ontology} as embodied knowing and being in the world to challenge the disabling, oppressive prosthetics of mass mediation, and to enable the creative and political agency of fragmented, limbless bodies. I discuss the historical origins of “prothesis,” its use as a rhetorical augmentation of language and technological augmentation of amputated bodies, to suggest that the visual language of art disrupts and extends beyond the dialectical closure of \textit{thesis}, \textit{antithesis}, and \textit{synthesis} through the divergent interconnectivity of \textit{prothesis}. Within the context of art education, prosthetic pedagogy is characterized as performances of subjectivity that intersect, critique, and extend beyond academic, institutional, and corporate assumptions to enable the creation of new and diverse understandings through art practice.

\textit{Knowledge about ourselves demands protheses, which tie meanings and bodies together.}

—Morton Søby (2005)

As dead American GIs have returned home in body bags from the war in Iraq, the many wounded, a vast number of them amputees who in any previous wars would have died on the field of battle or on an operating table in a combat support hospital, have survived and their lives have been extended due to the most recent technological advances and surgical procedures in medical science (Poff, 2005). These developments in medicine have corresponded with advances in the technologies of destructive weapons that have been deployed in the war (Hambling, 2006). Moreover, the mass mediation of the war has equally advanced as compared with previous conflicts due to sophisticated communication technologies (Globalization 101.org, 2003) and the media networks’ deployment of embedded journalists who risk their lives to report and broadcast in real time the horrific battling in every sector of the war including the gruesome wounding and killing of both military and civilian personnel. As \textit{amputated} bodies of information, these journalists’ disparate, truncated reports have restricted the public’s comprehensive and accurate understanding about the circumstances of the war, thus dismembering the body politic. As cultural critic Susan Sontag (2003) writes, “The understanding of war among...[those of us] who have not experienced war is now chiefly a product of the impact of these [reports] and images” (p. 21).
These broadcasts have had global consequences as images of wounding, death, and dying are viewed every day through the various news networks and every hour on the half hour through round-the-clock news reports from the likes of CNN, BBC, MSNBC, ABC, CBS, NBC, and the Fox Network, not to mention continuous access via the Internet. What has been localized in the zone of battle is then hypothesized and globalized through the apparatus of the mass media in every corner of the world: in bars and restaurants, in our living rooms and bedrooms, and now we have the ability to download the war onto our iPods™ and cell phones, which we carry in our pockets or attach to our bodies wherever we go. Ironically, while as cyborgs we are connected and experience the war virtually and vicariously through mass mediation systems, there are those in actual battle who are physically being disconnected of their limbs and losing their lives.

The corporeal horrors of the war in Iraq have recalled the pictorial amputations of the German Dadaists, namely Otto Dix, whose fragmented collages and montages represent the devastations to the body politic in Germany during and after World War I (Perry, 2002, p. 76). According to art historian Brigid Doherty (1998), Dix and the German Dadaists "look[ed] to the body as the repository of politics" (p. 77). Dix’s 1920 oil and collage on canvas, The Skat Players (Bader, 2007), is a cynical representation of how the human body is both the supplier and recipient of the scheming brutality of political power. A card game of tricks that involves three or four players, Dix’s skat players appear as veterans of World War I with official standing, multiple amputees fitted with multiple prosthetic body parts. Having been tricked into believing that World War I would end all wars, they engage in their own folly as they trick each other in the card game by using their prosthetics to stack-the-deck, deceive, and cheat one another. A parody of the utopian representations of Paul Cezanne’s Card Players, 1890-92 (Murphy, 1968), and Fernand Léger’s The Card Players, 1917 (Fauchereau, 1994), Dix has transformed these artists’ post impressionist and cubist disfigurations, the formalism of their machine metaphors, into the amputations of collage and montage whose fragments represent bodily dismemberment on the one hand while on the other hand serving as pictorial prostheses affixed to the canvas. As art historian Graham Bader (2007) argues, the fragmented anatomical representations of Dix and the Dadaists “suggest not an aesthetic strategy but an entire culture driven by an ongoing cycle of corporeal assault, inscription, experimentation, and decomposition” (pp. 229-230).

As a metaphor of the brutality of World War I, art historian Ernst Cohn-Wiener describes the 1920 Berlin Dada Fair as “an anatomical museum, in which you can behold yourself dissected, not just arm and leg, but head and heart. Not only your very own body, but that of all of you collectively” (Doherty, 1998, p. 75). The disfigurations of German Dadaist collage and montage parodied politicians as “ridiculous machines made up of mismatched
industrial and biological parts” (Doherty, 1998, p. 77). Such technological metaphors, which represent the devastations to the body politic in Germany as a house-of-cards during and after World War I, echo the power politics of the war in Iraq. Both wars were waged with the most technologically advanced and destructive weapons of their time. Both wars benefited from the most technologically advanced and invasive surgical procedures and prosthetics to repair damaged bodies. Both wars were sensationalized through advances in mass mediation of their day and, in doing so, communications technology was used to confront the victims of war in order to freeze and reproduce their horror (Doherty, 1998, p. 79). In characterizing such technological correspondences between prosthetics and war, architectural theorist Mark Wigley (1991) writes: “Prosthetic technology alternated between producing substitutes for the body parts that military weapons had destroyed and producing these very weapons” (p. 23).

When it comes to devastations of war, history has most certainly repeated itself. In fact, since the Iraq war began, an inordinate number of GIs, both women and men, having returned as amputees like Lieutenant Dawn Halfaker (Moniz, 2005), have been photographed, chronicled, and broadcast by means of print and electronic journalism. Halfaker lost her right arm when a rocket propelled grenade exploded near her in the war in Iraq. Such ubiquitous exposure through the mass media has esentialized and represented the maimed, limbless body as a rarified symbol of relentless sacrifice, heroism, and loss worthy of sympathy, while casting a gaze of normality that marks it as the spectacle of contemptible freakery, which is often ascribed to and experienced by amputees (Serlin, 2002, pp. 48-49, 53). Art historian Marquard Smith (2006) characterizes the essentializing and fetishizing of disability as “feeding our culture’s fascination with spectacles of difference” (p. 59). Ironically, the voyeuristic regime of this fetishizing gaze has represented a doubling of amputation, the first being the loss of the body’s limb/s, the second that of being ostracized, cut off by the culture for the amputee’s bodily difference. Considering that the body’s knowledge, identity, and desires have been technologically mediated, constructed, and augmented by academic, institutional, and corporate assumptions suggests that the embodiment of contemporary cultural life is always already disjunctive and dystopian; and that its wholeness constitutes a utopian myth, which dissociates, stereotypes, and stigmatizes the amputated body as dysfunctional, abnormal other (Jain, 1999, p. 32). What constitutes normality anyway? Are we not all aberrant? Does not our horror and fascination with anomalous bodies in and of itself constitute a human anomaly? Given the cultural dislocations of our bodies, are we not all amputated in some form or another? Are we not all other?

In what follows, this article explores the correspondences between amputated, fragmented bodies and the disjunctive strategies of creative research, experimentation, and representation found in modernist and postmod-
ernist artworks whose collage narratives can be described as “a cutting off, sectioning, segmenting [and juxtaposing]” of materials, processes, images, artworks, artists, viewers, and the cultural body (Lingis, 2006, p. 75). Arguably the most important 20th-century contribution to the history of art, the disjunctive narrative of collage has in common the jerry-rigging research of *bricolage*; that is, the improvisational dis-assembling, exchanging, and re-assembling of images, ideas, and objects in ways that they were not originally designed. In describing the undecidable and contingent subjectivity of this process, anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) writes: “The ‘bricoleur’ may not ever complete his [sic] purpose but he always puts something of himself into it” (pp. 21-22). What Lévi-Stauss alludes to is that the bricoleur’s performative subjectivity and creativity take place in-between the cultural fragments, the detritus of his enterprise.

Moreover, this article conceptualizes the robust, yet tenuous juxtapositions, interconnectivity, and criticality in-between and among the fragmented art bodies of collage narrative as *prostheses* that *supplement* displaced, disjunctive representations and understandings. In describing the disjunctive character of art research and representation, literary theorist David Wills (1995) writes:

> Such an idea of juxtaposition as coincidence is a function of *prosthesis* [italics added]. It takes a fact of shared space, the contiguity of two or more differences, and narrates their relation as a coincidental event. But that shared space remains [unstable] impossible to delimit; for as long as every relation is a relation to difference, what is a close or distant relation cannot be rigorously determined. (p. 42)

According to Wills, given the instability of images and ideas, their meanings and our understanding of them are contingent; they always exist in prosthetic relation to other images and ideas.

Critical theorist Jacques Derrida’s (1976) conceptualization of the logic of supplement as two opposing yet strangely unified significations corresponds with prosthetic interconnectivity. Based on his critical reading of Rousseauian texts, Derrida defines the first signification of the supplement as:

> A surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *fullest measure* of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence. It is thus that art, *techné*, image, representation, convention, etc., come as supplements to nature [originary and normalized knowledge] and are rich with this entire cumulating function. (pp. 144-145)

Derrida then juxtaposes this “self-sufficient” signification of the supplement with that which “intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of … as substitute … it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness” (p. 145).
By juxtaposing these oppositions of the supplement, Derrida argues that its two significations “cannot be separated” from each other, and that each “is by turns effaced or becomes discreetly vague in the presence of the other” (p. 145). In doing so, Derrida suggests a paradox that reveals, yet postpones, the differences between the two significations to allow for a multiplicity of significations and understandings to occur. Apropos prosthetic interconnectivity, Derrida characterizes the connectivity of the supplement’s two significations as being an exterior addition. In doing so, his logic of the supplement confirms that prosthesis functions both as a surplus and as filling a lack, which paradoxically represents the amputated body as both a “plentitude enriched by another plentitude” yet a “mark of emptiness.”

Hence, bearing in mind the possible linkages between art-based research and the amputated body, I propose an embodied form of knowing and being in the world, a prosthetic epistemology and prosthetic ontology, that challenge the disabling, oppressive prosthetics of mass mediation, its gaze of normality. As critical theorist Donna Haraway (1991) suggests, mass mediation and other culturally constructed perceptual systems constitute prosthetized forms of vision and visuality. She writes:

The ‘eyes’ made available in modern technological sciences shatter any idea of passive vision; these prosthetic devices show us that all eyes, including our own organic ones, are active perceptual systems, building in translations and specific [constructed] ways of seeing, that is, ways of life. (p. 190)

Photographer Andreas Feininger’s *The Photojournalist* (1951) is consistent with Haraway’s claim that prosthetic devices reveal perceptual systems. As the photojournalist in Feininger’s photograph holds the camera to his face, its lens and viewfinder align with his eyes to suggest the prosthetic augmentation of his body’s perceptual capabilities. In doing so, the body is represented as cyborg—machine and meat interconnected. While body and camera seem incompatible, both represent interconnected perceptual systems, one organic the other technological, which complement and supplement one another. Moreover, as we viewers return the gaze of this photograph, we too are connected if not implicated in its perceptual regime and apparatus. As with Feininger’s prosthetic embodiment, art-based research is an active process of critical examination and deconstruction of the gaze of normality, which enables the creative and political reconstruction and agency of fragmented, limbless bodies.

My aim here is not to minimize or trivialize the pain, suffering, and rehabilitation of those with amputated bodies, or to use the metaphor of prosthesis at the expense of those who live with artificial devices because, as cultural critic Vivian Sobchack (2006) cautions, doing so ignores “the phenomenological—and quite different—structural, functional, and aesthetic terms of those who successfully incorporate and subjectively live the prosthetic
and sense themselves neither as lacking something nor as walking around with some ‘thing’ that is added on their bodies” (p. 22). Similarly, cultural theorist Sarah S. Jain (1999) warns against limiting the use of the prosthetic trope merely to argue in favor of or in opposition to technology when “the wounding ingredients of technological production [those academic, institutional and corporate proselytizing offenses to the body committed through schooling, labor, and consumption] remain continually under ontological erasure” (p. 49). Moreover, I want to avoid the abuse of disability tropes as “opportunistic metaphorical devices” suggested by literary theorists David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder (2000), who conceptualize the fetishizing of disability in literature as narrative prosthesis “to indicate that disability has been [too easily] used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary [and other mass mediated] narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight” (p. 49). Consequently, while healing and rehabilitation of the wounded body is imperative, art as therapy has not been addressed in this writing because positioning art research and creative work merely within clinical and pathological understandings often undervalues their enabling of amputees’ creative and political agency for which Sobchack, Jain, Mitchell, and Snyder are advocating—especially in a culture that is compelled and consumed by the political economy of institutionalized and corporate medicine (Illich, 1976; Foucault, 1994).

Instead, my aim is to position art and prosthesis in a disjunctive, yet coterminous, dialectical relationship in order to expose and examine both their discursive and corporeal correspondences as embodied knowing. My intention in doing so is to examine alterity and how art research can enable the embodiment of cultural difference. As critical theorist Morton Søby (2005) points out, considering that, historically, the body has extended beyond its physical limits through the use of various kinds of tools, including orthopedic devices to enable the disabled body, “Prosthesis has a restoring and normalizing function and it becomes an element in the great story of evolution and development of civilization” (p. 7). Based on the body’s willful desire and ability to extend its limitations, psychologist Sigmund Freud (1962) argued:

Man has, as it were, become a sort of prosthetic God. When he [sic] puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but these organs have not grown entirely together with him and they still give him troubles at times. (pp. 38-39)

As Søby (2005) argues: “For Freud, prosthesis presents the boundary between that which is human and that which is cultural,” suggesting that the “troubles” about which Freud wrote call attention to the incompatibilities of nature/culture, body/machine, normal/abnormal, and other delimiting dualisms (p. 6).
It has been this troubling incompatibility of prosthesis, which advocates prothetic pedagogy, an embodied form of art research and teaching that challenges and resists both the disabling stereotypes and stigmas of the amputated as dysfunctional, and the fear and loathing of technological supplements that enable the body’s agency. Indeed, there has existed an interesting correlation between the fear of disabled bodies and their enabling through prosthetic technology insofar as the fear of technology is the consequence of denying the body’s technological need, which in turn, is a consequence of the body’s presumption of wholeness and self-sufficiency. Critical theorist George P. Landow’s (1992) example of techno-phobic academics and intellectuals is a case in point:

Transferring the term prosthesis from the field of rehabilitation ... gathers a fascinating, appalling congeries of emotion and need that accurately conveys the attitudes contemporary academics and intellectuals in the humanities hold toward technology. Resentment of the device one needs, resentment [and denial] at one’s own need and guilt, and a Romantic dislike of the artificiality of the device that answers one’s needs mark most humanists’ attitudes toward technology, and these same factors appear in the traditional view of the single most important technology we possess—writing. These attitudes result, as Derrida has shown, in a millennia-long elevation of speech above writing, its supposedly unnatural [prosthetic] supplement. (p. 170-71)

Ironically, what Landow describes as Romantic idealization and bifurcation constitutes an amputation, which isolates the body from technology, and from the body politic in the same way Derrida suggests about attitudes toward speech and writing. What modern and contemporary artworks and amputated bodies have in common is that they constitute an irritant as their disjunctive, abstracted materiality rubs against the grain of viewers’ assumptions and understandings of the totalized body. Corporeal abstractions either in the actual and virtual sense have not corresponded or fit viewers’ assumptions of what normal bodies should look like. Philosopher William Barrett’s (1962) characterization of viewers’ aversions to abstractions in modern art, like those of the Cubists, Fauvists, Surrealists, and Abstract Expressionists, corresponds with viewers’ fear and loathing of amputated bodies. He writes:

Modern art touches a sore spot, or several sore spots, in the ordinary citizen of which he [sic] is totally unaware. The more irritated he becomes at modern art the more he betrays the fact that he himself, and his civilization, are implicated in what the artist shows him. (p. 43)

Cultural theorist Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s (1996) theory of anxiety surrounding “freak discourse” corresponds with Barrett’s irritant. Thomson argues, “Because such [’exceptional’] bodies are rare, unique, material, and

\[1\] Derrida’s discussion about the hierarchy of speech over writing is found in Of Grammatology (1976), p. 8.
confounding of cultural categories, they function as magnets to which culture [projects and] secures its anxieties, questions, and needs at any given moment” (p. 2). Thus, according to Barrett and Thomson, as we experience and embody the visual and conceptual complexities and contradictions of modern art and exceptional bodies, we have done so with horror and fascination because we discover and identify with those same “sore spots and irritants,” as qualities and characteristics within ourselves. Contrary to the presumption of wholeness, such eccentric embodiment has suggested that we are always already disabled in one form or another: amputated, fragmented, and in a mutable relationship with a technological world that requires constant placements, displacements, and replacements; in other words, we have been enabled by virtue of prosthetic alterations and adjustments.

Considering the origins and history of its applications, the trope prosthesis is an apt representation of complementary and supplementary relationships between art and other forms of research found in the sciences and social sciences. According to Wills (1995), the use of the word was first recorded in England in 1553 in Thomas Wilson’s Arte of Rhetorique, which the author “borrowed directly from the Greek … in its rhetorical sense of the addition of a syllable [pre-fixed] to the beginning of a word” (p. 218). In contemporary cyberculture, for example, the prefix e in e-Learning has constituted a prosthetic extension whereby learning is supplemented by the use of electronic devices such as computers. Pertaining to this writing, art-based re-search suggests art as a prosthetic supplement to stand on, and the prefix re as prosthesis to search back, examine again, and acquire knowledge anew.

The 16th century was a time when the Reformation reconstituted religious doctrine, when Guttenberg’s press revolutionized the production and dissemination of print. There was a renaissance in medicine, science, and art when one body of knowledge replaced another—a time that has since been referred to as the beginning of the Age of Reason, the Enlightenment, and the Early Modern. It was a time when Wilson’s rhetorical reintroduction of the word prosthesis coincided with Ambroise Paré’s rediscovery of ligature in France in 1552. A surgical procedure that Paré attributed to Galen of Pergamon, the second-century Greek physician, ligature was the binding of arteries following amputation, thus replacing the practice of cauterization, which was more than likely to result in the patient “bleeding to death” (Wills, pp. 215-216). Paré’s use of ligature, an artificial construction in its own right, made it possible to augment both the life of the limb and subsequently the patient. Ligature also made it possible to attach prosthetic devices to amputated limbs.

Wills writes: “For the French the medical sense of the word [prosthesis] would come first, but not until 1695 [143 years after Paré’s rediscovery], about a decade before the rhetorical sense, which first appeared in French in 1704” (p. 218). Wills further characterizes knowledge during this historical
period of renaissance as not only “rearranged but prosthetized—broken apart and artificially reconstructed” (pp. 219). Historical placements and replacements are replete in his account of the trope *prosthesis* as it extends from its rhetorical use by the Classical Greeks to late 16th-century England, then by yet another extension to the human body in the early 18th-century France. Through this trajectory, both body and text have been discursively *prosthetized*, hence artificially supplementing one another and suggesting, by yet another extension, the possibility that art research represents *prosthetic* embodiment.

The prosthetic embodiments of metaphor and metonymy correspond epistemologically with the Hegelian dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Like metaphor, dialectical tension between thesis and antithesis is resolved by synthesis into a unified whole—a totalized understanding or representation. However, while synthesis enables movement beyond the initial dualism of thesis and antithesis, its dialectical closure constitutes a new thesis position disconnected from other complex and contradictory understandings and, in doing so, it has a tendency to stabilize as yet another art/body paradigm. Critical theorist Jean François Lyotard (1999) reminds us: “Research that takes place under the aegis of a paradigm tends to stabilize...[and exploit creative and political agency]” (p. 61).


> Once, most people thought that artificial-natural, human-machine, organic and constructed, were dualities just as central to living, but the figure of the cyborg has revealed that it isn’t so. And perhaps this will cast some light on the general permanence and importance of these dualities. After all the cyborg lives only through the symbiosis of ostensible opposites always in tension. We know, from our bodies and from our machines, that tension is a great source of pleasure and power ... [As such, the cyborg metaphor challenges and moves beyond] dualistic epistemologies to the epistemology of cyborg: *thesis, antithesis, synthesis, prosthesis* [italics added]. And again ... (p. 13)

Hence, as these scholars suggest, *thesis/antithesis/synthesis/prosthesis* represents a fourfold open and mutable epistemology that enables oppositional discourse beginning with the dialogic of thesis/antithesis, followed by a resolving of its tension through synthesis, then indeterminate flights of understanding that extend beyond our bodies and symbiotically interconnect with others and broaden our capacity to understand and accept difference in the world. This indeterminacy of prosthesis has been constituted by disjunctive, incongruous fragments of images and ideas, knowledge, and understandings, whose complex, irreducible slippages of meaning resist synthetic closure similar to the way in which collage narrative has resisted

Charles R. Garoian

*Studies in Art Education*
concrescence (Kuspit, 1983, p. 127). In doing so, prosthesis has represented excess, a surplus knowledge and understanding, which is unapparent or unknown yet supplements the dialogical framework of thesis/antithesis/synthesis through an on-going process of becoming.

In her response to post 9/11 global politics, terrorism, and war, critical theorist Judith Butler (2004) regards “vulnerability” and “recognition” as important aspects of resisting synthetic closure when responding to others in times of violence and mourning. For Butler, vulnerability “dislocates us from our positions, our subject-positions” and allows us to recognize one another not “as we already are, as we have always been, as we were constituted prior to the encounter itself…but] to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always [italics added] in relation to the Other” (p. 44). Such deliberate and on-going solicitation of becoming and petitioning of future relations with others constitutes a hopeful version of the Hegelian dialectic, “but it is also a departure, since I [Butler] will not discover myself as the same as the ‘you’ on which I depend in order to be” (p. 44). The vulnerability, recognition, and deliberate becoming called for by Butler corresponds with the characteristics of prosthesis that resist concrescence—the synthetic closure of one’s subject position in relation with the other.

The precarious, teetering materiality of artist Robert Rauschenberg’s combines is consistent with the motility of prosthesis. Rauschenberg coined the term “combine” to characterize his bridging of painterly and sculptural processes, his combining of found visual and material culture, and, his desire for the viewer’s embodiment of his art through their respective materiality. The disjunctions between and among the detritus and quotidian materials and objects that are found in Rauschenberg’s combines “materialize the image, to make a representation read as though it were a corporeal thing,” writes art historian Rosalind Krauss (1974, p. 39). Krauss continues:

When the ‘images’ are actual objects … [as in the example of Rauschenberg’s combine, Canyon (1959), affixed with oil, paper, fabric, metal, cardboard box, printed paper, printed reproductions, a photograph, wood, paint tube, and mirror on canvas, with oil on a stuffed bald eagle, string and pillow], the sense of identification between material objects and ‘images’ is heightened in every way. (p. 39)

Krauss’s conceptualization of Rauschenberg’s materiality suggests prothetic embodiment; a connectivity between the representation of an object and the actual object itself; the object and its connectivity with other objects in the combine; the objects and their connectivity with the contexts from which they were transferred; and, the combine’s material connectivity with viewers’ bodies as its attached objects physically and conceptually extended beyond the frame of the combine. Invoking the Derridean concepts of “recognition
and misrecognition,” Wills (1995) describes viewers’ extending beyond the frame of their understanding to embody works of art as “reading[s] informed by prosthesis” (p. 59).

In reading or analyzing the work of art one recognizes the work of the author; but in the same movement, one inevitably requires that the author stands aside, that she yield some space for the [misrecognized] discourse of the spectator. (Wills, 1995, pp. 59-60)

Art critic and historian Branden W. Joseph (2006) characterizes Rauschenberg’s materialization of images in the combines as a transgression that goes against the framing edge of historical, rectilinear representations of pictorial space. Such “framing contingency” has been consistent with the destabilizing yet enabling facility of prosthesis as it “implies both separation and continuity, both a seamless relation to the world outside itself and a cut, break, a gap, or bifurcation from it, what might be called a contingent framing edge as opposed to a formalist one” (pp. 62, 66). Krauss (1974) argues,

In Rauschenberg’s work the image is not about an object transformed. It is a matter, rather, of an object transferred. An object is taken out of the space of the world [de-territorialized] and embedded [re-territorialized] into the surface of a painting, never at the sacrifice of its density as material. (p. 40)

Furthermore, Rauschenberg’s title, Canyon, ironically suggests a gap or impasse that is traversed when an object like the stuffed bald eagle has been de-territorialized and transferred from its natural habitat and the taxidermist’s studio, and re-territorialized within the context of the combine and, from its perch, projected out toward the viewer. Such prosthetic extension affirms Rauschenberg’s well-known declaration: “Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.)” (Perreault, 2006).

While modernists like Rauschenberg confined their prosthetic criticality within the formalistic boundaries of the art world, a generation of contemporary postmodern artists has created radical works of art that openly and directly challenge the oppressive socially and historically constructed assumptions and conventions that exist within the broader context of contemporary cultural life. Thus, by extension, the prosthetic materiality and framing contingency associated with Rauschenberg’s combines are evident in the radical critiques of artists like Judy Chicago2 whose collaborative, community-based installations challenge gender politics; the painted quilts of Faith Ringgold3 and paintings of Robert Colescott4 that critique racial injustice; Merle Laderman Ukeles’s5 ecological performances; and Cindy Sherman’s6 uncanny photographic impersonations that raise questions about the marked body and its construction of identity by the spectacle of mass mediated culture. Unlike the modernists, the prosthetic criticality of these
and other contemporary postmodern artists constitutes examples of critical
citizenship and radical democracy.

Unlike the Heideggerian understanding of difference, which posits prosthetic
technologies as disembodied amputations and erasures of the body's
capabilities, prosthesis, argued from a Derridian perspective of differânce,
constitutes an embodied supplement. Derrida's is a prosthetized word, differânce,
in which a meaning that differs is grafted onto a meaning that
is deferred thus rendering language and understanding undecidable, indeter-
minate, and mutable (Ulmer, 1985, pp. 46-47). A graft, according to
Derrida, is a linguistic structure that contains two distinct concepts situated
side-by-side, yet separated by parenthetic, apostrophic, or hyphenated punc-
tuation marks, ( ), /, [], {}, “”, and —, which he describes as “passing a knife
between two texts” (Wills, 1995, pp. 295; Derrida, 1986, p. 64). Similarly,
Wills (1995) argues, the “recontextualization that defines citationality
through the use of punctuation marks in text bodies…allows for the opera-
tions of excision and insertion, removal and replacement…[constitutes] pro-
thesis” (p. 296). Excised yet sutured together, disparate texts, and in the case
of visual art, images are prosthetically co-dependent. While their separate
meanings expose and critique their differences, their co-dependence exposes
and defers metaphysical closures. Thus, the paradoxical logic of differânce
constitutes not merely a “playing with words … [but a] betting with words,
employing them strategically with an eye on larger stakes,” argues critical

Within the body of art education, Derrida’s prosthetic grafting of differânce
has been evident in the art-based research, writings, and theories of art
education scholars Rita Irwin and Alex de Cosson, and Graeme Sullivan.
By adjoining the first letter in each word, art, research, and teaching, then
“passing” the “knife” of a slash between them, Irwin and de Cosson (2004)
have prosthetized these cultural practices into the neologism a/r/tography to
suggest their linguistic and epistemological differences and correspondences.
Indeed, the Canadian word métis, its appropriation from the French métissage,
and Irwin and de Cosson’s re-contextualization within a/r/tography consists
of a dis-membering and re-membering process based in the epistemology
of prosthesis. These scholars characterize métissage as “an act of interdis-
ciplinarity. It hyphenates, bridges, slashes, and creates [interstitial spaces
that enable] exploration, translation, and understanding in deeper and
more enhanced ways of meaning making” (pp. 30-31). Educators Cynthia
Chambers, Dwayne Donald, and Erika Hasebe-Ludt (2002) further define métissage as
A site for writing and surviving in the interval between different
cultures and languages; a way of merging and blurring genres,
texts and identities; an active literary stance, political strategy and
pedagogical praxis. As Métis has been appropriated from its original
and negative meaning “half-breed,” ... métissage [is appropriated] from its original meaning “mixed-blood” to become a creative strategy for the braiding of gender, race, language and place into autobiographical texts. (Introduction)

In her installation The Body Knowing7 (2004) a/r/tographer Stephanie Springgay (2004) assembled several small oil paintings, rose petal panels, and a dress to collage an autobiographical narrative that “alludes metaphorically and metonymically to gender, sexuality, and desire, and to issues pertaining to the shifting identity of woman, artists, and scholar in the academy” (p. 62). In doing so, the collage fragments in Springgay’s installation constituted an “archive of body memories” that are braided together and stand-in, prosthetically, for the body’s identity, knowledge, and understanding (pp. 62-63).

Irwin and de Cosson’s (2004) conceptualization of a/r/tography as métissage parallels Derrida’s grafting of differ-ânce and the fourfold epistemology of thesis/antithesis/synthesis/prosthesis discussed previously in this article. By dis-membering and re-membering art, research, and teaching, they argue for their interconnectivity, interchangeability, and interdependency.

In these [three] interlingual acts, there is at once an acceptance of playing with particular categories and a refusal to be aligned with any one category. Where two would be inclined to dialogic opposition [thesis/antithesis] a third space offers a point of convergence [synthesis]—yet respect for divergence [prosthesis]—where differences and similarities are woven [sutured] together. (pp. 28-29)

Hence, with the adverbial phrase “yet respect for divergence,” Irwin and de Cosson have prosthetized dialogical convergence and, in doing so, they advocate its extension and interconnection with a diversity of interpretations and understandings, and again, and again...

Like Irwin and de Cosson, Sullivan’s (2005) conceptualizations of art research are also based on prosthetic differ-ânce. His “artist-theorist,” for example, metaphorically juxtaposes the “artist” with the “theorist” to reveal their differences, while suggesting their metonymic contiguity, which is coterminous, interconnected. Sullivan’s prosthetizing of art and theory is further made evident through his detailed illustrations of frameworks, or mappings of diverse research trajectories and intersections that artmaking enables. Each framework represents for Sullivan strands of inquiry that when flexibly folded upon, around, and under one another prosthetically, creates complex yet complementary “dimensions of theory” and “domains of inquiry” (pp. 98-99). He argues, “…although [the] conceptual barriers [of these strands] help to define areas of interest, they are permeable barriers that allow ideas to flow back and forth [italics added]” (p. 94). Sullivan has written about this permeability and flow in his characterization of installation artist Jayne Dyer’s8 art research:


Dyer’s art suggests that where and how we locate ourselves requires an acceptance that our relationship with place is neither stable nor able to be coded. Rather, it constantly shifts [allowing ideas to flow back and forth] in the space between the tangible and the transient. (Sullivan, p. 134)

For Sullivan, such flexible folding constitutes a “braiding” process in which the differentiated strands of art research function as separate and distinct, yet intertwined lines of inquiry, thus prosthettizing a robust network of perspectives and understandings to occur (p. 105).

What Irwin and de Cosson’s a/r/tography and Sullivan’s artist-theorist have in common is art research that extends and augments academic, institutional, and corporate understandings through performances of subjectivity, community, and the embodied knowing of critical prosthesis. These scholars’ notions of “permeable barriers,” “flexible folding,” “braiding,” and “merging and blurring” of cultural boundaries enable the interconnections and interdependencies of prosthetic criticality where slippages of knowledge and understanding resist reified and rarified assumptions, representations, and enable creative and political agency.

Unlike quantitative researches in the sciences and social sciences, the prosthesis of art research “again and again,” as Gay, Figueroa-Sarriera, and Mentor (1995) suggest, extends beyond the dualism of thesis/antithesis, and the absolute closure of synthesis, as personal memory supplements public memory (Lury, 1998; Landsberg, 2004). And again, such prosthetic memory is interconnected with linguistic prosthesis as metaphor and metonymy mutably amputate, graft, and augment visual and verbal language to create and re-create new meanings and representations. And again, the prosthetics of memory and linguistics are interconnected with perceptual prosthesis as the vision and visuality of art research challenges oppressive regimes of looking, seeing and understanding. And again, the prosthetics of memory, linguistics, and perception are interconnected with cognitive prostheses as the rhizomatic thought processes of art research challenge and augment the limitations of dualistic and dialectical thinking. And again, the prostheses of memory, linguistics, perception, and cognition are interconnected with epistemological prostheses, which challenge through art research oppressive socially and historically constructed assumptions and representations and enable new images and ideas to occur. And again, the prostheses of memory, linguistics, perception, cognition, and epistemology are interconnected with ontological prostheses as the body and identity are reclaimed from the objectifying regimes of academic, institutional, and corporate systems and re-presented through their own creative and political subjectivity. And again, the prostheses of memory, linguistics, perception, cognition, epistemology, and ontology are interconnected with the phenomenological prosthesis of the body, its breaking out of the frame of its materiality, its skin to extend and
interconnect with the material world. And again, the prostheses of memory, linguistics, perception, cognition, epistemology, ontology, and phenomenology of the body are interconnected with technological prostheses, which augment and supplement the materiality of the body with tools that enable its facilitation of the world. Supported by the imperatives of vulnerability, recognition, and deliberate becoming, as Butler (2004) suggests, these prothetic eccentricities of the body resist synthetic closure and enable open and mutable positions of subjectivity with the other. Doing so raises the hope that the brutality and devastations of war, and the gaze of normality, discussed earlier, can be averted.

And again, and again ...

While in this ending I have differentiated the prothetic eccentricities of the body, it is their correspondences and interconnections, and with those of other bodies, those of community, and of the body politic that oppressive socially and historically constructed assumptions and representations of social injustice and violence are exposed, examined, and that the creative and political agency of the body is continually enabled.

And again …

References


---

Studies in Art Education


