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Contents

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Sarah Kiernan and Claire Ancomb 5-12

ARTICLES

Lisa Bufano and Aimee Mullins: disability and the aesthetic of non-human-like prostheses 15-36

Chiara Montalti

Art, artefact and nature in Gillo Dorfles's work. For an understanding of our aesthetic constitution 39-53

Filomena Parente

INTERVIEW

"For a brutal reality I need a brutal language". Deception in Contemporary Art from the Artist's Perspective: Interview with Santiago Sierra . . . 55-69

Laura Partin

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Chiara Montalti, Filomena Parente, Laura Partin 70-71

LISA BUFANO AND AIMEE MULLINS: DISABILITY AND THE AESTHETIC OF NON-HUMAN-LIKE PROSTHESES

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The essay aims to examine possible readings of disability in the context of visual art, especially regarding bodies prosthetised in unexpected ways. To do that, I will analyse two performances, participated/created by Lisa Bufano and Aimee Mullins, which employ prosthetics that distance them from the mimicry of human limbs. I will briefly contextualize them in the history of prosthetics. I will observe how their peculiarity and non-human forms can serve aesthetic and destabilizing purposes regarding the contours of disability. I will especially mention their potentiality regarding disabled bodies' mobility in space and their relationship with tools. The association between a disabled body and non-human traits carries several symbolic meanings and might also produce risks. Generally, they can update the perspectives on the crafting of creative assemblages that start from impaired bodies. In conclusion, I will observe how Bufano's art entails more promises on an ethico-political level.

“Is that a person?”

—A bystander to Lisa Bufano’s performance *Mentally Fine* (2010)

Do we have to be *avant* or can we be ourselves?¹

—Jillian Weise, *Cyborg Detective*

1 Introduction

Aimee Mullins and Lisa Bufano presented a similar bodily appearance, but as performers proposed different ways to embody lower limbs prosthetics. In this essay, I will examine how disability can be investigated through performance art. I will explore disability by examining the relationship between human bodies and prosthetic devices, which distance themselves from human forms. The figure of Aimee Mullins – athlete, advocate, model and actress – is often employed to analyse disabled bodies in society and question the design of prosthetics or the cultural diktats on bodily integrity. I will examine the closeness of her body to animal traits as suggested in the avant-garde movie *Cremaster 3* (2002), directed by Matthew Barney. To explore more productively the contiguity of non-humanness to disability, the role of the latter in visual art, and the possibilities guaranteed by prosthetic addenda, I will also juxtapose Mullins’s persona to Lisa Bufano’s choreography, *One Breath is an Ocean for a Wooden Heart* (2007). Bufano was a performer artist and a dancer.² I will also pinpoint how Bufano’s performance can ensure more productive defamiliarization to some cultural narratives around disability.

Firstly, assisted by Tomoko Tamari (2017) and Marquard Smith’s (2006) historical and aesthetic analyses, I will discuss the role of design in the

1 Weise implicitly means “*avant-garde*”, and she refers to her and other disabled people.

2 Since she passed away in 2013, I will use the past tense.

prosthetic realm. Afterwards, mostly through Smith (2006) and Alison Kafer's (2019) readings of the artworks, I will examine, what is found to be, their unusual display of prosthetic embodiments. Contextually, I will also recall Mullins's and Bufano's intentions and comments. I will critically assess some features of the characters played by Mullins in *Cremaster 3* (2002): the fixity – confronting it with Bufano's mobility – and the discomfort that emerges. I will also explore them through Barney's aims in the employment of Mullins's body. Then, mostly along with Petra Kuppers (2000; 2003; 2008) and Tamari (2017), I will discuss how prostheses can be experienced in visual art and their ambivalent symbolic meanings. Lastly, I will propose the multiple directions in which these hybrid assemblages may captivate the viewers. Mullins and Bufano's oscillation between humanity, animality and technology can also be framed through the figure of the cyborg, as depicted by Donna Haraway in the *Cyborg Manifesto* (1991). Besides the mentioned authors, the last section will be mainly grounded in Disability Studies.

Throughout the article, several perspectives will emerge, and I will draw out how non-human-like artistic prosthetics can function as a productive trouble with regards to assumptions about disability, embodiment, and about the interfaces among bodies, technologies and spaces. The performances may produce both risks and potentialities regarding disabled bodies. Given the analyses of productive and critical outcomes of both performances, however, Mullins's collaboration with Barney will emerge as riskier.

2 Prosthetic aesthetics

Along with the support given to physical abilities, aesthetic features have always been a concern in crafting prosthetic limbs. In the late 19th and early 20th century, prosthetic devices were made “to closely mimic the human form” and, therefore, “camouflage [the] impaired bodies”, making them look “able-bodied, or “normal”” (Tamari 2017, 30). While cosmetically satisfying, the “natural look” has not always matched with

functionality.³ The trend started to change, especially after the First World War; when the primary aim of prosthetics was to re-direct the injured soldiers back into the labour force.

Mass production techniques and increased functionality became deemed more important and thus a new type of *uglier*, but *cheaper* and *functionally superior* prostheses became made available (Ibid, 30, my emphases).

Despite the variations in the history of their aesthetics, prosthetic devices have always been made with the aim of seamlessness with the receiving bodies “in such a way as to make themselves invisible” (Smith 2006, 51). As Marquard Smith highlights in a study based on the archives of the Science Museum in London, historically, the urge to conceal has been particularly true for disabled women. While male amputees were represented in photographs involved in activities, female ones were often still and turned away.⁴ “Female amputees” expressed “a need for continued disguise” (Ibid, 54). Therefore, their images reinforced typical traits historically inscribed in the feminine nature: modesty and discretion. Besides, they seem to be encouraged to “pass for something other than disabled” (Ibid, 54).

While prostheses are “supposed to blend with the human body without being conspicuous” (Vanshtein 2012, 144), it is not necessarily the case in the artistic realm, where particular visual effects are often actively sought after. This new attention is demonstrated by the widespread diffusion of sculpture-like prostheses, mostly used in art and fashion projects. Mullins is particularly active in promoting a creative approach towards prosthetics and participated in some of these projects (cf. Ibid,

3
Functionality and support of physical abilities, however, are not inscribed in every kind of protheses – for example, prosthetic breasts or craniofacial prostheses do not serve other purposes that cosmetic and aesthetic ones.

4 On the paucity of disabled women in medical representations, see also Ott in Ott et al. 2002.

149-154; The Alternative Limb Project).

A prosthetic limb doesn't represent the need to replace loss anymore. It can stand as a symbol where the wearer has the power to create whatever it is that they want to create in that space (Mullins 2009a).

Mullins also recalls when she realized she could "move away from the need to replicate humanness as the only aesthetic ideal" (Ibid), and then explored different styles.

The concept of prosthetic aesthetics indicates the "approach of questioning prosthesis (in general) in relation to aesthetics (in particular)" (Tamari 2017, 50). Tamari specifically employs "prosthetic aesthetics" to convey the cultural reception of prosthetic bodies, accounting for the conflicting feelings evoked by their images (Ibid, 46-51). In this article, I will take performances into account. I will not merely focus on the possible cultural reception of the prostheses presented, but present the subjects' perspectives, who crafted them and employed them as well.

3 Mullins's claws and tentacles

The Cremaster Cycle is a series of five full-length movies made between 1994 and 2002. Despite the unconventional numeration, *Cremaster 3* (2002) is the most recent one, in which one of the characters played by Barney, the Entered Apprentice, goes through tests and rituals to enter the Masonry. The characters, often hybrid or monstrous creatures, presents a sculptural aesthetics, appearing as mobile work of arts. One of the sets is, quite appropriately, the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. Mullins recalled that Barney contacted her after her 1999 appearance in an Alexander McQueen fashion show, and they started a collaboration (cf. Inglese 2014).⁵ *Cremaster 3* (2002) represents Mullins's

.....
5 She also starred in Barney (2014).

first experience as an actress, and it is clear that her ‘disability’⁶ is not incidental; Barney’s choice evidently values the aesthetic possibilities intrinsic to her employment of prostheses.

I will particularly focus on *Cremaster 3*’s part called *The Order*, in which Mullins plays the Entered Novitiate, and her metamorphoses. In the first version of the character, she represents “the Apprentice’s [that is Barney’s] alter-ego” (Spector in Smith 2006, 63) and they share the set. Mullins is dressed in white and wears transparent high-heeled prostheses. While Mullins and Barney’s characters approach each other, however, she morphs into a “hybrid Egyptian warrior” (Mullins 2009a) who attacks the Apprentice. He must kill her to keep scaling the Guggenheim and continue his initiation. This second version as a half-cheetah and half-woman is endowed with “articulated paws, claws and a tail” (Ibid). Mullins presents this version as “a little homage to [her] life as an athlete” (Ibid), as she was the first runner ever to wear the famous *cheetah legs*.

In the last frames of *The Order*, Mullins turns in a third version of the Novitiate and appears seated, still, while she keeps five lambs on a leash. She is blindfolded, bleeding, has a noose around her neck, and wears a white tunic that leaves one breast uncovered. In this last scene, the camera starts with a close-up of the prostheses; they are made of polyurethane, transparent and “look like jellyfish legs” (Mullins 2009a). Smith problematizes the fixity of the sequence; once defeated, Mullins’s character cannot see nor move (2006, 66-67). This version of the character also recalls the fixity observed by Smith in disabled women’s portraits mentioned above. Also, Stefanie Heine (2014) frames this last figure through Greek mythology; Mullins’s character recalls simultaneously Oedipus, Nemesis and Medusa. Whereas Heine interprets “the frozen image” as “an outcome of Medusa’s petrifying gaze” (2014, 7-8), recalled by the snakelike tentacles, I would claim the opposite. The view of the tentacular prostheses seems to freeze us, the public, who are left to won-

6 Even though I will use the term disability throughout the essay, Mullins would not refer to herself as disabled and proposes sometimes the term ‘super-abled’ (cf. 2009b).

der about the possible meanings of her body merged with tentacles.

A possible interpretation is highlighted by Mullins, who recalls the director's intention. She presents the design of the prostheses as a collaborative work between the two of them. However, regarding the last scene, she remembers:

[o]riginally Matthew had wanted me to do that scene without prosthetics [...] as a way to express the Masonic theory that you have to lose your lower self in order to reach a higher level. I guess the literal representation of that would have been for me to sit on the sled without any limbs below the knee, but that would have been difficult for me because it's very, very intimate. We had a long dialogue about what we could do instead, and Matthew came up with the idea of making the legs appear like jellyfish tentacles because they're not a human form and they're clear. It worked for me because I don't feel so bare where there's something between me and the ground (Mullins in Smith 2006, 64).

These animal-inspired prostheses were, therefore, a compromise between the two of them. Smith raises the issue of Barney's "metaphorical opportunism" (2006, 66); the symbolic meaning he conceived appears problematically based on the old, recurring theme of bodily transcendence and also displays a rather "disingenuous and boorish" (Ibid, 66) attitude with regards to Mullins's missing lower limbs. As Petra Kuppers highlights, Mullins is used by the director; he uses her (supposed) liminality to embody a figure "between humanity and animality" (2008, 172). Through all the interpretations presented, the movie insists on Mullins's difference. Vivian Sobchack pinpoints that her figures in *Cremaster* are not even metaphors and trespass beyond that; they are embodied 'metalepsis'. For example, the representation starts from prostheses named after cheetahs and leads to the actual metamorphization of their user (cf. 2004, 223-224).

Whilst I would not claim that Mullins's body is purely exploited, as

I always strive to acknowledge agency, her presence, nonetheless, conveys a certain grade of awkwardness and discomfort. In the first two depictions of the Novitiate, she appears ‘wobbly’ and ‘unsteadily’ (Smith 2006, 66). The last scene, as mentioned, opens exactly with a shot of her lower limbs; reading it through her statements above it is possible to feel her reticence even strongly. The artist Elizabeth Wright reads Mullins’s movements as “indicative of the fragile relationship between the body and prosthetic” (2009), with the latter seeming close to betraying her. Smith (2006) deciphers the ‘vulnerability’ conveyed by the representation as a challenge to “the discourse of prosthesis with its overwhelming imperatives of rehabilitation, empowering, and resolute unshakability” (2006, 66). Smith’s remark properly points towards a refusal of the *supercrip* narrative, which emphasizes individual will-power, overlooks social and economic obstacles, and implies that disabled people who try hard enough – especially when helped by technological enhancement – will succeed (cf. Clare 2015, 1-13). While Mullins’s vulnerability could be conceptualised in this framework, the *fragility* associated with disability is even stronger and often goes unchallenged, especially in the medical model of disability and its depiction only as a tragedy (cf. Clare 2015; Montalti 2020, 135-137). Disabled people are often represented as *ontologically* frailer and more prone to breakage than non-disabled ones because of their “deficits”. In this respect, Mullins’s movements are not particularly challenging the cultural scripts of disability.

4 Bufano’s table and animals’ legs

Differently from Mullins, Bufano was an interdisciplinary trained artist whose experience encompassed visual art, sculpture, and performance art - with an interest in dance as well. As a performer, Bufano “often used prosthetic and props in her work” (‘Info’ in Bufano n.d.). Generally, she crafted them following peculiar forms, both object- and animal-like (cf. Shea and Bufano 2013; ‘Video’ in Bufano n.d.). In particular, in sev-

eral performances – such as *2 Legs* (2005), *Mentally Fine* (2010), *Home Is Not Home* (2011) (cf. Ibid; ‘Work’, n.d.) and *One Breath is an Ocean for a Wooden Heart* (2007) – she employed “wooden stilts secured to [her] arms and legs” (‘Info’ in Bufano n.d.), which she got from Queen-Anne style tables. When explaining the aims and the aesthetic features sought, she recalled how “the dominating theme is the visceral experience of alienation, embodied by creatures, real and imagined” (Ibid).

One Breath premiered in 2007 in Zagreb and was performed both in Europe and in the United States. As described on Bufano’s website, it is “an unusual modern dance duet for a disabled dancer and an able-bodied dancer”⁷ (‘Work’ in Bufano n.d.), where this second role is performed by her colleague Sonsheree Giles.

[T]he dancers are transformed through a wide range of imagery: animated furniture, magical toys, 8-legged insect, 4-legged gazelle, 2-legged birds. The effect is an eerie otherworldliness (‘Work’ in Bufano n.d.).

Regarding the specificity of the prostheses, while the two dancers were setting up the piece, Giles experienced the peculiar mobility enacted while wearing them. As Giles stated, she was not capable of ‘[feeling] what she [was] doing’ (‘Work’ in Bufano n.d.). Starting precisely from the ‘disconnection’ provoked by the stilts, the two artists decided to “try to remain physically connected in some way to each other through-out the piece” (‘Work’ in Bufano n.d.). The contact throughout the performance is not always a kind one, they also prick each other but never really move apart (cf. Kafer 2019, 16).

Bufano’s prostheses appear unconventional in two ways. Firstly, concerning the material employed: the table-legs are made of wood, which is modest and of daily use. Alison Kafer illustrates the audacity of the

7 The participation of both disabled and non-disabled dancers is officially called integrated dance (cf. McGrath 2012).

exhibition:

[s]he rejects the logics and circuits of biomedicine in favor of furniture design and art-making; rather than grant biomedicine exclusive authority over prosthetics, she centered a different form of expertise (Kafer 2019, 14).

While Kafer interprets Bufano's work through Donna Haraway's concepts of *making kin* and *companion species*, I will emphasize another framework from the latter. Haraway's works strongly encourage "politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating" (1991, 195) and contest the analyses 'from nowhere' – indebted to fellow feminist theorists, especially of colour (Ibid, 195). As Rosi Braidotti highlights, that means the urge to "[account] for one's locations in terms both of space (geo-political or ecological dimension) and time" (2019, 34). In Bufano's case, the disruption of the medical management of disability, which also revolves around the use of *creative* and not *assistive* technologies, is possible because there are alternatives at hand. Her capacity to ironically employ wooden, destabilizing and useless 'legs' is possible in her specific *location*, both as an artist and as an American disabled woman. Globally, wooden prostheses are often the only ones available. Braidotti (2019) refers to the temporal dimension as well; for example, Bufano's artistic prosthetic also allowed the *desynchronisation* to emerge, which characterizes disabled people's lives in different places. While in specific locations cheap wooden prostheses are obsolete and characterized the last century, they represent the present range of possibilities somewhere else (cf. Riny 2018; Strait 2006; Tamari 2017).

Secondly, Bufano's prostheses are unconventional in light of the mobility they enact, that does not privilege bipedalism. In one respect, Bufano and Giles's movements contribute to the challenging of established dance traits, especially ballet, as well as other dances involving disabled participants tend to do. "The basic movement in ballet is

upwards” (Alten in Koppers 2000, 123), and the bodies involved are “young, predominately female and thin” (Whatley *et al.* 2018, 180), and reinforce the idea “of an abstract body without ‘impairment’ and/or ‘disability’” (Ibid, 180; cf. McGrath 2012).⁸ With regards to disability specifically, as Kafer underlines, she “created a technology that encourages or even amplifies the queerly sideways, animal-like crawling we are supposed to disavow or outgrow” (2019, 16). In fact, “crawling”, as Ashley Shew underlines, “makes people uncomfortable” (Shew in Nelson *et al.* 2019, 10).

It could also represent the concept of *trans-mobility*, which entails “the ability to move beyond traditional forms of movement and mobility” and also “the existence of free and disabled bodies in motion” (Nelson *et al.* 2019, 2). Bufano embodies the creative possibilities opened by disabled bodies, and their actual *flexibility*, while, on the contrary, they are often perceived as *fixed*. In cultural narratives, disabilities are rarely thematized as dynamic and dependent on the context. The fixity may also be associated with disabled people who employ mobility aids; they are frequently depicted as hardly moving and *stuck* as in ‘wheelchair-bound’ (cf. Koppers 2003, 8). This representation appears in striking contrast with the fixity portrayed in Mullins’s third version of the Novitiate. As mentioned, that suspended scene ends her story arc, with the jellyfish prostheses working as the focal point of her defeat by Barney’s character.

5 How prosthetics *work* in artworks

Broadly speaking, every peculiar prosthesis defies gender scripts. For example, as resulted from Smith’s archival investigation (2006), women had to wear them imperceptibly. Prosthesis had to appear discreet, while permitting the users to accomplish typical feminine tasks (cf. Ott

8 I will not focus extensively on disabled dance because it would produce asymmetry between the two performances. The theme can be further explored in Koppers (2000); Whatley *et al.* (2018); Hall (2018); McGrath (2012).

2002, 9-11; Smith 2006, 54). That idea is even more destabilized, therefore, in performances that centres on disabled bodies that explicitly ask the public to stare. In the artistic realm, when disabled artists choose to employ prosthetics as props, they do not aspire to make them invisible. On the contrary, the crafted parts shall stand out. In these cases, the intrinsic *tasks* assigned to prostheses are different than usual; they do not necessarily permit the artists to walk or grab objects, even though they most often permit them to move in some ways.

As mentioned in regards of both performances, the locomotion is sometimes odd, unconventional and unstable. As much as Bufano and Giles's choreography is described as "both enabled and constrained by their use of wooden stilts" ('Work' in Bufano n.d.), Mullins is alternatively abled and disabled by the prostheses made by the special effects artist Gabe Bartalos. Koppers argues that the use of 'permanent and temporary extensions' by disabled people in visual artworks productively interrogates the spectators about accessibility and also exhorts them to consider different 'locomotions' and innovative interfaces between bodies and environments (2008, 174-175).

As Tamari highlights, artistic prostheses "could be seen to work in two paradoxical ways"; in one sense, they draw attention to disabilities but can also divert the attention from them – an aspect synthesized as "the *invisibility* of disability" (2017, 48). Nonetheless, in Mullins's opinion, her appearance in *Cremaster* invites the viewers "to look, and look a little longer" (2009a). Bufano, too, explained:

I'm not an astounding dancer, but being a performer with a deformity, I find that there's a gut response in audiences, an attraction/repulsion aspect to it that can be compelling (Bufano in Murray 2014).

Koppers pinpoints that works of visual art performed by disabled people with the use of 'sensationalised "addenda"' (2008, 169) – such as

mobility aids, prostheses, and so on – can have a dual function. Taking into account Mullins too, Kuppers highlights how they can be ‘semiotic markers of difference’ (Ibid, 169), and in the meantime work as “seductive [...] invitations into a different form of embodiment” (Ibid, 169-170). The sense of curiosity that emerges, the ‘useful ambivalence’ (Ibid, 169), could engender ‘more respectful’ approaches towards bodily differences and impairments, and “[undermine] stereotypes of tragedy and negativity” (Ibid, 180) as well. Therefore, following Rachel Adams’s proposal, aesthetics seems to have the capacity to let emerge ‘feelings’ and ‘new perspective[s]’ (2020, 698). These performances could open conversations on disability, bodily integrity, and technology, precisely because they are not explicitly thematized.

The arts are a vital resource for accessing lived realities – particularly the realities of those who are different from us – and also for expressing less apparent fears, anxieties, and desires that might be obscured by more straightforward sociological accounts (Ibid, 697).

6 Risks and potentialities of non-human-like prostheses

In what follows, I will specifically deal with the non-human nature of the prostheses worn by Mullins and Bufano. Their appearance certainly does not run the risk of normalization, often encountered with standard assistive technologies. In the artworks examined, prostheses recall animals and are even more liminal in Bufano’s case – halfway between birds, spiders and objects. Their movements and appearance suggest “a fluidity between human, animal, plant, and machine bodies” (Kafer 2019, 14).

This oscillation recalls Haraway’s cyborg figure, which insists on “boundary breakdowns” (1991, 151) among people, animals and technologies. Cyborgs embody “the *pleasure* of the confusion of boundaries”,

but they also interrogate “their construction and deconstruction” (Ibid, 150, 181). They participate in flexible mutations, and they are not afraid of Otherness; they constantly compose affinities precisely *because* they do not embody fixed identities. Since cyborgs do not aim at wholeness, they appear to be adequate figures to embody the ‘unsmoothness’ of Bufano and Mullins’s merging with alterity; cyborgs are not *exactly* hybrids and are always “in partial connection with others” (Ibid, 181).⁹ Concerning this point, Amanda Cachia examines “Bufano’s limbs” as they “meet the table legs” (2016, 138):

[the] coagulation of forms between flesh and furniture is not smooth, but rather points to an alternative world of bodies that become alive through inanimate forms. Bufano has rendered the furniture anthropomorphic (ivi, 138).

Mullins and Bufano’s embodied alterity is variously interweaved in the relationships with other figures on stage. For example, Heine examines the foster’s passage “from affinity to attack” (Heine 2014, 5) (from Novitiate to Cheetah) as the disruption of the stillness of the sequence, which figurately represents the *norm*. Mullins’s “transformational and transitional figure” (Ibid, 4) has to be quickly killed to restore the order. Violence must be unleashed to stop her deviance, that is, in a Deleuzian-Guattarian perspective, her “becoming ani/omalous” (Ibid, 3). The initial affinity between the Apprentice/Barney and the Novitiate/Mullins, therefore, does not survive their difference, meaning that her transformation into Cheetah. The two dancers of *One Breath*, instead, end up building a strategic alliance that permits them to never lose balance. They embody possible frictions as well, which do not, however, revolve into destruction. The similarity (which does not equate with sameness) between a non-disabled and a disabled dancer also makes us contem-

⁹ This point is relevant to every figure presented, except for the Cheetah, which is highly hybridized.

plate us on the porosity of disability. Giles never dominates Bufano as they both try out new ways of moving.

The closeness between disabled bodies and non-human entities entails risks as well. The sense of uncanniness produced could be followed by a detachment of the subjects involved from humanity. For example, analysing Mullins's persona and her roles in *Cremaster*, Tamari highlights how prostheses

that departs from the human form can potentially create ambivalent sensations. [...] This crossing and re-crossing of the boundaries between the human, other living entities and things, deliberately disrupts our capacity to see her as a human body (2017, 28, 34).

Both Tamari as a critic and Bufano as an artist accord a disruptive potential to these multiple and even risky readings; the latter also explicitly refers to the relevance of ambivalent feelings in the artistic and performative context.¹⁰ The perceived continuum among humanness, animality and thingness represents a particularly critical point if 'disability' is included in the equation. Historically, disabled people have been often assimilated to animals in terms of being *less than humans*

.....
10 I will not confront Tamari's theorization of another ambivalent reaction to prostheses, meaning "attractiveness" and "abjection". In this regard, she actually refers to high tech ones, which is not our case. In fact, she examines Mullins's appearance in different contexts than *Cremaster* (2017, 35). I briefly mention that the concept of abjection concerning prosthetic devices is related to "uncanniness", notoriously raised by roboticist Masahiro Mori. The more they recall human forms, the more they appear familiar to us – though, should they look too similar to human parts, they would be framed as uncanny. Therefore, in Mori's terms, the prostheses examined in this essay would *not* fall in the 'uncanny valley'. In recent years, there have been both critics and supporters of Mori's conclusion (cf. Mori 1970; Sansoni *et al.* 2015; Poliakoff *et al.* 2018). In addition, several disabled scholars and artists highlight how *uncanniness* is perhaps even more strongly perceived in case of 'unprosthetized' bodies, rather than the contrary (cf. Betcher 2001; Wright 2009; Lorde 1997). Lastly, even if Mori and his colleagues' theories were indisputable, at least in some cultural contexts, why should the design of prosthetic devices necessarily follow the general public's backlash?

(cf. Kupperts 2003; Gabbard 2015; Clare 2017; Taylor, 2017; Crary 2019; Lundblad and Grue 2021), or even addressed as *vegetables*.¹¹ For example, Eunjung Kim opens up to this thingification – this ‘unbecoming human’ (2015, 296) – framing it as a possible anti-ableist practice that values non-violence and interdependence. Therefore, while the proximity with animals and things does not represent a productive perspective *per se* for disabled people, it can become a critical point of strength when actively chased and crafted *by* them – in our case – in art.¹²

Lastly, whereas according to Margrit Shildrick (2010), all prosthetic devices pose questions about bodily integrity, I am arguing that forms which recall non-humanness situated in an artistic context are even more prone to do that. These spaces, as expressed also by Mullins and Bufano, are inherently more capable to let thoughts and feelings wander beyond stereotypes. Their performances can successfully challenge the idea that bodies are “self-contained entit[ies]” (Shildrick 2010, 12), and open up to their flexibility instead – which make them capable “to incorporate what might otherwise be understood as alien matter in either organic or inorganic forms” (Ibidi, 12). Besides, the ‘leakage’ (Shapiro 2011) of corporeal matter, the challenge to the ‘intactness’ (Ibid) of the body and the ‘instability of bodily boundaries’ (Ibid), represent recurrent themes in Barney’s artworks, especially in the *Cremaster Cycle*.¹³

7 Conclusion

As it was discussed in this article, it is not possible to trace a negative or positive linear review of the visual outcomes. The peculiar prosthetic

11 Other minority groups have been framed as objects or animals; for example, consider the dehumanization of black people. For a recent analysis see Anderson *et al.* (2018).

12 An interesting reference here, is undoubtedly Sunaura Taylor’s artistic work, centred on the nexus between disability and animality (2017).

13 Despite the title of the talk centres on disability, Shapiro does not deeply thematise how the category may be (eventually) reworked by Barney’s aesthetics.

aesthetics, which recalls several non-human entities, can function as a destabilizing practice towards bodily differences and corporeal boundaries (cf. Cachia 2016). At the same time, it could concur to reinforce a de-humanization tendency towards disabled people. The intrinsic *success* of these prostheses is very different from the ones used in daily life and may also branch off in multiple directions. They can enable specific performance, fit the scenic context, and be propelled by destabilizing purposes.

I have observed how the prostheses can nurture a peculiar and creative relationship with technology that diverges from the supercrip stereotype. The devices appear useless and non-productive in assistive terms. As Mullins explains, “the only purpose that these legs can serve, outside the context of the film is to provoke the senses and ignite the imagination. So, *whimsy matters*” (Mullins 2009a). This view is also shared by Kafer:

These are prosthetics with no medical or normalizing purpose, made solely for pleasure and politics, made from love for the opportunities offered by the odd body (2019, 14).

Therefore, these performances can enrich the imagination about what disabled bodies *can do*; the movements, the embodiment of devices and the aesthetic possibilities in creative contexts, and the ways to inhabit spaces. These tables-cheetah-spiders-jellyfish assemblages are often about to fall, attacked to death and, nonetheless, they find companions on their way like lambs and co-dancers.¹⁴ They unsettle the boundaries between human bodies and non-human entities, both objects and other animals. Disability, here, interferes with the most popular cultural texts about performance art, technologies, human features, spaces, and mobility. The performances invite us to nurture these “queerly sideways” (Kafer 2019, 16) and to experience (dis)identification, rather than alternatively fixate or expel the difference. Therefore, the body that emerges

14 On prosthetics as possible companions see Lundblad and Grue (2021).

is never self-complete and bounded against otherness, but is irreducibly caught up in a web of constitutive connections that disturb the very idea of human being (Shildrick 2010, 13).

However, I have also highlighted that the aesthetics of *Cremaster* entails a less destabilizing potentiality concerning disability. Concerning Barney's aesthetic vision, it is difficult to overlook the fact that Mullins's roles appear to lean on her *difference*. While a character or performer's difference may also be actively emphasised, in this case the result is, at least partially, an *othering* process. Mullins's bodily difference appears quite "*prosthetic to the narrative*" (Lundblad and Grue 2021, 559); her disability is employed to convey the characters' liminality and, in Barney's original idea, it serves to embody the transcendence of the body.¹⁵ Bufano's performance appears more fruitful because it is less prone to metaphorical exploitation and started directly from her own experience of disability.

Lastly, regarding the prostheses and the movements enacted, I have observed how Bufano's dance appears to trouble more productively the boundaries of disability. The wooden legs crafted by the artist herself, interpreted through the feminist concept of location, can produce critical views regarding the social-economic situation of disabled people. Her movements, along with Giles's, are sometimes unstable as Mullins's but are also capable of channelling the flexibility she can embody, challenging the bodily normativity that considers bipedalism the main objective of people with physical impairments (cf. Taylor 2017), and the dance is shared with a companion. Instead, the vulnerability expressed by Mullins's mobility and her fixity in the last scene of *The Order* seems mainly produced by Barney's opportunistic employment of her body.

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 15 Lundblad and Grue employ the sentence in their analysis of *Avatar*, but is also relevant in this case (2021). It derives from David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's theorization of "narrative prosthesis", which firstly pinpoints to disability pervasiveness in literary narratives, and secondly to its distancing from material experiences. Disability is rather employed to convey dispositions of the characters, or used as a plot trick.

In conclusion, by showing the primary role of aesthetics in the re-working of the contours of difference and disability, I argue for an ongoing exploration of the topics presented. Both artists and theorists interested in bodily normativity, therefore, may continue to produce interesting insights on how non-human traits could be productively associated with disability.¹⁶

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