

Kristina Fiedrich – RESEARCH PROPOSAL SUMMARY

The Fashionable Prosthetic: Investigating the visibility and new fashion of prosthetic research.

This research will explore the relationship between the technological advancements of prostheses and the emergence of prosthetics as fashion. The research intends to argue that the technological advancements in health research – specifically prosthetics and implants – have refigured a conversation based purely on form and function to one of potential, aesthetics and art. The assertion is that prosthetics have become the means by which to transform identity and the body itself.

Organizations such as the International Society for Prosthetics and Orthotics in Copenhagen, Association of Children’s Orthotic-Prosthetic Clinics and the not-for profit WarAmps formed to help amputees and inform the general public about prosthetics. Current medical research on the development and improvement of prosthetics include new composite materials, mobility, improved prosthetic function, mechanically-powered devices, impact of surgery and the effects of long-term prosthetic use.

With technological advancements, prostheses are more conspicuous: South African sprinter Oscar Pistorius competed in the 2008 Summer Paralympics with bionic limbs created by leading orthopedic developer Össur. Simultaneously, artificial limbs have the ability to be less conspicuous with the help of cosmesis (cosmetic enhancements for prosthetics) and new materials research. Better-fitting, lightweight, highly functional and often surpassing ‘natural’ human limb counterparts, emerging prosthetic technologies are transforming reality for many amputees. Images of amputations and prosthetics abound in popular culture, from Luke Skywalker’s robotic hand (1977) to athlete, activist and actor Aimee Mullins’ custom hand-carved, wooden high-heeled legs on Alexander McQueen’s runway (1998). As a result, Mullins exemplifies the discussion of prostheses as fashion statement. Artist Rebecca Horn, after suffering a temporary physical disability, began creating various prostheses in 1968. Matthew Barney, an artist best known for his work with prosthetics, cast Mullins in his *Cremaster* film series in 2002.

As a visual artist, I am interested in investigating the relationship between the visibility of the prosthetic and the new wave discussion of fashionable prosthetics. In exploring the correlation between the aesthetics and appearance of the prosthesis, I will collect anecdotal information from amputees, occupational therapists and prosthetic engineers. The dissemination of the results of the research would be presented as a body of work including a blog, published book, drawings, and installation culminating in a series of exhibitions. In addition to the creative practice, the research would also be disseminated through a comprehensive peer-reviewed thesis paper, artist talks and workshops.

Central to a discussion of the advancement of technology in health research and its reflection on contemporary culture and medicine, the research will manifest as a visual narrative, attempting to bridge the gap between art and science as well as that of our physical bodies and the experience of technological interactions. In this way, the research encourages a discourse between the body and an identity formed within the proliferation of technological advancements in prosthetic research.