On Crutches, Choreography and (Crip) Care: Curative objects and palliative things in two performance pieces

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For G. F.

Snapshot 1: two tall, slim, long-limbed, impossibly athletic, nearly nude female dancers with sleek hairdos enter stage right. They are, quite literally, joined at the hip: a leg brace is holding together the right leg of one and the left leg of the other, making their (already perfectly coordinated, though odd and peculiar) movements flow with even more synchronicity and rhythmic precision. From the left, enters another, equally lean woman, clad in suggestive underwear which consists of thin strips of white material similar to those that constitute the leg brace worn by the two other dancers. Her outfit – a harness bra and harness panties – looks like it has come straight out of the medical BDSM fetish scene; bandage meets bondage. She is using a medical walking cane that is too short for her tall frame, which is further amplified by her pointe shoes. The cane hinders rather than helps her movement, and she theatrically struggles with it: due to its shortness it gets in the way of her maintaining her balance; the awkward angles it forces her body into interfere with her balletic uprightness. After a series of grotesque and uncomfortable moves, she relinquishes it. Immediately, her virtuoso technique becomes apparent as she performs a sexually charged, animalistic dance at the two barres that have been placed in the middle of the stage by two male dancers while she was grappling with the cane. Even now, her dance is far from smooth; her vigorous, sharp moves suggest anguish, contorting her body in poses that invoke the iconographies of hysteria, and yet they are way more controlled and less painful to watch than her interaction with the cane was.

Snapshot 2: a boyish, petite woman wearing jeans, a loose T-shirt and a pixie haircut is moving on crutches around the performance floor, populated with sparsely seated members of the audience – some in chairs, some in wheelchairs, some on cushions – and a tall male dancer lying on the ground. Something about her physique, other than the crutches, suggests a non-normative body; it might be her unusual torso-to-legs proportion, the inward turn of her feet, or the intensely focused attention she pays to the ground while moving. I will allow myself to cite Julia Watts Belser's beautifully detailed description of this part of the performance rather than trying to write it anew:

[The female dancer] Claire moves fluidly among the audience on stage, her steps fast and light, the music up-tempo and staccato. As she approaches Jess [the male dancer], she plants her crutches to either side of his legs, then levers her body up, lands her feet upon his knees. She lingers there for a moment, then spins off her perch, tucking herself into a curl, her body held horizontal by the crutches, one breath of perfect suspension before she sweeps her leg into a slow, deliberate curve that brings her feet back to the ground. She approaches again, spiralling her way through another portion of the audience [...] Crutches allow her to hover in the air [...] The next time she spins, she brings her feet into contact with a member of the audience, alighting on someone's knees, touching down against a woman's crossed arms.[1]

The first snapshot describes a scene from *bODY_rEMIX / gOLDBERG_vARIATIONS*, a ballet (to use the term utilised on the project's website) staged by French Canadian choreographer Marie Chouinard and performed by the dancers from her dance company. The second snapshot captures a score in *The Way You Look (at me) Tonight*, a 'dance-based performance project' by San Francisco-based choreographer and performer Jess Curtis and Scottish artist Claire Cunningham.[2] Both performances incorporate medical assistive devices: in *bODY_rEMIX* this includes a range of objects such as canes, crutches, leg braces, rollators and walking frames (all used by dancers without visible disabilities), while in *The Way You Look...* both the disabled dancer, Claire Cunningham, and at several points her able-bodied partner, Jess Curtis, use extendable crutches.

Prosthetic and assistive devices have been utilised by both disabled and non-disabled artists over the last two decades in increasingly creative and novel ways. This use has been celebrated as a means of resignifying objects that had previously been construed, and read, as medicalised, undesirable or even degraded. As performance theorist Bree Hadley notes, 'symbols associated with the disabled body are being reappropriated and recontextualised not just by disabled artists, but by other artists, too, as positive symbols of difference'.[3] Such 'positive' reinscribing of new meanings on medical items through their use in arts and culture has been discussed at length by

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[1]   Julia Watts Belser, 'Improv and the angel: Disability dance, embodied ethics, and Jewish Biblical narrative', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 47:3 (2019) 443–469, 461.

[2]   Jess Curtis, '"The Way You Look (at me) Tonight": Touch Tours, Haptic Practices, and Sensory Strategies', in *Thinking Touch in Partnering and Contact Improvisation: Philosophy, Pedagogy, Practice,* ed. Malaika Sarco-Thomas, 10–26, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020, 10.

[3]   Bree Hadley, *Disability, Public Space Performance and Spectatorship: Unconscious Performers,* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 152.

scholars from a variety of fields.[4] The current chapter, however, moves beyond the semiotic reading of assistive devices and considers their use through material-semiotic and non-representational lenses. That is, rather than analysing what crutches and other medicalised props *stand for* in these performance pieces, I aim to elucidate what they *do*. Borrowing from an actor-network theory approach to material culture, I am interested in objects' and things' actancy and their capacity to 'authorise, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on', as well as – in fact, more than – in their signifying power.[5]

Conceived as a response to the title and theme of this volume, this chapter considers how medical devices used in contemporary dance and performance are configured, in some cases, as curative and in others, as palliative; in some cases, as things, and in others, as objects. It enquires how, by affording different entanglements – between bodies, things/objects, space, and other bodies – crutches and other medical devices in the two performances produce different temporalities, corporealities, subjectivities and ontologies. My readings are informed by queer and crip theories, phenomenology, psychoanalysis and by my own embodied experiences, both of dance and dance training (albeit as an amateur) and of using an assistive device – in my case, a back brace (albeit a lot less consistently than my doctors would have wished for).

I begin with defining some of the key concepts I use in my analysis. I then turn to a close reading of the use of crutches in the two performance pieces through the lens of these conceptual frameworks, demonstrating how such use construes different paradigms of embodiment, (dis)ability and relationships between bodies and objects/things.

Curative / palliative

In her seminal book *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, disability theorist Alison Kafer discusses 'a curative imaginary' which is 'an understanding of disability that not only expects and assumes intervention but also cannot imagine or comprehend anything other than intervention'.[6] Such an imaginary is predicated on the idea of disability – or indeed any disease – as a problem to be resolved or, at the very least, mitigated. In this normalising paradigm, a 'cure' for a disabled or diseased body/mind

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[4]   For discussions about the use of prostheses in photography, fashion and visual arts, see Laini Burton and Jana Melkumova-Reynolds, '"My leg is a giant stiletto heel": Fashioning the prosthetised body', *Fashion Theory: Journal of Dress, Body and Culture*, 23:2 (2019) 195–218; Jana Melkumova-Reynolds, '"Let me be your stimy toy": Fashioning disability, cripping fashion', in *Dangerous Bodies: New Perspectives on Fashion and Transgression,* eds. Royce Mahawatte and Jacki Willson, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023.
[5]   Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 72.
[6]   Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013, 27.

is something that is sought by default. The logic of a curative imaginary, then, is that of human perfectibility.

It is not difficult to see how this logic implies a certain temporality, one that Kafer refers to as 'curative time' where 'the only appropriate disabled mind/body is one cured or moving toward cure'.[7] 'Moving toward' is an important feature of the curative imaginary whose defining characteristic is the injunction to progress, to aim – and work – towards overcoming, or at least *mastering*, the disease at some point in the future. Such an imaginary relies, to use Sara Ahmed's term, on 'promissory forms of happiness';[8] on the idea that 'happiness is what you get if you reach certain points'.[9] In a curative imaginary, being 'well' – a mastery of the body, of the self and, ultimately, of the real – is 1. Attainable 2. Desirable 3. Not yet achieved.

The conceptual opposite of the curative model of care within medicine is the palliative model where care is aimed to alleviate symptoms, rather than remove the cause of the disease. To use Ahmed's language again, this model eschews the 'promise of happiness' and instead operates from the premise that there is no cure for the condition in question. In a sense, the palliative model is an instantiation of Heideggerian 'Being-towards-death',[10] just like the curative model can be seen as a form of 'being-towards-happiness' – or, perhaps more appropriately for the purposes of this chapter, 'being-towards-mastery'. Rather than striving to make the subject fundamentally 'better' in the future, palliative care focuses on making their lived experience (ultimately, of living towards death) more tolerable in the present.

The time paradigm of palliative care is clearly different from that of the curative model because it is not underpinned by the idea of progress. In its refusal of futurity, palliative time shares many similarities with queer time as conceptualised by queer theorists such as Lee Edelman: eschewing 'the constraining mandate of futurism' and embracing the idea that there may be 'no future', it moves beyond the familiar tropes of purposeful linear development and growth, allowing for stillness and repetition.[11] In her poignant meditation on time and care, psychoanalyst Lisa Baraitser invites her reader 'to think of how we might attempt to take care of time when it seems to pool, dammed up by a foreclosed future that no longer brings [a] promise'.[12] In this passage, she is not

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[7]   Kafer, *Feminist*, 28.
[8]   Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010, 160.
[9]   Ahmed, *The Promise*, 26.
[10]   Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1962.
[11]   Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004, 4.
[12]   Lisa Baraitser, *Enduring Time*, London: Bloomsbury, 2017, 12.

talking about palliative time as such, and yet her discussions of 'time's suspension – modes of waiting, staying, delaying, enduring, persisting, repeating, maintaining, preserving and remaining – that produce felt experiences of time not passing', which she uses to refer to temporalities of other forms of care, could be productive to think with about the temporal modalities of palliation, too.[13]

Etymologically, the term 'palliate' is thought to originate from Latin 'palla' (a garment) and 'pallium' (a cloak)[14]. 'The word 'pallium' was used to refer to a garment worn by Greeks made from wool, flax, or cotton'.[15] Another linguistic tradition traces it to the proto-Indo-European word 'pelte' which means to 'shield', and some advocates prefer this interpretation as they find the concept of 'cloaking' to be ridden with the negative connotations of 'covering up' or 'masking'.[16] Thus, medical humanities scholar David Morris contends that palliative care 'shields the patients from assault of symptoms' and offers 'security amid circumstances full of risk and uncertainty'.[17] Such a reading, he maintains, is richer and more conducive to a recognition of the importance of palliative care than its association with 'cloaking'. What Morris seems to overlook here, however, is how vital cloaking itself can be – one only has to think of security blankets and their role in comforting the child, or the use of emergency blankets in first aid.

In this chapter, I would like to think of objects and things as curative or palliative. Curative objects/things aim to 'cure' us, i.e., to make us better. They are our aids in the projects of self-mastery and self-improvement, there to propel us towards our desired aims and goals. In Ahmed's terms, they are 'happy objects' – objects that 'become happiness pointers, as if to follow their point would be to find happiness [...] in directing ourselves toward this or that object, we are aiming somewhere else: toward a happiness that is presumed to follow'.[18] Assisting us in our quest for the 'good life', curative objects/things are telos-oriented and, in the original sense of the word, prosthetic: the term 'prosthesis', derived, via late Latin *prostheticus*, from ancient Greek *prosthetikós*, 'adding; repletive; giving additional power', has the idea of extending, building up and developing embedded in its etymology.[19]

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[13]   Baraitser, *Enduring Time*, 12.
[14]   Salimah H. Meghani, 'A concept analysis of palliative care in the United States', *Journal of Advanced Nursing,* 46: 2 (2004) 152–161, 155.
[15]   Meghani, A concept analysis, 155.
[16]   David B. Morris, The cloak and the shield: A thumbnail history of palliation, *Illness, Crisis and Loss,* 6 (1998) 229–232, 231.
[17]   Morris, The cloak, 231.
[18]   Ahmed, *The Promise*, 26.
[19]   Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek–English Lexicon*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940. Available at http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0057:entry=prosqetiko/s (accessed 15 February 2023).

Conversely, palliative objects/things do not aim to change us into better versions of us, nor to aid our progress; they are non-teleological. They step in to shroud us, comfort us, stay with us while we are living through pain, anguish and rupture; to care for us without attempting to cure us. One of the etymological traditions links the word 'palliate' to 'pall', a cloud (as in 'cast a pall')[20]. A cloud floats, hovers over[21], dwells, cloaks. I propose to think of palliative things as those that enable and enact hovering, cloaking, dwelling, and being-with.

Objects / things

Before I move on to the analysis of the two performances, I need to disentangle another dichotomy that the current volume's title invites us to consider, that of objects and things. The scholarship that draws a distinction between these two terms builds on Martin Heidegger's essay *The Thing*. Heidegger differentiates between objects and things by suggesting that an 'object' is 'that which stands before, over against, opposite us' whereas the thing 'stands forth', which 'has the sense of stemming from somewhere, whether this be a process of self-making or of being made by another'.[22] An object, in other words, is static, finished, and opposed to the subject (and, possibly, to other objects), while a thing is processual and relational – it is a 'bearing-upon, a concern'.[23] Its processual nature is expressed in Heidegger's proposition that 'a thing things' in a 'worlding world'.[24]

Building on Heidegger's ideas, anthropologist Tim Ingold proposes to think of things as 'gatherings of forces'.[25] He uses the tree as an example of such a gathering: can we really think of a tree, he asks, without including the bark, the creatures that live in the bark, the algae and lichens that cover it, or the currents of the wind that form its 'character'? In other words, 'What is tree and what is not-tree? Where does the tree end and the rest of the world begin?'[26] In a similar vein, he continues, a building cannot be easily disentangled from its environment: 'Rainwater drips through the roof where the wind has blown off a tile, feeding a fungal growth that threatens to

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[20]   Elliot Vredenburg, 'Notes toward a meteorology of the cloud', *Surveillance & Society*, 13:2 (2015) 283–291.

[21]   Lisa Baraitser, drawing on the work of Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, mentions 'hovering' as one of the temporal modes of care in a recent interview – see Laura Kemmer, Annika Kühn and Vanessa Weber, 2021, Pandemic times. A conversation with Lisa Baraitser about the temporal politics of COVID-19, *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization*, 21:1, 21–30.

[22]   Martin Heidegger, 'The Thing', *Poetry, Language, Thought (*trans. A. Hofstadter. New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

[23]   Heidegger, 'The Thing', 173.

[24]   Heidegger, 'The Thing', 178.

[25]   Tim Ingold, 'Bringing things to life: Creative entanglements in a world of materials', *Realities Working Papers*, 15 (2010) 2–14, 4.

[26]   Ingold, 'Bringing things to life', 4.

decompose the timbers, the gutters are full of rotten leaves', and both human and non-human inhabitants (insects, rodents, pets) constantly come and go.[27] For this reason, to Ingold, 'not unlike the tree, the real house is a gathering of lives, and to inhabit it is to join in the gathering, or in Heidegger's terms, to participate with the thing in its thinging'.[28] A thing, then, is an assemblage of multiple simultaneous, overlapping or conflicting, open-ended processes, 'goings-on'.

Because a thing is emergent, processual and relational, it constitutes other things (including bodies) as such, too. An object presupposes a subject that stands before it, observes it or acts upon it – that is, exercises mastery over it[29]; but a thing summons other forms of relating. Ingold notes that '[t]o observe a thing is not to be locked out but to be invited in to the gathering' that it is.[30] I believe the philosopher Michael Polanyi refers to a similar way of relating to things when he speaks about 'indwelling', i.e., experiencing things by 'pour[ing] ourselves into them',[31] 'dwelling' in them, 'depriv[ing] them of their character as external objects'.[32] (The term 'pouring' will become pertinent to my analysis later in this chapter). The collapse of the subject-object dichotomy, invoked here, is a fundamental feature of flat ontologies – that is, ontologies that do not privilege any actors/objects over others.[33] In such ontologies, the focus is not individual actors, subjects or objects, but on relations and processes of mutual constitution between various actants in a network (or, to use Ingold's term, meshwork). Things, in the sense defined above, belong in, and produce, flat ontologies, while objects enunciate the more classical subject-object ontologies.

Now that these terms have been defined, however briefly and crudely, I will proceed to consider prosthetics as curative or palliative objects or things.

Crutches and *agōn*: *bODY_rEMIX/gOLDBERG_vARIATIO*NS
Since the late 1970s, Marie Chouinard has been known for her viscerally moving, provocative, deeply sensual and often troubling performances. These may feature 'the reanimation of the human body via technology and prosthetics; a playful reinscription of the aesthetics and traditions of classical ballet; [...] metamorphosis underpinning the shocking, transgressive, and explicit; a

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27   Ingold, 'Bringing things to life', 5.
28   Ingold, 'Bringing things to life', 5.
29   For a discussion of 'projects of mastery' see, for instance, Leo Bersani, 'Sociality and Sexuality', *Is the Rectum a Grave? and other essays*, London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, 102–119.
30   Ingold, 'Bringing things to life', 4.
31   Michael Polanyi, 'Sense-giving and sense-reading', *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy*, 42:162 (1967) 301-325, 303.
32   Polanyi, 'Sense-giving and sense-reading', 304.
33   See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2010; Graham Harman, *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016; Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.

hesitation between the animalistic and the otherworldly'.[34] After over a decade as a solo performer and choreographer, in 1990 she founded Compagnie Marie Chouinard, which went on to become an internationally acclaimed dance company. *bODY_rEMIX/gOLDBERG_vARIATIONS*, premiered at Venice Biennale in 2005, comprises two acts of 45 minutes each, in which ten contemporary dancers (who undertook pointe training for the performance) perform physically vigorous and increasingly intense and bizarre vignettes that involve their interaction with each other, two barres, a clothes rack and an array of medical devices and other props. This is accompanied with a musical score by acousmatic composer Louis Dufort comprising extracts from a 1981 recording of Glenn Gould's rendition of *Goldberg Variations* by Johann Sebastian Bach, interspersed with cut-up, slowed down or sped up and/or heavily reverberated clips from Gould's radio interview; and, at several points, the surreal 'distorted grunts, groans and breaths' emitted by one of the dancers who carries a microphone in her mouth.[35] The show has toured Asia, Europe and North America and received numerous accolades. It has also been praised by scholars of performance and dance. Thus, in her compelling and sophisticated analysis, Alanna Thain considers *bODY_rEMIX* as an exercise in transcending the material and opening up the immaterial, virtual dimension of the dancers' bodies, which 'activates the intensive movement of affect as a resonant exploration of the in-between'.[36] Similarly, Hadley suggests that the prostheses used in the show 'challenge the dancers' bodies to go beyond their normal movement habits, to find new movements, new relationships and new modes of being'.[37] I will come back to some of these discussions later in the chapter.

The performance starts with a female dancer wearing a single pointe shoe standing on her pointe-less, bare foot and knocking the other, pointe-wearing foot on the floor forcefully. The knocking is loud, persistent, unremitting; the kind that makes you certain the knocker is prepared to break in if their call goes unanswered. Pointes and other prosthetics in this performance are, indeed, tools for breaking in: into space, into another dancer's kinesphere,[38] and into the audience's comfort zone.

Insert around here: Figure 1. Compagnie Marie Chouinard, bODY_rEMIX / gOLDBERG_vARIATIONS, Photo: Marie Chouinard, dancers: Carol Prieur, Chi Long.

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[34] Alanna Thain, The in-tensions of extensions: Compagnie Marie Chouinard's 'bODYrEMIX/gOLDBERG VARIATIONS', *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies,* 19/1 (2008) 71–95, 80.

[35] Hadley, *Disability*, 160.

[36] Thain, 'The in-tensions', 79.

[37] Hadley, *Disability*, 162.

[38] Kinesphere is 'the sphere around the body whose periphery can be reached by easily extended limbs without stepping away from that place which is the point of support when standing on one foot' – see Rudolf Laban, *Choreutics,* London: Macdonald & Evans, 1966, 10.

Such breaking in is necessitated by the profoundly agonistic nature of *bODY_rEMIX*. The performance unfolds as an intense struggle of the dancers with both human and non-human adversaries. This combative tenor becomes pronounced early on, in a scene where two male dancers move the two barres that were previously standing side-by-side and position them in a such a way that they enclose the space, turning what was a ballet class-like setup into a space reminiscent of a boxing ring. They face each other for a few long and tense seconds in what looks like a stand-off and proceed to perform a duet bristling with forceful and seductive lunges, chest-butts and headbutts. The trope of a battle – gripping, at times extremely uncomfortable to watch yet impossible to look away from – has a long genealogy within the history of theatre and the performing arts as the cultural imaginary of *agōn*, the ancient Greek term that can be translated as 'contest' or 'debate'. The ethics and aesthetics of *agōn* underpinned much of ancient Greece's cultural, social and political life and was the cornerstone of ancient theatrical tragedy and spectator sports. The enjoyment of watching *agōn* as entertainment is, needless to say, still deeply entrenched in Western culture, and I have wondered if *bODY rEMIX* was conceived to make the spectator at once aware of their own enjoyment and slightly embarrassed about it.

In *bODY_rEMIX*, the *agōn* onstage often involves a contest between the human and the prosthetic device: we watch the dancer's attempts to tame an uncomfortable cane, to master the rigidity of crutches and the constraints of walking frames that are perpetually too short for the dancers' height and force them into difficult, often untenable positions. The viewer soon comes to resent the medical items onstage because they clearly stand in the way of the dancers' athletic perfection, thus frustrating the spectator's scopophilic desires. The props are the easily identifiable antagonists in the show; a lot of the time they are plot devices in the agonistic encounters staged by Chouinard, turning what might otherwise be a smooth and eminently watchable contemporary ballet into a steeplechase or, as a comment under a video extract of the performance on YouTube puts it, into 'survival horror'.

When they are not 'standing against' the dancers, the medical devices become allies in the performer's battle against the world, which may include other objects or dancers. Thus, there is a disturbing scene where a female dancer approaches another who is lying on the floor, seemingly exhausted, and pokes her chest with a crutch. Soon, they are performing a fight-like dance, lashing out at each other, in turns, with crutches and with pointe shoes, all while maintaining their exquisite gracefulness. This is one of the many instances in the ballet where crutches and pointes assume

similar roles; those of slicing through the space, extending into it and aggressively occupying it. Such slicing into and occupying is played out on the sonic level, too: both crutches and pointes are used to produce sharp, penetrating sounds, be it knocking, clanging or stomping. For instance, there is a particularly grotesque and provocative score where a man on crutches enters the stage with a third crutch attached to his waistline like a strap-on dildo. He approaches a clothes rack and violently thrusts against it, his strap-on hitting it with a loud, piercing metallic noise.

Crutches and other assistive devices, then, activate the stage as an agonistic space. At times, they are the drivers of the struggle, creating orientations and spatial conditions that need to be overcome by the dancers; at others, they aid such overcoming. By engaging with them, the dancers enter into fantastical and phantasmagorical assemblages with these items and with each other. These assemblages offer openings for rethinking the human form – on more than one occasion, the way performers are compelled to position themselves in order to use the prosthetics makes them look like insects, birds, or other non-human beings. Importantly, however, there is never any sense of fusion or incorporation between the dancers and the objects; on the contrary, their relationship is reliant on a continuous and riotous (re)production of difference between them.

Chouinard's choice of devices here is interesting: a crutch, both literally and metaphorically, is something that is meant to take on some of the body's weight, to ease the burden inherent in its (uniquely human condition of) uprightness. And yet, except for one scene where a dancer leans back on her crutches to watch her colleague perform a vigorous routine, in *bODY_rEMIX* they are never used for support. In fact, they become less and less crutch-like as the performance progresses. At one point, a male dancer uses a total of five extremely short crutches; two of them are ostensibly used to prop him up (albeit in a surreal, difficult pose), but the others are not: a short crutch is coming out of his mouth, another crutch is strapped to his forehead, and yet another one to his back. He moves around the stage in an awkward diagonal position, as if permanently coming out of a press-up; his movements are permeated by the same anguished and frantic energy that is palpable throughout *bODY_rEMIX*. The shapes he adopts are mainly unrecognisable, even to the eye of an experienced dance spectator. This is one of the most interesting parts of the performance as it does conjure radically different possibilities of the body: the crutches, which are attached to different parts of the dancer's body, noticeably shift his centre of gravity, thus making for a novel relationship with the ground and, by extension, with the rest of the space, and enabling what Thain refers to as 'a different bodily kinestruct'.[39] Ultimately, however, the crutches here

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[39]   Thain, 'The in-tensions of Extensions', 72.

continue to *produce* rather than reduce the dancer's struggle, and produce and reaffirm the dancer's alterity to the world, including the crutches themselves.

What, then, are we to make of the role of prosthetics in *bODY rEMIX*? I propose, firstly, that they are best read as objects rather than things. As Ingold explains, drawing on Heidegger, 'an object stands before us as a *fait accompli*, presenting its congealed, outer surfaces to our inspection. It is defined by its very 'overagainstness' in relation to the setting in which it is placed'.[40] This would be an apt description of the use of props in Chouinard's choreography: they stand in the dancers' way, interfering in their spatial explorations and obstructing their movement. They are rigid, uncooperative, reluctant to negotiate. On the few occasions when they are not working against the dancers, they are used to extend the dancer's body and colonise the space around it. In that sense, they help to render dancers' bodies into objects – also determined by 'overagainstness' – as well, enabling them to acquire, however temporarily, what Leo Bersani might call a 'mastery [that] places the subject in the world on the subject's own terms'.[41] Such mastery, in his analysis, belongs to a particular 'relational system' in which '[r]elationality is grounded in antagonism and misapprehension, which means that to meet the world is always to see the world as a place where I am not', and 'the subject is either in danger of being stolen or has already suffered a loss of self'.[42]

Furthermore, they are objects that foster a curative paradigm in which even the most 'abled' body, like those of the muscular and agile dancers of Compagnie Marie Chouinard, is seen as always already disabled. This is particularly apparent in the several scenes where female dancers are seen only wearing one pointe shoe: the pointe-less leg looks vulnerable, too soft, too short, almost lame. Such a body is constantly struggling to assert itself and its position of mastery in relation to the world and to other bodies; it is incomplete and, despite its athleticism, muscularity and stamina, not-quite-there-yet, and therefore permanently on a quest to get 'there'. In another essay, Bersani speaks of the consciousness constantly forming 'affectively motivated projects that essentially oppose us to the world, projects whose satisfaction requires mastery of otherness'.[43] Here, otherness is used not (only) in terms of identity (racial, sexual and other forms of difference) but refers to everything that is 'not-me', which might include one's own body. The dancers in *bODY_rEMIX* are grappling for such mastery throughout the performance. While *bODY_rEMIX*

[40]   Ingold, 'Bringing things to life',4.
[41]   Leo Bersani, 'Sociality and Sexuality', *Is the Rectum a Grave? and other essays*, London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, 102–119, 110.
[42]   Bersani, 'Sociality and Sexuality', 110.
[43]   Leo Bersani, 'Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject', *Is The Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays,* London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, 139–153, 149.

is not, as Thain asserts[44], 'about' disability as such, I would argue it is about the inherent incompleteness of the human that underpins a need to strive for progress, for completeness, for a contained, coherent and commanding subjectivity.

The time of *bODY_rEMIX* is, to use Julia Kristeva's terminology, is 'time as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding; time as departure, progression, and arrival' which also 'renders explicit a rupture, an expectation, or an anguish'.[45] It is, in other words, a corollary of curative time, of being-towards-cure, or being-towards-mastery. Crutches, canes and other medical devices in the show are *curative objects* insomuch as, even when they do not enact or promise a cure, they enable and underpin the curative paradigm that is central to the performance. Whether helping or hindering the dancers, they are implicated in, and productive of, the 'projects of mastery' that *bODY_rEMIX* conjures, a mastery of the subject over objects.

Crutches and care: *The Way You Look (at me) Tonight*

First performed in 2016, *The Way You Look (at me) Tonight* is a multimedia and multi-format project: a dance performance interspersed with abundant, sometimes (seemingly) unscripted, dialogue and philosophical commentary, poetry, video art, interactions with the audience and, at one point, a song performed live. The show is a collaboration between Claire Cunningham, a Scottish dancer, choreographer and performer born with a medical condition which began to require the use of crutches in her teens; Jess Curtis, an American choreographer, dancer and researcher; and Alva Noë, an American philosopher and a member of Curtis's PhD dissertation committee whose work on enactive perception informed many of the project's ideas. Noë's filmed or audio recorded commentary is present throughout the performance, woven into the soundscape by Matthias Herrmann, which largely consists of slightly distorted and crackling recordings of popular mid-20th century jazz songs and ethereal ambient music, and into video art by Yoann Trellu projected onto 3 screens. But even outside of Noë's input, philosophical discourse flows freely throughout the show: wandering around the stage in what looks like part contemporary dance, part performance, part meandering, Curtis and Cunningham discuss perceptions and experience of disability, age(ing) and gender, crutches and wheelchairs, and relationships between bodies, other bodies (including non-human and inanimate ones), and the world. These discussions, although fully accessible to a non-academic, are rooted in philosophy and critical theory; Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, Graham Harman and object-oriented ontology all make an appearance, as does

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[44]   Thain, 'The in-tensions of Extensions', 85.
[45]   Julia Kristeva, 'Women's time', *Signs*, 7:1 (1981) 13–35, 17.

Marie Chouinard, in a brief in-joke: at one point, when Cunningham teaches Curtis to use crutches, she reproaches him, jokingly, for not 'cripping up' enough – that is, for not actively performing pain and deformity as is expected from an able-bodied person using medical items associated with disability. 'I wouldn't get into Marie Chouinard's company, then!' Curtis retorts, to a few knowing laughs in the audience. This is clearly a sarcastic reference to the use of prosthetics in *bODY_rEMIX* – Curtis and Cunningham confirmed this reference but were reluctant to discuss it further when I asked them about this response during the Q&A following their performance at The Place in London in 2019.

Audience involvement is a key feature of the show. At the outset, upon entering the performance space, members of the audience are offered the choice of sitting in the centre and therefore being subject to physical contact with the dancers, or sitting a little further afield. As the show unfolds, the audience is invited to participate in various exercises exploring attention and perception. Most importantly, those who choose to occupy seats in the performance space are regularly touched or brushed with by both Curtis and Cunningham, whose dancing and talking occurs in very close proximity to the audience.

Crutches feature prominently both in the choreography of *The Way You Look...* (hereon *TWYL*) and in its dialogue. They are discussed at length throughout the performance and at one point become the subject of a dance lesson that Cunningham gives to Curtis (more on this below). Early in the show, in her reflection on crutches, Cunningham cites disability scholar and activist Julia Watts Belser's writing on what she coins as 'queer relatedness'[46] between wheelchair users and their chairs, premised on recognising and celebrating wheelchairs' 'animacy' and the sense of kinship and interanimation that wheelers experience towards them. Cunningham draws parallels with her own relationship with her prostheses: 'I am never really alone', she says, referring to crutches that are both her dance and her life partners.

The use of crutches allows Cunningham to inhabit planes of movement other than the vertical plane characteristic of ballet and the horizontal plane of floor work central to contemporary dance. A lot of the time she is positioned in a liminal state, her body oriented in ways unfamiliar to dance spectators. The logic of her movement is not upright and not bipedal; the crutches make her into a four-legged being (reflected in the playful intertextual title of one of her more recent works, *Four*

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[46]   Julia Watts Belser, Vital wheels: Disability, relationality, and the queer animacy of vibrant things, *Hypatia* 31:1 (2016) 5–21.

Legs Good), and her steps are organised accordingly. In interviews, Cunningham reflects on how her embodiment that is premised on having four points of contact with the ground influences her choreography: 'I paid a lot of attention to the ground. I was realising that I was quite geekily obsessed with ground and terrain and that I was noticing the ground a lot, and that it was to do with using the crutches, with having four legs rather than two'.[47]

<mark>Insert around here: Figure 1. Claire Cunningham and Jess Curtis in *The Way You Look (at me) Tonight*. Photo by Sven Hagolani.</mark>

This 'obsession with ground' is an irreducible part of a particular mode of being-in-the-world that Cunningham describes as follows: 'certain aspects of my attention become very highly tuned that are related to coordinating four feet... I think I became aware of it being a large part of my life – a spatial tension, an attention to terrain'.[48] Watts Belser, in her analysis of the performance, also focuses on the 'quality of perception she [Cunningham] has honed as a crutch user, a mode of motion that requires her to always look down, to assess the landscape, to gauge in an instant where she can safely place a crutch [...] Crutch use hones a specific type of knowledge'.[49]

Indeed, a key theme in *TWYL* is the sensory knowing that stems from lived experiences of disability. Although Cunningham and Curtis do not use this term, some disability scholars might call the performance a cripistemological[50] (a portmanteau of crip and epistemology) exercise. *TWYL* is concerned with the phenomenology of disabled modes of moving, feeling and knowing as a complete sensory-perceptual experience and a unique epistemic position. It foregrounds crip subjectivity as a body of knowledge about space, relationships with objects/things, and embodiment itself, and Cunningham's engagement with her crutches is a constant rearticulation and reconfiguring of this body of knowledge. At different points in the performance, the idea of a crip expertise is made explicit in both moving and humorous ways. Such is, for instance, the scene where Cunningham instructs Curtis on how to use crutches, explaining to him how to position his hands on the handles, how to grip them, how to shift his weight and how to navigate the space. A non-disabled performer, Curtis becomes a sensory apprentice to his disabled partner and expresses surprise, unease and then joy as he discovers new modes of moving. This scene

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[47]   This interview with Cunningham can be viewed on her website or at https://vimeo.com/453253379.
[48]   https://vimeo.com/453253379 (accessed 15 February 2023).
[49]   Watts Belser, 'Improv', 461.
[50] Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer, Cripistemologies: An Introduction, *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies,* 8:2 (2014), 127-147

places 'a premium on the disabled subject as a knowledge producer';[51] here, crutches subvert the usual positions of the non-disabled person as more proficient (in movement, dealing with material items and generally being-in-the-world) than the disabled person.

However, to assume that the focus here is on Cunningham's mastery of crutches as a means of taming the object world would be to misunderstand the entire ethos of the performance. Despite her proficiency and prowess, the relationship between Cunningham and her crutches is not configured as that of command or mastery. Rather, it is a relationship of (mutual) care. Disability and dance scholars Danielle Peers and Lindsay Eales have once aptly noted that '[t]hose appropriately performing able-bodiedness comfortably *use* technology, and those who fail to perform able-bodiedness (the disabled) are uncomfortably *dependent* upon technology'.[52] Many disability dance projects tend to celebrate the former type of relationship, highlighting disabled dancers' supreme command of wheelchairs or other prostheses. Yet, while this is important for removing the stigma from disability – essentially, by constructing it as super-ability – such projects ultimately reproduce the ableist ideal of a sovereign, empowered subject in command of their body and of the world.

Celebrating dependence (in any form), on the other hand, is no mean feat; it is much more difficult than celebrating mastery, and there is not, as yet, a definitive language for it within contemporary Western culture. As psychoanalyst Adam Phillips writes (emphasis added), 'no one ever says, for example, "he's very good at being dependent on her" [...] Why, if I said I had *an ambition to become more dependent*, would I, at least in this culture, be politically and psychologically disparaged? We can think of success [...] as being related to issues of self-sufficiency'.[53]

The way Cunningham engages with, and talks about, her crutches opens up much needed ways for rethinking relationships of (inter)dependence as desirable and generative. Much of her language, both kinetic and literal, is informed by contact improvisation (CI), a dance and movement form that both she and Curtis work with. To let the reader grasp the ethos and embodied reality of CI, I will cite a poignant description of one of the key aspects of the technique by choreographer and dance theorist Ann Cooper Albright:

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51   Tobin Siebers, 'Returning the Social to the Social Model', David T. Mitchell, Susan Antebi, and Sharon L. Snyder eds. *The Matter of Disability: Materiality, Biopolitics, Crip Affect*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019, 39–48, 47.

52   Danielle Peers and Lindsay Eales, 'Moving materiality: People, tools, & this *thing* called disability', *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal*, 2:2 (2017) 101–125, 112.

53   Adam Phillips, 'On success', *On Flirtation*, London: Faber & Faber, 1994, 42–59, 53–54.

Starting with two hands, one partner will firmly, yet openly, touch another person on the back or shoulder, kinesthetically "asking" their partner to pour their weight into the receptacle of their hands. The asking partner can regulate how much weight is given by resisting and pouring back even as they accept the responsibility for the other person's weight. This mutual pouring creates an energetic dialogue that continuously loops between the partners. Eventually, the partners begin to pour their weight back and forth, using different body parts as their physical contact revolves around the space and across their bodies[54].

As this description suggests, movement within CI is premised on an ethics of care and responsibility; it is about taking, and trusting one's partner(s) to take, the burden/weight of another body, about willingly accepting – in fact, joyfully welcoming – mutual dependence. However, the (most common) way of doing CI described by Cooper Albright only involves human bodies and a 'pouring' – of weight, burden, responsibility – that occurs between them. When such pouring is animated and mediated by another actor (in Cunningham's case, the crutches), this complicates and enlivens things further.

As mentioned earlier, a large part of *TWYL* involves interactions with the audience through touch, and this touch is often mediated and enabled by the crutches. Cunningham approaches members of the audience, pauses next to them to gauge their consent about being touched, lifts herself up on crutches, and lets them hold her in the air momentarily before landing her feet against a viewer's bodypart. 'When Claire brings her feet against a surface, her touch is light [...] She lands with exquisite precision, with gentleness', notes Watts Belser.[55] Crutches allow her to lean on the audience and share some of her weight with them – but not too much. The audience thus gets to experience a kind of 'light' version of CI: while Cunningham delegates some of her weight to them, it is spread between the crutches and the viewer, making the burden on the latter lower, less heavy. She doesn't break into one's space (unlike Chouinard's dancers); she slowly pours some of herself into it – at least this is how I experienced it as a member of the audience. Another important quality of movement that crutches allow her is that of suspension, or hovering; the precious few seconds she spends pausing in the air, assessing the readiness of the person in front of her to accept her touch. If hovering was invoked earlier as a temporality of care, in *TWYL* it is a

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54   Ann Cooper Albright, *Engaging Bodies: The Politics and Poetics of Corporeality,* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2019, 242.

55   Watts Belser, 'Improv', 461.

prerequisite and even instrument of care if we were to understand the latter, following Heidegger[56] (and some of the discussions in the performance), as attunement or attention towards someone or something.

In *TWYL*'s choreography, crutches become an instrument of articulating 'qualities of and spatial relations between objects and beings'.[57] Watts Belser cites a conversation with Cunningham where she draws parallels between her attention, and attunement, to the ground and to the bodies of her dance partners: 'a quality of perception she has honed as a crutch user, a mode of motion [...] requires her to always look down, to assess the landscape, to gauge in an instant where she can safely place a crutch. "I'm looking at Jess as landscape" Claire says. "He's terrain"'.[58] Crutches also afford Cunningham a unique way of inhabiting space by dwelling in it: she can be seen leaning on them in almost languid poses or sitting on their handles snugly, creating pockets of cosiness and comfort for herself in the otherwise bare space of the stage. She calls two of the many human-crutch configurations she has invented 'swivel stool' and 'bench stool', and this 'homely' language suggest an intimate ease and familiarity she has with crutches – and, by extension, with the material world: '"I can read the physics of the object that I land on," Claire explains. "I know how to put my weight directly on it and straight through it, without knocking it over. That's a very specific skill I have. When I look at Jess's body, I can read it very fast"'.[59] For her, crutches become tools of emplacement, whereby 'place' can be terrain, the stage, or another person's body.

The final scene of *TWYL* is one of the most poignant in the show. Perched high on her crutches, Cunningham suddenly becomes almost as tall as Curtis as she puts her arms around his neck. Their faces are close; he holds her gently as they rock very slowly to a crackling sound of Jerome Kern and Dorothy Fields' *The Way You Look Tonight*. At a brief glance, the pair's movement looks like a classic slow dance one would associate with courtship. However, it takes more than two bodies, male and female, to sustain it: the swaying engages Cunningham's crutches as much as it does Curtis and herself. It is the crutches that enable the pair to be dancing 'cheek to cheek' (due to their difference in height, among other things), and the precarity of Cunningham's perched position necessitates a particularly attentive coordination of motions.

Insert around here: Figure 2. Claire Cunningham and Jess Curtis. Photo by Sven Hagolani.

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[56]   Heidegger, *Being and Time*.
[57]   Curtis, 'The Way', 18.
[58]   Watts Belser, 'Improv', 461.
[59]   Watts Belser, 'Improv', 461.

Some viewers may be drawn, by the iconography of the slow dance and the idiosyncratic love song that accompanies it, to read this score in a heteronormative way, as a romantic scene of coupledom that overcomes bodily differences; thus, one of the members of the audience at the performance I attended made a suggestion, during the Q&A, that Cunningham and Curtis are 'so perfect together' that they should 'get married or something' (despite Cunningham openly discussing being asexual and queer and Curtis mentioning his long-term partner, who is obviously not Cunningham, during their onstage dialogue). I find a different reading more productive: I see this dance as a celebration of a different way of being (im)perfect together, one that involves interdependence – including more-than-human interdependence (here, between Cunningham, Curtis and the crutches). The extremely slow – at times, barely perceptible – movements of this sequence invoke the temporality of dwelling, making the scene kindle a 'desire to dwell with disability, a desire which is antagonistic to the normative desire to cure or kill disability'.[60]

Here, I would like to circle back to Albright's discussion of 'pouring' one's weight into another's body in contact improvisation. I find it wonderfully resonant with Polanyi's discussion of relationships of indwelling, cited earlier: experiencing things by 'pour[ing] ourselves into them'.[61] It also talks to Ingold's distinction between objects and things: things 'leak', while objects 'present their congealed surfaces for inspection'.[62] Things allow (and possibly invite) pouring while objects do not open up the space for it; things allow indwelling, while objects do not. There is a great deal of 'pouring' throughout *TWYL*, and the final scene, where such slow and careful pouring occurs between Curtis, Cunningham and the crutches, is its epitome.

Crutches, then, activate the space of *TWYL* as a relational space; a space where both bodies and things emerge as 'gatherings', in Heideggerian terms, ongoing processes of entanglement with other bodies and things, and must be thought of as constituting, and being constituted by, the webs of relations and intra-actions they are enmeshed in. To apply the terminology introduced at the outset of this chapter, crutches in *TWYL* are configured as *palliative things*. They do not summon a 'cure' for the bodies that engage with them, and do not foster relations of mastery. Rather, they enable and enact relationships of interdependence, cooperation and sharing of knowledge, experience, burden, and responsibility. By affording 'indwelling', leaking and pouring

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60   Eliza Chandler, 'Cripping community: New meanings of disability and community', *No More Potlucks, 19*, quoted in Peers & Eales, Moving materiality, 2012, 106.
61   Polanyi, 'Sense-giving and sense-reading', 303.
62   Ingold, 'Bringing', 4.

between bodies, other bodies and things (such as themselves), they cultivate dwelling, being-with, and hovering; all features of what I earlier defined as palliative time-orientations.

In her analysis of *bODY_rEMIX*, Thain argues that 'the use of prostheses in Chouinard's piece is [...] less a reaching out into the world from a centred subjectivity than an exploration of the tensions and lines of movement'.[63] My reading drastically differs from Thain's: I read Chouinard's dancers' agonistic stance as grappling for (if not necessarily a manifestation of) precisely such a 'centred subjectivity', and the use of prostheses as a means of achieving such a subjectivity. If anything, I would use Thain's exquisite formulation to describe the use of prostheses in *TWYL*, which foregrounds, conversely, a decentred subjectivity – that is always already intersubjectivity; a subjectivity premised on interdependence and radical care.

Conclusion

In her fascinating reflection on dance and Deleuzian ideas of becoming, philosopher Claire Colebrook writes: '[B]ecoming is not a means towards the realisation of some end. Rather, becomings are best seen as counter-actualisations: ways in which the already-constituted actual world always bears a power to become other than it already is'.[64] Later in the piece, she notes that 'dancing – unlike writing a novel that would have an external object of completion – is, at each moment of its actualisation a dance; one does not have to wait until the completion of the performance to produce the dance'.[65] Both dance and becoming, in her account, are non-teleological; becoming is not 'becoming something finite' but an ongoing emergence of new possibilities. Like Heidegger's thing that is thinging in a worlding world, Colebrook's dancing body is 'bodying', without striving to arrive at a final destination, to become-this-or-that.

Crutches in *The Way You Look (at me) Tonight*, in my reading, are enablers and enactors of such non-teleological dance/becoming, while in *bODY_rEMIX / gOLDBERG_vARIATIONS* they permit a different kind of becoming: an end-oriented one, a becoming-masterful. In that sense, as this chapter has argued, in *bODY_rEMIX* they can be read as curative objects: while standing against the dancers or else helping them stand against the world, they are implicated in projects of mastery, articulating themselves, bodies and subjectivities as 'neatly bounded powerhouses of capacity'.[66] Meanwhile, in *The Way You Look*, they are palliative things that enunciate their own and dancers'

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63   Thain, 'The in-tensions of Extensions', 87.
64   Claire Colebrook, 'How can we tell the Dancer from the Dance?: The Subject of Dance and the Subject of Philosophy', *Topoi* 24 (2005) 5–14, 5.
65   Colebrook, 'How can we tell the Dancer from the Dance?', 7–8.
66   Watts Belser, 'Vital wheels', 6.

bodies' indeterminacy and relationality without attempting to foreclose or bind. They enable ongoing pouring between bodies, things and the world; they call for being-with without securing, for shrouding without enclosing.

I am aware of the potential dangers of a 'palliative' reading of items used in disability dance due to the term's established association with end-of-life care and the implications it has for disability politics. Watts Belser warns against discourses and practices that feed into 'the dominant assumption that people with disabilities are almost/already dead and the oft-voiced claim that people with disabilities would be "better off dead"'.[67] This is not at all my intention when I talk about palliative things: the meanings I attach to the term 'palliative', as outlined earlier, stem from the term's etymology as 'cloaking' and focus on a refusal to follow a curative paradigm. 'Palliative', in my interpretation, is not about envisaging, let alone calling for, death (for people with or without disabilities); rather, it is a corollary of 'crip' and 'queer' in its rebuttal of normalising, progress-oriented, mastery-based ways of thinking, sensing and relating. Palliative things invite the kinds of queer animacies and queer relatedness that Watts Belser conceptualised with reference to wheelchairs and wheelers: relations that 'destabilize the expected notion of the human as sovereign and solitary in relation to inert objects, violating the emotional flatness that is presumed to govern the relations humans have with their owned things', and eschew the imperative to perfect, improve, overcome, or master.[68]

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[67] Watts Belser, 'Vital wheels', 6.
[68] Watts Belser, 'Vital wheels', 9.

Figure 1:

Figure 2:

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