

# Aesthetics and the impact of technical aids



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# What are the effects of the appearance of an aid on the lives of users?



## Standard idea:

- Stigma-effect: the aid refers to and magnifies impairment (*impairment* becomes *disability*)
- Aid is a symbol for being handicapped
- Can be a reason to not use the aid or to hide it
- Aid-users passively endure stigma



## Our research



27 biographic interviews with users of hearing aids, incontinence products or arm prosthesis

Focus was on the role of medical aids in mechanisms of in- and exclusion

So how do people actually deal with stigma?

They tinker with the appearance of their medical aids!

# Questions



- How do users tinker with the appearance of an aid?
- And how does such tinkering change the experience of the impairment and of disability?
  - Needed: Concepts to understand the effects of aesthetics in everyday situations
  - Theoretical perspective: anthropology of art

# Alfred Gell: anthropology of art



- On the power of art objects
- *Distributed agency/ personhood:*
  - Your personhood and your influence are not limited by your body.
  - In all objects that you cause (by making, buying, owning or carrying it) your agency is enclosed.
  - In this capacity, objects, as secondary agents, can exert influence on others

## The neighbours' Ferrari



# Alfred Gell: anthropology of art



- But, an object is not the result of the acts of one person, but of multiple heterogeneous actors
- Though its impact (on an onlooker) often derives from just one of those actors

Portrait of King Willem  
Alexander



Picture by Erwin Olaf





# Impact portrait caused by:



- **Causes :**
  - Qualities of the painter
  - Power of the portrayed
  - Art genre
  - Commissioner
  - Owners
  - Life course of the portrait
- **Impact can be any of those**

# What about medical aids?



- Distributed agency can also take place unwantedly, like with a medical aid

# Agency/ AID



- **Causes**

- Impairment (missing limb, incontinence, limited hearing...)

- **Unintentionally an aid often refers to just one cause: the impairment.**

- The impact of the aid is determined by the impairment.

- The person who uses the aid can 'become' the impairment in the eyes of an onlooker (and sometimes themselves)

# Agency/ medical aid



- However, the aesthetics of an object can be tinkered with by the user, emphasising other causal relations

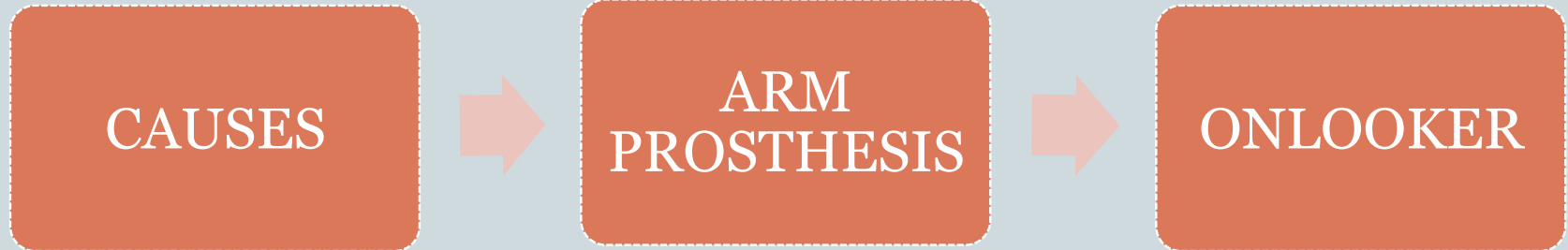
# An example: Wim's robotic arm



- Wim: 'I like emphasizing the mechanical side of the artificial arm. I have asked for a decoration on the arm of the mechanics inside. As if it is a real robot arm.'



# Impact appearance arm prosthesis Wim

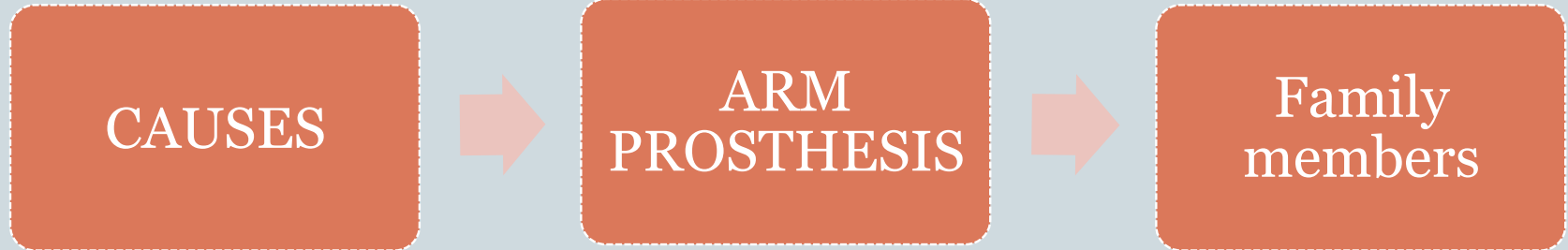


## -Causes

- Wim's technological expertise
- His history with the manufacturer
- Impairment/ accident

-But this does not always work

# Impact appearance arm prosthesis Wim



- Causes
  - impairment

The impact of an aid is situational



# Technical aids that are not public: incontinence material



- Incontinence is associated with being incompetent, not being able to take care of yourself, not having self discipline, not being an adult, being impure.
- The taboo is big and in the public domain hiding is the only option
- Thus: incontinence material should first and foremost be invisible.

# Incontinence material: invisible



Causes:

- Incontinence

Hardly any options to diversify causal relationships towards onlooker

# And for the users themselves?



-Causes

-Incontinence

# Tinkering possible ?



## -Causes

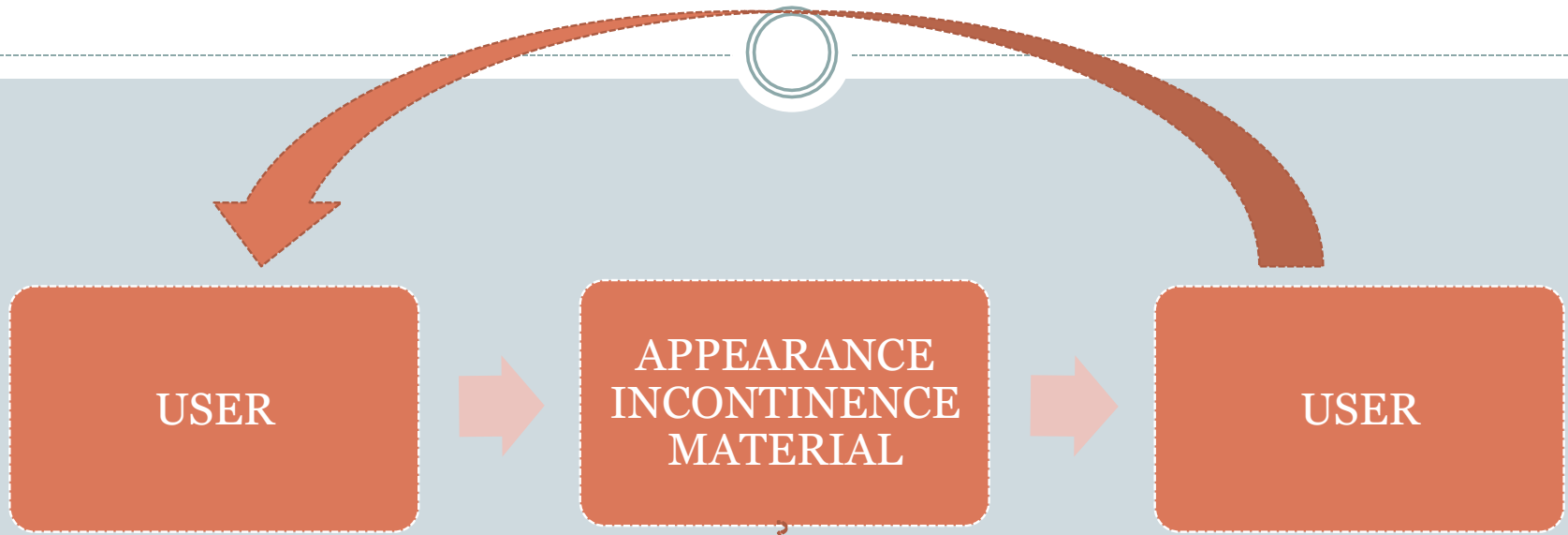
- Incontinence
- Agency/personhood of the user?

# Tinkering with incontinence material



- ‘I was a young woman of 19 years, just discovering my own femininity.’ This was incompatible with incontinence. By cutting the material the two could be reconciled.
- ‘They do not know what’s in the bag’: material in nice Samsonite bag.
- Suggestion: More appealing colours and design of products
  - I am worth something as a user

# Effects on impairment and disability



Tinkering with appearance is not always directed at onlookers. It might affect users themselves as well as their relation to the impairment.

# Contribution to Disability Studies



- Moving beyond the notion that the appearance of medical aids simply magnify the impairment
- and that their users passively endure the resulting stigmatisation



# Summary (1)



- In our interviews we saw several people tinkering with the appearance of their aids.
- With Gell's models and the concept distributed personhood you can clarify
  - The effects of such tinkering
  - Whom they affect
  - Whose personhood/ agency is distributed in the aid



## Summary (2)



- By tinkering with the appearance, the user often introduces new causes of impact other than the impairment.
  - The aid looks this way because he/she wanted it to.
- Sometimes this tinkering is directed at an onlooker, sometimes at the self
- At the same time, through the tinkering with the aid, the relationship with the impairment and the experience of ‘disability’ changes as well