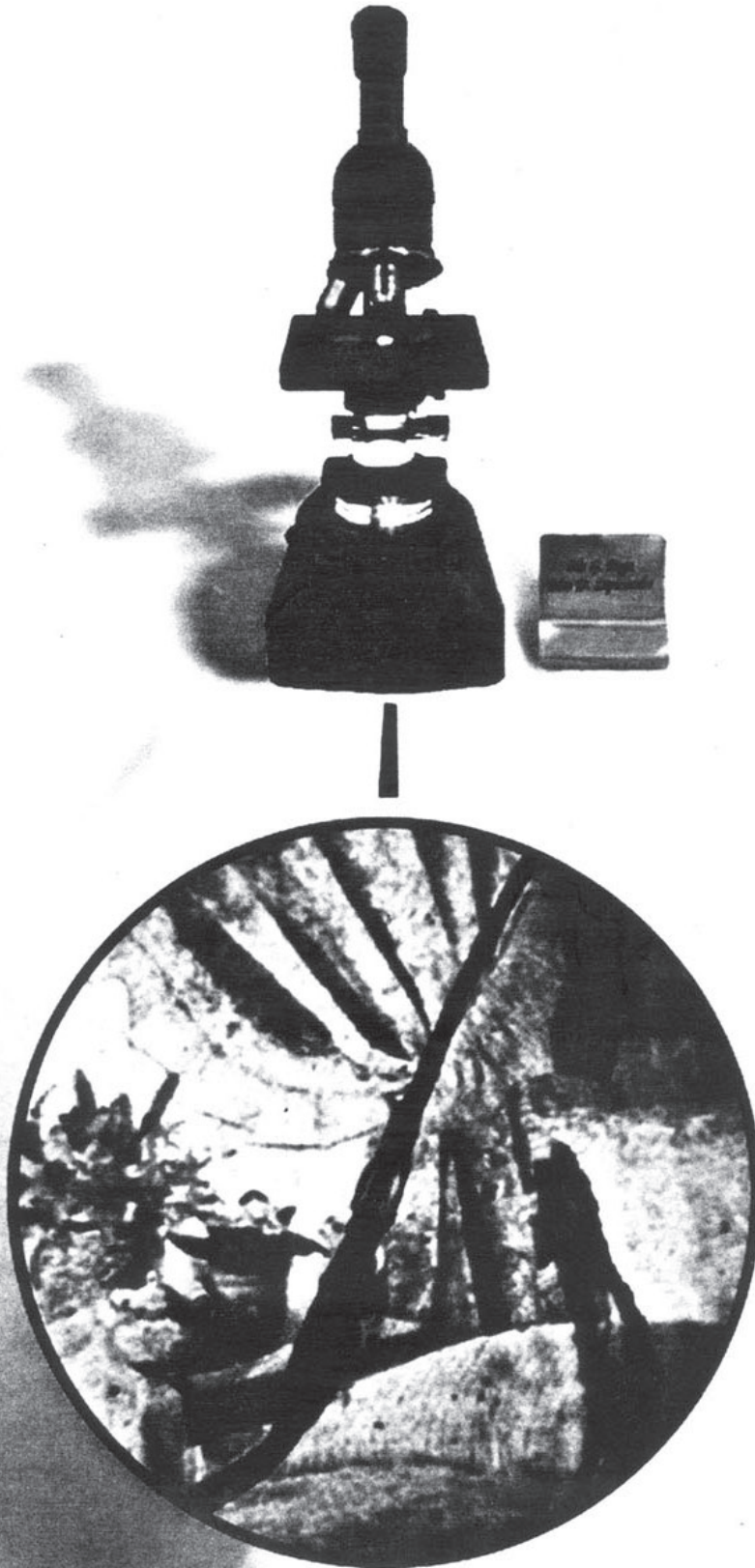


WOMEN'S ART MAGAZINE

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NAOMI SALAMAN • GWEN JOHN • LORRAINE GAMMAN • HERMIONE WILTSHIRE
THE ART OF FETISHISM • GUNS & SHOPPING

WOMEN'S ART MAGAZINE

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Rona Pondick
Jars of Mine
1994
wood, glass jars,
metal lids and pigment

The press release for the current South Bank touring exhibition, *Fetishism*, claims that Freud believed that "in shopping all women are fetishists". On first glance, considering the influence psychoanalysis (especially Sigmund Freud) has had on the visual arts, this statement and the fact that it was highlighted in the press release seemed reason enough to focus this issue on fetishism. Does it matter that this infamous doctor made such a claim? What intrigues me is the influence this particular aspect of psychoanalysis has had on women's practice: what is it about fetishism that intrigues?

Surely, it is partly because it delineates so clearly between what *they* have and what *we* don't. An initial question is to ask how the female fits in, in terms other than lacking, absent or missing. If one takes a brief historical account and cites Laura Mulvey, Mary Kelly and Helen Chadwick to name a few, obviously this has been a starting point. But why has fetishism gained so much currency? And what, if anything does this currency mean?

There are three types of fetishism: the anthropological, the commodity and the sexual. These cohorts together constitute a definition; it is difficult to read one without the other. Each definition metaphorically and metonymically substitutes a part for the whole and each hierarchically distinguishes us from them and delineates between the haves and the have-nots. Even though this broad interpretation might lead to a situation where **all** parts stand for **all** wholes, it is safe to suggest that fetishism is about power.

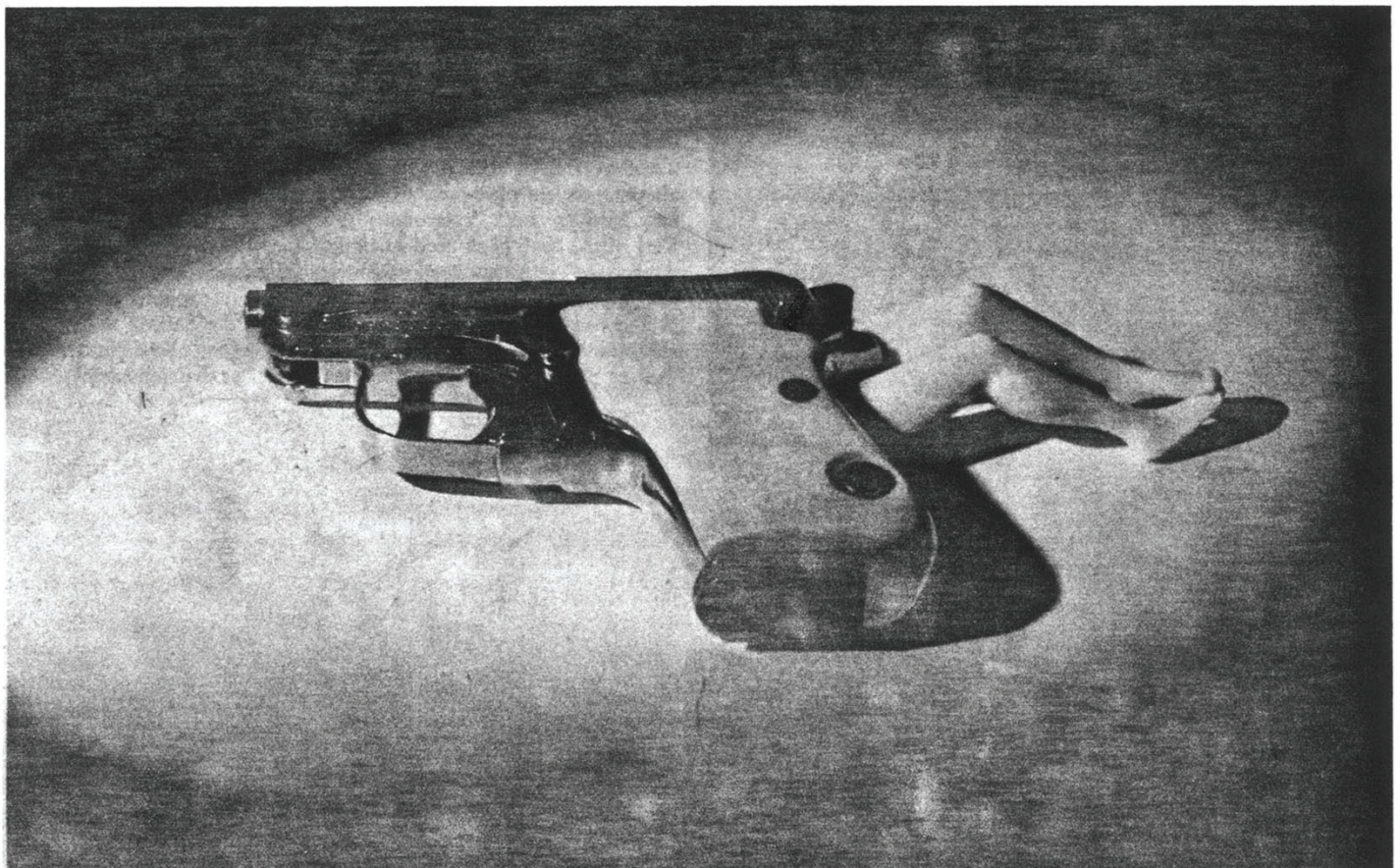
The dynamics of this issue shift if we take this on. Not only do the articles and the site-specific front cover explore the many facets of fetishism, but they also highlight the real conditions for agency. This is the key to all the articles. How do we get it, how do we use it and where does it take us? These act as catalysts as well as reverberations. To think about how it is possible to claim, invert, subvert and manipulate is part of the fun. Therefore, this editorial is an invitation to you to meander, consider and probe with the intention of finding some provocation, relevancy and pleasure.

Laurie Simmons *Lying Gun* 1990 (courtesy: Metro pictures, N.Y.)



Speaking of getting, how and where ... the first 15 new subscribers to *Women's Art Magazine* receive Linda Nochlin's book, *Body in Fragments*, published by Thames and Hudson, as a gift. As well, apologies to inIVA for WAM's error in the last issue. Please note that inIVA stands for Institute of International Visual Arts. Finally, the winner of the New Writers Award will be announced in the September/October issue.

Heidi Reitmaier



Too Much of a Good Thing

Sadie Murdoch finds the touring show

Fetishism
Brighton Museum
and Art Gallery
29 April - 2 July

Castle Museum and Art
Gallery, Nottingham
22 July - 24 September

Sainsbury Centre
for Visual Arts
University of East Anglia
Norwich
17 October - 10 December



Sylvie Fleury *Delicious* 1994 shopping bags

If the definition of fetishism is the irrational overvaluation of an object, then we are all fetishists. As good postmodernists, we know that language attributes false values to all things, in the way it is used to code and structure the world. Fetishistic misrepresentation would appear to be one of the hazards of discourse. The term however has been used to cover an ambitious exhibition and programme of events currently taking place in Brighton and organised by the South Bank. The curators of *Fetishism*, attempted to investigate “three moments of fetishism in the history of art”, and have chosen to aim their scrutiny at African “power objects”, Surrealist photographs and sculpture and a selection of recent contemporary art. The press release depicted a photograph of a bondage-clad, body-pierced fetishist and a casual glance down the list of discussions and events revealed: “Leather and Liberation: Contemporary Feminism, Fetishism and Sexuality”; “Do Tongues Power, Desire and Domination”; “Sexualisation and the Aura of Art”. There was a curious blend of sensationalism and coyness in the organisers’ promotion of this show which was, I suppose, somewhat inevitable. As the press release rather unnecessarily pointed out, the word itself “conjures up images of fantasy, private obsession, sexual deviance, rubber and high heels”. The implications of this word overshadows the highly urgent political debates, from racism to the exploitation of women, raised by much of the work exhibited here.

However, the real problem with a term such as “fetishism” is that theorists fall over themselves to expand and interpret the meaning of the concept; from its etymological origins in European Colonial descriptions of non-Western artefacts, to its application in Freudian and post-Freudian definitions of repression and displacement, to Marxist theories of commodity value. “Fetishism” is a theoretician’s wet dream. It can signify excess and deficiency, desire and loss, and is imbued with a sense of the illicit and transgressive. The fact that the meaning of this word is both highly charged and impossible to fix renders attempts by the curators of *Fetishism* to cover this vast field of the overvalued a daunting task. However, they do succeed in diluting any social or political agenda that could be explored.

This is disappointing for the exhibition begs a social or political reading. Notions of fetishism are used in discourses that are either about power, or project power or authority on to the marginalised, exploited and dispossessed. Fetishism is an essential part of the West’s hidden history, where the term is implemented as an index of perversion, deviancy and transgression. In a society where abusive power structures are held in place by notions of “normality”, it should thus follow that a little bit of transgression can go a long way. *Fetishism* demonstrates just how ineffective transgression can be. This is not necessarily the fault of the exhibits, many of which are powerful and challenging. The exhibition is



too wide-ranging in scope, hung in three separate sections, blocking any interesting juxtapositions that could be made. The first room displaying "power objects" or *nkisi* from Central Africa fails to subvert the idea that so called "primitive" (ie. non-Western) peoples are a basic, primal and a much simplified version of ourselves. Low light levels in this room (to ensure preservation) further enhanced a sense of cultural and chronological isolation. Section two displayed aspects of Surrealist activity, including work by Hans Bellmer, Salvador Dali, Alberto Giacometti, Ronald Penrose, Meret Oppenheim and Man Ray. A fair degree of consistency was achieved however between both the Surrealist room and the contemporary section in terms of the representation of female sexuality and the female body. In one room, breasts and buttocks abounded; in the other, it was all hair, clothes and shopping bags. Despite the lack of cohesion in the show overall, it is on the subject of women that we find a consensus on the meaning of fetishism.

To understand the paradoxes of fetishism, particularly as used by the Surrealists, it is essential to refer to Freud. Fetishism in psychoanalytic terms involves displacing the sight of women's imaginary castration onto a variety of reassuring but often surprising objects which serve as signs for the lost penis. The Surrealist movement was heavily inspired by Freud and it is significant that the few women members were mostly dismissed, or ignored at the time, or later written into the history books as the wives or mistresses of their male colleagues. Consistent with the minimal role accorded them within the group, women are presented as existing outside the domain of the social, occupying a kind of twilight

Renée Stout *Fetish No.3* 1989 mixed media



zone of the irrational and fantastic. Simone de Beauvoir has described effectively how, in Surrealist artistic circles, women were viewed as enigmatic sphinxes with deeper psychic links with the unconscious.

This unique woman at once carnal and artificial, natural and human casts the same spell as the equivocal objects dear to the Surrealists: she is like a spoon-shoe, the table-wolf, the marble-sugar that the poet finds at the flea market, or invests in a dream. She shares in the secrets of familiar objects suddenly revealed in their true nature and in the secrets of plants and stones. She is all things.¹

Women were Surrealism; they literally embodied it. From Bellmer's dislocated dolls to Ray's photographs of split crown fedora hats², Surrealism is locked into an obsessive dialogue with female sexuality. And this obsession is underpinned by a terror at women's difference in the form of a perceived but imaginary "lack". Meret Oppenheim's trussed high-heeled shoes and fur cup negotiate this territory but ultimately remain circumscribed by Surrealism's fetishistic *frisson*.

It would have been refreshing, if not reassuring, to find that the contemporary section attempted to dismantle the fetishistic fixations proffered by Freudian-inspired Surrealists in the 1920s. Carlos Pazos' items of bricolaged misogyny do not so much perpetuate this tendency; rather they wallow in it in a manner which questions the sanity let alone the sensitivity of the curators. *She Left Deep Scars in My Heart and in My Cheque Book*, 1988 presents us with a bathing costume hanging by the crotch from a sword, demonstrating, literally, the procedure of castration, with the female genitalia being formed from a wound, a slash.

The extended nipple of Dorothy Cross *Amazon*, 1992, a cow-hide clad female torso with a single udder/breast, assumed a grotesque phallic appearance. However rather than confounding and scrambling notions of "penis envy" and female masochism, Cross perpetuates, mystifies and stylises these issues. The references to mutilation, in the cutting and splicing of the hide (as well as creating a penis substitute which evokes castration) and the presentation of the female body as nurturing and animalistic, all present a negative image of female sexuality and desire.

Sylvie Fleury receives "nil points" for her catalogue disclaimer in which she advises us that she is "against feminism". This is a pity, for her video piece *Twinkle*, 1992 and installation *Delicious*, 1994 is a perfect evocation of debilitating female narcissism, sexual frustration and displacement activity. However, again the representation of desire rests on the axis of absence; the high heels of the shoes she tries on in *Twinkle* are simply strap-on phalluses. Nevertheless, the campy humour and tacky soundtrack begin to crack the fetishistic edifice. Humour is a good debunker. Nevertheless, as Laura Mulvey stated in her scathing criticism of the arch-fetishist Allen Jones:

The message of fetishism concerns not women, but the narcissistic wound she represents for man. Women are constantly confronted with their own image in one form or another, but what they see bears little relation or relevance to their own fantasies, their own hidden fears and desires. They are being turned all the time into objects of display, to be looked at and gazed at and stared at by men. Yet in a real sense women are not there at all. The parade has nothing to do with woman, everything to do with man. The true exhibit is always the phallus. Women are simply the scenery on to which men project their narcissistic fantasies. The time has come for us to take over the show and exhibit our own fears and desires.³



Rona Pondick *Baby* 1989 wax, baby bottles, shoes

This last sentence is important, for it calls for a form of “female fetishism” that explores the site of obsession and fantasy from a female perspective. But if language defines the limits of what can be discussed and if language is born of and instrumental in maintaining power relations, then we can never come round to a truly emancipatory “female fetishism”. For women are inscribed in language negatively. As feminist critics have pointed out, any notion of desire dependent upon the primacy of the phallic signifier is necessarily flawed, as it positions women in terms of a lack or deficiency.

The work of Sophie Calle also featured in the contemporary section is of interest. Calle explores her own desires and compulsions, often engaging with strangers in ways which stretch the boundaries of speculative and casual interest. *Autobiographical Stories* documents her temporary employment as a stripper in Paris with texts and mementoes: a dressing gown, a wedding dress, snapshots of herself on stage being watched by men. It is not clear whether her adventure is fictitious or true what is important is that Calle mostly delineates the field of female obsession without having recourse to the props of male castration anxiety. The same interpretation can be applied to the work of Annette Messager, whose *Histoires des Robes* 1990 works consist of montaged photographs of body parts pinned onto items of women’s clothing, present objectification from a female perspective. Rather than the glossy, cropped shots of glistening flesh that we find in advertising, we see instead images of mouths, hands, penises and nipples that look plausible, used and forlorn.

There are still overtones of masochism and voyeurism in Calle and Messager’s work; Calle’s photograph of a mutilated life-drawing sits very uneasily in the imagination. Female fetishism is a troubled area; desire, sexuality and fantasy cannot be removed completely from the socio-political context. Nevertheless, it

should be possible to stake out new territory and be genuinely subversive using the mechanics of fetishism from a female point of view. Rona Pondick, included in the contemporary section of *Fetishism*, comes closest to this with her work. Previous pieces have included miniature upholstered chairs with shoe-clad feet, and clusters of embryonic “heads” embedded with teeth. Anxiety and dread suffuse her work. *Baby*, 1989, a pair of turd-clad child’s legs with baby-bottles appearing at the ends, functions as an acutely observed spoof on the anal/oral dialectic in Freudian psychoanalytic theory.

Ultimately then, the agenda for *Fetishism* is too wide, the points of reference too dispersed to deal in any great depth with the complex issues raised. This is unfortunate, as much of the work is provocative, compelling and, particularly in the contemporary section, begins to break the ground for a genuinely transgressive form of fetishism, which does not rest simply on sensationalism, exoticism or castration anxiety. As it is, the work is rendered harmless by its separation into “theme rooms”. It is interesting to imagine the political and cultural reverberations that might have occurred from placing a *nkisi* next to a Hadrian Pigott, or a Hans Bellmer and in close proximity to a Dorothy Cross.

1 Simone de Beauvoir “The Myth of Woman in the Work of Five Authors” *The Second Sex*, 1956

2 Briony Fer makes an interesting case for Ray’s fetishising of female genitalia in “The hat, the hoax, the body” *The Body Imaged: the Human Form and Visual Culture since the Renaissance* ed. Kathleen Adler and Marcia Pointon, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp161-173

3 Laura Mulvey “You Don’t Know What’s Happening Do You Mr. Jones” *Spare Rib* no. 8, 1973, pp13,16,30

Sadie Murdoch is an artist and writer

