

Fat Shoes

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This issue of *Tessera* explores the possibilities of creative and critical feminist work that finds its point of departure in material culture. Of course, reckoning with sensuous materiality is nothing new for feminist critique, which has had a way of pressing the issue of matter, even within ostensibly materialist forms of criticism.¹ But what is new in the explorations of material culture drawn together here is the emphasis on an order of *things* – mysteriously compelling, achingly desirable, soothing and sometimes strangely repugnant things. Flipping through these pages, you will encounter representations of shoes, cosmetics, pink bunnies, prom dresses, silk folds, transparent plastics, and velvet boxes – the kinds of objects and surfaces more likely to be found in a women’s magazine than an advertising-free journal of critical feminist interventions.

This turn to material culture as a starting point entails the risk that criticism will stop at commodification, only serving to enrich the aura of things or to grant subversive meanings to shopping. But on second look, there is something different about this order of things in its instantiation here. A fastidious, self-conscious attention to frames, and the appearance of disjunctive elements within these frames, suggest that something is amiss in what Judy Cheung calls the “Plastic Moment.” The shoes are sitting in a roasting-pan full of fat. The prom dress is fringed with human hair. The pink bunny returns its goofy stare from between a woman’s legs. In short, the artists and writers in this issue of *Tessera* call our attention to the highly mediated nature of our relation to a special order of things, the order of the fetish.

The fetish is poised at the intersection of the psychic and the social: it is that strangely revered object, invested with an aura of meaning that far exceeds the object’s merely sensible or useful properties. But even though fetishistic fixation is experienced as an intensely personal, idiosyncratic attachment, the objects that appear to provoke it are cultural artefacts; they are commodities produced, exchanged, and invested with value within public economies. This psychic-social intersection is a site of intense contradiction from the point of view of “woman,” for psychic and social

explanations of fetishism position her as the object and the subject of fetishism, respectively.

On the one hand – from the perspective of classical psychoanalysis – women have no relationship to the fetish, other than that of being. Fetishism is anchored to a scenario of traumatic perception in which “woman” occupies the place of what is seen, rather than the position of the traumatized seer who needs to avert his gaze in order to sustain a sense of mastery. The psychoanalytic fetish is a substitute for something that the boy finds missing in a moment of traumatic perception, the maternal phallus. Fetish-objects support the disavowal of the knowledge that the maternal phallus is missing and serve as defensive props against castration anxiety – an anxiety that no “normal,” ie. successfully feminized and heterosexualized female will experience, according to orthodox theory.

On the other hand, within the history of Left-critiques of consumer capitalism, “woman” tends to figure as the paradigmatic consumer of commodity-fetishes. Fetishists par excellence, bourgeois women are the unconscious or unrepentant participants in the mystification of capitalist relations of production, caught up in the magical allure of manufactured goods. If the working-class hero or, as Sue Thornham points out, even the subject of resistant subcultural style in early cultural studies, is normatively male, the ordinary consumer of “mass culture” is implicitly female (*Feminist Theory* 131). In these views of fetishism, then, woman loses out on both counts: she can’t play the psychic and sexual game, and she can only be the uncritical consumer of commodity-fetishes. She misses out on pleasurable perverse desire as well as critical consciousness.

The main terrain for feminist engagement with the concept of fetishism has been film theory, where fetishism tends to be thought in psychoanalytic terms, as the psychic pleasure associated with a sense of visual mastery. In the Freudian narrative of the formation of a fetishist, the boy triumphs over the trauma of the missing maternal phallus by fixating on his last safe perception – the foot, the undergarment, the hair; the fetish stems from his defensive re-organization of the image of the “castrated” woman into an overinvested fragment (shoes, silk, fur)² or a composite of these, the compensatory fantasy of the studly woman – fur-clad, stiletto-wearing, whip-wielding, reassuringly phallic. Feminist film theory’s extrapolation of a theory of visual pleasure in the cinema from this scenario of compensatory seeing is well known. The stylized and fragmented female image in classical narrative cinema is constructed to afford the

pleasures of fetishistic reassurance and voyeuristic distance, to a spectator beset by anxieties about his lack.³ As for the spectatorial position constructed by conventional “women’s films,” it is characterized by a non-fetishistic claustrophobic proximity to the image, a lack of distance that means narcissistic or empathetic overidentification takes the place of desire.⁴ Mary Ann Doane has detailed the way in which this female gaze came to be articulated with the gaze of the consumer, in such a way as to construct the cinematic image as “both shop window and mirror, the one simply a means of access to the other” (*The Desire* 33).

Doane proposes a strategy of resistance to this construction of women’s seeing by turning to the idea of masquerade, the “manufacture [of] a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one’s image” that would allow women to have the last laugh in the cinema (*Femmes Fatales* 26). But the critical distance of an ironic mode of spectatorship is not the same as the distance that instigates sexual desire. The assumption still seems to be that women either cannot or should not be capable of fetishizing. One of the most original responses to this dilemma of desire has been Teresa de Lauretis’s theory of lesbian desire as a “perversion” that is signified and sustained by fetishes.

If psychoanalytic theory maintains that no “normal” woman requires a fetish as a means of self-defense against castration anxiety, then so be it. This is the starting point for de Lauretis’s reconceptualization of castration in non-phallic terms, as the damaged ego-ideal that the girl is likely to experience in patriarchal culture (“the lack of a libidinally invested body-image, a feminine body that can be narcissistically loved” [*The Practice of Love* 262]). The disavowal of this “normal” denegation of the female ego and its instinctual demands is the source of masculine fetishes in lesbian culture, de Lauretis argues. The lesbian fetishization of masculine accoutrements (the suit, the pinky ring) announces a rejection of the norm of sexual difference that requires a deprivileging of the female ego. What makes these signs of masculinity compelling in lesbian culture is their functioning as fetishes, fetishes that deny the wounded body-image in the subject and publicly signify her sexual yearning for the integral female body in other women.

De Lauretis’s formulation asserts a positive claim on fetishistic desire for “inappropriate” objects on behalf of women. But this formulation also contains a limit on its own universalizability because de Lauretis insists that she is writing a theory of lesbian sexuality in culture that cannot be

generalized to all women through reference to some pre-social common denominator such as the female psyche. Whether a theory of heterosexual women's fetishes might be constructed from a basis in another kind of lack (for example, a traumatic perception of lack in the father) is a question that de Lauretis leaves to others to pursue. In the meantime, the question of female fetishism is answered with accounts of "woman" as the narcissistic consumer of fetishized femininity. These accounts at least go to show that the positions of subject and object are not necessarily incommensurable when it comes to women's relationship to the commodity form.⁵ And this is an important point for any feminist critique concerned with the way in which discourses addressed to women cultivate particular "desiring motives" (as Doane reminds us, Freud's question, What do women want?, "is not an idle question, nor is it Freud's alone" [*The Desire* 22]). In this issue of *Tessera*, Ilya Parkins thus suggests that the fetish can provide an entry point for thinking about feminine subjectivity in historical terms which would take account of the unstable, contingent systems of meaning and value that shape our passionate relations to material objects.

But the historical positioning of woman as the figure of excessive consumption also has resonances beyond feminist inquiries into what and how women want. As Julia Emberley has shown, in the 1980s the image of the fur-clad bourgeois woman registered as a contemptible spectacle in the anti-fur campaigns of a "progressive" Euro-American ecological movement. This deployment called upon a densely sedimented historical association of femininity with sexual and material excess. It also dismissed the agency of "material girls" who resist being reduced to the dependent possessions of men and manipulate the field of symbolic power in attempt to gain access to wealth. As Emberley points out, the anti-fur campaigns of the eighties disparaged this kind of agency, ironically, just as Madonna was turning the feminist analysis of sexual commodification on its head by proposing the commodification of women as a "Girl's Best Friend," a resource for sexual independence (*Cultural Politics* 10-11). And yet perhaps Madonna's defiant self-commodification went no further than to argue for the "purchasing power" of a commodity, which is after all a purchase on the desire of *others*.

Feminism dreams of another economy, in which female commodities might "go to 'market' on their own, enjoy their own worth among themselves, speak to each other" but the difficulty is that it is in the very nature of the commodity to appear to bear a social relation to all other commodi-

ties, and to appear to speak volumes (Irigaray, *This Sex* 196). The commodity speaks the same language as other commodities, whispers “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties,” as Marx pointed out, only because the source of its value in the exchange of human labour is necessarily made a matter of mystery in capitalism (*Capital* 163). The strange, enigmatic attraction of the commodity-fetish, like the psycho-sexual fetish, arises from a displaced meaning: in the case of the former, it is the exploitation of human labour that is displaced, in the case of the latter, it is the absence of the maternal phallus. Whereas psycho-sexual fetishism disavows the absence of something that was never there, the unequal social organization of labour that commodity fetishism disavows is obviously of a very different order. The special aura of the commodity-fetish stems from its predication on the repression of something that *was* there – the worker who sold his or her labour-power in an unequal exchange in the making of the object.⁶

We can hardly fail to observe that the kinds of objects that figure so prominently in the psychoanalytic theory of fetishism – objects such as fur and shoes – are commodities burdened with social and historical significance. In the economic exchanges of the market and the political exchanges of “progressive” ecological discourse, fur may appear to speak in the voice of the expensive woman; however, as Emberley’s demystification of the fur fetish demonstrates, fur’s “soft and sensuous fibers” also evoke a history of “class exploitation, imperialism, and the oppression of women” (17). Psychoanalytic theory accounts for the intensity of affect involved in the fetishistic relation, but it does not explain how the desires and disavowals of fetishistic fixation take shape within the history of capital. As Peter Hitchcock has argued, a personal fixation with Nike athletic shoes, for example, is currently *purchased* through sanctioned ignorance of the condition and the fate of the shoe-stitcher in the “farthest corners of the globe (farthest, that is, from ... the consumer)” (*Oscillate Wildly* 140, 119). The other side of Nike’s cultivation of psychic overinvestments in athletic shoes among young North American men is the corporation’s “penetration” of ever-cheaper zones of female labour in the developing world. This cartography of masculine “global fetishistic disavowal” raises broader questions about the gender of capitalist desire and the tensions between desire and “affective responsibility” to the producer who is increasingly unimaginable under globalization (119).

The shoe is indeed *the* emblem of psychic as well as global capitalist commodity fetishism and this issue of *Tessler* is not without its shoes. In Mary-Anne Wensley's *Fat Shoes*, a pair of strappy high-heels nests in a roasting pan full of fat. The point is not just that desire is always culturally "cooked" (especially when its objects are good enough to eat). Wensley's installation also seems to make the disturbing suggestion that there is something cannibalistic about our relation to such commodity-fetishes. As soon as the product of human labour emerges as a commodity, Marx said, it appears to "evol[v]e out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will" (163-64). For Marx these "grotesque ideas" are values severed from their establishment in the exploitation of human labour: every commodity is "grotesque" insofar as it is an object that "voices" the social relations of production as if they are part of its own intrinsic make-up. Fetishistic desire is thus a desire to consume an object with a human aura. But Marx's invocation of the grotesque also points to what is largely repressed in his own critique of commodity fetishism, through a labour theory of value that still does not acknowledge "how much the practical activity of the body [is] organized through gender differentiation" (Hitchcock 59). The grotesque vein in art and literature is linked to the body – to the body's "lower stratum" and to woman's incarnation within this stratum as unfinished, mutating, processual body, more particularly (Hitchcock 80). The uncanniness of *Fat Shoes* thus also has to do with its presentation of the denegated body of the mother that is in excess of fetishized femininity as well as certain materialist notions of production and value. *Fat Shoes* makes a grotesquerie of the classic masculine fetish, puncturing the aura of the shoe as phallus-substitute and commodity-fetish by returning it to a context that soaks it with the associations of the mother's body and domestic labour.

The belly-button encased like a precious jewel in a velvet presentation-box on the cover of this issue is another piece of Mary-Anne Wensley's. *Contemplation* seems to allude to an entirely different order of desire and disavowal that instigates a reverential relation to a body-part that is, in a sense, the mother's signature. Both Wensley and Angie Nishikihama, another artist in this issue whose work on fetishism seems to take her to the navel, play with gendered notions of absence and presence as they push this particular button. The negative space of the belly-button assumes the positivity of the precious jewel in Wensley's cover art; in

Nishikihama's work, it becomes the mouth of a pink latex bunny/pyjama-pouch, cast entirely from molds of the artist's body. The pink bunny is a knit stuffed-animal in other pieces in Nishikihama's series, where it makes its appearance in the zone of "traumatic" perception – hugging a woman's ankles, flopping between her legs. The glances at the female body constructed within Nishikihama's knit pink frames provide humorous counter-takes on the menacing castrated being "perceived" by the Freudian fetishist.

Other contributors to this issue rework fetishism's visual register by injecting uncertainty and ambivalence into the fetishist's attempt at mastery and possession. In Malca Litovitz's text, "Dolce & Gabbana Girl," the speaker flaunts her control over a *mise-en-scène* in which she figures doubly as a seductive "dish" and a knife-wielding domestic woman. Chantal Rousseau's ink drawings of nude women in clown masks produce lesbian visual puns on the positions and postures of straight pornography. Ailsa Kay's narrative, "Rendering the Fold," associates the reifying properties of photography with the will-to-mastery of the psychoanalytic case history, two attempts to penetrate the veiled "mysteries" of femininity. Martine Delvaux discusses *Dans ces bras-là*, a novel that displaces this gendered representational dynamic by narrating from the point of view of the veil itself. *Dans ces bras-là* is the portrait of a female character who appears only in light of her own descriptions of a catalogue of male characters.

Other contributors work with the fetishistic collection, the profusion of objects that protects against emptiness. Anitra Hamilton's still lifes aestheticize military equipment but with a twist: her grenades are covered with a delicate layer of egg shells that transforms tools of destruction into the gentler artefacts of an imaginary "reptilian" humanity. Judy Cheung's *Plastic Moment* fills the frame with a seemingly endless spread of travel-size toiletries. Jessica Winton's *Red Bird*, a display-case full of ornamental hearts, invokes the fetishization of romantic love through the circulation of such magical signs in popular women's culture. The human hair fringing the negligee and the prom dress in Megan Whiten's two works refers to the classic function of the hair-fetish as a token of triumph over (and a protect against) the traumatic perception of lack. The lack in question here is related to the violences, failures, and disappointments of the institutions of heterosexual intimacy.⁷ Whiten's pieces are not fetishes but vaguely disturbing works of art that say something about the delicate balance between knowledge and belief in romantic relationships. nathalie

stephens' text is another meditation on acts of splitting, breaking, and undoing – in relationships between bodies but also between languages. The enigmatic broken fragments in “elliptique héréditaire je” are “collected” by a desire associated with the rhythms of the sea, rhythms that carry away and toss together traces and echoes.

Another set of contributors focusses on public culture's fetishistic beliefs and collectively-articulated overinvestments. Rita Van Tassel and Ingrid Chu play on the promises of endless enjoyment and transparent communication that are central to the marketing of new technologies. Wendy Coburn's two sculptures, *The Spirit of Canada Eating Beaver* and *Leda and the Beaver*, stage a conversation with an earlier feminist artist's appropriation of the emblem of Canadian nature, history, and industrious national character, pushing the sexual possibilities Joyce Wieland's uses of the beaver. Tracy Kulba's essay on the Famous Five statue controversy considers some of the desires and disavowals of nationalist-feminist commemoration. She argues that the recently-unveiled monument to the first-wave feminists who won “person” status for Canadian women in 1929 can be read as a “palimpsestic object, layered by competing historical narratives.” SanSan Kwan's essay reflects on her own experience as a performer in *Lotus Blossom Itch*, a piece of dance-theatre that problematized the erotic objectification and aestheticization of Asian femininity. While Kwan's essay provides a critique of fetishization as sexual and racial exploitation, Lisa Robertson's text, “The Men,” asks us to consider fetishism as a gift of compensatory over-valuation that women are free to give to others.

Notes

¹ Materialist forms of analysis have sometimes produced totalizing analyses of class exploitation supported by unexamined norms of masculine embodiment. See Peter Hitchcock's argument that feminist materialism has profoundly reconceptualized the *matter* of materialism (as body and embodiment) – to include, emblematically, the carbuncles on Marx's nether regions, in *Oscillate Wildly*, Chapter Two.

² See “Fetishism” (1928), trans. Joan Riviere, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol XXI, 152-57.

³ See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 1988) 57-68.

⁴ Mary Ann Doane makes this argument in *Femmes Fatales* and *The Desire to Desire*.

⁵ As Thornham points out, the female equivalent of the *flâneur*, that detached observer of the modern city, is the prostitute or “streetwalker whose gaze, whatever irony and detachment it might possess, marks her as commodity as well as (worker and) consumer” (*Feminist Theory* 137).

⁶ Hitchcock makes this point very clearly in *Oscillate Wildly*, 120-22. Marx’s argument is that the social relations of production (the relationships between owners and producers) are displaced or translated into relationships between things on the store shelf, things with values that appear, in that context, to inhere in them naturally.

⁷ The fetishization of romantic love in popular women’s culture, Lauren Berlant has argued, works to disavow the standard traumas of the “institutions of intimacy.” Women’s magazines, for example, promote love’s promise even as they offer women therapeutic solutions for its failures and disappointments. “Remembering Love, Forgetting Everything Else,” paper presented at the University of Toronto, March 15 2001.

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