

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 [ILLUSTRATION OMITTED] 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...