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# 4

# The Spirit of Matter: On Fetish, Rarity, Fact, and Fancy

Peter Pels

This essay is an attempt to use the concept of fetish for an inquiry—begun elsewhere (Pels n.d.; Van Dijk and Pels 1996)—into the place of materiality in present-day cultural and social theory. The fetish is a good guide in such explorations, because, ever since it emerged from the cultural tangle of West African trade, it has signposted an untranscended materiality and beckoned its students to sojourn in the border zones that divide mind and matter, the animate and inanimate. The fetish foregrounds materiality because it is the most aggressive expression of the social life of things: not merely alive, it is an "animated entit[y] that can dominate persons" (Taussig 1980: 25). Fetishism is animism with a vengeance. Its matter strikes back.

My inquiry is divided in two parts. The first addresses the way in which "fetishism" can be distinguished from other expressions of the social life of things through a discussion of Arjun Appadurai's seminal essay on the subject. In particular, this section addresses the difference between fetishism and animism in terms of what I call the spirit *in*, as opposed to fetishism's "spirit *of*" matter. Next, Appadurai's positive evaluation of the alterity of the fetish leads to a discussion as to what extent the fetish is an "other thing" in cultural and

social theory. It addresses the paradox that the fetish is commonly regarded as something negative, a denial of an accepted reality or "normal" hierarchy of values, yet also is made to function within this normality in some way. Thirdly, I will argue that Appadurai's focus on commodities leads away from the questions of materiality raised by the fetish, and discuss what concept of materiality will accommodate the contradictions sketched in the preceding sections. This theoretical part reflects the way in which the fetish functions to question the boundaries between things and the distinctions they are held to delineate (cf. the introduction to this volume).

Abstract theory, however, is never sufficient to counter the threat posed by the fetish's materiality and historicity. The second part of the paper, therefore, investigates the possibilities for advancing another mode of argument by suggesting a historical contextualization of the first, theoretical part, a contextualization that I feel is essential for a proper understanding and use of fetish. By linking the discourse on fetish to the, historically synchronous, discourse on rarities, and both these discourses to the emergence of Western notions of "fact" and "fancy," I hope to show that the possibility of thinking of an untranscended materiality of things is historically contingent on the emergence of a global trade in objects, in which "fetish" was the derogatory term of a pair of which "rarity" was the appreciative one (both being, in a sense, the "others" of the commodity). The persistent idealism of a Western discourse of representation that emerged afterwards, during the Enlightenment, subsumed this untranscended materiality to orders of classification, and made it into something of an occult quality of Western philosophy. As such, it points to a theory of signification that cannot be thought from within an intellectual tradition that is still heavily inflected by Enlightenment thought. Since that is also my provenance, the essay doesn't really have a conclusion: It disrupts and unsettles rather than clarifies. If that lack of conclusiveness isn't caused by my lack of mastery of these issues (and it may very well be), we can always blame the fetish. It wouldn't be the first time in its history for it to be declared guilty of confusion.

## Methodological Fetishism

Arjun Appadurai formulated the methodological prerequisite for the analysis of the social life of things as follows:

> Even if our own approach to things is conditioned necessarily by the view that things have no meanings apart from those that human transactions, attributions and motivations endow them with, the anthropological problem is that this formal truth does not illuminate the concrete, historical circulation of things. For that we have to follow the things themselves. . . . [E]ven though from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context. No social analysis of things (whether the analyst is an economist, an art historian, or an anthropologist) can avoid a minimum level of what might be called methodological fetishism. (1986: 5; emphases in original)



This profound and puzzling paragraph rules out the possibility for any independent "life of things" in its first sentence ("things have no meanings apart from . . . human transactions" etc.), but allows "things-in-motion" sufficient independent activity to "illuminate their human and social context" further on. This struggle for primacy between people and things may be clarified by setting Appadurai's "methodological fetishism" within the context of the genealogy of the fetish.

Appadurai assumes that the theory that says things have no meanings except those that humans endow them with is a "necessary condition" of "our" approach. At the same time, he posits a methodology that assumes that human life cannot be understood without the illumination provided by things-in-motion. He thereby inverts the relationship of continuity between theory and method of normal science, where theory provides hypotheses that method translates into research practice. Instead, Appadurai seems to use method here to obtain an alternative or counterpoint to a theory that, for the understanding of the "concrete, historical circulation of things" stands in our way. But why cultivate such an incongruity?

I feel this can be clarified by zooming in on the genealogy of the fetish. William Pietz has beautifully shown how, in the seventeenth century, the fetish emerged from the hybrid wilds of West African trade, allowing Dutch merchants to name those aspects of their trading relationships with Africans that could not be understood in terms of mercantile ideas of the rational calculation of value (Pietz 1985; 1987; 1988). Merchant ethnographers like Willem Bosman transformed the *fetisso*—an object functioning within African trading relationships—into the fetish—the central feature of "African" religion.[1] This essentialization of the fetish tends to obscure that it was, in a sense, an uncontrollable object that burst the bounds of capitalist calculation. Even though European ethnographers try to bring its hybrid inexplicability under control by making the fetish into something

essentially "African," this same discourse gave the fetish a life and a career that eventually allowed it to migrate from Africa and (un)settle down in two of the most important intellectual landscapes of Western modernity, Marxism and psychoanalysis. Even in this diaspora, it retained parts of its original identity: Whether as "African" religion, as the overvaluation of Western commodities, or as a specific articulation of sexual desire, the fetish remained an object of *abnormal traffic*.

Appadurai's injunction to be methodologically fetishist, therefore, seems to call for an "abnormal" traffic in information, in which the norm to be deviated from is obviously given by the theory—providing "necessary conditions"—that says "meanings" cannot but come from humans. The answer to the question about Appadurai's intended relationship between theory and method could then be that "methodological fetishism" is a reversal of the commonly accepted hierarchy of facts and values in social and cultural theory, which says that things don't talk back. Or, better, that says that those people who say that things talk back may be dangerously out of touch with reality.

Now, there are two ways of saying that things talk back, of which one seems more out of touch with this commonly accepted reality than the other. Things can talk back because they are animated by something else, or they do so because of their own "voice." The first possibility is in fact what Appadurai means: The sentences that I left out of the quotation given above say that the meanings of things are inscribed in their forms, uses, and trajectories and that we can only understand how human traffic "enlivens" them by analyzing these trajectories (Appadurai 1986: 5). The notions of "inscription" and "enlivening" indicate that, whatever things can do in this way of thinking, their agency is derivative. In contrast, one can also say that things act, emit messages and meanings on their own. The first attitude is animist: a way of saying that things are alive because they are animated by something foreign to them, a "soul" or, in the evolutionary anthropologist Edward Tylor's words, "Spiritual Being" (Tylor 1873, I: 424): a spirit made to reside *in* matter. Animism, as applied to things, transcends their materiality by saying that the perception of the life of matter is only possible through an attribution of a derivative agency. In contrast, fetishism says things can be seen to communicate their own messages. The fetish's materiality is not transcended by any voice foreign to it: To the fetishist, the thing's materiality itself is supposed to speak and act; its spirit is *of* matter. As I see it, Appadurai's social life of things is more properly the life of the ventriloquist's dummy, a "methodological animism." A call for a "methodological



fetishism" would entail something more radical, for it would indicate a relationship in which such transcendence of materiality by human intention or artifice is not possible.

An obvious objection at this point seems to be that one can only come to such a theoretical distinction by ignoring the actual "life" of a thing, its biography in which, at a certain point in the thing's career, it is inscribed with human intentions, while at a later moment it may appear, fetishistically, as a *Ding an Sich* emitting the messages of such inscriptions on its own. In such a view, the fetish would be merely an isolated, phenomenological moment within a culturally and historically encompassing process. However, there is a danger of tautology if such an argument is used within the context of Appadurai's methodological propositions, which are meant to "illuminate . . . the concrete, historical circulation of things" (1986: 5). These propositions define materiality as contingent while positing human intentionality and artifice as transcending that contingency, thus introducing the terms that need to be explained as facts into the explanation. A crucial point of the different discourses on fetishism is precisely to outline the possibility that the materiality of things can stand in the way of, and deflect, the course of human traffic ("when the fetish comes to life, . . . some process has been suddenly interrupted," Freud 1950: 201).[2] Defining this human traffic as the transcendence of materiality and contingency theoretically outlaws the fetish before it has been given a chance to unfold its otherness.

## The Fetish as Other Thing

By discussing the fetish animistically, Appadurai appears to reconcile his call for the abnormal traffic of things with the theoretical primacy of human intention and artifice. This coupling of social determination by humans with "fetishism" is something Appadurai owes to his emphasis on commodity fetishism. Commodities occupy front stage in Appadurai's argument, and an astonishing range of commodity fetishisms appear in his text (1986: 50–56). Yet Appadurai's use of "methodological" fetishism is quite unusual, as a further examination of Appadurai's relationship to the discourse on fetish will show. Appadurai significantly departs from most uses of fetishism in refusing to deploy it simply as "a critical discourse about the *false* objective values of a culture from which the speaker is personally distanced" (Pietz 1985: 14, emphasis mine). His call for a useful methodological fetishism partially reverses this negative judgment. At the

same time, Appadurai's derivation of the life of things from human agency (for which, in my terms, a methodological animism would seem to be conceptually sufficient) downplays the actual *danger* posed by talk of the fetish: its threat to overpower human beings by its materiality.

Appadurai's use of a methodological fetishism retains fetishism as an "other" of existing theoretical assumptions, yet reverses its valuation as something "false." This move can be understood as being analogous to the ways of rationalizing difference of many anthropologies: "this custom may seem weird, but it is not as strange, irrational or useless as it appears on the surface." There are two primary ways of thus demystifying curious customs: the *comparison* with things done by "us" that turn out to be similar, and the demonstration that a curious custom actually fulfilled an active *function* in social survival. In the case of fetishism, demystification by comparison (which often implies a reenchantment of "our" world) is used by Michael Taussig in juxtaposing a Latin American "fetishism" with the Western commodity variety;[3] or by Appadurai in juxtaposing the different commodity fetishisms arising from Chicago stock exchanges and New Guinean cargo cults (1986: 50 ff.). This debunking use of "fetishism" goes back to Marx, who both rehabilitated West African fetishism and reenchanted capitalism by applying "fetishism" to the world of commodity production and exchange (Pietz 1993). It is important to bear in mind that, while such positive assessments of fetishism are unusual, all the examples given are regarded as seminal moments in the development of social and cultural theory.

The second demystification—rationalizing fetishism by showing it has a social function—is even more unusual within the discourse on fetish. It is a part of Appadurai's reasoning to the extent that his methodological fetishism leads him to propose, in the wake of Baudrillard and others, a rehabilitated, that is, social, relational, and active notion of consumption (Appadurai 1986: 31). Appadurai translates Baudrillard's critique of the Marxian emphasis on production into a theory of *demand*, which is no longer seen predominantly as a passive false consciousness but also as an active intervention in the world by consumers: Now, they do not just suffer but also make the market (cf. Miller 1987). Whether this critique of Marx is completely justified is a moot point: Marx's own account of the fetishization of capital can serve to show consumption's potential importance for understanding fetishism. Capital is fetishized by the process of valorization by labor, the realization of that value by market circulation, and the accumulation of realized value through capital investments. The last part of the process can be interpreted as the fetishistic consumption of capital by the capitalist, for it "becomes identified as wealth itself," "the very embodiment of desire" (Pietz 1993: 147). This process is, therefore, simultaneously a fetishization of capital, and an investment of it that may set in motion further cycles of valorization, realization, and accumulation—that is, its motivation is *both "false" and functional*, both "subject to" and "subject of" culture, both product and producer. Similarly, we can say that less privileged consumers are both passively subject to, and active subjects of, fetishized commodities: Under capitalism, their demand—which is both determined by, and determining, social and economic forces (Appadurai 1986: 31)—more often than not takes the form of the fetishized commodity. Nothing brings out the inevitability of this contradiction as well as the story of Marx's overcoat, the fetishized commodity that, in a fully capitalized world, was a necessary material condition for the production of the book that would "unmask" the fetishization of commodities (Stallybrass, this volume). This "double attitude" of the fetishist, the simultaneity of affirmation and denial of reality (Freud 1950: 202–3) helps to explain why fetishism has been such a successful exemplar for understanding ideology, and why it can be easily inserted within arguments that endorse the thesis that any regime of truth is a regime of power and vice versa. This bringing forward of a more "positive" conception of the otherness of the fetish is, I feel, the most valuable element of Appadurai's approach.



Of course, fetishism is not Appadurai's main topic and he uses it merely instrumentally, as a counterpoint to an over-emphasis on the causative role of human traffic. That means that his interesting departure from the traditionally derogatory notion of the fetish is subordinated to a theory that proclaims the opposite: that things are ultimately and necessarily subject to human traffic. This does not sufficiently acknowledge the central importance of the "untranscended materiality" of the object that Pietz argues is crucial to the discourse on fetish (1985: 7). Appadurai's elevation of fetishism from the status of a falsehood to that of a method for understanding object relations addresses the dimension of fetishism that defined the fetish as the "other thing" of the commodity, thus making (African) fetishism into an irrational (that is, noncapitalist) attribution of value; while at a later, Marxian stage, criticizing the capitalist attribution of value itself as being fetishistic. But Appadurai's theoretical interests steer him away from the other side of the fetish's genealogy: the fact that the Dutch merchants of the seventeenth century not only defined the fetish as the other thing of the capitalist commodity, but also as an alternative to their own Protestant Christianity.[4] In contrast to the

idolatrous others of Christianity, who were thought to worship material *representations* of false spirits, the worship of the fetish implied revering the terrestrial and material object's presence itself (Pietz 1993: 131). This powerful object remained, in the discourse of fetishism, underdetermined by a system of commensurable human values: Any "trifle" that "took" an African's "fancy" could become a fetish or object of worship (mark the active tense of "to take"). I shall return to this notion of "fancy" below, where I discuss an aesthetics in which the positive power of an object to influence a human being is coupled to its underdetermination by a system of (rational) human values. Suffice to say here that this untranscended materiality provided the Enlightenment with a radically novel, because atheological conception of religion (Pietz 1993: 138).

This threat of the fetish to undercut the primacy of human signification by the materiality of the object is not sufficiently recognized by Appadurai's account of the social life of things, because he concentrates on the spirit of the commodity, which is its exchangeability (Appadurai 1986: 13). By concentrating on the commodity phase, commodity candidacy or commodity context of the thing (1986: 13–15), Appadurai highlights its systematic social life, its transcendence by a system of human exchange values, while downplaying the way in which fetishism insists that the fetish is an object that has the quality to singularize itself and disrupt the circulation and commensurability of a system of human values. This capacity to singularize itself in relation to an ongoing process, and thereby to arrest it, is what makes the fetish into an "other thing." It is "other" in relation to accepted processes of defining the thing by its use and exchange value. The fetish is one of the "other kinds of worth" that, according to Igor Kopytoff, are "attributed to commodities after they have been produced, and this by way of an autonomous cognitive and cultural process of singularization" (1986: 83). However, its singularity is not the result of sentimental, historical or otherwise personalized value: The fetish presents a *generic* singularity, a unique or anomalous quality that sets it apart from *both* the everyday use and exchange *and* the individualization or personalization of objects. The fetish presents a general difference from the everyday valuation of objects, for a fetish can be a commodity at the same time—be it an "other" commodity, like velvet or fur (Freud 1950: 201), lace (Pinch, in this volume), or blue jeans (Miller 1990). The fetish may be commoditized (in the broad sense of being exchangeable against something else: Appadurai 1986: 9, 13), but even then its system of circulation is different from the everyday: an exchange of things already used, as with shoes



or underlinen (Freud 1950: 201); pawning, as with Marx's overcoat (Stallybrass, this volume); the theft of a piece of lace (Pinch, this volume). Unlike souvenirs (Stewart 1993: 132ff.) or foodstuffs (Kopytoff 1986: 75), the fetish is not singularized by being absorbed into the person or history of the consumer: although it is often close to the body, it maintains an aesthetic value that radically distinguishes it as a material object from the subject it confronts. In this confrontation, the fetish always threatens to overpower its subject, because—unlike our everyday matters—its lack of everyday use and exchange values makes its materiality stand out, without much clue as to whether and how it can be controlled.

## Materiality?

Thus, we can see that one of the possibilities provided by the discourse on fetish is the existence of objects—"other" things—that disrupt everyday valuations, and thereby raise doubts about the ability of human beings to maintain control over their meaning. Again, an untranscended materiality impresses itself upon the argument. One of the aims of this paper is to show why the discourse on fetish serves as a continual reminder of that materiality—why, in fact, talk of untranscended matter has such a fetish-like attraction in Occidental discourse. But we cannot address that cultural and historical question without first asking what we might be speaking of when we discuss materiality.

Most cultural and social theorists that address the issue will agree that in using "matter" or "materiality," we cannot be talking of a *Ding an Sich*, let alone a thing that, like a fetish, has an independent agency, capable of making and breaking human beings. Yet that does not necessarily imply that one has to affirm the eventual transcendence of the materiality of things by human intentionality and artifice.[5] Daniel Miller has argued that there is a "physicality" which carries over certain forms of signification from one context of human behavior to another.[6] This would imply attributing at least a minimum capacity for transcendence to material objects, although, since they are artifacts, this transcendence is achieved by human intentionality and artifice, and matter remains an empty signifier, a *tabula rasa* on which humanity inscribes meanings differentially. But despite reinstating this primacy of human intentionality and artifice, this first step enables Miller and Van Beek to argue—rightly—for a recognition of materiality in social process, by systematically treating materiality as a quality of

*relationship* rather than of things. Van Beek has recently formulated this in terms of materiality as an "ontological commitment" of human beings, their acceptance of the autonomy of the things with which they come in contact (1996: 18ff.). Yet, Van Beek's critique that Miller's theorizing of a dialectic of objectification addresses the theory of culture in general rather than the specifically material (1996: 9; see also Miller 1996: 27) seems equally applicable to his own argument, for "ontological commitment" implies that human beings *attribute* an autonomous materiality to a thing, not that there is anything specifically material about the relationship between people and things. Instead, I would suggest that the materiality of human interaction with things is best studied in terms of *aesthetics*: the material process of mediation of knowledge through the senses (Eagleton 1990: 13).

Such a step is supported by recent studies arguing for the crucial contribution of different sensory regimes to the construction of social knowledge. These studies have opposed a predominantly visualist, Occidental sensory regime to oral/aural (Fabian 1983), tactile (Pels 1998) and even olfactory registers (Classen 1993). However, such a separating out of different senses is itself a discursive construction, just as the distinction and ranking of five senses is peculiar to "the West" (Classen 1993; Howes 1991). Moreover, there is nothing "natural" about senses whose functioning is constantly changing under the influence of developments in human technology.[7] Yet, despite this constructedness of human perception, there is a level at which it becomes useful to distinguish a material, nonreflective politics of sense-perception from the way it is talked about (Van Dijk and Pels 1996). At this level, one can recognize ethnographically how a certain training of the senses and a certain construction of material culture come together to deflect, halt or change the rhythm of an ongoing social process (Seremetakis 1996). This happens, for instance, when the "stillness" of a souvenir or monument suddenly changes our everyday rhythm, to connect it with a memory or a history that is commonly absent; or simply when a cup of coffee reminds us of a necessary break in the work process (Seremetakis 1996: 12, 14–15). It also happens—and this will become more important below—when we are confronted with the difference from everyday life presented by strange museum objects or other curiosities.

This implies, however, that we recognize that materiality is not some quality distinguishing an object from a subject—that one should, in fact, question the slippage from the epistemological to the ontological notion of "object" which undergirds arguments like Miller's (1987). Also, it implies that the "material" is not necessarily on the receiving end of plastic power, a *tabula rasa* on which signification is conferred



by humans: Not only are humans as material as the material they mold, but humans themselves are molded, through their sensuousness, by the "dead" matter with which they are surrounded.[8] It is in this way that I understand fetishism—which confers a measure of plastic power to things—as providing an argument against idealism. In a Hegelian perspective, fetishism was associated with sensuous determination, which could never attain categorical universality and therefore obstructed the liberation by *Geist* (Michasiw 1992: 80; Pietz 1993: 140). Such atheological worship, of a thing "untranssubstantiated into the signifier or allegory of a concept or ideal" could not be honoured with the name of "religion," just as Africa as a whole could not be admitted into "history" (Pietz 1993: 140; 1985: 7, note 10). Marx turned this on its head: Although he, too, identified fetishism as the "religion of sensuous desire," he thought it was closer to reality than monotheism (Pietz 1993: 140). This allowed the double movement of rehabilitating fetishism and reenchanting capitalism which I mentioned above, in an explicit anti-idealist critique.

Marx's formula of fetishism as the "religion of sensuous desire" recognized the notion of materiality implicit in fetishism, and took its threat to elevated spiritualities like Hegel's seriously. It recognizes that human passion—both of possessing and of being possessed, of greed and fancy—emerges within a material dialectic between human sensory routines and material objects. Marx himself shows how difficult it is, within this dialectic, to demarcate subject from object and determine the direction of their mutual influence:

> To be *sensuous*, i.e. to be real, is to be an object of sense, a sensuous object, and thus to have sensuous objects outside oneself, objects of one's sense perception. To be sensuous is to *suffer* (to be subjected to the actions of another). (quoted in Pietz 1993: 144)

This conception of materiality and reality no longer excludes the possibility brought forward by the discourse on fetish, that to be sensuous is "to be subjected to the actions of another *thing*."

The fetish, therefore, is both discursive creation and material reality (Pietz n.d.), something that emerged historically to designate a process in which objects constitute subjects. It points to an aesthetic sensibility in which the direction of mutual influence of human subject and thinglike object can be reversed; in which we cannot only think animistically, of anthropomorphized objects, of a spirit *in* matter, but also fetishistically, of human beings objectified by the spirit *of* the matters they encounter. The greed or fancy evoked by the fetish constitutes humans as sensuous, and therefore suffering, beings, as

both subject and object of a historical configuration of desire in which neither humans nor objects possess a predetermined primacy.

However, the exploration of the possibilities which the discourse on fetish opens up is fairly recent, fed by, among other things, a more consistent attention paid to consumption, where the immanence of the object plays a more independent role than it does in the study of production (which privileges human agency) or exchange (which emphasizes the transcendence of a system of commensurability). Why this recent emergence of the materiality of things, and of the fetish in particular? The fetish has been a possibility in Occidental discourse since the seventeenth century. Since then, similarly hybrid objects like caste, totem, and taboo have arisen, without having an impact in the West equal to that of the fetish.[8a] The fetish somehow possesses an intellectual force that makes one wonder whether it is sufficiently served by a theoretical discussion like the preceding, that turns it into a general human trait (whether one calls this an aesthetic sensibility, or a cognitive process, or something else). Such theoretical exercises, although useful, will never "tame the beast" of fetishism (cf. Ellen 1988: 220), for such domestication implies that it is possible to arrest the continual, paradoxical movement that most uses of the concept entail. Any merely *intellectual* attempt to go "beyond" fetishism (see also Miller 1990) fails to recognize that fetishization is both "false" and functional, a form of misrecognition *as well as* recognition of reality; that it implies a "double attitude" (Freud 1950: 203) or "double consciousness" (Pietz 1985: 14) on the part of the fetishist. As (part of) an aesthetics of untranscended materiality, fetishism tells us to move in, rather than escape, the sensuous border zone between our selves and the things around us, between mind and matter. In the remainder of this paper, I will argue that the aesthetics that produced the—predominantly "false"—fetish was also the source of—predominantly "functional"—commonplaces of Western objectivity like "rarity" and "fact," and that this gives us a reason why the fetish has so preoccupied European minds. So let us shift from metaphor to metonymy and go back to the period in which the fetish first materialized.

## Singularity, Chance, and the Shuffle of Things

The seventeenth century, wedged in between the first (De Marees 1604), and the most widely read ethnography of the West African fetish (Bosman 1702), was also the heyday of the curiosity cabinet and the object displayed in it, the so-called "curiosity" or "rarity." I think it



can be argued that the rarity—in Francis Bacon's words, "whatsoever the hand of man by exquisite art or engine has made rare in stuff, form, or motion; whatsoever singularity, chance, and the shuffle of things hath produced; whatsoever Nature has wrought in things that want life and may be kept" (1594, quoted in Impey and MacGregor 1985: 1)—is the twin of the fetish: It was not just born at about the same time, but also duplicated its mercantile features, if with a European complexion. Since the rarity is an important source of the Western notion of objectivity, this comparison sets the fetish within the history of Western objectivity, and gives us another angle from which to consider the reasons why a majority of (post-) Enlightenment scholars shied away from its untranscended materiality.

Like the commodity (Appadurai 1986: 16), the rarity can only be understood as a thing in motion, a thing being "shuffled." Unlike the commodity, however, the rarity's motion makes it into a marvelous object, something that stands out as "curious" and "rare" from the everyday world of commodities, something that possesses a generic singularity over and against everyday commodities that we also found with the fetish. The rarity stands somewhere between a magical or miraculous substance like a relic—an object with power of its own—and the modern museum object, which represents some broader concept or reality other than itself. The rarity substantiates categorical transformations, things that confuse the everyday, like natural mimicry, nature's freaks, or exotic imports. The categorical mobility of the rarity is above all manifested in a specific performance: The arousal, in its spectators, of a sense of *wonder*, the feeling of being in the presence of the extraordinary, out-of-place, or radically different. This sense of wonder was an attitude as applicable to the marvels of natural magic, the meditations of Protestant pietist science, or the novelties of exotic artifacts, flora, or fauna.

Curiosity cabinets or *Wunderkammern* are often regarded as the origin of the museum, and of course they provided many museums now extant with a collection with which to start. According to stereotype, these "not-yet" museums were deficient in order and not as publicly accessible as one might have wished, yet "in terms of function, little has changed" (Impey and MacGregor 1985: 1). In such views, the curiosity cabinet is taken to be an ordered display of things, a "collection" which erases the context of origin of its objects, to make them dependent on principles of interior classification, organization, and categorization (Stewart 1993: 153). Such taxonomic collecting is thought to characterize the curiosity cabinet, even if some of its orderings were symbolic rather than functional, and for

private display rather than public education (Olmi 1985: 5–7).[9] However, it is doubtful whether this story can be upheld. The museum order of arranging objects in such a way that they form a collection representing "history," "nationality," or "nature" only comes up as taxonomy in the eighteenth, and as series in the nineteenth century (Bennett 1994). It is characterized by a discourse of representation, based on the idea that the things displayed "stand for" something else (Mitchell 1991; cf. Stewart 1993: 152). In contrast, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century curiosity cabinets do not display an order or system of that kind (Olmi 1985: 15). Some argue they are "not even a vague or half-formed gesture" toward the museum (Mullaney 1983: 41). Instead, it might be better to avoid the museological and taxonomic discourse of representation as much as possible, and look upon the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century *Wunderkammer* with a theatrical metaphor, as a place for the production and performance of aesthetic difference.[10]

This may be clarified by the relic, for despite their mutual differences, both the rarity and the relic stand on one side of a divide that separates them from the museum object. The late Medieval relic collections of the great religious houses and the Renaissance curiosity cabinets were, in content at least, related: While the former included "secular" rarities like giants' teeth and bones, or natural marvels like "thunderstones" (prehistoric stone implements; MacGregor 1983b: 70–71), curiosity cabinets sometimes included relics and statues of saints (Daston 1994: 256; MacGregor 1983a: 21). This correspondence in content is reinforced by the fact that both relic and rarity were not meant to *represent* anything (if that is understood in terms of being a sign that stands for an absent referent). The relic did not represent but *was* the saint, and this identity proved itself by the performance of a miracle (Geary 1986). Similarly, a rarity demonstrated its identity by evoking "wonder" in its spectator, a feeling of being in the presence of the extraordinary and marvelous. The performance of the wondrous or marvelous also covered the miraculous, and that explains the presence of relics in a rarity collection, although the performance of wonder meant, as we shall see, much more than the kind of miracle commonly expected from a Medieval relic.

An important difference between the relic and the rarity is that the singularity of the former was personalized: The relic was, properly speaking, a saint. In contrast, the singularity of the rarity was, like that of the fetish, generic rather than individual. The rarity collections did not represent the world because "they ignored 99.9 percent of it in favor of the singular and anomalous" (Daston 1988: 458), and



this departure from the accepted categories of the everyday was an important reason for their selection *as* rarities, objects meant to produce astonishment in their audience. Rarities and curiosities were not held together by a classification imposed on them before or after the fact, their character was based on their criteria of entrance in the collection: They were *selected* so as to "defy classification in principle" and "break the rules of the normal and predictable" (Daston 1988: 458). Rarity collections included magical substances like bezoar stones and unicorn horns (only later "disenchanted" as the horn of the narwal whale), substances expected to perform miraculous cures and regarded as preternatural, a category that was always "wondrous" but only *sometimes* a sign or representation of something else (like a religious lesson or satanic influence; Daston 1994: 256). But they also included collections of antiquities, meant to reproduce the atmosphere of the classics (Evans 1956); or works of art, for as long as genres like the still life—often depicting rarities—had not yet secured the nobility of painting (Foster 1993: 255); or the magic of mechanical innovations like the automatons of Inigo Jones and Salomon de Caus (Yates 1972: 39–40). Most importantly, they were dominated by exotic objects, first brought by Columbus and his successors to the cabinets of the Medicis and other Southern noblemen, and later by Dutch and English traders to those of Northern collectors.

The performance that the curiosity cabinet was meant to achieve, therefore, ranged from the magical through the classical, artistic, and scientific, to the exotic, and it was theatrical in the widest sense of the word. The sixteenth-century Italian, and the early seventeenth-century English curiosity cabinet and garden were private *theatrum naturae*, arranged according to the conventions of the art of memory (Laurencich-Minelli 1985: 19; also, Boström 1985: 100–101; Hunt 1985: 198). These conventions derived from the rhetorical practice of memorizing speeches by furnishing an imaginary architectural trajectory through a "memory palace" with the symbols needed for the narrative sequence of the speech (see Spence 1985; Yates 1966). The speech could then be given by passing through each room or corridor in sequence, retrieving the symbols that evoked that specific section of the speech required. Thus, the sections of the memory palace's display did not represent so much as produce an oral performance aimed at the persuasion of an audience; a presentation of otherness, rather than a sign of its absence. Similar productions of affect among the audience were what was aimed at in the itineraries produced by Italian and English landscape designs (Hunt 1985; see also Paulson 1975: 19ff.) It is significant that both John Tradescant's rarity collection and

Shakespeare's plays were thought to fall under the College of Revels, which controlled such performances. Both performed the "fullness of the world," the former in his house, The Ark, the latter in his theatre, The Globe (see Hunt 1985: 198; MacGregor 1983a: 20; Mullaney 1983).[11] The Ark and The Globe were "theatres of the world" (Yates 1969: Fucíková 1985) in the sense that theatre also meant "conspectus" or "collection" (Hunt 1985: 197).

As Frances Yates has shown, the idea of a "theatre of the world" was common to what she called the Rosicrucian Enlightenment, the work of a set of innovative practitioners of natural magic and Hermetic philosophy (1969; 1972). For these scholars, the art of memory symbolized the possibility of a knowledge of the world that could lead to truly miraculous performances (Yates 1966; 1969). However, the idea of the rarity collection as theatre goes beyond the sphere of the Rosicrucians, and connects them with Protestant pietist critics and the main protagonists of the "Scientific Revolution" that were otherwise critical of magic and its aura of demonic persuasion. Early cabinets in Italy and England were often the property of an aristocracy, or of the scientific, clerical or technical personnel they employed or protected, and often displayed a perception of the world in terms of Rosicrucianism. Later Protestant owners of curiosity cabinets in Northern Europe, like the members of the Royal Society, and Dutch and Scandinavian mayors, bankers, scientists, and merchants may or may not have been hostile to Rosicrucianism, but many of them substituted the architectonic imagery of the art of memory with the two-dimensional block- and tree-diagrams popularized by the philosopher Petrus Ramus and his followers (Stagl 1995; Yates 1966), an epistemological shift that was necessary for the idea about the representation of the world through taxonomy of later philosophers of "universal language" (Knowlson 1975; Slaughter 1982).[12]

However, until the urge towards taxonomy came into its own in the eighteenth century (along with the work of Linnaeus, Buffon, and the creation of the first museums), the idea of a theatre of the world, and more particularly, of the role of wonder as the essential performance of the rarity, was not displaced. Despite the growing suspicion of the leaders of the Scientific Revolution towards rarity collections and marvelous performances, major collections (such as those of the Royal Society and of the University of Leiden) were made more, rather than less marvelous, during the seventeenth century (Hunter 1985: 164–165; Olmi 1985: 14; Schupbach 1985: 171). Dutch collectors spoke as easily of the "theatre of wonders" of their cabinets as their Italian predecessors (Amsterdams Historisch Museum 1992: 89). The University of Leiden perfected a display that—though clearly opposite in intention to the magicians' *hubris* implicit in Rosicrucianism—did not in the least undermine the power of the rarity to arouse wonder: The *anatomie moralisée* of the summer display of skeletons and rarities in the anatomy theatre, where, instead of the winter performances of dissection, visitors could now be impressed by the lessons of worldly *vanitas* conveyed through these palpable images of mortality and human insignificance (Lunsing Scheurleer 1985: 120; Schupbach 1985: 169). The display was copied widely (Oxford, Hunter 1985: 160; Copenhagen, Schupbach 1985: 172). As the Dutch collector Swammerdam, writing to a Parisian colleague in 1678, shows, "moral anatomy," Protestant piety, and wonder went very well together:



> I present you herewith the Almighty Finger of God in the anatomy of a louse; in which you will find wonder piled upon wonder and God's Wisdom clearly exposed in one minute particle. (quoted in Lunsing Scheurleer 1985: 120)

Similarly, the wonders of God's creation were meditated upon by Protestants through, for instance, their collections of shells (Lunsing Scheurleer 1985: 116). And this piety did not prevent more mundane uses of wonder, as in Swammerdam's apothecary, where the display of tortoise shell, alligator skin, or rhino horn would advertise his mastery of the secrets of medicine (George 1985: 186). Such moral imagery of objectivity would endure well into the nineteenth century (Daston and Galison 1992). However, since morality was something following on wonder rather than inherent in it (according to Descartes and Spinoza: Greenblatt 1991: 24), such moralizing was already an attempt at controlling wonder's potential insubordination.

## Wonder, Fact, and Fancy: The Rarity as Fetish

In fact, the wonder aroused by the displays of theatres of the world was, from the late Medieval period up to the Enlightenment, regarded as a primary passion, and the fount of all knowledge. It was an experience that seemed "to resist recuperation, containment, ideological incorporation," and this may be why Descartes and Spinoza suspected the suspension of categories that it entailed, and the "freezing" or "paralysis" of the subject that an excess of wonder brought about (Greenblatt 1991: 17, 20, 24). Of course, the most perfect wonder was

one that was also a material reality (1991: 36). Descartes' scepticism as far as rarity collections was concerned may be explained by his suspicion of an excess of wonder, yet he regarded wonder as the fount of all science (Daston 1988: 459). Francis Bacon suffered from a similar scepticism, yet he regarded the rarity as a necessary possession of the philosopher, for in his conception, the wondrous provided a novel sense of "fact."

It has been recognized that rarity collections are related to the Scientific Revolution in the sense that they raised the classificatory quandaries that bore fruit in the eighteenth-century work of Linnaeus, Buffon, and Lamarck (George 1985: 179). They provided a "granular view" of the world that facilitated the eighteenth-century disposition of things in the slots of a taxonomic scheme (Daston 1988: 462, 465). But the bizarre, rare and monstrous are not usually included in the history of science, despite the crucial role they play in the history of Western objectivity (Daston 1988: 453). Rarity collections, in bringing together automatons and natural freaks, helped assimilate art to nature and prepare for a mechanistic philosophy (Daston 1988: 464; Hunt 1985). Most important, they created a sense of factuality separate from scholastic "natural philosophy" (Daston 1988: 465). Despite Bacon's scepticism about the frivolity of the curiosities on display, he also regarded "singularity, chance, and the shuffle of things" as essential contributors to philosophy. He could use "marvels" in order to break down the distinctions between artificial and natural, and between natural and preternatural, and criticize natural philosophy by asking it to also explain the "singular instances" that, particularly in the case of the preternatural, it had defined as being out of its bounds (Daston 1994: 261).

> This is why the first scientific facts retailed in the annals of the Royal Society and the Paris Académie des Sciences were often such strange ones, for natural philosophy required the shock of repeated contact with the bizarre, the heteroclite, and the singular in order to sunder the age-old link between a "datum of experience" and "the conclusions that may be based on it"; in other words, to sunder facts from evidence. (Daston 1994: 261–62)

The cabinet of curiosities, that "museum of the preternatural" (1994: 256), provided that shock through wonder, aroused by preternatural freaks of nature, exotic objects from overseas, works of art, or the products of human technical or artistic virtuosity. Thus, rarities helped promote our familiar sense of the word "fact" as a datum of



experience separate from the conclusions we may base on it (Daston 1991: 345). The word entered the English language in this sense in the early seventeenth century, when Bacon praised the rarity cabinet and De Marees disparaged the fetish.

Thus, the seventeenth-century career of the rarity suggests its pivotal role within an aesthetics of wonder that concentrated on the singular instance or anomalous "fact." This aesthetics dominated the thinking of a European intelligentsia that was rich, cosmopolitan, and prone to travel, and could, at times, disregard incipient divisions between magic and science or between religious denominations in the name of knowledge and curiosity (Daston 1988: 455).[13] While in the new science, one could talk of a "new creed of particulars" that opposed anomalies and singularities to the commonplaces of everyday life (or the *topoi* of the rhetoric of natural philosophy; Daston 1991: 341), in other fields of European culture, one can speak of an aesthetics of the fragment and the quotation that is often subsumed under "Mannerism" or "Baroque" (Bunn 1980; Olmi 1985: 9, 14). This aesthetics is apparent in the "metonymic or synecdochic tabulation of objects" of Dutch still life (Foster 1993: 259); its affinity with scientific culture appears in the label of an "art of describing" (Alpers 1983). James Bunn identifies this aesthetic as "mercantile," for to him it thrives on displacement, on the removal of a form or figure from its context or ground, to make it stand on its own. The curio collection is the soul of this aesthetic (Bunn 1980: 303). Like its artistic cousin, the seventeenth-century still life, it displays little taxonomic logic, but presents things as having a "power of their own" (Foster 1993: 255). Within this aesthetics, the things themselves call for an immediacy of description that cannot be assimilated to the narrative conception of art that emerged in fifteenth-century Italy and dominated art history's major analytic strategies (Alpers 1983: xix–xx). Mercantile aesthetics, whose "ultimate principle of order . . . may well be the imperial market" (Foster 1993: 259) presents things without a narrative connecting them, or, better, with the homogeneous and empty space of global exchange forming their only connection.

Hal Foster links this aesthetic to fetishism through the Dutch still life, but despite noting the historical convergence of ethnographies of the fetish and depictions and collections of "rare commodities," his analysis is largely metaphorical, treating the still life "as if" it is fetishistic. It is as important, however, to emphasize the metonymic, historical link between fetish and rarity—for which one has to acknowledge that the still life did not just depict rarities, but was in itself a rarity, to be included in a collection. James Clifford has

hinted at this congruity of fetish and rarity when he argued that, in order to undo the effects of power of the taxonomic museological regime, we shall have to return to the museum objects their "lost status as fetishes" (1985: 244)—while he was patently referring to a museum, the Pitt Rivers, in which the status lost would rather be that of rarities, at least partly derived from the Tradescants' cabinet (Williamson 1983). Rarity and fetish are easily confused because both are objects "close to being sui generis" (Daston 1988: 456). Rarity, fetish, and still life all present objects with a "power of their own," displaced from the economies in which they functioned and that Dutch merchants encountered in the course of the expansion of the global market; objects that therefore appear "not alive, not dead, not useful, not useless," in "eerie animation" (Foster 1993: 257), promoting the conceit that they have a factual presence of their own. Just as the fetish emerged, as an object, out of the trading relationships established by Dutch merchants on the West African coast, so too was the rarity to a large extent the result of the import of exotic products and artefacts. As the rarity collector John Tradescant asked West African traders, he desired "Any Thing that is Strang" (Macgregor 1983b: 20), that is, anything that was set apart from existing systems of signification. Of course, a West African fetish was itself "strang" enough to be included in a rarity collection. But I am suggesting that rarity and fetish are twins—one bright, the other of a darker hue—born on the shipping routes frequented by European merchants, and christened as either outlandish fact or bizarre fancy. The rarity was "any thing that is strang"; the fetish—according to William Smith's account of 1744—"any thing [the Guinea Pagans] fancy" (Pietz 1987: 41). Both strangeness and fancy combine the positive power of an object to fascinate with its underdetermination by the systems of signification with which the subject is familiar.

My interpretation of the rarity's "wonder" as the inversion of the fetish's "fancy" is reinforced by the fact that, as "wonder" became subordinated to the taxonomic urge of the Enlightenment, the rarity was increasingly described like the fetish, in terms of "fancy," or related terms like "trifle" or "bric-a-brac." As "fact" separate from systems of interpretation became an accepted category, and the clamor for systems of classification of such facts increased, "wonder" became a threat rather than a liberation. No longer serving as an escape from scholasticism, the rarity's singularity became suspect, and redefined as a thing insufficiently controlled by subjective discipline. Already in the seventeenth century, suspicions towards the



"fancy" that could lead to the erroneous acceptance of evidence from miracles accompanies attempts to naturalize the preternatural (Daston 1994: 265); just as Descartes and Spinoza suspected the "paralysis" of the subject which wonder could effect. The Enlightenment replaced wonder with doubt, and questioned the naming of things by drawing up ever-perfected systems of classification (which, among other things, declare fetishism, the religion of materiality, to be the most primitive expression of mankind). By the early nineteenth century, Samuel Coleridge could describe the often riotous category transgressions of the rarity and the curio as an "epistemology of fancy" (Bunn 1980: 319). "Fancy" was the way in which Victorian culture reacted to a form of collecting that was too passionate, too subject to the article collected, too *feminine* to measure up to the discipline and rigour of contemporary male collecting and its model, the museum. This "other" kind of collecting was domesticated in the "fancy fair" (Dolin 1993). Even Bunn, in describing the aesthetics of the rarity, mostly adopts a depreciative tone, the style being one of "bric-a-brac," "randomly purchased knickknacks," a "prodigious yet patternless" Baroque (1980: 303) that apparently still threatens the subjective discipline of art history, just as its kind of collecting was felt as a threat overburdening the island by late eighteenth-century British intellectuals (1980: 316). Present-day museologists' negative assessment of the rarity cabinet, as a museum deficient in order, can be traced to this eighteenth-century suspicion of the unordered object.

But note that such a negative assessment of a perception of and dealing with objects that is "developing out of the hands" of seventeenth and eighteenth century artists and thinkers (1980: 303), that this disparagement of an *uncontrollable* aesthetics, builds on this aesthetics itself. It does not deny its truth as much as it displaces it by the idealism of an epistemology of classification. The threat of mercantile aesthetics may have had to be contained in such a way because "wonder" is such an easily democratized attitude, one difficult to discipline within any "style" or "taste." To restore hierarchy, wonder had to be domesticated as kitsch, "fancy," or "bric-a-brac," objects collected—at home, by women and children—without order or use. But as such, these unordered objects still recall a period in which their riotous independence was functional; when the falsity of fetish and fancy emerged together with the functionality of rarity and fact, and the displacements effected by the globalizing market made them all appear as *Dinge an sich*, with an "eerie animation" of their own.

## Fetish and the Limits of Representation

Thus, we see the fetish is not the only substantiation of the spirit of matter: Its emergence coincides with that of "fact" and "rarity," two other ways of discussing an untranscended materiality. Moreover, it seems this spirit of matter is largely released by the dominance of market relationships. In the same tentative and exploratory mode of the rest of this paper, one might suggest that this is also a step towards explaining why consumption and fetishism are again at the center of attention in cultural and social theory, for this resurgence seems to coincide with global developments that have given market ideology a new lease of life. However, this paper was meant to suggest that the fetish is not merely a symptom of, but also a challenge to some of the ways of thinking that characterize the present; just as, at other moments in its genealogy, the fetish threatened to disrupt everyday processes of human signification. In particular, it sits uneasily with the new magic of constructionism, which tends to treat the social as nothing but a human product and to see the materiality of social life as just an empty carrier or representation of human intention and artifice. The fetish, or the spirit of matter in general, militates against this idealism and suggests a counterbalancing materiality. The fetish provides an alternative to those theories that say everything is representation, if representation is understood as a process in which a material signifier is made to stand for an absent signified defined as a mental category or human process of construction. Already at the point of its first emergence, the fetish's material *presence* was opposed to the idol as *representation* of a (false) spirit (Pietz 1993: 131). In conclusion, I want to suggest that the fetish still occupies a similar position today: that of an occult counterpoint that marks the limits of a dominant discourse of representation.

Of course, I do not deny that fetish can itself be a representation. It has, for example, long "stood for" something typically "African" (whether "religion," or something pre-religious in its stead). Twentieth-century anthropological consensus, however, has branded this representation of Africa as false, since it did not and does not accord with West African practice (cf. MacGaffey 1994).[14] Pietz's genealogy of the fetish has shown that its discourse does not represent (West) Africa. Rather, it marks "a space of cultural revolution" (1985: 11). The fetish, like the rarity, indicates a crossing of categorical boundaries, a border zone where one cannot expect the stability of meaning that is routine in everyday life. Even more: Whereas in everyday life, we can usually supply the meaning of things, by giving either their use, or a description of their place in life, such a distinction between the thing and its meaning, symbol and referent, or representation and represented is subverted by fetishistic relationships: The fetish erases the distinction between signifier and signified on which the present-day discourse of representation is based (Ellen 1988: 226). It is too powerful a presence to be a mere re-presentation of something else.



The discourse of representation is idealist in so far as it maintains the Saussurian distinction between a material signifier and an ideal signified, and assumes the former is given meaning by the latter. Such a theory makes human intention and artifice—communication on the model of human consciousness—a prerequisite of signification, excluding all other forms of natural interaction (cf. Eco 1976: 14–15). Saussure *re*discovered this relationship of material signifier and ideal signified, for it was forged in the seventeenth, and became dominant by the eighteenth century (Foucault 1973: 67). This emergence of the modern concept of the sign is directly related to the systems of classification that subsumed the formerly unruly Baconian "facts" and that helped to label collections gathered without such classifications as "fanciful." The prime example of the modern concept of the sign's binary relationship with the signified was the map or diagram (Foucault 1973: 64), and this shows its affinity with the "diagrammatic reduction of thought" characteristic of eighteenth-century taxonomic schemes (Fabian 1983: 116).[15] The modern discourse of representation, the modern concept of the sign, and the systems of classification that subsumed the uncontrolled objects released by market relationships, were all products of the Enlightenment. This is the historical provenance of the systems of meanings that, in Appadurai's words, "encode things with significance" (1986: 5), the "necessary condition" of the primacy of human traffic that Appadurai mentioned as the context for his methodologically fetishist counterpoint.

The aesthetics of order and taxonomy that displaced the fetish and the rarity to the margins of occidental thought has made them into occult qualities, things that live hidden lives in demonic or domesticated form. Yet they are necessary for the order of representation to pretend to extend itself over a surface of chaos that needs to be disciplined. But this universal extension of the sign "precludes even the possibility of a theory of signification" (Foucault 1973: 65). The fetish foregrounds the basic problem of signification that the idealist theory of representation has attempted to submerge in the binary model of the material signifier and the ideal signified: that our

only way to know of a distinction between material and ideal, or actual and virtual, is through an actual material sensation. On the one hand, the fetish is a material presence that does not represent but "takes one's fancy," making us suffer sensuously. On the other, it is only fanciful to us because it reminds us of a displacement and signals a loss or denial. Thus, the fetish shows the limits of representation by disrupting the continuity of reference and replacing it by a substitution (not a re-presentation but a presentation of something else). Yet at the same time it asks how we can know the substituted by the signals emitted from what substitutes for it; or how we can know the virtual if that can only be conveyed through the material itself. This is the poststructuralist question of how we know of "codes" or "encoding" *without* such entities or operations being, practically speaking, present. It may also be the first step that makes a theory of signification possible.

## Notes

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1. Such essentializing movements, in which a practical relationship between unequal (groups of) people is translated into an "essential" difference between subject and object, are constitutive to ethnography. In order to understand its operation, however, one has to acknowledge that ethnography was a genre of and for colonial relationships from the inception of early modern colonization and trade (Pels and Salemink 1994; 1998).

2. See also Daniel Miller's account of Marx's idea of objectification as rupture (1987: ch.3).

3. "If they can see the maintenance or the increase of production under capitalism as somehow bound up with the devil and thereby make a fetish of the productive process, do we not also have our own form of fetishism in which we attribute to commodities a reality so substantial that they acquire the appearance of natural beings, so natural in fact that they appear to take on a life of their own?" (Taussig 1980: 30).



4. "Fetish could originate only in conjunction with the emergent articulation of the commodity form that defined itself within and against the social values and religious ideologies of *two* different types of non-capitalist society" (Pietz 1985: 7: my emphasis), that is, the Iberian, Catholic Christian, and the West African.

5. As the work of Appadurai shows, the implication of this distinction is to avoid the question of materiality in favor of a concern with commodity and use values.

6. "The importance of this physicality of the artifact derives from its ability thereby to act as a bridge, not only between the mental and physical worlds, but also, more unexpectedly, between consciousness and the unconscious" (Miller 1987: 99). One might add that objects can also transfer form—and consequently, signification—from one historically or culturally distinct context to another.

7. Cf. the changes in human sensory regimes under the influence of the technologies of the linear perspective, the lens, the camera (Jay 1993), or the telephone (Van Beek 1996: 8).

8. "Dead" in this context, means little more than "without intention," but in semiotics, intention is no longer regarded as a prerequisite for signification (Eco 1976: 14–15).

8a. The complete genealogies of these concepts on the lines of what William Pietz did for the fetish remain to be written, but they will surely reveal that they are similarly placed in a context of "cultural revolution": caste, as an originally Portuguese term inflected by colonialism in India and orientalist imagery to denote a human group other than class or nobility (see Dirks 1992); totem, as a North American term domesticated by anthropology to denote an improper understanding of the relationship between the human and natural realms; and taboo, as an Oceanic term inflected to give European languages a nonlegal and nonreligious notion of prohibition.

9. Susan Stewart's otherwise brilliant observations on the collection (1993: 151ff.) fail to recognize the difference between taxonomic collections and curiosity cabinets; the latter are closer to the collections of the pack rat (1993: 153) than to those governed by a "narrative of interiority." See also below, on the "entrance criteria" of the curio collection.

10. This is a paraphrase of Steven Mullaney's description of the curio cabinet in terms of a "rehearsal" of cultural difference (1983: 42, 48). Despite a number of agreements in our argument, I have avoided the term "rehearsal," to counter any association with a preexisting script being interpreted. However, if I understand Mullaney rightly, he, too, means a repetition of the same production, rather than the representation of an absent original.

11. The rarity collection of the Rosicrucian Jesuit Kircher in Rome was actually meant to recreate the contents of the Ark (George 1985: 186); a shop for rarities in Paris was called "Noahs-Arke" (Macgregor 1983b: 91).

12. Given the general association of magic with Catholicism, Rosicrucianism might be expected to have found few adherents in Northern Europe. However, the origin of the term Rosicrucian at least needs to be sought in Reformation Germany (Yates 1972), and while many Northern rarity collectors were Protestants (such as the Dutch: Lunsing Scheurleer 1985: 117; Amsterdams Historisch Museum 1992), they were not necessarily hostile to Rosicrucian thinking (like the Swede Hainhofer (Boström 1985). Hostility to Rosicrucianism was more likely to be found among those scholars who wanted to replace the magical worldview of Rosicrucianism by taxonomic thinking (Knowlson 1975; Vickers 1984).

13. See also Marie Louise Pratt on the "continental, transnational aspirations of European science" in the early eighteenth century (Pratt 1992: 25).

14. To interpret Freud's theory of fetishism as saying first of all that the fetish represents the mother's phallus is, I feel, as silly as saying that the fetish is a typically "African" thing (cf. Freud 1950: 199).

15. Another important model is the disparity between the book and the text, where material form is easily separated from ideal content in a similarly binary model (cf. Stewart 1993: 22–23).

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