ART BECOMES YOU!

PARODY, PASTICHE
AND THE POLITICS
OF ART. MATERIALITY
IN A POST-MATERIAL
PARADIGM
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THE CONTEMPORARY ARTIST AS COMMODITY FETISH

AMELIA JONES

In the very act of resisting commodification the work of art becomes subordinate to its values, only able to define itself through a process of cultural negotiation...

The ethical pathos of [contemporary] art derives from the tension between what it promises (an aesthetic community which transcends the relentless self-interest of the capitalist system) and the fact that its continued existence as a cultural form depends on precisely this system.

Grant Kester, 2004

There is a long history in Euro-American art of artists documenting themselves in photographic (including cinematic, televisial, and digital) images that are circulated through artistic and commercial networks. From Marcel Duchamp’s 1924 Monte Carlo Bond, to Andy Warhol’s reiterative self-portrait silkscreen images and performances for media cameras from 1960 onward, to the burgeoning artistic self-imaging projects since the 1960s by artists such as Cindy Sherman, Nikki Lee, and Yasumasa Morimura, artists have explored the role of photographic imaging technologies in rendering or conveying the self, and correlative in circulating the artist as an image (a commodity that can be reproduced, looked at, purchased, and/or downloaded and “possessed”).

This particular trajectory of self-imaging indicates a shift that has accelerated in recent years away from either the veiling of the artist’s body (as in high modernism) and from the live performance of the body common in some of the early twentieth-century avant-gardes (in particular the various effusions of Dada) and resurfacing in 1960s and 1970s performance art. Self-imaging per the projects of Warhol or Sherman – a performance of the self for the purposes of creating an image to be circulated in the institutions of art (including the market) – thus eschews the “live” event’s emphasis on presence as having a compelling, even violent critical effect on spectatorship and focuses instead on a rendering of the artist’s body such that its cultural value and significance is exposed as being inevitably predicated on absence. This turn towards artifice and simulation (itself, of course, typical of what many have theorized as the postmodern condition, linked to the economic and social shifts of late or global capitalism) makes use of the capacity of photographic technologies of representation to turn the artist’s body into a spectacle to be circulated through the commodity systems of the art world and its corollary discourses, such as art criticism and art history.

What does it mean that artists now elaborately, willfully, and increasingly frequently perform themselves within the joint commodity-media systems that comprise the art market, such that the value of their work – indeed its very character – is defined in and through their bodies, but their bodies signified as absent referents, made visible only through representation? Through deliberate self-fatification in projects revolving around pictures of their own bodies, artists from Yayoi Kusama to Nikki Lee have performed themselves as images – images that are inherently commodified and yet are positioned so as to be seen, displayed, and consumed as art. There are thus two profound paradoxes linked to this kind of artistic production: 1) while these images are produced as art (that is how they have their value), they are simultaneously overtly circulated as commodities and mass cultural products; 2) enacting themselves first and foremost as objects of cultural desire, the artists’ “subjectivity,” if we can call it that – or their agency – rests in the “authority” that substantiates our interest in their production of themselves as spectacle.

It is the purpose of this essay to explore what this shift to willful self-commodification through self imaging – where the artist embraces and even exacerbates the processes and effects of late capitalist commodity culture – might be understood to signal in terms of broader conceptions about the meaning and significance of the self in global late capitalism. How, I will ask, have artists navigated and/or produced the subject via representation? How and why have they increasingly often, as in the practices noted above, shifted the terms through which art is interpreted, given value, institutionalized, and marketed – from an emphasis on style and form as the bases of cultural value paramount in modernism (at least in its dominant formalist variants) to structures of subjectivity and visibility as the foundation for an aesthetic value that has come to be conflated with commodity value?

1. I am grateful to Henry Rogers for the opportunity to develop these ideas, and to my students in my "SelfImage" seminar at University Manchester, who provoked my thinking in productive ways.


3. It is worth emphasizing that I am using the term “photographic” very broadly, to include other forms of representation that draw on the logic if not the formal or technological properties of analogue photography.

4. Claude Cahun’s brilliant performative self-portrait images from the 1920s and 1930s are crucial examples of self-documentation, but Cahun did not “market” the images overtly as did Duchamp, Warhol, and the other artists whose self-images are discussed here.
Ultimately, these artists' works suggest that we now understand ourselves not through new "styles" of self-expression, codified through visual form, as dominant modernist and postmodernist theorists would so often have it, but through changed conceptions of the self as represented, as constituted in and through the visual—and thus as circulable in the rapid circuits of exchange of money and cultural value that constitute global capitalism.

While it is somewhat of a truism at this point to argue that US modernist theorists who rose to dominance in the post-WWII period such as Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg promoted an idea of modernist art as a more or less direct expression of individual feeling and/or of authentic "being," the extent to which many postmodern theorists replicate such ideologies of art as subjective expression and/or art as determined through individual style on the deepest level is rarely noted. Fredric Jameson, one of the most influential US-based postmodern theorists, for example, argues, 5.1 In this sense, the shift I am noting parallels the turn to the subject in twentieth-century philosophy, especially in its French variants. See Carolyn Dean, The Self and Its Pleasures: Lacan, and the History of the Decentered Subject (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995).


8. I discuss this dual dynamic at some length in my chapter one, "The Pollockian Performance and the Revision of the Modernist Subject," in Body Art/Performing the Subject (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 53-102. Notably, as point out here, in his famous "American Action Painters" (Art News 51, n. 8 (December 1952), 22-25, 48-50) essay, Rosenberg is clearly describing Pollock when he describes about flinging paint and the canvas as an "arena in which to act," but he never names Pollock by name. My argument, then, is that, while invoking the body of Pollock, Rosenberg still avoids naming him. Such an overt acknowledgment of the specific body of the artist would unhinge the representational system of art criticism, whereby the critic (per a warded down version of Kantian theory) claims disinterestedness (i.e., a lack of personal engagement) in relation to the art he is analyzing.

Jameson, while arguing for a shift in the understanding of the self in postmodernism, retains the idea of art being about style on some level (and thus reiterates the modernist idea of art as an expression of individual subjectivity, as being about "art itself"). It is my attempt here to provide a different framework for understanding a dominant trend in contemporary art, one that acknowledges a profound shift (articulated in part from this very work) in the conception and experience of the self. It is my view that we can learn from artists such as Sherman, Morimura, Renée Cox, and Mariko Mori, who push the capacity of technologies of representation to "produce" the self as image in order to interrogate the boundaries of contemporary subjectivity and identity as these develop in relation to the circulation of images, of capital, and of aesthetic or cultural value today.

Performing the Body (as Fetish)

In the 1950s, Abstract Expressionism (or Action Painting, as critic Harold Rosenberg would have it), was proclaimed the heir to the European avant-garde tradition and was marketed by forces allied both with the Museum of Modern Art and the US government as exemplary of American freedom and individualism. Within this logic, the subject of Euro-American modernism was ideologically secured as the center of a self-willed and coherent creativity while at the same time rendered implicitly invisible as an actual (ideologically, emotionally, sexually, racially, and otherwise invested and identified) body making the work of art. The body of the artist was necessary as origin of the work but had at the same time to be veiled or occluded for only as such could it sustain the myth of its potential transcendence.

The competing ideological forces conspired to construct a self-contradictory system that could be sustained only through the occlusion of the fact that the body of the artist at the centre of creation could only ever be identified as that of a Euro-American, Caucasian man. The stakes of continuing to veil the artist's body were extremely high. Paradoxically, however, with the simultaneous rise of mass media culture, the "subject" per se was also "subject" to representation—as the circulation of images of Jackson Pollock's body during the 1950s made clear. Just as the need for centering the subject became the most acute, with the increasing challenges posed to dominant Euro-American cultural values by the advent of postcolonialism and the rise of the various rights movements in the 1950s and 1960s, the mass media were starting to make up of that subject for their own ends. The media aimed at further substantiating the visibility of artistic subjects as marketable images and by representing their bodies it paradoxically led to the feminisation and commodification of these same subjects. Pollock, whose veiled body secured both Greenberg's and Rosenberg's claims for American artistic dominance, was caught up in this system. In the greatest irony of all, Pollock's international fame rested increasingly, after the publication of the famous 1949 Life magazine article that asked "Is He the Greatest Living Artist?" on the visibility of the very body Greenberg and Rosenberg labored to suppress.

Aligned intimately with capitalism, and so with media culture, modernism thus both substantiated the centered subject so central to Euro-American political and economic dominance and provided the means to destroy it. Photographic media, and particularly the photographic self-portrait, bear out this paradox. While photographic technologies, including proto-photographic devices such as the camera obscura and drawing devices developed in the Renaissance serve to concretize the centered subject, literally
positioning the artist – and his viewer-to-be – at the centre of the perspectival cone of vision, the self-portrait image also produces the artistic subject as an object and so installs an impossible contradiction at the core of modernism.9 I am arguing here that it is this contradiction – that the artist in capitalism and late-capitalism must be made into an “object” in order to gain authority as a “subject” of making – which became one of the most productive aspects of a particular kind of contemporary visual practice.

Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama’s work exemplifies the postmodern shift in emphasis, whereby the contradiction is exacerbated rather than suppressed. Working in New York in the late 1960s as a Japanese woman (and thus doubly othered by American culture), Kusama had picked up on the specifically feminizing aspect of Warhol’s relentless self-promotional self-displays to perform herself in New York’s public spaces. She staged numerous performative events, which she promoted through elaborate public relations strategies – designing body ware, organizing group and self performances, producing and disseminating her own public relations materials, and otherwise making herself ubiquitous. Kusama made clever use of the political energies of the time to produce herself as, simultaneously, fashion maven, avant-garde artist, seductive sex object, and political activist.

Kusama can be seen as a kind of hinge between photographic self display and live performance, as she produced the latter to generate the former (and vice versa). The difference between the body art of that time, however – with its links to Fluxus, Happenings, theater, and dance – and the kind of obsessive self-imaging of Warhol and Kusama must be stressed. The critical effectiveness and emotive force of body art – its capacity explosively to expose and even exaggerate the artist/artwork/spectator circuits of desire and meaning formation – are derived in part from its complex relationship to “liveness” or “presence” (however much the artists in question interrogated what this claim to presence might mean). The model of fetishism provides a way of understanding the different effects and values of different modes of self display.

Thus New York body artist Vito Acconci’s 1974 Command Performance overtly choreographed the circuits of fetishism veiled in conventional modernist accounts – placing the viewer in front of a video monitor where Acconci appears; unbeknownst to the viewer, she is being simultaneously filmed by a video camera, her image playing in real time on a monitor set directly behind her. Acconci’s piece, typically of the early 1970s body art works, thus aggressively conveys of art as a process, a system of exchange with an audience. Within this system, the artist’s body is representational and simulacral – it is “present” only through videography. It is the spectator, embarrassingly enough, who finds her “presence” registered (but, again, through videography, as simultaneous “absence”) in the real-time of her visit there – for others to see. The circuits of fetishism here are complicated and critically self-reflexive.

In contrast, the self-displays of Warhol and Kusama draw on a related but different trajectory – one in which “presence” or the pretense of its possibility is completely abandoned, and in which a confluence of fetishes, such as that identified by Abigail Solomon-Godeau in her study of the 1860s photographs of the Countess of Castiglione by the Mayer & Pierson firm in Paris, is embraced. Per Solomon-Godeau’s model, this confluence consists of an intersection of sexual, commodity, and photographic fetishism.10 As with all historical shifts, then, Solomon-Godeau’s model suggests that the “seeds” for the exaggerated photographic self-displays we find in postmodern art can be found in earlier modernist practices and in structures of subjectification that started to take place much earlier in Euro-American culture.

How much more, then, with the explosion of mass media products and processes from cinema around 1900, to the first color news magazines to include pictures and text together (1920s and following), to television (1950s),
impossibility, of the attempt to represent herself,” as Solomon-Godeau puts it, then Sherman’s work appears to take as its primary theme precisely this impossibility.\(^{15}\)

It is worth stressing the way in which Sherman’s project, which has been one of the most inventive in the visual arts since the 1970s, confirms my point about developing a very different way to view postmodernism from that offered by Jameson. Rather than fixating on borrowed styles, making art about art itself as Jameson argues that postmodern artists do in the quotation above, Sherman produces work that – like that of the other artists whose works are being discussed here – insists on and even embraces the confluence of fetishisms through which the modernist and now, more violently, the postmodernist subject situates herself in the confusing matrices of late capitalist cultural production, dissemination, and institutionalization.

Sherman’s resolutely postmodern project is extended in the recent performative self-imaging works of Nikki Lee, who continues to use analogue photography as a more or less “documentary” mode of rendering referentially “real” situations. In her “Projects” series begun in 1997, Lee attaches herself briefly to various communities, refuges herself according to their bodily and behavioral norms, and has herself photographed in more or less amateurish snapshots – unstaged, and randomly shot by a friend or bystander using an inexpensive automatic focus camera. Through these photographs, in which she momentarily adopts the identity signifiers of everyone from yuppies, to elderly women, to lesbians, Lee explores even more aggressively the powerful confluence of identity politics and representational artifice. Like Sherman, Lee begins from the point of self-manipulation, while using straightforward, unmanipulated analogue photographic techniques;\(^{11}\) but Lee produces herself in relation to “minority” and other marked identities as the “source” of the simulacral effects of photographic (mis)representation, placing identity at front and centre of her project.

With Cindy Sherman, for example, we now have a 25 year long career of reiterative self-imaging projects, each of which articulates a different, but always critical, relationship to the confluence of the three fetishisms noted above. With her society portrait series from 2000, she jacks up the stakes of her project by crossing the line between self and other – and between identification and parody. The camera indexically, and so paradoxically, documents an endless array of female subjects who are both exaggeratedly fake and disturbingly “real” to the extent that they represent the only Cindy Sherman we can ever “know.” If the Countess of Castiglione performed herself over and over again for the camera, only to run up against the “difficulty, if not the

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11. Ibid., 70.
12. Ibid.
13. I am indebted to Leslie Tonkonow, Lee's dealer in New York City, for providing me with detailed information about the artist's processes (in emails of June 22 and July 3, 2004). Lee continues to use 35mm film, and uses no cropping or manipulation (after the image is captured, that is) of any kind. The only digital element comes in with the larger prints, which are printed digitally (but as scanned from 35mm negatives).
both to be an object and a subject of clothing design) refigures herself as a digitally rendered (and thus, in material terms, non-existent) high-tech robot cum Geisha-prostitute cum passive little Oriental girl – the latter, one assumes, for Western eyes.

It should be stressed, then, that there is another kind of fetishism that Solomon-Godeau did not acknowledge in her otherwise brilliant account of the uses of photography in structuring modern European subjectivity. Certainly when they perform themselves for Western culture, Kusama and Mori, whether they like it or not, enact on some level the Orientalist or ethnographic (racial) fetish about which theorists such as Malek Alloula and William Pietz have written so perspicaciously.14 The power of the self-performing imaging by these artists derives from the inextricable interconnections among photographic, sexual, commodity, but also ethnographic or racial fetishism. The tendency of many artists dealing explicitly with race to deploy photographic technologies, I am suggesting, might have something to do with the fact that the conundrum of how representations relate to the real, or how or whether visibility conveys identity, is begged with both kinds of fetishism (racial/ethnographic and photographic).

The work of artists such as Kusama, Mori, and Morimura – as well as that of Lyle Ashton Harris, Renée Cox, Laura Aguilar, and many others – highlights the confluence of the photographic, sexual, commodity, and ethnographic fetish. Each artist performs her/his visibly “raced” and gendered/sexed body in ways that challenge the identifications usually ascribed to such a body. In his self-imaging works from the late 1980s and 1990s, Ashton Harris flaunts his gorgeous black male body in feminized poses, sometimes in whiteface. Cox produces herself willfully as classic sexual fetish in images such as the 2001 The Good Little Catholic Girl (facing away from the viewer on stiletto heels, she bares her fishnet-hose covered ass to us, nothing else of her torso or head visible except her dreadlocks), confusing the cues of sexual fetishism by merging them with racial fetishism (coded as counter-cultural, with the appearance of the dreads).15 Aguilar, in her late 1990s “Nature Series,” performs her vast, zaftig Latina body within Western US landscapes, perverting a pristine modernist style and the tradition of fetishizing women’s bodies in landscape settings (à la Edward Weston) with a gorgeous but unwieldy body that is bluntly antithetical to the Euro-American (thin, white) ideal.

Within the context of the Euro-American art world these renderings of highly charged bodies activate the viewer’s complex responses to otherness (or sameness, as the case may be), linking the power of the fetish inexorably to the desire of the person who is attracted to (and/or circulates or consumes) it. These artists thus deploy the quadruple fetishisms explored here in order to stress the aspect of fetishism that calls up the viewer as the propagator of the meaning and value of the fetish (or, more accurately, as the producer of the fetish as fetish). Activating the viewer as part of the circuit of determining the meaning and value of the bodies being rendered in the image puts questions of identity where they belong. Identity is determined, or so these images insist, in a complex interrelation between the body perceived as being “behind” the image (the artist), the body perceived “in” the image (in our case, the artist, again), and the body viewing or otherwise handling the image. Finally, then, photographic renderings of the colored, sexualized body beg productive questions about where and through what processes “race” and “sexuality/gender” take their meaning; and questions about which bodies these (and other) identifications relate to, why, and in what way.

Representation, in this work, delivers the visible body of the artistic subject to the world as multiply fetishized; these artists perform themselves in various artificial and charged guises, flamboyantly “self-revealing” but inexorably bound by the limits of representation and, ultimately, of “presence” itself to confirm any “essential” identity for the subject (so much Lee’s blithe adoption of other ethnic identities or Ashton Harris’s cross-gendered, cross-raced self-portraits suggest). Identity, their work seems to tell us, is not only in the eye or mind of the beholder. It is a profoundly complex mutual enactment across bodies and representations which potentially produce queer, cross-racial, and otherwise unsettling identifications on either side of the equation.

Digital Fetish
This complicated relationship to the “real” is made more complex in projects making use of digital imaging technologies. Sherman’s, Lee’s, Ashton Harris’s, and Cox’s masquerading photographic self performances still promise an indexical tie to a referent – the self articulated Sherman or Lee, whose artifice lies in their self performances (and, correlatively, in the uncertainty of the body itself) rather than in the “lie” of the photographs, which are still analogue and so indexically tied to bodies posing in the “real.” Self-display projects that highlight the qualities of digital imaging technologies push the level of simulation even further. Via digital composites and digital video, artists such as Morimura, Mori, and Pipilotti Rist perfect and extend the self-as-spectacle, with spectacle
now articulated through the digital matrix of zeros and ones and thus removed one step further from the referent of the centered, instrumentalized self. Morimura, Mori, and Rist produce themselves as digital fetishes, images that refer not as analogical or ideational signifiers to a "real" body that is being "betrayed" through the simulacral aspect of representation. They are, rather, representations that bear no relation (in analogic terms) to that to which they refer. While Sherman's and Lee's images still retain a lingering relationship to an idea of an actual person masquerading as someone else, they lead us in the direction of Mori's and Rist's images — where there is no longer even a reference to or promise of a "real" subject whom the image confirms or betrays. Pipilotti Rist — who activates herself as moving digital image, and via digital sound, in large-scale video installations such as *Sip My Ocean* (1996) — exists only in and through mass media culture (including the photographic, televisual, and musical registers of the digital). She represents the generation born after 1960, for whom representation came to be imagined not only as the access to the real but as the only means through which the real could be apprehended, experienced, and registered. How does the digital fetish, which thus refutes (or at least mitigates) any belief in a pre-existing real, relate to the primitive or ethnographic fetish? As William Pietz has noted, the primitive fetish came into being within the context of colonialism; it "could originate only in conjunction with the emergent articulation of the ideology of the commodity form that defined itself within and against the social values and religious ideologies of two radically different types of noncapitalist society." Pietz argues that the primitive fetish is thus characterized by an "irreducible materiality," in that so-called primitives supposedly venerate objects which they view as the "thing itself" (i.e., as god). Correlatively, one might say that the digital fetish is irreducibly *immaterial*, and that this immateriality destabilizes our belief in the materiality of the bodies depicted therein. For an artist whose body is recognizable as "not white," i.e., as implicitly "raced" and "primitive" in signification, to use digital imaging technologies to render her body visible (like Mori) is to work at the deepest level of representation and identity formation to unbridge the link between the sign and the referent — and thus to destabilize the racist logic of primitive fetishism. Within the context of the Euro-American art market (including its intellectual variants, art criticism and art history), artists of color, then, have a dual project — both to prove they are "real" (in the sense of being representable) while at the same time destabilizing any attempt to attach stereotypes to their bodies, visibly recognizable as "raced," by refusing the link between their bodies and the significance attached to them by external desires and social forces. It is the photographic (and particularly the digital) that enables such a project. At the same time, as Pietz's quote points out, it is precisely the rendering of the body as image that turns it into a commodity that can be circulated across, within, and beyond the "material" conditions that brought that body to life otherwise. With the digital image, the body becomes all the more definitively unhinged from the real as it is dematerialized in its instantaneous dissemination — most strikingly when it is conveyed across the World Wide Web network.

Postscript: Performance and the Photographic Self-Image in the Service of Commodity Culture

In the last decade, extending the examples of Duchamp, Warhol, and Kusama, a new tendency has emerged at the centers of the Western art world — particularly London and New York: the overt performance of the artist as celebrity through the popular and art media. While artists such as Matthew Barney, Tracey Emin, and Vanessa Beecroft do not make self-portrait images as their primary mode of production, their practices take their cue from the long history of artists displaying themselves in photographic images. Like Kusama or Jeff Koons, they transform the work of art into an extended field that includes the body/subject of the artist (whether or not "realistically" conveyed).

Matthew Barney, a key figure in this elaborate manipulation of the various circuits of commodification available to the art world, reached the apotheosis of public acclaim with the solo exhibition of his work mounted at the Guggenheim Museum in New York and the simultaneous publication of a *New Yorker* profile based on his career by Calvin Tomkins in 2003. Tomkins' melodramatic encomium, and their placement in one of the most respected and widely circulated magazine for American intellectuals, exemplify Barney's usefulness to an art world that still thrives on straight white male artists as the guarantor of aesthetic and economic value (and he's good looking too! — many articles about Barney begin by noting that he began his adult career as a model). Making the stakes of his claims explicit, Tomkins makes this ideology explicit in his comment that, "[a] lot of people are wondering what's next for Matthew Barney. If we consider that the prevailing metaphor of the 'Cremaster' Cycle

16. On Rist's work, which has been inspirational to me in thinking through these issues, see my essay "The Televisual Architecture of the Dream Body: Pipilotti Rist as Parademon," which will be published in my forthcoming book, *Self/Imag.

17. Many other creative projects have explored this loss of a belief in a "real," centered, or stable subject positioned at the origin of knowing and seeing, or at the other end of the equation, as the object of desire. The 2002 mainstream Hollywood film *Simone* (starring Al Pacino) narrates the story of a film director who manufactures the "perfect" (digital) actress, only to find that she becomes more visible and famous than he (sadly, rather than following this up by exposing his failure to cohere in the face of the huge values of Hollywood media culture, the film reinserts his authorship; his ex-wife returns to him, reasserting the heterosexual matrix, and together they continue to deploy "Simone" the actress to make money and promote their own careers). In the 2004 play *Perfect*, produced at the Contact Theatre Manchester, a young man devises his "perfect woman" out of computer software only to have his father surreptitiously arrange a meeting with an identical, fresh

18. I can testify to this, given that I was born a year before Rist — in the early 1960s.


20. Although it must be said that the apparently "Asian" body (i.e., Mori's visible identity as Japanese) is not viewed as "primitive" within Euro-American culture in the same way that the African body is.
was pre-genital, there’s no telling what he’ll bring us when the creative organs [i.e., the testicles] fully descend.”

Then there’s the case of Tracey Emin, the Young British Artist (YBA) whose relentless self-confessions in her works and her frequent appearances in the British mass media produce a public artistic subject who is at the same time a package of private revelations. In the 1999 My Bed she literally displays the site of her sexually intimate life; in works such as the video installation CV C**Vernacular, 1997, she tells us the supposed story of her life in a dead-pan voice, including stories of her rape at the age of 13, and her subsequent promiscuity and suicide attempt. The narrative Emin produces is on a level with her self-displays via her own body or, as with the infamous My Bed, via synecdochal extensions of it; together, these conspire to elaborate a network of fetishistic images and objects that collectively delineate the artistic subject “Emin.” The fact that Emin, a woman of partly Turkish descent living and working at the center of the British art world, can only command about a tenth of what her fellow YBA artist, Damian Hirst, is able to make from equivalently ambitious works of art (Charles Saatchi recently paid only £150,000 for My Bed, while he paid £1 million for Hirst’s piece Hymn around the same time) shows that, self-performance and simulation aside, some kinds of bodies are still “essentially” worth more (as origins securing the value of works of art) than others.

Vanessa Beecroft, the superstar Italian/American artist, removes her literal body from her performance works, most often replacing it with multiple duplicates in the form of slim, white women whom she hires to stand in high heels, naked, for duration performances. It is in the sense that these women replicate Beecroft’s own ideal body image that these works can be discussed as part of the trajectory I am addressing here. For example, in VB 46, performed at Gagosian Gallery in the exclusive LA community of Beverly Hills in 2001, a bevy of white women with bodies covered in white makeup and sporting white wigs stood for around three hours, reaching various states of exhaustion. As they stood and then collapsed over time, an Asian woman with a wig of long red hair circled them auspiciously on equally high heels.

If the racial and sexual fetishism of Beecroft’s piece weren’t already explicit—and problematic—enough, a group of black women and men worked as guards in the gallery; wearing “men in black” type business suits and earpieces, their racial and class difference was sartorially marked (though notably, they are not visible in any of the glossy commercial stills I’ve seen taken of the piece). According to the research of Jennifer Doyle, who spoke to the gallery directly about the guards, they were hired and deployed without the slightest self-consciousness about the symbolic value of their performative presence in relation to this project, in this gallery, in whiter than white, wealthy Beverly Hills.

The cultural and literal economic value of Beecroft’s work also hinges on course of the photographic fetish. Beecroft has the works photographed and, through the gallery, sells these photographic documents of the performances at around $10,000 a pop. Coming full circle from the situation in 1970s body art, the photographic documentation of Beecroft’s elaborately simulacral performances (which render others’ bodies as artifice) are now self-consciously marketed as fine art fetishes. There is no pretense of Beecroft being
interested in the raw energy of live performance; the events themselves are rigorously choreographed, the models directed to control their bodies as much as possible. They are pictures even before they are pictures (many if not most of the photographs are taken in controlled circumstances before the actual event takes place). The live has been subordinated before the fact of its enactment to the commodity object of the photographic document.

The practices of Barney, Emin, and Beecroft exaggerate the fact that self-display inevitably slides into self-commodification. What none of them bring to the foreground, however, is the crucial fact that the perceived identity of the artist on display has everything to do with how the images are valued in both aesthetic and economic terms. Barney, the handsome white male who is reiteratively produced as heterosexual and virile (married to the pop musician Björk no less), can display himself without mitigating the phallic privilege assigned to his work by critics such as Tomkins. Emin is compromised, as so many women artists have been, by her own tactics, which draw on the stereotype of white female hysteria (regardless of the ethnic complications in her own background) in order to gain visibility, but thereby reduce the economic value of her work (as having been produced by, precisely, a feminine hysterical). Beecroft unabashedly deploys the triple regime of fetishes Solomon-Godeau noted to profitable ends, while totally missing the point of racial fetishism by deploying it deliberately on one end and failing to see its significance (and the role it plays in substantiating the class values embedded in her work) on the other.

In closing, I would like to take inspiration from two projects that specifically respond to Beecroft and explicitly surface all four kinds of fetishism, complicating the links among them and refusing any simple marketing of their bodies or their work along racial or sexual lines. The Beecroft spoofs are by Los Angeles based Toxic Titties collective, a group of young queer feminist artists, Heather Cassils, Clover Leary, and Julia Steinmetz, who describe themselves as “a lesbian biker gang with no bikes;” and by Los Angeles based impresario (a drag performer, writer, filmmaker, musician, and cabaret diva) Vaginal Creme Davis.

Crucially, two of the Toxic Titties infiltrated Beecroft’s VB 46 by answering her advertisement, posted at California Institute of the Arts (CalArts, where they were then students), and promising a “day of beauty” for young white females. In this way, they learned about her methods for extracting intimate details from her participants; they describe her as extracting the personal details from her “assistants” by having them fill out elaborate biographical forms, then molding them into identical objects to enact the inexorable sexual fetishisation of women’s bodies, only to profit through photographic and commodity fetishisation by selling pictures of them (a profit secured by their whiter than whiteness). They were first forced to stand in formation in their painfully uncomfortable stiletto heels at a sound stage in order to be photographed in formation before the actual performance and instructed before the public event to “be detached” and not to make direct eye contact with any person or camera or to speak.

In her contribution to the Toxic Titties MA Thesis show, discussing the actual performance event at the gallery in Beverly Hills, Heather Cassils noted Beecroft’s exhortation that they could sit down on the floor but only if they maintained the blank emotional demeanor her works demands and her own decision to stand for the duration of the performance in protest. Cassils described how demeaning it felt to be one of Beecroft’s stand-ins:

As viewers entered the white cube my quadriiceps started to shake so hard I thought I was going to fall out of my designer heels that cost more than my rent. My fists were clenched, my stomach taut. I felt like my skin was a force field against the eyes that were drinking me in. I wanted to make myself menacing and indigestible. The more I stood the more energy built up in me until I thought I was going to explode in my stillness. ‘Wow, she’s so angry. Wherever did she [Beecroft] find her?’ Really great. And it was this moment I realized I was powerless in this situation. My silent anger was easily subsumed by the artwork. No one could tell my anger was my own and not a possible instruction from the artist. Despite all my intentions, I had sold my body and my voice.

Drawing on this experience, and propagating a sweet yet highly productive revenge on Beecroft’s manipulative disempowerment, the Toxic Titties then produced their perverted version of Beecroft’s work in a performance entitled Toxic Troopers staged at University of California, Riverside in the Spring of 2003. For this piece, they participated simultaneously, along with a decided motley crew of female and male bodies of all shapes, sizes, and colors, in a pseudo-fascistic display of bodies, their sexual “perversity” exaggerated through the prosthetic enhancement of large dildos and other accoutrements. The Toxic Titties insist in this piece on the intersectional complexity of identity, and its resolute performativity in relation to others, beyond the heteronormative, white feminine body assumed in the logic of Beecroft’s pieces; their first year). They are “a lesbian biker gang with no bikes.” Their most recent project involved forming a business partnership in which they see metaphorically turned into a marriage contract, complete with a wedding ceremony, rings, cake, invitations, and a party. See http://www.turbulence.org/gigs/bmunch🄀guide/吉林-chap-13.

27. Another project, Boys, produced by Polish artist Katarzyna Kozielska also reworks Beecroft’s events—in this case three videos and a number of photographs document a group of naked young men standing in Shelly formations with cute-like things strapped to their pubic. According to the artist’s website, “[j]essica in front of the camera and given no specific instructions from the artist, the men [were] left to their own devices,” in contrast to Beecroft’s highly choreographed and idealized female bodies. See http://www.kozielska.pl/gazze.html.

28. I am indebted to Jennifer Doyle’s research and to the Toxic Titties themselves for this information. See Doyle, “White Sex,” ms p. 19.
In activating the multiply identified participants (who are made so passive in Beecroft's work), the Toxic Titties refuse the static racial and sexual fetishisation at work in Beecroft's elaborately staged performance (living bodies that provoke and respond to the audience cannot be fetishes in the traditional sense). Too, as "live" performance, with the photographic documents and videotape produced more as an afterthought than as a marketing play, the piece mocks the precious aestheticism and the assumption of homogeneity that underlies the art world value systems Beecroft's work both exposes and relies on.

Vaginal Cream Davis's Beecroft-related piece,VD as VB 1434578 (Guggenheim Bikini Show, Spicy Beef Curtains at the Parlor), performed at the Parlour Club in West Los Angeles on June 15, 2002, equally brazenly activates the rough aggressive potential of live culture to spark the visitor's corporeal responses. In its savage wit and willful debauchery, the work also parallels the Toxic Titties' funny yet deeply cutting attitude towards Beecroft's performance events. In particular, as with the Toxic Titties piece, Davis's work comments on Beecroft's seemingly unwitting or uncritical manipulation of the quadruple fetishisms noted above - with VB46, the marking of the "ideal" white female body (as a stand-in for Beecroft's own) as a photographic, commodity, sexual, and racial fetish.

Vaginal Davis's ("VD") debut as VB automatically perverts this ideal in at least two ways - first, by presenting the artist herself, an impressive six foot six inch cross-gendered Black/Chicano impresario, speaking "as" Beecroft briefly at the beginning, surrounded by an extremely heterogeneous crew of gender-fluid men and women standing on display on scaffolding; and second, by producing the work within her own counter-cultural cabaret, increasing the intimacy effect (Davis notes that audience members freely fondled the models, in particular the young men), and by documenting the performance event with snapshots (the rough and ready appearance of which contrasts strongly with the pristine, fetishistic images of Beecroft's performances).

Furthermore, the fact that the photographs were themselves taken by Davis, in double (triple?) masquerade as "Loria de Haven" - and made available as freebies to be dragged easily off Davis's website - ratchets the intervention up another notch. As Davis puts it to me, "the photos on the webpage are taken by me as Loria mocking how photographers take pictures of the Beecroft presentations that are then sold at galleries for oodles of filthy lucre."

In contrast to Beecroft's overtly craven pandering to the art market, Davis makes his snaps available to anyone with access to a computer (I am quite certain she would be more than happy to mail copies to anyone who didn't, as well!). The digital fetish replaces the analogue fetish even as the circuits of commodity culture that serve to ratify certain artistic bodies as origins for valuable works of art are stymied. The photographs are not for sale - they are free, and circulate as such on the Web.

The brilliance of the Toxic Titties' and Davis's parodic engagements of Beecroft's work is precisely their attention to the way in which the four fetishisms noted above - photographic, sexual, commodity, and racial - work together to produce some bodies as desirable commodities and produce other bodies as the privileged repositories of cultural capital. In this way, these projects extend the insights of the work of Ashton Harris and Cox - artists who explicitly point to the ways in which photographs of black bodies so often function to guarantee the privilege of non-black subjects. Too, by making their bodies "present" within an array of other bodies, and marking all as sexually perverse, cross-gendered, non-ideal, and definitively "raced" (whether white, black, yellow, or brown), the Toxic Titties and Davis expose the way in which the white female body can be circulated as a sign of "aesthetic" turned commodity value so as to secure the "authority" of the artist who wields them (even if the artist is a white woman, as with Beecroft).

Far from the sublimatory and self-congratulatory (as well as highly lucrative) theatricalisations of masculinity that serve to bolster Matthew Barney's visibility and wealth, and beyond even the sharp but localized interventions poited through the self-imaging practices of artists from Kusama to Sherman and Mori, the Toxic Titties and Vaginal Davis produce and perform radically heterogeneous bodies that subvert and pervert while paradoxically also embracing (through exaggeration and parody) the confluence of four fetishisms that determine the cultural and economic value of bodies in and as art. They open a way to rethink the fetishisation that occurs with the self-display of the artist's body - one that acknowledges the role of all kinds of difference in determining just how this fetishism functions and how its fetishes come to mean. In this way they point to new ways of understanding how and in what ways we exist in contemporary image culture.