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Exhibition: *Commodity / Fetish*

Hans Bellmer, Robert Heinecken, Richard Prince, Nicolás Guagnini, Sam Lewitt

Dates: **March 13 – April 10, 2011**

Reception: **Sunday, March 13, 6 – 8 PM**

Miguel Abreu Gallery is pleased to announce the opening of *Commodity / Fetish*, a group exhibition organized by Nicolás Guagnini. A reception for the show will take place on Sunday, March 13th, from 6 to 8pm.

Fetishes entered the West during colonialism, a historical period in which capitalism expanded through slavery. Portuguese sailors and traders introduced the word *fetiço* as a name for charms and talismans worshipped by the inhabitants of the Guinea coast of Africa. C. de Brosses' *Le Culte des Dieux Fétiches* (1760) popularized the term in anthropology, which influenced the word's spelling in English and French. In the figurative sense, "fetish" means something irrationally revered. A material object in which force is supposed to be concentrated is a fetish.

Karl Marx, in his 1867 magnum opus *Capital*, unfolds the concept of fetishism of commodities using a comparison with religious thought: "There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. This Fetishism of commodities has its origin, as the foregoing analysis has already shown, in the peculiar social character of the labour that produces them."

Exactly 60 years later, in his short essay, "Fetishism", Sigmund Freud attached fetishism to sexuality. No "male human being is spared the terrifying shock of threatened castration at the sight of the female genitals". For Freud, the "fetish is a penis-substitute," for the "woman's (mother's) phallus which the little boy once believed in and does not wish to forego." The boy refuses to accept the fact that a woman has no penis, "for if a woman can be castrated then his own penis is in danger; and against that there rebels part of his narcissism which Nature has providentially attached to this particular organ." What is involved here is a process of denial: the perception of loss persists, but a "very energetic action has been exerted to keep up the denial of it." The "horror of castration sets up a sort of permanent memorial to itself by creating this substitute." The substitute, or fetish "remains a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a safeguard against it."

These two uses of the term have been conflated, and in turn fetishized, in the already classic term "objectification." Here, Freud's little boy evolves into the spectacular patriarchy of late capitalism. There is no outside fetishism and commodification (John Kelsey famously titled a text "Our Bodies, Our Shelves"). These are the conditions of production, of desire, and of the production of desire in late capitalism. Capital is desire. There is no question that this condition has reduced our form of life into biopolitical submission. If we accept this reality as such, and simultaneously dismiss the possibility of fetishism as politically incorrect, we diminish our chances of sexual / economic survival. An acknowledgement of the active-passive duality of the drives that Freud identifies in the unconscious should tell us that there is no objectification without identification. By imposing ideals, total identification subsumes image production into the instrumentalizing logic of patriarchal oppression. Identification creates myths and models. However, a total endorsement of the prohibition of objectification for its inherent oppressiveness would undercut the criticality implicit in the act of recombining, and foreclose the

perverse pleasures of fetishistic participative permutation – both of which can be construed as alternative allegorical procedures. At stake is the imperative need for heterogeneity – the need to reclaim new subjects for those objects – new fetishes for our commodities.

In light of the permutational abyss implicit in the non-hierarchical character of the linguistic sign, along with the abysmal reality of exchange value that reduces qualities to quantities, Sam Lewitt's *A-Z* project of entwined coins and advertisings could be equated with Hans Bellmer's proliferation of protuberances and orifices in places only imaginable by the hand. Bodies are currency, just as currency is language. Suspended between the poles of the Commodity / Fetish combinatory situation, Robert Heinecken's *Lessons in Posing*, Polaroids of fashion catalogues photographs, pose to us, again and again, the question of how branding is a process of codifying desire. The system of social construction here at work is ironically exposed, but the irony is erected in articulating many similarities and some exceptions. Differences, or "mistakes," make the hierarchies in Heinecken's lessons less stable. In re-photography there is no more original, just as in the fulfillment of fetishistic fantasy all subjects and objects can become generic in their specificity. Richard Prince, the fourth artist in the installation, perennially and deliberately self-positioned on the alpha-male side of sexual politics, stated in a 2003 interview: "Yeah, maybe re-photographing a picture is like fucking a picture. There is something sexual about standing behind a camera and staring at another picture. It's hard to explain."

These works are installed in my own *Curatorial Machine (Exhibition System 7)*, a cross-shaped set of rotating panels roughly the size and proportions of corporate revolving doors. The mobile configurations allow for the flux of spectators to continuously reconfigure the position of the panels. The incorporation of the arbitrariness of audience participation undercuts a curatorial decision: that the rotating units present wall art of a certain dimension. Everything else is left to chance – but a geometrically and mechanically limited chance. This piece borrows from Brazilian artist Helio Oiticica, whose practice negotiated the ideal spaces of high modernism with the bodily participation of the spectator; and from Dan Graham's *Three Linked Cubes/Interior Design for Space Showing Video* (1986), in which people see others seeing art as they see themselves reflected. I want this particular incarnation of the machine in the basement of Miguel Abreu Gallery to play with the idea of a gallery's "viewing room," which perversely doubles as a "project room," a space in which ideas are fetishized and commodified; and infamously recombined.

— Nicolás Guagnini, 2011

For more information or for visuals, please contact the gallery:

Miguel Abreu Gallery
36 Orchard Street (between Canal & Hester), New York, NY 10002
Telephone 212.995.1774 • Fax 646.688.2302 • post@miguelabreugallery.com

Gallery hours: Wednesday – Sunday, 11:00 AM to 6:30 PM

Subway: F to East Broadway; B, D to Grand Street; J, M, Z to Delancey / Essex Street