

“Doing Things with Fetishism”: The Performing Hybrids in Carla Harryman’s Poetry Play *Performing Objects Stationed in the Subworld*

by Laura Hinton

Hybrid writings [are] staged as they are between fiction and theory, the domestic and history, abstractions and androgyny, the rational and the nonrational, the creator and her artifact, organize themselves against normative ideas while using whatever tools ...or poetic discourses [that] present themselves to advance their tellings.

– Carla Harryman, Preface to *There Never Was A Rose Without a Thorn*¹

Fetishism [is] ... a potential source for productive answers to questions about how subjects negotiate difference....

–E.L. McCallum, *Object Lessons: How to Do Things with Fetishism*²

Carla Harryman’s *Performing Objects Stationed in the Subworld* is a work of poet’s theater that “negotiates difference” by putting into play (into *the* “play”) what D.W. Winnicott calls “transitional objects.”³ These “transitional objects” are the fetish-like objects of infant and adult fascination and fantasy. Harryman’s performance work cobbles together – out of people, things, words and texts, visual as well as oral -- these “transitional objects” that create an “intermediate area of experience” Winnicott describes in observing the activity of young children

¹ *There Never Was A Rose Without a Thorn*, City Lights: San Francisco 1995: 1.

² *Object Lessons: How to Do Things with Fetishism* (Albany: SUNY P, 1998), 8.

³ See D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Tavistock, 1989), which is a further development of his theory presented originally in a paper, entitled, “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena” (1951).

in play. Like Winnicott, and like Harryman in *Performing Objects*, I will treat that “intermediate area” of play as the realm of art, particularly in non-narrative multi-media performance art.

Performing Subjects and Fetish Objects

While the classic psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud describes art as an activity that “sublimates” the sex instinct, Winnicott’s object-relations theory offers a radically different theory about the nature of artistic achievement -- a theory I believe Harryman inscribes in her subtext to *Performing Objects*. Winnicott describes art as using “transitional objects” of desire much like children use dolls, the self-sounds of baby babble, and even other children themselves. Like their transitional objects, the subjects *at* play and *in* art maintain only temporal “identities” in the “intermediate area of experience.” The very the concept of the so-called “psychoanalytic” becomes an entity that is performance-based, and situates “subjectivity” within an immediate and transitory condition of performance presentation. As “subjects” adapt to shifting and make-believe identities, literally making themselves up in play, they mirror the instability of their objects. These objects serve as fantasy fetishes. While notoriously striving for their monumentalizing and eternalizing effects, these object-fetishes are inherently instable, as E.L. McCallum’s *Object Lessons* explains. The object-fetish is ironic, attempting to sublimate the fear of loss linked to castration, and doing so through a representational process of “substitution,” which Freud first theorized in his 1928 essay, “Fetishism.”⁴ The “subject” in its mirror encounter with the fetish-objects of play becomes less about identity than about adaptation, re-adaptation, mutation, accretion, “substitution,” supplementary action. It engages with fetish objects in a playful activity, one that is continuously gathering, spinning, tossing out

⁴ See Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," in Vol. 21 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1962): 152-157.

before other mirroring subjects alternative subjectivities and their positionings – all of which might reflect multiple and play-ful points of view.

Harryman's *Performing Objects* puts the instability of the subject at play on stage. And it puts *into* play the ironic instability of subjectivity's fetish objects – puts them to good “use,” borrowing that word from McCallum. In a book with the subtitle, “How to Do Things with Fetishism,” McCallum states that she wishes to “de-fetishize fetishism,” that is, to “unloosen its fixed meaning, examine its internal contradictions, and release the fetish from its overdetermined and overdetermining interpretation as the very pinnacle of the Thing, an object the fetishist is stuck on as the embodiment of substance and meaning” (McCallum). But one must separate the concept of fetishism from its Freudian-schooled moorings – “the dominance of that penis-substitution definition” (McCallum 4) – in order return again to its interrogation effects. In Harryman's “use” of fetish-objects that mimic the hybrid personas before us in her poet's theater play – all of whom are engaged in continual acts of imagination and play – Harryman, too, uses fetishism as a means of interrogation. She demonstrates through her *own* act of “play” that object fetishism can be a source of subjectivity's “self” substitutions. These “perform” ironic, internal contradictions, or “splittings” of “self” (mirrored in the object).

These issues of subject-object mirroring and play in *Performing Objects* occur in Harryman's work both as scripted (written) text, and in performance. I was actually at the opening night of the San Francisco staged performance of the poet's theater play in Fall 2003; and here I refer to a DVD video reproduction of the performance made that same night. What is important to note about *Performing Objects* as a work of poet's *theater* is that I – and all of us – were and are immersed in its dense, spectacular poetic language *as spectators* as well as poetry auditors. We do have an special aural relationship to poetry in performance, as the writers in

Charles Bernstein's excellent volume, *Close Listening*, have theorized.⁵ Yet little critical attention has been given to the role of the *visual* in performance poetics – and by discussing object-fetishism, I wish to do that here. This attention to the visual – to space and the spectacle, from a subject's position as audience viewer – is particularly important to discussing a work of poet's theater phenomenally staged as *Performing Objects* in its San Francisco incarnation, in the Mission District, at a performance space called The Lab. We are called upon not only to “listen,” but to watch. And our eyes are drawn not only to the literal Things – the performing objects – that litter the stage, but also to their embodied representation in the human “subjects” that, through play, are using them.

These objects, like their subjects, form part of the hybrid multi-media that Harryman involves herself in as a poet, when she incorporated a visual installation as her theatrical *mis-en-scene*. As “the play” unfolds, these dead-looking objects of a Detroit junkyard appear to enter symbolic use, and gain transformatory currency. “Things” on the stage, which may or may not apparently “belong” (to any-one, or seemingly within the context of the play itself) are like their human mirror-performers, hybridic, performance playthings – both source of art, and the “art” that is always changing through various hybrid incarnations. As objects, they also form embodied “presences,” in the human stage players who play with them, and who come to stand as extensions of, as well as “substitutes” for, objects through play. *They perform themselves* as “transitional objects.” They become hybrids both of themselves and of their human “others.”

Substitutes of substitutes, Things are their own human “others.” And they made the human subject in this poetry play “*other*” to *itself*. There are no closed-off, distinct ego-bound personalities; rather, every embodied human figure is a hybrid constantly in performance,

⁵ See *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, ed. Charles Bernstein (New York: Oxford Press, 1998).

continually changing. Hybridity in the figure of the play extends to the nature of the performance text, as well, both staged and as read on the page. When we read the performance text, for example, we find it to be an object composed of many competing, hybrid-object “art” and “playing” parts, through the multiple discourses -- both visual and oral -- that “make the text up,” as imaginary act.

These hybrid parts of the performance work are part of the “internal splitting” process, or on-going “splitting/s,” that compose the performance text. This is a hybrid text that is voiceless and faceless, only because it offers so many visual-verbal points of view, so many “faces” of potential character, representational objects, and objects of thought. The hybrid parts are like “portions” of the imaginary “intermediate” realm that fascinate, just like the fetish does, in its various cultural guises -- the commodity fetish, the sexual fetish, the woman as fetish, and combinations of the above. If the classic fetish described by Freud attempts to make a whole appear out of its substitutional parts (in order to maintain, of course, the subject’s nostalgically regressive, monumentalizing desires in reaction to castration), Harryman’s *Performing Objects* is a work of poet’s theater *at work*, one which keeps its objects from consolidating, forever at play. The subjects like their objects refuse traditional fetishism’s form of self-censure; and they refuse to monumentalize or close off the object in the traditional fetish process of containment (of fear, of unscripted desire). Instead, *Performing Objects* celebrates the difference of play, within “play” and the “intermediate” zone of the performance text. It employs fetishism’s ironies to make the “intermediate area” more visceral, if sometimes threateningly so, more alive.

As McCallum notes, the fetish gets its sensational charge, its thrill or “fascination,” by

this “sexy,” performative co-mingling with its subject – a subject once again bound up with the object’s playful, *representational* ambiguity. Such ambiguity can be “useful,” as McCallum writes, when the fetish directs us “into the basic hermeneutic problem of how one can grasp, of even approach, the radically different, and communicate it to those like oneself without compromising the difference of the other” (McCallum 3). Another commentator on fetishism in its artistic-representational role, the film critic Christian Metz, admits that fetishism’s ambiguity always re-generates the problem of “perception.” That problem is located in the act of *seeing* the fetish, which wants to appear before its subject as *one* “Thing,” but inevitably returns to reappear as another. This circuitous process is described in Metz’s analysis of fetishism’s “disavowal” (the Freudian “*Verleugnung*”) of seeing the mother’s “missing” phallus. This is the “sight” (as non-site) that inaugurates fetishism to begin with. Disavowal arises when female sexual difference registers as anatomical “lack,” and which then “necessarily” must be recovered / covered up through hybridic substitute mechanisms. Metz explains, however, that this mechanism always generates *internal difference within the subject*. The subject *perceives* maternal “lack,” then, in turn, creates the fetish to deny it. As representation is born, so, too, is the subject’s on-going “internal splittings.”

Winnicott’s realm of “the intermediate area” of play might well be considered a site where subjects can stage their own objects – as re-presentations of the “internal splitting/s.” I credit Nick Piombino in his use of Winnicott to describe performance effects in contemporary poetry as this site of play, particularly as he shows Winnicott’s “transitional object” to be, in poetics, a source of “sounds, both audible and imaged.”⁶ Piombino’s emphasis is on the “aural ellipsis” that is created “between a poet and listeners at a reading,” or “an intensified

⁶ See Nick Piombino, “The Aural Ellipsis and the nature of Listening in Contemporary Poetry,” in *Close Listening*: 57.

collaborative sharing” that is play and linked to these “transitional phenomena” (to use another Winnicott phrase), which the object-relations theorist refers to as a

“designation of the intermediate area of experience, between the thumb and the teddy bear, between the oral eroticism and the true object-relationship, between primary creative activity and projection of what has already been introjected . . . By this definition an infant’s babbling and the way in which an older child goes over a repertory of songs and tunes while preparing for sleep come within the intermediate area . . . along with the use made of objects that are not part of the infant’s body yet are not fully recognized as belonging to external reality.”⁷

As we come to embrace the essentially visual as well as “aural” capacity of objects in a performance poem, we might note what Piombino himself, quoting Winnicott again, calls those objects’ “*potential space* between the individual and the environment” (Piombino quotes Winnicott, 58; emphasis original). And we might note – and see -- the spatialized referents that the fetish-object constructs when staged. Before our own playful look – not a steely gaze, but an engaged look of concentration – we, the audience spectators of a poetry play, mirror the subjects who mirror objects. We, too, become part of the “intermediate” zone of play in our experience of “the play.” A general ambiance of ontological instability reigns – and through this, our own spectatorial subjectivity is called into question, pleased, entertained.

⁷ Piombino quotes Winnicott, 71; original citation in Winnicott, 2.

“Internal Splitting/s” and Hybrid Figuration

In the poetry play, the “internal splitting/s” prefigure the hybrid “parts” that compose the work of performance art on all kinds of levels. First, the *mis-en-scene* constitutes one level of the “internal splitting” off, or hybrid figuration, that puts into play the “intermediate area” – from the moment the “play” opens before our eyes. The San Francisco performance text I witnessed was/is (as performance digital archive) particularly rich for a *mis-en-scene* composed of hybridic parts. The set design which doubled (“internally split”) as a visual-art gallery installation was created for Harryman’s piece by artist Amy Trachtenberg. The very collective process by which the San Francisco theatre version was created, in its multiple interactions between director, author, actors, musicians and visual artist, mirrors the textual hybrids that compose *as text*. Multiple voices, visions, personalities, subjects and art objects are put into play in a production that is part art installation and visual text, part operetta (with music by Erling Wold), part Language poetry, part psychological drama, part slapstick comedy, part silly child’s play. Even the environmental setting suggested by the staging of *Performing Objects* is a hybridic representation. As the website for *Performing Objects* notes, the work as a whole “portrays a world ... always under construction. . . Situated between the sliding borders of city and suburb and between commonplace existence and fantasy.” Certainly the multiple collaborations that organize the hybridic text underscore the fetish-object slippages as it makes its substitutions through the multi-media platform of the piece, and the multiple concepts of art these slippages between form suggest.

Among the hodge-podge of object “Things” that lay upon the stage are piles of tires, a ladder, stacks of old newspapers, pipes and buckets and bins of metal parts. Associated with urban refuse, these objects that once might have had fetish interest in the world of mechanical

“reality” but have long since lost their “use,” are put to new use, a recycled use, by a performing human figure known as C2, or the Child. C2 enters the “intermediate area” of the performance arena, to give these old objects new currency through her activity of “play.” These disconnected once-socialized mechanical “parts” are reinvigorated by C2, the Child, and granted new fetish meaning through readapted, substituted identities -- made possible through her improvisational roles. It is *her* play as “child’s play” which inaugurates *the* “play” of poet’s theater art – through the re-play of the interpretation of fetish objects. Albeit voiceless at first, the Child/C2 makes herself heard through the metallic objects she clashes together; she makes startling loud sounds. Picking up an object that looks like a pastry wheel, for instance, she (infant-like) rolls it around while on her hands and knees. What was once an indefinable wheel perhaps used in a cook’s kitchen has now become a mobile toy car that gives joy and desire to the Child.

[See link to CLIP 1 beginning of play.]

Through C2's fantasies and substitutions of these parts of art on and off the floor of the stage, other objects, too, gain new currencies and a potentially transformed fetish status. They, too, become “tools” of play, within the contingency of their performance situation. These objects are like the textual debris that make up socialized scripts. Other “performing hybrids” in this play are the personas like C2. Other persona “characters” enter “to play” as *the* play moves forward. They sometimes function as mirrors or extensions of C2, splitting off as if projections of the child’s “other” multiple identities. These figures love, taunt, engage with and reject one another, reinvent one another as mirroring “others” in the process. In the Lab performance, we watch as these personas take over each other’s designated scripted speeches; they invade each other’s discourses and textual boundaries, forming new hybrids of themselves (*as* “selves”). The concept of performance event in the “play” act circulates around and amidst the various subjects

who are “acting” toward one another as objects. Their socialized, object-like, fetishized status is actually announced in the script, as “Object Rudiments”: “C1, a “White woman” and C3, called “Black man,” in addition to C2 (the Child). These people-as-objects are only “knowable” as we, the spectators, face their on-going performance and watch their “use” dramatically performed, within the context of the play. In the Lab performance and staging devices, these ever-shifting embodied presentations (Black man, for example, is played by a white male) is exemplary of their hybrid status. The fact that their partialized speeches interrupt and butt into one another “acts out” not only rude behavior and family-like dysfunction performed by the cast, but dramatizes the problem of all hybridic subjects at play, as subjects merge with their objects (and vice versa).

While the name of the characters as “Cs” carries the letter trace of a perhaps more traditional ensemble cast, that of “Characters,” their “names” are, after all, not names but letters and numbers. Likewise, these personas’ identities are not static but exhibited (“staged”) in contiguous relational state, unfolding as they perform before the spectating audience. It is significant that the written script’s “Notes” recommend that these three human “objects” in the play be performed by 5-6 different actors, thereby enhancing their mobility as characters and their flowing, hybridic tendencies. Skin color and ethnicity becomes another piece of the social hybrid that confronts the audience spectator watching the staged performance at the Lab. The performing objects represent and also circularly share traces of different races and genders. As the theoretical Notes in the script explain: “The categories of gender and ethnicity are mutable ... based on whatever circumstance of performance.”

Mutability, hybridity, “switching” of easy “tagged” identities based on classically fetishized social relations through stereotypes – these are the effects of the performance context.

Any such fetishized versions of persons through social stereotypes are repudiated by the hybrid gendered-body features, as well as conflated or “switched” skin color. Object-relations theory supports the fact that human subjects become roles and are absorbed for their function, say, by other human subjects in a family. Such mobility and roll-play as reflected in the child’s relation to adult figures (“Mother” or “Father”) are adapted in Act 1 (called “Rudiments of Love”), when C2 (the Child) plays with a clothesline strung with fetish-like costumes -- exhibitionist, multi-colored, glossy and transparent fetish-clothes in spectacular fabrics, in the Lab performance, suggesting designs of women’s lingerie but also shirts, house-dresses, even animal costumes. Meanwhile, the other “Cs” are masquerading C2's persona, by taking over her dialogue. The male C says:

What’s more fun than this is hanging up her dolls, pinning them at the
shoulder to the clothes line: these dolls she identifies as big mama, little mama,
white papa, and black papa...

More character roles, like the accumulated object hybrids, are added in the C2 speech, growing in imaginative accretion:

...Clare, Chole, Clovis.

The concept of the “substitute” linked to object fetishism is then made explicit both in the Lab performance and the script, when C2 remarks upon the roll-play that is possible through the use (and reuse) of dolls, and she continues to give her potential “dolls” more accretive names (stated in the third person, which in of itself treats her as object):

She runs out of dolls before she runs out of names, so uses large leaves *as substitutes* for dolls: these leaves are Kathy 1, Kathy 1 ½, and Kathy 3.7.

In the performance version, C2's speech is uttered first by the white male while the staged

figure of "Child" — a young black woman -- silently stares into space. This action increases the sense we have both of her objectification towards and within herself -- and also her self-conscious performative detachment. The seeming confusion of “character” between and among the “C” personas links them to a similar confusion through language and discourse. Poetic language here “uses” the substitutional processes of fetishism to forbid fetishistic suture in the spectatorial atmosphere of the theater, forbidding a kind of audience identification that might lead to static representational images – or the image of human subjectivity offered here, as the “subjects” play, with others and within them-selves. Those characters of bourgeois realism and its psychological domestic drama in traditional theater have no presence here. The audience spectator is invited not to identify in the traditional sense, but to “play” only by visual-oral dependence and silence.

Dolls, Clothes, Words

When the White woman character takes over the C2 (Child) speech next, the *hybrid script* seems to come full circle. All dialogue “speech” remains dialogic, incomplete, not named and “possessed” by any one embodied performer. Not only are we reminded in these multiple hybrid formations of the "doll," particularly that Mattel toy called Chatty Cathy (you pulled a string and through a mechanical voice box she spoke – the high-end of toy production in the mid-1960s); but we are reminded that the word “doll” in the poetry play is loaded with hybridic conceptual weight and socialized desire attributed to little girls as budding young women. As I have written in my analysis of the use of the white and black dolls so visually important to

Douglas Sirk's version of *Imitation of Life* (the 1956 film with Lana Turner),⁸ the image of the doll conflates culturally visual-fetish implications. Dolls as we know them are actually fairly recent historical playthings (becoming popular in the mid-19th century), associated with popular culture's sentimental notions of "femininity," which is linked to woman's supposed natural desire for procreating and caregiving – what Nancy Chodorow has called in her object-relations book by this name, "the reproduction of mothering." The desire of little girls to *become like* mothers -- like the socialized stereotype that "mothers" behave socially as "good daughters" – are all various versions of the female social hybrid, and the performance icon of the "living doll" of the "made-up" woman. Harryman's play is of course challenging those "feminine" object-attachment "norms," in all their bourgeois gender identity formations. It does so by putting the "Cs" into play -- into the play proper – thereby illustrating their performance value in a society that fetishizes people like objects in its social performance roles.

Similarly, the clothesline, too, imparts a further slice of the hybrid formation -- of that which is maintained in Western society as cultural female identity. The clothesline reminds us of female objectification through "woman's work": the hanging of the clothes particularly associated with working-class or servile groups of women, historically that class most easily granted to African American women through slavery and/or as white women's maids or nannies. "Clothes fetishism," of course, is also associated with the commodity aspect of cultural femininity, through the "adornments" or "accouterments" of a "female masquerade" that is marketed to mostly to women (particularly excessive or "useless" items from the see-through lingerie suggested on the clothes line, as well as high heels and jewelry). Dripping the fetish object of clothes, the clothesline is also suggestive of the masquerade of cross-dressing, the

⁸ Laura Hinton, *The Perverse Gaze of Sympathy: Sodomasochistic Sentiments from Clarissa to Rescue 911* (Albany: SUNY P, 1999).

“naughty” hybridization of both sexuality and gender. As we see in the performance of the Lab, the performance bodies on stage play with the once-illegal hybridization or intermarriage of races. The play plays with figures of different ethnicities and uncertain genders in the performance arena, to suggest that socialized race, like gender, is itself a performance.

Genders, ethnicities, races form hybrids on the Lab stage. These socially hybrid forms layering stereotypes based in visual fetish icons about sexuality, gender, and various strata of socialized subjectivities work within the "text-ualization" of scripted performance play. The "intermediate" zone of play appears all "fabric-ation" -- of the hybrid text hanging, as it were, in the theatrical space through the clothesline, in all its spectacular, glittering fabrics. In further scenes, we view the “Cs” playing with a long, glistening fabric tongue, one that is wrapped around the stage, fetish-like and sexual, and recalling again the “line” of “clothes” that reflects the hybrid use of staging as well as words, visual and musical art versus language. And we view an “interlude” scene – a scene that itself serves as a kind of “transitional object,” which I think is one of the most brilliant scenes in the play, and depicts a group of people playing cards in a bright-lit circle on the floor. Called the “Monitor” in the script, this scene is a play within a play, a set of play-objects within a play about objects. The figures seated on the floor are throwing down chips. And they utter words and phrases, as if they are holding a semantically coherent conversation. But it is a hybrid language; and all we hear are disconnected phrases and odd sounds. It is language in its recognition both of its origin in baby babble (“non-sense”) and as performance whose hybridic arbitrary arrangements are simply agreed upon in advance by a society of fetishists (who call themselves “conversationalists,” or “writers,” or “poets”). In terms of actual language utterances, a player starts what sounds like a phrase and another interrupts with another. All phrases remain broken, like “cyclone fever,” and ”you love your,” “Can your

prison guard”; we hear single words bouncing off one another: “parents” “Parots,” and “melodrama.” The group *appears* to be both engaged in the game and their conversation (as game).⁹ This scene that seems so separate from the dramas of “C2” and the other “Cs” is in fact a central one. It plays out and illustrates fetishized fragments that compose so-called “coherent” languages, and is itself a great moment of Language poetry that playfully leads its spectators to question all contexts by which a given group of speech acts make sense-- which hybrids of language make sense to what hybrid group of people or within what social settings.

At the end of this provocative scene, the group “picks up the toys,” and they leave the circle. And in many other scenes, including those that incorporate operetta and choreographed dance-like movement, the hybrid nature not only of subjectivity and objects but of language as inter-subjective objects appears to resonate with the conceptual desire to “use fetishism.” In its insightful study of the transformative nature of the object world, and its emphasis on subjectivity as a series of “splittings” through the larger configuration of the group, we learn which objects are “stationed in the subworld” – and which objects are not. The “subworld” is both a marginal community and a space between community; it is a staged place. It is the internal world of hybrid subjects who are embodied performers — bodies walking around in the object world that surrounds us all as social subjects. Harryman’s poetry play teaches its audience how to “play” with the fetish. It turns, its spectator learns subtle theory about a poetics that is not just transitional – but can provide a forever-open, *performatively* socialized, space of desire.

⁹ Harryman inevitably explores the concept of “the game” in her writing and performance art. As I discuss in an article in *PMC*, “the game,” for Harryman, is an activity that is artistic and sociological, “which Harryman imitates, probes, and transforms in order to explore systematic and arbitrary constraints” because the “game” is that which is controlled through a series of tightly controlled rules that provide constraints to regulate the flow or trajectory of various literary devices. This scene of the card-players exhibits the arbitrary directedness of such “game” regulation. See Laura Hinton, “To Write Within Situations of Contradiction: An Introduction to Carla Harryman’s Inter-genre Writing.” *Postmodern Culture* 16.1 (September 2005).