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Ballet Hooves: Rose English and the Spectacle of Fetishism

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Six dancers enter a rectangular arena delineated by rows of small porcelain horse figurines. They wear short tunics repurposed from linen horse blankets with white knee socks and white gloves. Attached to each of their black leather waist belts are large and well-groomed horse-hair tails in blonde, brunette, and black. The dancers silently parade across the grass in single file, the horse tails swishing, their own sleek ponytails tied back with red ribbon. They move slowly, one foot on the ground at a time, inhibited by the height of their shoes, which are made from real horse hooves and hold their feet aloft in a sustained balletic demi-pointe. Captured on Super-8 video, the dancers are seen trotting backwards and forwards in unison. Their choreographic repertoire includes forming lines, linking arms, and high kicks, along with other symmetrical gestures conventional within the lexicon of equestrian dressage. These movements are contrasted with naturalistic moments of more animalistic behaviour. The camera tracks across the scene, the frame occasionally breaking the performance into fragmented parts: a tail, legs, white socks, hooves. The troupe of horse girls reform their single file and exit the ring.

Commissioned by the Southampton Festival of Performance Art, Rose English staged the 20-minute performance *Quadrille* at the Southampton Show on 11 July 1975, the day of the open dressage competitions. Referred to as 'horse ballet', in classical dressage riding, the horse is trained to perform a series of synchronised movements. A quadrille is a specific type of stylised dressage performance involving pairs of horses. The required harmonious aspects of strength, control, and rhythm are much like the disciplinary focus on athleticism, proportion, and pose in ballet technique. In addition to the height of the hooves, requiring the dancers to hold themselves erectly, the precision of their choreographed movement was influenced

Figure 1 Rose English, *Quadrille*, 1975. Courtesy Richard Saltoun Gallery, © Rose English.

by the re-balancing process of 'collection', where the horse is trained to carry more weight on their hindquarters, enabling them to execute certain movements with increased lightness and ease. The height of the dancers' shoes referenced the anatomy of a horse's rear foot: how they are always anatomically 'on their toes'.[1] Originating as an ancient form of military training, dressage became later popularised as an art form through its eminent role in extravagant Renaissance and Baroque court fêtes.[2] English initially had fantasies of staging the performance at the Spanish Riding School in Vienna: an Austrian institution founded on the tenets of the *haute école* Renaissance tradition.[3]

In this article, I will consider what is gained by English instead placing her equine simulation within the site-specific context of the quotidian British summer county fair (figure 1). *Quadrille* was executed on Southampton Common, rather than the 'Baroque palace dedicated to dressage, where horses and riders perform under crystal chandeliers'.[4] Along with dressage, there was show jumping, a fox hunting competition, military and police

exhibitions, arts and crafts, and a dog show, alongside rabbits and other pet displays. Located in the affluent county of Hampshire, Southampton is a port city with extensive maritime and industrial associations, with architecture significantly altered by the damage of the Blitzkrieg, and shores that elicit the colonial histories of the British Empire. A group of army cadets appear at the end of the Super-8 video, carrying the boxes of porcelain horses away from the arena. English's choreography also bears comparison with the precise and synchronised kick-line formations perfected by the Tiller Girls dancing troupe, best known for their 'pony trot' routine, which blurred militaristic symmetry with showgirl aesthetics.[5] As Elspeth Probyn has suggested, 'horses have been an effective strategy of British colonisation (of lands and girls)', inciting 'a certain structuring of femininity, social class [and] young girls' sexuality'.[6] These intersections between trade and imperialism, women and horses, simmer in *Quadrille*, raising questions of how notions of class, sexuality, and national identity are performed – both on and off the stage. In the photograph *Quadrille (Rose and Dancers Entering)* (1975), the dancers are captured walking in single file alongside a large black van emblazoned with the words 'Royal Navy and Royal Marines'. English, dressed in white, stands between her ensemble, at ease (figure 2).

Quadrille indicated the commonalities between dressage and ballet: elaborate staging, bodily display, and a shared origin as entertainment and court spectacle. The performance functioned as fantasy cosplay: women dancing as horses, groomed and clothed in reconstructed equestrian equipment, with hooves worn as substitute ballet shoes. English's distinct strategies of substitution and exaggeration can be interpreted as being akin to the psychoanalytic logic of sexual fetishism, a privileged mode of perversity, in which certain objects or body parts become overvalued with a special erotic power. Following Freudian theory, the fetish complicates psychic and social constructions of the sexed subject. Freud theorised how pathological perversions could displace 'normal' sexual aims by replacing the sexual object with an 'unsuitable' substitute, thereby creating new erotogenic zones, such as non-genital body parts or inanimate objects, through the phenomenon of 'sexual overvaluation'.[7] Across cognate forms of fetishism within cultural theory – for example, the talismanic nature of the anthropological fetish or the hidden value of the commodity fetish – the object always holds a magical power. However, the tangible physicality of the fetish object marks

Figure 2 Rose English, *Quadrille (Rose and Dancers Entering)*, 1975/2012. C-type photograph. Courtesy Richard Saltoun Gallery, © Rose English.

the phenomenon as unique, in addition to elucidating the proliferation of fetishes for tactile materials, such as fur, velvet, and silk, and their status as metonymic fragments and bodily substitutes. Within the terms of Freudian theory, fetishism is an exclusively masculine perversion, functioning as a traumatic defence against the castration complex.[8] Considering that this then asserts a denigration of the female body, I am curious about the socio-political implications of appropriating fetishism as a feminist strategy.[9]

It is the alchemic act of overvaluation within fetishism that significantly appeals to my analysis of English's work. I am concerned with what Jane Gallop has posited as 'the erotics of engagement', which she defines as a sexuality that is not only found in the object but situated in the 'dynamic of encounter' with that object.[10] Similarly, the signification of English's objects and costumes are typically conveyed through the dynamic of the fetishistic encounter, which becomes a spectacle in and of itself. Like theatrical props, her work is always animated by specific items. Her oeuvre abounds with horses, wings, silk bows and ribbons, recurring as repeated motifs in various installations, performances, or photographs. While English's examination of

image, pleasure, and representation can be situated within the context of the Women's Liberation Movement in early 1970s Britain, her early work gestures towards ambivalence rather than overtly political intent, strategically employing humour and irony. In this way, her investigation of eroticism remains distinctive from contemporaneous feminist thinking and artistic practice during this period.[11] Naomi Schor has argued that 'irony is the trope of fetishism', quoting Donna Haraway's claim that '[irony is] about the tension of holding incompatible things together'. Haraway continues, 'It is also a rhetorical strategy and political method, one I would like to see more honoured within socialist feminism'.[12]

Fetishism, too, is a perversion that serves to hold heterogenous ideas together.[13] It also demonstrates an act of displacement: in its most simple form, the value of one object or body part is transferred to an unrelated, unsuitable substitute. In *Quadrille*, English displaces equestrian culture and the heritage of pageantry, fragmenting and reassembling it into a surprising new guise. The performance took place twice on the same day, eliciting two divergent receptions. The original iteration in the dressage arena provoked intense antagonism from the British Horse Society representative who initially attempted to halt the event.[14] As compensation, the Southampton festival organisers suggested an impromptu second performance at a different site within the agricultural fair. This audience were provided with no information about what they were about to watch. English recalled, '[they] just sat there, patiently watching as if it was the police dog display team [or] the parachute regiment'.[15] Away from the conventions of the conservative equestrian arena, the site of the county show at large provided a liberated site for *Quadrille* to be staged, with the new audience's affirmation due to associations with the circus and other forms of popular entertainment, interpreted as all the fun of the fair.

Preparations for *Quadrille* had spanned months. English acquired hooves and horse tails from an abattoir and sought help from a taxidermist who demonstrated how to cure the animal parts. In the meantime, she initiated other work that provocatively played on the rituals of the British upper class, combining images of the erotic with the reproductive, ribbing the aristocracy's fixation with pedigree. On 13 December 1974, she presented *The Boy Baby . . . A Mere Glimpse* at Battersea Arts Centre, an elegant performance that tenderly burlesqued the fetishistic worship of a newborn baby. Her concept

of 'a mere glimpse' was antithetical to the durational performances being made by other artists in the 1970s, with English instead seeking an intense, rich, and short-lived temporal experience.[16] A vaudevillian adoration of the child, set to the music of Johannes Brahms' *Lullaby* performed by live musicians, the 'boy baby' was heralded to the audience. Lying in a carrier, the baby was transported by two naked female dancers, wearing only socks and ballet pointe shoes, with Hermès-style silk scarves worn on their heads and knotted under their chins (figure 3). The baby, dressed in a tulle crinoline skirt decorated with appliqued photographs of ballet dancers, was lovingly bequeathed to the third dancer, hanging suspended on a trapeze wearing a pair of real swan's wings. The two naked dancers had 'ridden' into the space, each 'astride' a small porcelain horse figurine. This was sandwiched between their legs, as if saddled to ride, in a similar configuration to the photograph of English and her sister's bottoms in *Rose and Athene Riding Porcelain Horses* (1974). The topsy-turvy disjunction of scale was deliberately comic. This image can be interpreted via Sianne Ngai's theorisation of cuteness, in which the 'phantasmatic logic' of fetishism is intensified by the 'fantasy of the agency of its hyper-objectified objects'.[17] English had acquired these ready-made horse figurines in their hundreds from the pottery manufacturer J.W. Beswick in Stoke-on-Trent, renowned for their animal ornaments. The collection included shire horses and calvary horses, among other different types, and all were unglazed ceramic 'seconds', unable to be sold due to their imperfections. A quotidian British knick-knack, suited for a display on a mantlepiece or bookshelf, the figurines speak to a culture of sentimentality and decorative kitsch.

A few months before *Quadrille,* in February, English had presented *Untitled (Country Life)* (1975) as part of the 'Sweet Sixteen and Never Been Shown' group exhibition at the Women's Free Arts Alliance, London (figure 4). While the show was open-call, Amy Tobin has identified how English's use of debutante portraits picked up on the irony in the exhibition's title.[18] These portraits derived from the infamous 'girls in pearls' *Country Life* magazine frontispiece, initiated with the launch of the publication in 1897 as a means to announce the entry of elite young women into high society. English felt the women featured in *Country Life* were presented 'as if for sale', condensing the sexual and economic fetishism inherent within representations of the female body as objects of exchange.[19] Akin to the advertising of the era, where

Figure 3 Rose English, *The Boy Baby . . . A Mere Glimpse*, 13 December 1974. Photograph from the performance at Battersea Arts Centre. Courtesy Richard Saltoun Gallery, © Rose English.

Figure 4 Rose English, *Untitled* (*Country Life*), 1975. Installation view from 'Sweet Sixteen and Never Been Shown' at the Women's Free Art Alliance, London, February 1975. Courtesy Richard Saltoun Gallery, © Rose English.

representations of femininity were steeped in classed, sexed, and racialised politics of idealisation and exclusion, the 'girls in pearls' presented an image of white bourgeois aspiration.

English arranged these debutante portraits into two lines on the floor, creating a triangular formation, accompanied with uniform rows of the porcelain horses, some accessorised with miniature silk headscarves. Viewed en-masse, their doll-sized procession imitated the geometric arrangements seen in military pageantry, akin to the Royal Tournament. The installation had a devotional and shrine-like appearance. On a plinth, English had arranged photographs of a horse, along with the prototype horse hoof shoes, and the horse tail belt, accessorised with a large pink bow. A framed photograph of the artist captured naked on horseback wearing the tail – *Rose on Horseback with Tail* (1974) – was draped with two silk scarves in a funereal guise. In this image, the belt was staged in relation to the horse's own tail and mane, presenting a curious, repetitive entanglement of animal pelt, leather, and flesh. The presentation of the hooves and tail as wearable items also opens up the possibility of their critical relation to the surrealist

fetish object – from Meret Oppenheim infamously covering a teacup, saucer and spoon with gazelle fur in 1936, to Dorothy Cross fabricating a grotesque pair of stilettos from cowhide and teats in 1994. Oppenheim's perversion of manners and gendered domesticity particularly resonates with English's provocative rupturing and deconstruction of dressage. English's references to 'country life' – specifically, the costuming and paraphernalia associated with highly classed and codified leisure activities – also indicates how the category of 'Britishness' itself is ripe for both erotic and political fetishisation.

English's accumulation of objects and their repetitive display also signifies another layer of symbolic overvaluation and obsessive sexual desire. In her work on the fetish in the fin-de-siècle, Emily Apter identified the frenzied, perverse collecting habits of the middle and upper classes as a form of 'bric-a-bracomania': 'crisscrossing the high associations of connoisseur collecting with the low associations of the prostitute's peep show'.[20] In *Untitled (Country Life)*, this same perversion is hiding in plain sight, disguised by the exuberant femininity of English's chosen materials, their ornamental arrangement, and the associations with affluent 'girly' activities, such as horse riding and ballet dancing. Both *Country Lif*e, and elements of the *Boy Baby*, evoked a childish setting inhabited by trinkets and tchotchkes. These objects were imbued with a perverse power, displayed through repetitive and absorptive behaviours that mimic the fetishist's obsessive nature. English both compounds and revises the gendered structure of the psychoanalytic fetish, signifying a female fetishism fuelled by playful fantasy and erotic possibility. Her deployment of adolescence is intertwined with her subversion and misappropriation of fetishism, in which the notion of psychic defence is re-imagined as a sustained period of latency.

Through the early to mid-1970s, English's work was rooted in the production and installation of sculptural objects, presented through performances in the style of *tableaux vivant*. She joined the Leeds Polytechnic Fine Art department in 1971 after being expelled from Bristol for working across numerous disciplines. At Leeds, the progressive interdisciplinary environment supported her expanded practice, allowing her to freely conceive of her sculptural output as not just *objets d'art* but part of a 'wider manifestation which was by its very nature transient and could not be owned'.[21] The ambivalent dialectic between absence and presence conveyed by the concept of transience is also intrinsic to the structure of the fetish, significantly through its investment in the imaginary phallic object.[22] It is

also comparable with Jacques Lacan's theory of *objet petit a*, the unattainable object of desire, which interprets psychic existence as being incomplete and therefore structured by the desire for an object that might satisfy this lack.[23]

In her graduate degree show production *A Divertissement* (1973), which she directed and choreographed, English fabricated a highly charged erotic atmosphere through a series of props and costumes. It starred three fellow students, who also modelled for a series of photographic studies. A 'divertissement' referred to the short ballet dance that originated in the early eighteenth century – an enjoyable diversion from the narrative, in which a dancer could display their technical skill unrelated to plot. Hinging on tropes of ornate Baroque interior décor, the set included a feather mattress tied up with a satin sash and a ruched blue satin curtain with ballet shoe fringing. A white porcelain veil, constructed by dipping the lace material in liquid slip, was hung centre stage. The heady aroma in the space was also artificially boosted by English arranging a fragrant display of stocks, lilies, and carnations in front of an electric fan. Accompanied by a live pianist playing Erik Satie's *Gymnopédies*, *A Divertissement* began with a dancer on pointe, moving behind the curtain as it rose, her own shoes becoming mixed up with the curtain's fringing as her body was slowly revealed to the audience. The dancer unrolled the mattress to reveal two naked women lying inside it asleep, a striking image in which the cliché of female recumbence was made absurd. They dabbed each other with perfume and powdered one another's bottoms with swansdown puffs. After fastening heart-shaped porcelain cache-sexes around each other's hips, the women walked away from each other, eventually coming back together and allowing their porcelain hearts to touch, which produced the 'clinking sound of china against china'.[24] They then kissed. Once their lips met, the suspended veil crashed to the ground, shattering into pieces, and the stage curtain fell on the scene. In addition to the iconoclastic smashing of the veil emphasising the transgressive and libidinal joy, the revelation of the porcelain's fragility demonstrated the performative potential of objects and their ability to transform in situ. Revelling in material and dramatic jeopardy, the event demarcated the live space as an animated arena, a site where kinetic acts could be staged and produced.

To further analyse the performance, it is useful to look closely at the cache-sexe as seen modelled in *Study for A Divertissement: Jo and Porcelain Cache-Sexe* (1973) (figure 5). In the photograph an otherwise naked Jo lifts her short,

Figure 5 Rose English, *Study for A Divertissement: Jo and Porcelain Cache-Sexe*, 1973. Cibachrome photograph. Courtesy Richard Saltoun Gallery, © Rose English.

frilly apron to reveal the shiny, perforated object tied around her hips with string. This playful, hyperbolic display of her body, a mimicry of the 'crotch shot', can be framed through Freud's analysis of 'the moment of undressing', the last point where the women can still be assumed to be phallic, animating the act of fetishism.[25] However, the revelation does not come: the cache-sexe fulfils its semantic purpose and visual access is denied to the viewer. Jo is also depicted holding a handheld mirror but there is no reflection, its blankness inviting the viewer to perceive themselves in the stillness of this frozen frame, as if perpetually caught in the act. Parveen Adams has noted how the act of suspense located within the fetishistic scenario has 'the frozen, arrested quality of a photograph', as 'something fixed to which the subject constantly returns'.[26]

There is a potential comparison to be made between English's cache-sexe, the Lacanian *agalma*, and the mythological tale of Pandora's Box. Lacan borrowed the term *agalma* from Plato's *Symposium* in his formulation of a metaphor to explain the *objet petit a* in relation to real-world objects. The precious *agalma*, which translated from the Greek means gift or ornament, is contained within a box and made unattainable. The container itself has no intrinsic value and can take numerous forms; it functions only to sustain one's yearning for the object locked inside.[27] Addressing Pandora, Laura Mulvey has argued that the configuration of her 'artificial, made-up, cosmetic' body as 'a lure and a trap' can be extended to the box itself.[28] Due to their mutual 'interior/exterior topography', both are spaces of secrecy and concealment.[29] In the series of five photographs which comprise *Study for A Divertissement: Diana and Porcelain Lace Veil* (1973), Diana is clothed in a leotard and tights, making the cache-sex's modesty function purely decorative. With its large perforations and meshy net-like surface, the materiality also recalls Mulvey's description of Pandora's box: 'eye-catching, shining . . . The surface is like a beautiful carapace . . . But it is vulnerable. It threatens to crack, hinting that through the cracks might seep whatever the "stuff" might be there that it is supposed to conceal'.[30] This reveal/conceal dichotomy is also underscored in *A Divertissement* by English's theatrical use of the rising and falling stage curtain, and her choice to approximate a lace veil, whose translucent materiality simultaneously shields and draws attention to the figure beneath.

While at Leeds, English made erotic votive objects out of porcelain in various forms, including hands, feet, stars, wings, feathers, and breasts. The

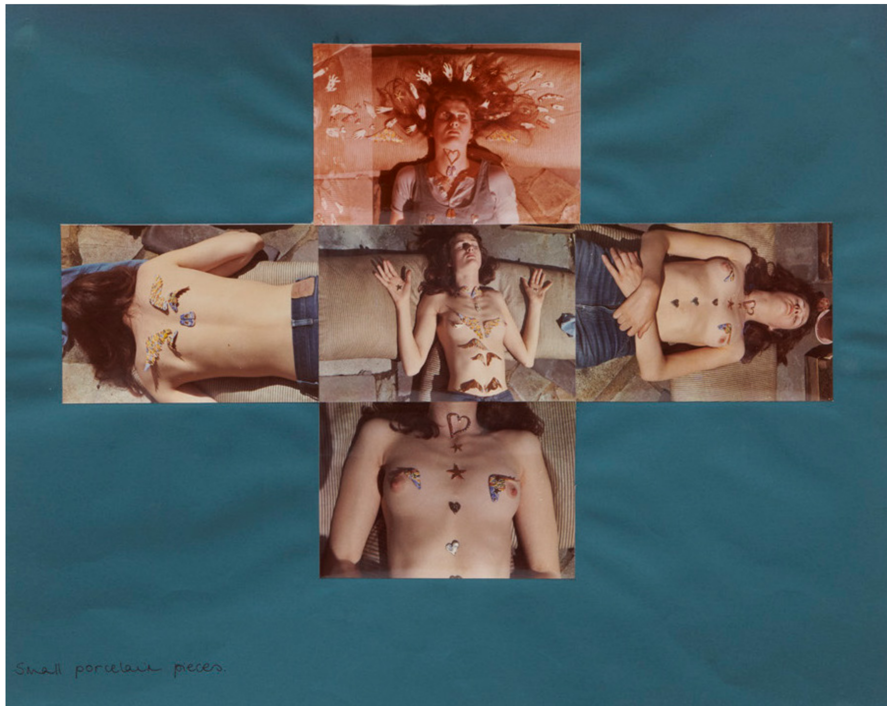

Figure 6 Rose English, *Small Porcelain Pieces (Collage)*, 1973. Courtesy Richard Saltoun Gallery, © Rose English.

photographs in the *Small Porcelain Pieces (Collage)* (1973) show these small, shard-like pieces arranged upon semi-clothed bodies in a constellation of fragments, which accentuate and adorn the various body parts and naked flesh (figure 6). The objects themselves start to become displaced, with the symbols converging with one another: hands circle the breast-like mounds, stars decorate hands, and wings merge with feet. Their diversity is suggestive of Freud's theory of polymorphous perversity in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), in which the sexual disposition of early childhood is bisexual and multifarious, articulated by the amorphous composite instinct within the sexual drives. Independent, non-integrated impulses were related to multiple, unfixed polymorphous erotogenic zones, with the whole body a potential surface for excitation and pleasure: 'any part of the skin and any sense organ could probably function as an erogenous zone'.[31] English's appropriation of the body as a literal surface similarly situates it as conduit

for sensation and satisfaction, with her objects mapping out a landscape of erogenous regions and sensing organs. The accentuated, protruding mouths, breasts, and pudenda of English's porcelain ballet dancers with their brightly rouged lips, nipples, and labia, might speak to those more 'privileged' sexual zones, but their garnished convergence with embellished hearts and stars, stripes, and circles, prevents the primacy of gynocentric logic.[32] Despite their ornamental status as necklaces, the figures' ambitious gymnastic poses and their colourful, harlequin-style embellishments more closely resemble acrobatic performers, asserting the carnivalesque playfulness simmering below the controlled, classical realm – a leitmotif recurrent in much of English's early work, and one that is particularly significant in the staging of *Quadrille* at Southampton.

Due to the absence of the Oedipus complex, Freud's *Three Essays* also demonstrates a pathway for thinking about sexuality beyond the matrix of essentialism and heterosexual binaries. English's use of a polymorphous lens to retrieve the female body from the parameters of this matrix could be configured as another act of adolescent refusal, by rejecting the transformations of puberty. After puberty, infantile autoerotic sexuality is superseded by adult genital object-related sexuality. As Juliet Mitchell has remarked, there is nothing to prevent polymorphously perverse adulthood, 'it isn't a state you grow naturally out of, it is a condition you learn to reject'.[33] In addition to signifying these roving infantile drives and sexual pliability, English's use of the body as surface becomes an exploratory and creative act that could also be aligned with intuitive children's play, in an attempt to return to infantile temporality through perverse or fetishistic creative acts. Freud maintains that pleasures can mutate into these perversions through fixation and 'actions of lingering'.[34] The role of the divertissement as an entertaining break from the plot could be interpreted as a type of lingering, a form of pleasurable adjournment, in addition to encouraging scopic fixation, with the interlude designed to purely emphasise the spectacular, skilful display of the body. This tension between vision and sexuality is similarly administered in the way Diana and Jo have been styled and choreographed by English. Her photographic studies can be analysed through Erving Goffman's interpretation of the 'feminine touch' in advertising, a specific category of 'ritualistic touching' that is distinguished from a utilitarian kind.[35] While these perverse acts of watching, touching, and lingering reinstate the assignable parameters

of the fetishistic scenario, the temporality of the engagement retains some polymorphous potential, with English manipulating and exploiting the fetish object through strategies of blurring and unfixing, which in turn begin to undo the illusion of stable phallocentric binaries.

To return to Mulvey's description of Pandora as 'artificial', the opulent items in *A Divertissement* – the saccharine perfumes and powders, the feathery swansdown puffs – are similarly suggestive of artifice in their evocation of the feminine masquerade and female glamour. Equivalent to the process of fetishistic substitution, in which certain objects or garments are fetishised due to their metonymic relationship to the female body, women are perceived as being interchangeable with their surface adornments. This logic facilitates their cosmetic construction as an image 'to-be-looked at', as titillation and spectacle, further exemplified by Jo and Diana's groomed appearance and use of make-up, with heavy eyeshadow, blusher, and lipstick.[36] These allusions to artificiality also appeal directly to the historical origins and linguistic etymology of the fetish as being fabricated, a manufactured object, in addition to its psychoanalytic status as an ersatz phallus.[37] The murky lines between verisimilitude and subterfuge demonstrate the psychic stakes of magical thinking, a process intrinsic to the fetishist's continuous and repetitive maintaining of their illusions, specifically the psychic investment in the imaginary phallic object.[38]

English's allusions to extravagance and luxury reframe frivolity and pleasure, reframing femininity's passive relation to consumption and excess as instead being one of active perversion. Her sensual materials summon an image of the music-hall revue or striptease performance: a *mise-en-scène* where the libidinal charge of sartorial, sexual, and commodity fetishism all coalesce. The smashing of the veil at the end of *A Divertissement* occurring in tandem with the 'clinking' of the cache-sexes could be interpreted as a theatrical crescendo: a climax. However, in keeping with English's interest in staging ambivalence, I want to suggest that this climax is potentially anticlimactic, due to being staged in a manner that echoes the repetitive cycle of disavowal undertaken by the fetishist in maintaining their illusions. The finale perpetuates the fluctuations between access and denial: the porcelain veil is broken and the performers are shrouded by the falling curtain. The mirroring of the kissing lips and the touching cache-sexes also introduces the idea of a masturbatory or autoerotic sexuality, presenting a cryptic moment of

polymorphously perverse satisfaction.[39] This scene is also particularly notable for its suggestion of lesbian sexuality. English's performers, at once naked and concealed, are held within an ambiguous visual realm. The cache-sex might be more analogous to Freud's description of an 'athletic support-belt which could also be worn as bathing drawers', fetishised for its ability to sustain a mood of equivocation between 'denial' and 'affirmation' as it 'covered up the genitals entirely and concealed the distinction between them'.[40] Looking closely at English's cache-sexe, with its swollen surface and elongated point, reveals a layer of sexual ambiguity. The image of *Jo and Porcelain Cache-Sexe* is also slightly farcical, a sentiment enhanced by the ballet shoe tied onto her head like a hat and the ribbon laces tied in a bow under her chin. In fact, this slipper is the most obviously phallic object in the image, with its pantomime-like displacement demonstrating the unfixed status of the imaginary phallus as being akin to a theatrical stage prop.[41]

If the pointe-shoe does represent the phallus, then its repetitive representation in *Study for a Divertissement: Diana with crinoline and pointe shoes I* and *II* can be seen to send up the traumatic fixation inherent within the Freudian fetishistic scenario while also parodying the phallic signifier's conceit as a fabrication (figure 7). In both photographs, English juxtaposed multiple pink ballet shoes with her own ceramic versions. The fact that both the 'real' and 'artificial' shoes have been handmade, albeit by different hands, along with their muddled order, further complicates their dedifferentiation: both and neither are the phallus. English's accumulation of shoes also generates an image of obsessive eroticised hoarding that reinstates Apter's evocation of collectomania as an example of perverse feminine desire, in addition to alluding to the well-trod cliché of foot fetishism. There are numerous tales of used ballet shoes becoming trophied souvenirs for a particularly zealous fandom. English's stash of satin and porcelain shoes are arranged into the shape of a heart, but it is Diana's place at the centre of this heart that circumscribes the subjectivity around which the fetishism coalesces: the figure of the ballerina. Through the pliable logic of substitution, the excessive pile of shoes gathered at her feet could be easily substituted with an image of a stage floor strewn with thrown flowers, recalling the ritualistic tradition of bestowing them to the principal female dancer. The symbolic overvaluation of either object situates them as metonymic fragments of the dancer's body, meaning that they function as signifiers through which the spectator's desire for the

Figure 7 Rose English, *Study for a Divertissement: Diana with crinoline and pointe shoes II*, 1973. C-print. Courtesy Richard Saltoun Gallery, © Rose English.

dancer can be sublimated and portrayed. Diana is also dressed in a large white hooped cage crinoline skirt, appliquéd with porcelain ballet dancers, bows, and paper cuttings from ballet albums. The sheer fabric, an allusion to the tulle netting on tutus, reveals her derrière and legs, inverting the crinoline's historical sartorial function as an undergarment. By artfully unveiling the body through the skirt's very construction, the translucent materiality of the garment suspends and freezes the act of undressing. The focus on Diana's legs signals how the exposed limbs of dancers were a prime fetishistic focus in the Romantic ballets, with short skirts revealing legs that quickly became the overdetermined and overvalued signifier for male desire.[42]

In 1980, writing in *New Dance* magazine, English queried, 'But why were the men driven to such distraction by the women on the stage? Why did they reward the objects of their admiration with tiaras, necklaces and bracelets?'[43] Her statement alludes to both the literal exchange of gifts from the audience to the performers, but also the metaphysical exchanges of consumption and pleasure that occurred in the theatres, and the audience's own responsibility in conjuring that potent atmosphere of seduction. English draws on the psychoanalytic interpretations utilised by feminist film theorists to deconstruct the fetishisation of the ballerina as a fantasy of phallocentrism. Her account of the 'ballerina-as-phallus', mediated through the contortion of the pointe shoe, is akin to contemporary feminist criticism that positioned the high-heeled shoe as the dominant icon of male fetishism. As Lynn Garafola has outlined, the development of the Romantic ballet in the nineteenth century had a strictly gendered ideology, with pointework 'not only a uniquely female utterance' but also 'a metaphor for femininity': being sublime, weightless, ethereal.[44]

However, pointe dancing necessitates a strength and athleticism that can only be attained by years of training, and despite the delicate satin and silk ribbons, the softness of the pointe shoe is a mirage, with the toe box stiffened with resin and the sole constructed from hardened and reinforced materials. Before its refinement in the Romantic era, pointework had emerged as a sensational acrobatic stunt called 'toe dancing', originated by the *grotteschi* Italian dancers who were known for their circus-like feats.[45] In *Quadrille,* English can be seen to restore this grotesque lineage through her fabrication of bestial ballet hooves. Rather than renounce the pointe shoe, her material revisioning productively combined the enduring physicality of the ballet

Figure 8 Rose English, *Jo and Tail*, 1974. Black and white photograph. Courtesy Richard Saltoun Gallery, © Rose English.

dancer with the animality of the horse, demonstrating their kindred labour. This fantasy of metamorphosis is further animated in English's *Jo and Tail* (1974) photographs, where Jo takes on the guise of a hybridised creature, with the curve of her spine aligned with the dock of the tail (figure 8). The erotic undertones to these images, heightened by Jo's nudity and her posture on all fours, indicates the subversive and mischievous sense of pleasure surrounding her transfiguration. Her hair, tied in a 'ponytail', is already rich with evocative over-identifications, sublimated through the actions of brushing, grooming, and polishing, while the tail belt, adorned with a matching bow, appears both manufactured and authentic, groomed yet monstrous. The interchangeability alludes to the sense of fetishistic longing and blurred over-identification that pervades English's horse girls, costumed in their equestrian accoutrements.

Rather than exclusively interpret the animality of the horse as a phallic substitute, which therefore presumes the condition of feminine lack, Probyn has conceived of the phrase 'becoming-horse' as a polyvalent 'strategy for figuring the undoing and the redoing of the lines between and among

entities'.[46] She unlinks the coupling of girls and horses in heteronormative sexual structures of femininity to produce new equine associations that 'scramble the subjective, the sexual, the social'.[47] English's desire to perform, merge, or identify with the animal self similarly unsettles the stability of gendered and sexual constructs. Guy Brett has posited that with her 'intimate and mutating allusions to horses, wings and the female body, she intimates an "erogenous zone" as a powerful energising force in performance, necessitating a reconsideration, a recasting, a rekindling of the relationship of human and animal'.[48] English's performance arena in *Quadrille* might also be the erogenous zone, with the fluidity of this environment providing a demarcated space for her parodic and fetishistic appropriation of spectacular entertainment.

Quadrille can also be interpreted as a form of 'horse play', defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as boisterous and physical play that 'exceeds the bounds of propriety'.[49] This perversion of propriety through humour, excess, and the absurd reiterates their potential as tactics of liberatory jouissance. To deviate from English's suggestion in *New Dance* that modern dance can release the figure of the ballerina, I want to assert that her horse-play at the Southampton Show represents a far more daring and dexterous exploration of these concerns. Through theatrical spectacle and hyperbolic showmanship, she suggested new ways of looking at the history of both artforms, extracting, transforming, and muddling specific elements of gesture and codified bodily display. By playfully manipulating both context and interpretation, English exploited the alchemic mobility of the fetish object, and the process of fetishisation itself. In her singular synthesis between hooves and shoes, role-play and sexual play, the lines between fetish and fantasy became provocatively blurred, with the ethereal lightness of the sylph brought back down to earth through the muscle of the mount.

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Notes

1 Rose English, interview with the author, April 6, 2023.
2 See Roy Strong, *Splendour at Court: Renaissance Spectacle and Illusion* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973).
3 Jennifer Kabat, 'A Chaos of Possibilities,' *The Believer*, 116 (January 2018), 34.
4 Ibid.
5 For an analysis of the Tiller Girls, see Siegfried Kracauer, 'The Mass Ornament,' in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 75–86.
6 Elspeth Probyn, 'Becoming-Horse: Transports in Desire,' in *Outside Belongings* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 55.
7 Sigmund Freud, 'The Sexual Aberrations,' in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (The 1905 Edition)*, eds. Philippe Van Haute and Herman Westerink, trans. Ulrike Kistner (London: Verso Books, 2016), 16–17.
8 Freud, 'Fetishism,' in *The Penguin Freud Reader*, ed. Adam Phillips (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2006), 91–92.
9 My research builds on existing psychoanalytic and feminist readings of the fetish, specifically those that revise Freud's androcentric paradigm or make a case for female fetishism, as exemplified in significant scholarship by Emily Apter, Marjorie Garber, Elizabeth Grosz, Mary Kelly, Jann Matlock, and Naomi Schor.
10 Jane Gallop, 'Carnal Knowledge,' in *Thinking Through the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 138–139.
11 See Amy Tobin, 'Sex Between Feminists,' *Women Artists Together: Art in the Age of Women's Liberation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2023), 183–222. Tobin includes English in a group of protagonists who invoked 'chaotic sensuality, eroticism and fantasy', considering how their 'approaches to sex, sexuality and sexual difference disturbed and enacted feminism in theory and practice,' 184.
12 Naomi Schor, 'Fetishism and Its Ironies,' *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 17, no. 1–2 (Fall/Winter 1988–89), 94–95.
13 William Pietz has referred to the fetish as 'a material space gathering an otherwise unconnected multiplicity into the unity of its enduring singularity'. See Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish, I,' *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 9 (Spring 1985), 15.
14 Guy Brett, 'To the Horse's Mouth,' in *Abstract Vaudeville: the work of Rose English* (London: Ridinghouse, 2014), 318.
15 Rose English, *Life of an Artwork: Quadrille by Rose English*, online video, Tate, 20 January, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wikBE0Wv_3Y (accessed 16 February 2023).
16 English's pursuit of erotic pleasure was an outlier within a zeitgeist of performance art that was often involved with pain, endurance, and violence, such as Marina Abramović or Gina Pane.
17 Sianne Ngai, 'The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde,' in *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2015), 62, 93.
18 See Tobin, 'Homewreckers/Homemakers,' in *Women Artists Together: Art in the Age of Women's Liberation,* 109.
19 English in Kabat, 'A Chaos of Possibilities,' 34.

20 Emily Apter, 'Cabinet Secrets: Peep Shows, Prostitution, and Bric-a-bracomania in the Fin-de-siècle Interior,' in *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 39–43.
21 English in a letter to RoseLee Goldberg, quoted in Brett, 'From a Call Box,' in *Abstract Vaudeville: the work of Rose English*, 28.
22 See Juliet Mitchell, 'Freud: The Making of a Lady I,' in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: A Radical Reassessment of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 85.
23 Lionel Bailly, 'That obscure object of desire: *l'objet petit a*,' in *Lacan: A Beginner's Guide* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 128–132.
24 For the full description of the performance, see English quoted in Brett, '*A Divertissement*,' 36.
25 Freud, 'Fetishism,' 93.
26 Parveen Adams, 'Of female bondage,' in *The Emptiness of the Image: Psychoanalysis and Sexual Differences* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 34.
27 Bailly, 'That obscure object of desire: *l'objet petit a*,' 131.
28 Laura Mulvey, 'Pandora's Box: Topographies of Curiosity,' in *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 55–57.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid, 63.
31 Freud, 'The Transformations of Puberty,' in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,* 82.
32 Ibid.
33 Juliet Mitchell, 'Pre-Oedipal Sexuality,' *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: A Radical Reassessment of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 53.
34 Freud, 'The Sexual Aberrations,' in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 13.
35 Erving Goffman, 'The Feminine Touch,' in *Gender Advertisements* (London: Macmillan Press, 1979), 29–31.
36 The concept of 'to-be-looked-at-ness' is central to Mulvey's essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' *Screen*, 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975), 6–18.
37 See Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish, II: The Origin of the Fetish,' *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 13 (Spring 1987), 24. He notes how 'fetish' derived from the pidgin 'fetisso' and the Portuguese 'fetitico' meaning 'witchcraft' or 'charm', which derived in turn from the Latin 'facticius' or 'factitius', an adjective formed from the past participle of the verb 'facer': 'to make'.
38 Despite knowing that the substitute object constitutes a false or simulated phallus, the fetishist continues to regard it as real *nevertheless*, recalling Octave Mannoni's 1969 essay on the Freudian paradigm of negative affirmation. See Apter, 'Fetishism in Theory: Marx, Freud, Baudrillard,' in *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France*, 13–14.
39 In Freudian theory, the paradigm for autoerotic infantile sexuality is the lips kissing themselves. See Freud, 'Infantile Sexuality,' in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 42–43. The scene also evokes Luce Irigaray's 'lips that speak together' as a primal form of autoeroticism. See Irigaray, 'When Our Lips Speak Together,' in *This Sex Which is Not One,* trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 205–218.
40 Freud, 'Fetishism,' 94–95.
41 I am drawing on Marjorie Garber's argument that fetishism is a theatre of display and

that the theatre itself represents an enactment of the fetishistic scenario. See Garber, 'Fetish Envy,' *October*, 54 (Autumn 1990), 47.

42 See Tamar Garb, 'Temporality and the Dancer,' in *The Body in Time: Figures of Femininity in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 7–38.

43 Rose English, 'Alas Alack! The Representation of the Ballerina,' *New Dance*, no. 15 (Summer 1980), 18–19.

44 Lynn Garafola, 'Introduction,' in *Rethinking the Sylph: New Perspectives on the Romantic Ballet,* ed. Lynn Garafola (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 4.

45 Jennifer Homans, 'Romantic Illusions and the Rise of the Ballerina,' in *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet* (London: Granta, 2010), 138.

46 Probyn, 'Becoming-Horse: Transports in Desire,' 62.

47 Ibid.

48 Brett, 'From a Call Box,' 44.

49 "Horseplay, *N.*, Sense 2." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, July, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8936136549 (accessed 19 March 2024)