Some Early Notes Toward an Ontology of Fetishes

by Jeffrey Barbeau

We now need an ontology of fetishes, a fetishist ontology of things. The substances of things are not simply outside us, outside the sphere of human consciousness, and they are not only relations of causal determinism between them and the human mind. Things, in the structures and substances, attract us and inspire us and direct us and organize our movements, order us.¹

—Alphonso Lingis
For the past eight months I have been involved in an art project in which I take a photograph of a moment that typifies the general feeling of my day. I envisioned this project as a way to take this ongoing and often ineffable process of typification and make it slightly more observable. What this has amounted to is a very loose and necessarily imprecise record of the emotional tone of my life for the past two hundred days or so. My plan is to continue with this project for the next two years. An even 730 days. What I hope to achieve is a productive coupling of practical obsession and virtual resignation.

What I have gleaned from this series of two hundred photographs is not so much a predictable series of images that follows one from the next, but more like a record of subtle and not so subtle experiential undulations. Not testaments to a resilient and self-identical presence, but rather continuous self-differentiation. If photography has long been a tool for the biopolitical regulation of life—of documenting identity—I am currently interested in the capacity of the photographic image to explore the novel qualities of duration. Following
Alphonso Lingis, this is not the record of a sovereign and self-legislating subject, but an account of life as we contend and actualize ourselves from within the materiality of things, vibrations that register on our bodies, rhythms that entice us. It is, in short, an openness to the strangeness around and in us. For Lingis,

The ceaseless activity of the mind to fix concepts and meanings on things appears as an anxious compulsion to staunch the leakage of strangeness. The sense of strangeness is not a cognitive recognition; it is the experience of the collapse of cognition, or vertigo, throbbing in raw emotional intensity.²

To my mind, this project is not a matter of the simple aestheticization of experience. Experience, as I have learned, is aesthetic from the very start: as subjects we are co-constituted and emerge as such through our engagement with an eventful and sensual field of encounters. Our purview as particular subjects (as students and researchers and artistic pro-
ducers, for instance) is generated from the continual productivity of sensual forces, temporary stabilizations, minor modifications, and bouts of real volatility. As Lingis suggests,

A working artist is not one who has an encyclopedic appreciation of artworks but one who has a passionate devotion to materials and forms that speak singularly to him or her. An artwork emerging in his hands captivates the artist and guides his hand; it goes beyond or goes outside whatever meaning that artist has conceived for it. It beckons him toward unknown paths. Are not artworks so many scattered sites outside the domain of work and reason, in the realm of chance?  

In my capacity as a researcher and an artist, I have found continual inspiration and creative gumption through a subjection of my thinking to this ‘realm of chance.’ What is more, I am constantly intrigued by the role that visual and material culture can play in an exploration of this insurmountable quality of ‘strangeness’ in our lives. All of the
photographs included herein are meant to witness our mostly mundane, and occasionally exorbitant, emergence from an inexhaustible realm of beings and things that both engage and exceed our selves. I consider it a modest, tentative contribution to a visual cultural ‘ontology of fetishes,’ a survey of our immersion in both built and natural environments.

Barbeau: An Ontology of Fetishes