economies, some having vast categories of objects that do not enter exchange, while others are more widely commodified. In addition, this difference is not a function of the infiltration of colonialism per se, but results from the degree to which a society has relations with other societies (Thomas 1991, chapter 3).

There is no doubt that our world system is interconnected by the flows of capital and power. Similarly, there is no doubt that the post-colonial condition describes not only “third-world” situations but a space we all inhabit, interconnected as we are by global flows. Nevertheless, this process of worldwide interconnection is more complex than an inevitable process of capitalist reification, of endless commodification. It is incorrect to understand gift-type economies to operate only in “third-world” cultures while “first-world” economies are commodity based through and through. Even objects that move in the apparently sanitized flows of transnational capital encode movements of cultural translation and mistranslation. Arjun Appadurai looks at these translation processes in the social life of an object in terms of knowledge: the continuities and discontinuities in knowledge between the producer and the consumer (1986, 42–44). There may be no knowledge gap in the local movement of a quart of peaches or the transnational movement of a car, both cases in which the producer and consumer share knowledge about a commodity thanks to proximity or standardization. But large knowledge gaps mark the movement among cultures of objects that encode personal or ritual meaning.

Appadurai complicates the Marxist notion of the commodity by understanding objects to move in and out of commodity status in the course of their lifetimes. In cross-cultural movement an object’s “commodity status” is highly mobile; for example, a thing that is above commodification in one society may be a commodity candidate in another, and intercultural relations heighten the likelihood that an object may enter the commodity context of another society (1986, 14–17). Objects may pass in and out of identities as commodity, gift, ritual object, or trash (Kopytoff 1986, 67). In intercultural movement this process accelerates. Through their travels and through being owned and used, objects become singular, gaining a biography. Objects contain a wealth of knowledge if only we could read them. Objects provide maps of their travels, the people who produced and came into contact with them, and the shifts in their values as they move.

**The Cinema of Transnational Objects**

Cinema, then, can follow an object in an attempt to elicit its cultural biography and to read the knowledge it embodies: to engage with the object discursively. In addition, as material objects themselves, film and video are uniquely capable of confronting the object in its material as well as its discursive meaning. Benjamin found dialectical images in the ruins of the arcades; we might look for them on the Home Shopping Channel. We may also turn to the microgenre of films and videos that trace the movement of recollection-objects among cultures, works that perform a dialectical reading of objects. These examples begin with the relatively simple transnational conversions of labor to capital, and move to more idiosyncratic and intimate travels of fetishes, fossils, and transnational objects.

First are those works that trace the movement of an object as it shakes the traces of local cultures to become a deracinated, transnational commodity. The transnational object in Amos Gitai’s Ananas (1983) is a can of pineapple. Its contents are produced in Hawai’i, its label printed in China, its can assembled on the North American continent, and so forth. The traces of humans who smelted the steel, harvested the fruit, and ran the printing press would be utterly lost in the can of pineapple, as in most commodities, were it not for Gitai’s excavation, which de-aliensates their labor. Similarly, in Marta Rodríguez and Jorge Silva’s Love, Women and Flowers (1988) the transnational object is the flowers that travel from a chemical-laden hothouse in Colombia by KLM jet to European florists. Rodríguez and Silva’s film takes a flower so highly cultivated that it seems to grow right in the florist shop refrigerator—the stiff, long-lasting carnation—and endows it with haunting histories of women’s labor. The flowers’ low cost in Amsterdam or New York reflects successful union-busting in Bogotá; their conventional length, we learn, is ensured by women workers who mechanically lop off extra buds; their unblemished uniformity results from the same clouds of toxic fungicides that cause the workers to sicken and die. In Deleuze’s terms, the carnation is a recollection-image of women’s work, pain,
and solidarity. In Appadurai’s terms, the film fills in a knowledge gap about the conditions in which the Colombian women labor, a gap that makes it easier for northern consumers to buy the flowers. Another film about suffering extracted from flowers is Jorge Furtiado’s Island of Flowers (1989), a surrealist documentary about the extremely poor people who live around and eke their livelihood from a garbage dump (“Isla das Flores”) outside Rio de Janeiro. In five minutes, the film demonstrates with wicked economy the inexorable logic of making equations between money, commodities, and lives. Like Love, Women and Flowers, Island of Flowers is a savage critique of the process of capitalist abstraction, recreating in reverse the accordion-like movement whereby human suffering is transmuted into value.

These films undertake the Marxist project of reconstituting human labor to powerful effect. Nevertheless, it is hard to see the traces of human presence in these objects as any sort of communication. Though the women who grow the carnations may know well who is on the receiving end of their labor, such mass-produced commodities are sufficiently deracinated that the northern carnation buyers probably have no idea where their flowers came from.

More complex intercultural movements endow objects with greater powers of memory and transformation. As global movements of capital and culture make the distinction between “first” and “third” worlds increasingly muddy, the shifts between commodity

and singularity accelerate and mutate. Ordinary enough commodities become singular markers of status in Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s Quartier Mozart (1992), where the magazine Paris Match—a commodity for a day, then trash, in France—becomes a rare and unique object in a neighborhood in Cameroon, making the shopkeeper of the quartier a local authority on Denzel Washington and Princess Di.

In Kidlat Tahimik’s The Perfumed Nightmare (1978), objects regularly move in and out of commodity status with the aid of fantasy, or, more properly, fabulation. Kidlat (the character) has the knack of finding unique objects, gifts, and fetishes among the anonymous commodities of Paris. The eggs he buys from an outdoor vendor turn out, every time he cracks one open, to have two giant yolks. Awed, Kidlat returns to the vendor, Lola, who explains that all her eggs are double-yolked because they came from the same grandfather—“not like those cheap supermarket eggs.” The Filipino Kidlat, the French Lola, and the German artisans of church onion domes, whom he also visits, all marginal to the tide of international commerce, recognize objects for the human (and chicken) experience they encode. Kidlat also marvels at the vast high-tech chimneys on the city’s new incinerator, big enough for three families to live in. At the end of the film, the president ex officio of the Werner von Braun Fan Club hijacks one of these vast white chimney-spaceships and flies home in it. This time, Kidlat uses his “bamboo technology” to magically reclaim the mass-produced object. A true fetishist, Kidlat turns one object to another use, as collectors turn another culture’s utilitarian objects into objets d’art. The final leg of his triumphant journey of fabulation is a Filipino commemorative stamp of Kidlat in the chimney-spaceship, “proving” that it happened.

That humblest of commodities, the potato, is re-endowed with history and sacred powers in Alex Rivera’s tape Papapapá (1996), whose title translates to “potato-father.” Beginning with the tuber’s sacred centrality to Inca culture, Rivera follows its historical journey from Latin America to Europe (in a stop-motion animated potato “race,” which the brown potato unfortunately loses), up through the continent, and back to North America. As it travels, the potato acquires new cultural values and loses old ones. While the potato was as sacred to its Irish cultivators as to the Incas, its status falls dramatically on its return to the Americas. The potato’s final reduction to commodity status is signaled by an interview with a spokes-
person for Tri-Sum Snacks, who explains that the company sees a vast potential market in Latin America for potato chips, as well as popcorn and pork rinds. At Tri-Sum, it is important that chips be light and uniform in color and untouched by human hands: this policy, the filmmaker suggests, reflects the unconscious racism of factory standardization. Meanwhile, the stakes of Rivera’s historical quest are raised by his anxiety for his Peruvian father, now an expatriate couch potato watching Latin American television in Miami. Rivera’s long-baked potato bursts its commodity frame, revealing layers of memories and forgettings, capitalist expansion and cultural recoding.

Jean Rouch has exploited the transformations that people and objects experience as they cross between cultures in many films, including *Jaguar* (1971), *Petit à petit* (1969), and more recently *Madame l’eau* (1993). His most famous experiment in the material embodiment of colonialism is surely *Les Maîtres fous* (1953), a documentary of the Hauka movement in Niger, a cult whose members become possessed by the spirits of colonial administrators. This important film has been thoroughly discussed (for example, Taussig 1993, 240–43; Stoller 1995). I would note simply that one of the striking things about the film is that it documents a fetishistic spirituality, insofar as it is not the spiritual state of the worshippers’ souls but the physical state of their bodies that mediate their relation to divine power: the Haukas’ spirituality is immanent and embodied. But of course what is most disturbing about the film is that what the Hauka embody is the history of colonialism of the Songhay people; this spirituality seems to be nothing elevating but a harsh exorcism of a colonialism that infects the spirit and the body. Rouch’s critique of colonialism is far more playful in *Madame l’eau*. In this film what moves is windmills, from Holland to Niger, supposedly at the inspiration of Rouch’s friends Damouré, Lam, and Tallou, to relieve the drought in their region. (These three collaborators first appeared in *jaguar* more than twenty years previously.) Rather than being a miniature model of World Bank-style development, in *Madame l’eau* the importation of windmills is marked by magic and the mutual contamination of cultures. After the Dutch government has agreed to donate three windmills, the three Nigerians perform a divination sacrifice on the Dutch seacoast. Perhaps it is this ritual that invests the windmill with non-Dutch (and non-discursive) powers, so that it causes a field of tulips to spring up overnight on the banks of the Niger.8

Another sort of work that traces the movement of objects among nations, gathering and erasing meanings as they go, is the film or tape that reconstitutes the path of an object as it becomes commoditized. Dennis O’Rourke’s *Cannibal Tours* (1988) and Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor’s *In and Out of Africa* (1992), for example, trace the process of cultural translation that makes local African objects into artifacts for export. Works like these follow not simply the process of commodification of indigenous use-values into exchange-values, but the willful creation of fetishes in intercultural translation. *In and Out of Africa*, which follows the traffic of the Muslim merchant Gabaï Baare between West Africa and New York City, shows how Westerners desperately desire to import not just commodities but histories, and how go-betweens pander to that desire. Baare hires African workers to carve massive numbers of traditional ritual objects and then age them with root-based dyes and mud. The fake antiques prove to be recollection-objects that put the lie to the collectors’ lofty notions of the universal beauty of (certain kinds of) African sculpture. When the American collectors buy these objects, they think they are buying aura, human experience encoded in an object. Yet in fact they are buying a quite different kind of experience, since these recollection-objects connect not to some authentic African ritual practice but to a quite cynical process of market analysis. *In and Out of Africa* retraces a trade route that was built
precisely to materialize colonial desires for a primitive authenticity, as they move from European and North American galleries and collections to African construction sites. Yet in following this route, the film not only deconstructs the collectors’ desire but also reveals that the African sculptural objects are precisely intercultural products, as in Pietz’s definition of the fetish. Commissioned by the trader Baare, they are the result of their African producers’ reasoned second-guessing of Western collectors’ fantasies about Africa.

The European and American collectors interviewed in the tape disdain the African sculptures that implicate them in the real history of European-African relationships. Colón figures, sculptures of white colonists, are rejected by one collector as lacking the universality and spirituality of traditional African sculpture. The European collectors prefer works that refer to a timeless, precolonial “Africa,” works that deny the coevalness of European and African cultures (Fabian 1983). “Ironically, it is these figures that actually are spiritual for their African makers; they are used in ritual practices to embody the power of the colonizers just as the Hauka dealt with their colonial history by embodying the spirits of the Europeans. The colón figures, like Cuna Indian figurines in the shape of General Douglas MacArthur and other foreigners (Taussig 1993, 10), materially embody spirituality: they are the radioactive fossils of colonialism.

Misguided—or dangerously knowledgeable—collectors also figure in Victor Masayesva’s Imagining Indians (1994). The collectors Masayesva interviews are variously knowledgeable about the native objects they own. From the greedy amateurs at a weekend fair to the dealer who is well enough informed about the kachina mask he owns to be uncomfortable with its power. The latter is waiting to restore the stolen mask to the Hopi community, if it can be acknowledged that he bought it legitimately. “I talk to it and feed it cornmeal,” he says, showing that he is attempting to respect Hopi custom. Yet Masayesva suggests that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. It is safe enough for hobbyists to buy native artworks that, like Baare’s fake antiques, are produced for the market. The transaction may be marked by colonial desire, but the manufacturers are practicing a pre-emptive fetishism, effectively protecting their culture by sending out decoy objects. The knowledgeable collector, however, is attempting to break through the layers of intercultural translation and to penetrate to the center of Hopi ritual practices.

36 and 37. Stills from Imagining Indians
Like Masayesva, I think that another culture’s spiritual identity is none of our business, and that to attempt an unmediated encounter with the most sacred objects of another culture is even more destructive than to fetishize them. As the dealer continues to speak, earnestly and rather arrogantly, Masayesva digitally erases him from the frame so that only the Navajo blanket behind him remains.

All these examples emphasize the singularity and materiality of an object, even, or especially, those objects that are supposed to be reducible to signs through exchange. The carnation, the potato, the Paris Match, the windmill: it is these objects’ unique trajectories through time and space that invest them with a value properly called aauratic. Market-based equations do not manage to capture their value. Nor, I would argue, do film theories based on Saussurean semiotics, in which any sign can equal any other. The irreducible materiality of these objects calls for a film theory that respects their aura as distillations of history. The films and videos discussed above may seem to be only films “about” transnational objects, works that take these objects as their subject matter and nothing more. But as my discussion moves to more idiosyncratic objects, I hope to show that it is the ability of film and video to make contact with these things’ material presence that gives these works their unsettling power.

The Memory of Transnational Objects

Another such volatile commodity circulates in Woman from the Lake of Scented Souls (1994; a China-Hong Kong-Japan coproduction) by Xie Fei. In this fiction film, Xiang, a Chinese village woman who runs a sesame oil factory, gets acclaim when her product is adopted by a Japanese company. The sought-after product, and the fetish in this story, is the sesame oil. It is said to get its flavor from the high-quality local sesame seeds and the clear water of the lake by which the village was built. The lake is also said to have an unusual perfume, according to the legend that two women once committed suicide by drowning themselves in the lake, rather than enter loveless marriages. Yet Xiang herself is unhappily married, and she has also forced a marriage between her mentally retarded son and a young woman, Huanhuan, despite the latter’s wishes. The film suggests that the heartache of the women who run the factory is essential to the flavor of the oil: local experience and local memory bottled for international consumption. This extremely local product is chosen for mass production and export by Japan, representative of multinational capital. The Japanese characters in the film are represented as urban and rootless, in contrast to the people of the village who live intimately with their history. What happens when what is considered universally superior, the Platonic form of sesame oil, turns out to be the bottled product of local memory?

The film is exhibited under two English titles: the literal translation Woman Sesame Oil Maker, and the more poetic Woman from the Lake of Scented Souls. This double title is another case of the mutation of transnational objects. The Chinese title refers prosaically to the commercial product. The title for foreign consumption calls up connotations of ancient, ineffable Chinese culture. The further the product (both the oil and the film) travels, in other words, the more its meanings become rarefied and distanced from their material origin. On the other hand, distance also makes it possible to specify the emotional source of the sesame oil’s flavor, which would have been anathema back in the village. Its manufacturers attribute the flavor of the oil to the clear water of the lake. They are at pains not to disclose the story of the thwarted lovers who drowned themselves in the lake, for fear of repelling their customers. But by the time the product is at a safe distance from the village, the romantic story only enhances its value.

Woman from the Lake of Scented Souls traces a remarkable process of concentration and displacement in the production of transnational objects: an emotional, even spiritual phenomenon becomes the force underlying the appeal of a commodity. It should not be surprising that what gets (literally) bottled in the film is women’s experience, whose expression is not sanctioned by the culture. The painful relationship between Xiang and Huanhuan is built on an irresolvable contradiction: the former requires her daughter-in-law to submit to a loveless marriage, as she herself did, in order to maintain the coherence of the family business. In the tense scenes between these women, the strained, truncated dialogue tends to be confined to the household chores. Neither speaks of the bruises that the daughter-in-law’s husband has inflicted on her. A tacit understanding grows between the two when the young woman discovers that her mother-in-law has had a lover for the entire duration of
her marriage. In these scenes, the women never meet one another's glance. Often one spies on the other from a window onto the courtyard of the house. Their final exchange takes place, in effect, through a veil: standing on the roof amid laundry hung to dry, the daughter-in-law is silhouetted behind a sheet while her mother-in-law, in a few subdued words, releases her from her bondage. In Woman from the Lake of Scented Souls the tragedy of the women's lives finds no verbal expression, and is muted visually as well. The longing and pain of generations of women appears only in the fragrance of the sesame oil they produce. (And the film is not a tirade against modernity: when the factory's primitive machinery is replaced by modernized equipment, an investment from the Japanese backers, the flavor of the oil is not altered. Instead, it is the specifically emotional character of the labor that affects the oil's quality.)

It is only a slight shift from the commodified objects in the works described above to noncommodified, personal objects. While those volatile commodities encode social more than individual histories, the meaning of personal objects resides in their power to release memories that are specific to individuals. These processes are not "merely" personal, however; rather, they suggest how the personal and idiosyncratic may be the only visible aspect of broader cultural histories (Seremetakis 1994: 135). The significance of the sort of transnational movement contained in personal objects cannot be underestimated. How often has it been the case that memories that were seen as "only" private proved to be the sole repositories of diasporic cultures? It is important to take seriously what seem to be isolated, idiosyncratic, or seemingly private phenomena, because they may prove to be the only level at which widespread cultural movements are able to speak.

Earlier I mentioned the piece of tar paper that is one of several objects that encode history in Tajiri's History and Memory. The object that Tajiri most successfully pursues to learn what it "remembers" is a wooden bird her grandmother carved in the detention camp at Poston. This colorful object, shot, like the piece of tar paper, against a black background, comes to resonate on another historical level when Tajiri finds a photo in the National Archives. Going through a box of documents from the internment camps, Tajiri comes across a photograph of a roomful of people working at long tables, labeled "Bird-carving class, August 1941," and there in the photo is her grandmother. The archive—in this case, the literal archive—is as ignorant of Mrs. Tajiri's private history as she is willfully amnesiac of it. Only the bird remembers. Traveling from the prison camp to the family home, the wooden bird embodies a recollection that is now lost. The carved figure that now resides in Tajiri's mother's jewelry box is material evidence of a trauma her mother has almost wholly forgotten.

Personal objects remember and attest to events that people have forgotten. Like cameraless films made by placing things directly on the negative, some works undertake to excavate the memories of objects merely by exposing them and "developing" the stories they retain. Such a work is Wael Ra'ad's short video, Missing Lebanese Wars (1996). Like several other expatriate Lebanese artists, among them Yasmine Khlat (Leylouna notre nuit, 1987), Olga Nakhas (Lebanon: Bits and Pieces, 1994), and Jalal Toufic (Credits Included: A Video in Red and Green, 1995), Ra'ad returns to his old home to ask the walls, the pictures, and the objects to recount the "missing" war and explain the marks it left on his family. The tape begins with a meditation on photography's ability both to fix and to undermine the truth of an event. "It is a well-known fact that the major historians of the Lebanese civil war were compulsive gamblers during the war period." Every Sunday, Ra'ad explains, Marxists, Islamists, and
Maronite nationalists went to the racetrack to bet not on the horses but on what moment of the photo finish would be represented in the newspaper the next day. This scene is shot so as to deny the camera’s ability to capture visible evidence. All we see of the race, in a series of blurry dissolves, are fragmented close-up shots of the crowd of spectators at the track. In the next scene, over a melancholy oboe solo from Marcel Khalife’s “Ghina’iyat Ahmed Al Arabi,” a voice-over recounts how a woman named Zainab Fakhouri left her husband during the war, taking seventeen objects with her on the journey from Bir Zeit to Beirut to Amman to Free Town. To illustrate this journey, Ra’ad isolates details from still photographs of family gatherings, homing in on the faces of loved ones but on the objects behind them. Encoding years of memories, the objects bear witness to how the war came to make itself felt in the marriage. Meanwhile, as the third part of this short tape explains, her ex-husband, historian Fadl Fakhouri, has his own memory objects: he spends his days listening to recordings of his old lectures about the Lebanese civil war and rearranging his son’s bullet collection (we see the bullets lined up on the bedspread), as though the right combination would make sense of his past.

Ra’ad’s oblique, seemingly dispassionate, and overtly fictionalized approach hints that to try to recover the memories these fossils contain would be too painful. Instead he moves cautiously over their surface, examining the geological forces that produced them. A later tape by Ra’ad, *Secrets in the Open Sea* (1997), makes even more explicit the power of objects to remember materially what is officially forgotten—in only three years. A number of photographic plates, Ra’ad explains in voice-over, were found in the intelligence headquarters of the warring militias active during the civil war. As he speaks we see the blue Mediterranean and more of those any-space-whether Beirut streetscapes such as Ra’ad and Jayce Salloum used in *Talaeen a Junuub* (1933). He continues: the Arab Research Institute in Beirut sent these plates to labs in France and the United States for analysis, where they were found to represent group portraits; we see this series of stills, some of which are obviously newsprint halftones. All the people in the photographs, Ra’ad explains, were members of the militias, and all had drowned at sea in the past few years. The film closes in silence with a percussive sequence of bluish rectangles. In Deleuze’s phrase, something is hidden in the image: these flat rectangles are witnesses to a disappearance. The very elaborateness of the research project *Secrets in the Open Sea* purports to record hints that the whole thing is a fake. A supporting document published by Ra’ad asserts that the prints’ $150,000-each development costs were defrayed by contributions from corporations, individuals, and the fictional Fakhouris of *Missing Lebanese Wars*, and that the Arab Research Institute contains 4,600 additional “indexed microfiched” documents (Ra’ad 1997). Such comfortable resources would be a fantasy for any artist, but especially one whose search for objective records of the Lebanese civil war has turned up only contradiction and denial. More wishfulness shows in the fake opening credit, “BBC and Canal+ present.” In short, the story that the photographic plates hide in their blue surfaces is not true—that is, it may well be true, but they are not telling it. Yet the blue plates that
briefly present their faces to the screen are radioactive, objects that look inert but contaminate the discourse of truth surrounding them.

**Objects and Sense Memory**

As an object decays it often changes in texture and emits odors. As a recollection-object breaks down, through the engagement with memory, memory generates sensations in the body (Bergson [1911] 1998, 179). Thus an image, insofar as it engages with memory at all, engages the memory of the senses. And as I will insist, the senses often remember when nobody else does. The memory of the senses may call forth histories of transcultural objects, histories that have been lost en route. How can knowledge be embodied in senses other than the visual? How can one form of sense knowledge embody another? I ask the reader’s patience while in the rest of this chapter I raise the stakes of such questions, which will be the subject of chapters 3 and 4.

Food and the plants on which it grows are recollection-objects in a number of intercultural films and videos. On Tajiir’s visit to Poston, she videotapes the date palms that the Japanese American prisoners planted almost fifty years earlier. Tall and strong, the trees attest to the presence of the people who “brought water to the desert and made things grow,” and to the concentrated sweetness of the fruit they might have tasted. In Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* (1992), okra and other vegetables imported from Africa act as memory-fossils for the inhabitants of Ibo Landing. Okra figures in Marlon Riggs’s *Black Is, Black Ain’t* (1995): it is an important ingredient in gumbo, which Riggs uses not only as a metaphor for the differences and commonalities among African diasporic people, but also a means of recreating African diasporic communities through memories of smell and taste and rituals of cooking. *Great Girl* (1994), a film by Kim Su Theiler, retraces a young American woman’s journey back to her Korean birthplace. Her search for her home and mother is inconclusive, except for a couple of indexical traces. One is a scar on the young woman’s forehead. A woman who may have been her mother does not recognize her, but she tells of an accident her little daughter had with the scissors that would explain the scar. The other is sweet potatoes. The narrator tells how she met Mr. Chao, the former gardener of the orphanage where she was supposedly raised, when she went to the village. “He said he didn’t recognize me, but he said that if I’d eaten sweet potatoes, he had planted them.” The material memory of sweet potatoes connects Kim Su and the gardener, even though neither of them remembers with certainty that she lived there.

Sense memories are most fragile to transport, yet most evocative when they can be recovered. Hamid Naficy notes that it is especially important to consider the nonaudiovisual ways that exiles experience film and television: “The exiles produce their difference not just through what they see and hear but through their senses of smell, taste, and touch. Indeed, these aspects of the sensorium often provide, more than sight and hearing, poignant reminders of difference and of separation from homeland” (1993, 152–53). What is left out of expression registers somatically, in pain, nausea, memories of smells and caresses. What does not register in the orders of the seeable and sayable may resonate in the order of the sensible.
The originary fossil-image in History and Memory—the image that encodes lost memories—is that of a woman filling a canteen at a pump. It is Tajiri, reenacting her mother’s sole recollection—image from the internment camps. A tiny puncture of pleasure in the eternal vigilance the woman must hold in order to survive in the concentration camp, it will be the only image to remain years later, when that other narrative of deprivation has been put away. The space that is beyond discourse in History and Memory is also one that the colonizing images from the American newsreels could not touch: a private sense memory, held in safe keeping.

As I have noted, Shauna Beharry is a ritual/performance artist. Seeing Is Believing (1991) was her first work in a mechanically reproduced medium. The tape expresses Beharry’s frustration over her inability to express in this medium, for, paradoxically, she is using video to show the limits of vision. It begins with Beharry’s camera searching a still photograph over and over. The photograph is of Beharry, wearing the sari. Her voice on the sound track is describing the anger and bafflement she felt when, after her mother died, she could not recognize her in photographs. Only when she put on her mother’s sari, Beharry says, did she feel that she had “climbed into her skin.” The feel of the fabric awakens for Beharry a flood of memories that were lost in the family’s movement from India to Europe to Canada. Seeing Is Believing calls upon the sort of knowledge that can only be had in the physical presence of an object—or from the indexical witness of cinema. Touch is a sense whose knowledge requires the physical presence of the object: Beharry makes this clear in her attempt to “squeeze the touchability out of the photo” (Beharry 1996). To touch something one’s mother, one’s grandparents, or an unknown person touched is to be in physical contact with them.

Similarly, in Mona Hatoum’s Measures of Distance (1988), it is the skin of her mother, as well as the indexical trace of her voice on tape, that gradually activate the sense of her mother’s presence as well as the painful finality of her absence. This is a tape Hatoum made in Vancouver about her mother in Lebanon. Photographs taken while her mother bathed, and tapes of their familiar conversations, punctuated with laughter, are overlaid by her mother’s letters to her far-away daughter. The letters establish the distance of the title, their Arabic words making a scrim over the images, and their increas-ingly mournful content, read in voice-over, has a muffling quality that seems to want to fill in the gap by appealing to the memory of touch. All three of these videos call upon tactile memory to create a communication between daughters and mothers that words, and audiovisual images, could not. All three use sense memory to restore the history that has become fossilized in an object. Ultimately they defetishize the object, by teasing out the story it contains.

Similarly, consider how smell is an indexical witness. Failing direct neural stimulation (olfactory hallucination), we smell because molecules from the source of smell have reached the membranes
within our noses. Smell requires contact, molecules coming into touch with receptors. A source of smell gradually diminishes over time as its particles disperse. To smell something, then, is to participate in its gradual destruction. But it is also to share the experience of the thing with others who smelled it before. Smell is the quintessentially fetishistic and defetishizing sense: it depends upon the presence of the object, but it also destroys it.

Beharry is quite aware that the power of touch, smell, and taste lies in their transitoriness. She makes this a theme of her performance “Ashes to Flowers: The Breathing,” whose title alone suggests a reverse movement of fetishism, where a live thing is reconstituted from dead traces. Participants smell incense and the food she prepares; at the end of the performance they walk on raw rice strewn in patterns on the floor, perceiving the image with the sense of touch at the same time that they destroy it. But to transfer this sense of the fleetingness of the senses to a recording medium, in both its intensity and its evanescence, requires that the fetishlike quality of the audiovisual image be acknowledged. Film and video (like any medium of mechanical reproduction) tend to fix and generalize their objects; but film is also capable of the same volatility that characterizes the fetish. Film/video is able to reactivate the presence of the fetishized object, as the (audio)visual image yields to the things it cannot represent; and in the process, as I will explain, the image ceases to exist as a fetish.

Sense Knowledge and Cultural Translation

When objects are extracted from their cultural contexts, it is often their nonvisual qualities that are the first to be forgotten. The cultural history encoded in nonvisual sense memory gets lost in any kind of intercultural movement, but especially in the diasporic movement to the modernized West, or from rural areas to metropolitan centers. This is an effect not only of Western ocularcentrism but also of commodification. Curators of visual art note that the recoding of a useful object as a high-art commodity tends to strip away its nonvisual aspects. As Laura Trippi writes, “Conventions of fine art display, taking objects out of context, stimulate a tendency to experience vision as if it operated objectively, independently of the other senses and even outside the contingencies of history” (1993).11 Similarly, Constance Classen (1993) notes that museums’ practice of storing artifacts behind glass recontextualizes these objects as primarily visual, and thus often misinterprets the sort of knowledge they provided in their traditional cultures. She uses the example of a basket from the Desana tribe of Colombia, a culture, she demonstrates, that has a complex organization of knowledge based on symbolisms of color, odor, temperature, and flavor. “Though a Desana basket, for instance, is evidently a multi-sensory object, it would never occur to the ordinary Westener viewing one in a museum that meaning might lie not only in its form and function, but also in its texture, taste, and smell” (136).

Fetishism as an intercultural relation involves a tremendous amount of translation, decipherment, and excavation. And ultimately there is no possibility of getting to a truth about either culture, for the fetish is produced only in the movement between cultures. Beharry’s excavations, for example, are not just about finding the Indian “voice” silenced by generations of life in the West. They are also excavations of many histories that get lost in cultural translation, histories that are repressed at home as well. In Seeing Is Believing, in the reading of the meanings fossilized in her own skin, she reveals a mixed legacy that includes a Chinese grandfather, undoing the myth of racial purity that matters both in cross-cultural “explanation” and in intracultural lineages. In the performance “Ashes to Flowers,” Beharry combines humble folk rituals with Brahmin ceremony, making a carnival of Hinduism in a way that may be quite offensive to some people. When she makes chappatis with rose water and kneads rose petals into them, she is not only mixing peasant food with ritual offerings, but also allowing folk rituals and women’s work to erupt into high Brahmin traditions.

Performed at (the appropriately named) Gallery Burning in Montreal, “Ashes to Flowers” addresses the difficulty of holding on to an ever-heavier object inscribed with indecipherable meaning, and undertaking the burden of translation. The earnest attempt at translation of Seeing Is Believing gave way, in the performance, to a dismissal of the very possibility of translation. In the early part of the performance, Beharry attempted to recite a poem she had written in Urdu. Like a child trying to remember a lesson, she stamped and tossed her head with frustration, her eyes wet with relief when she did manage to resolve a phrase. But she did not translate the poem
to the group of friends gathered in the gallery, none of whom understood Urdu. It was only for us non-Urdu speakers to experience the painful difficulty of excavation. (When Beharry performs this ritual for audiences of Indian descent, the reaction is no doubt quite different—sorrow, perhaps, at the cultural atrophy evident in her effort.) Such a renunciation suggests an acceptance of untranslatability as part of the postcolonial experience.

Beharry’s working process itself is antifetishistic, built on a suspicion of the reification that happens when an artwork enters discourse. (Whereas fetishes, as I have argued, are live things that can telescope back out to processes and relationships, reification reduces processes and relationships to things.) One must obtain permission from Beharry to write about her work. She does not circulate images of her performances or stills from her videos, but issues a single photograph, of her cupped hands holding a lily of the valley. Though she operates in the context of the Canadian art community, she has taken pains to work differently from most career artists. This course has been possible in part because of the still fairly generous Canadian art funding system, which enabled Beharry to pursue her practice in residencies and the like without being pressured to deliver salable products. She refuses to document her performances, preferring instead that information about her work be spread in the conversations of the people who have witnessed it. The statement she gives whenever required to represent herself in print is “My work is small, simple, and travels by word of mouth. I trust in it.”

Beharry’s projects typically erase their own process but leave traces of the changes that have occurred, often by substituting olfactory or tactile traces for visual evidence. They may include burying objects, burning objects (including, to this critic’s consternation, videotapes), scattering a pattern carefully traced on the floor, and otherwise ensuring that the record of the event remains only in the memory of those who witness it or hear about it. She is a curator’s nightmare. When Beharry was asked to create an installation at the Vancouver Museum of Anthropology around its collection of First Nations artifacts, she proposed to surround the objects in their glass cases with chappatis cut into the shapes of hands (Beharry 1996). The museum curators were horrified because the bread would have attracted insects; but as Beharry points out, the little

bugs are already in the walls and carpet of the museum, and her chappatis would only have made them visible! In this way Beharry’s work carries out Classen’s and Trippi’s critiques of museum practice by enabling the smell and gustatory processes that go unseen and disavowed in an ocularcentric culture—if only by appealing to the sense of smell of weevils and other insects. Beharry’s work, in short, is resolutely material in that it resists representation, and yet resolutely immaterial in that she erases its traces as soon as possible.

And interestingly, the way these traces linger the longest is in the form of smell. Paper and flowers burnt at one of Beharry’s performance spaces leave their acrid fragrance for days after. Sites where she has worked retain the scent of incense that she buried in the walls, detectable even under a fresh coat of paint. Friends receive in the mail poems scented with rose oil, or envelopes full of ashes that burst onto their shirts.

The artist’s grief in Seeing Is Believing is heightened by resentment of the Western cultural emphasis on visuality. The photographs of her mother seem to rob Beharry of actual memories of her. As such, the loss she is trying to address not only concerns the intimacy between mother and daughter but also has to do with a kind of knowledge. Memory, she suggests, can be lost in translation, espe-
cially in the difference between cultures’ regimes of sense knowledge. Beharry’s use of video to critique photography is a pointed reference to the way visual records steal memories, precisely in their reified concreteness. Photography has a specific cultural history, which includes its ethnographic use as one of the technologies of imperial domination. Nevertheless, the Western snapshot has achieved ascendancy in most cultures, including the top echelons of “third-world” cultures, as the way of coding private representation. As Beharry has stressed, visuality is also the dominant mode of knowledge in Brahmin ritual, or the practices of the upper caste within Hinduism. It is no problem, or not such a great problem, to put a Brahmin ritual on tape, say. The rituals that get lost in the act of immigration and cultural translation are the non-Brahmin, the peasant rituals.12

Beharry’s performances and videos excavate a form of knowledge that patriarchal cultures tend to dismiss, namely, the sensuous knowledge that pertains to Indian (diasporan) women’s daily lives. These are not experiences that would be immediately accessible to any woman. It is not possible to assert a feminine kinship with Beharry, or with the women whose lives are implicit in her work, on the basis of identifying with some universal female experience. Her source of memory, the feel and smell of a sari on her skin, is quite specific to a particular group of women. However, though we the viewers may not be privy to the particular information Beharry learns from putting on her mother’s sari. Seeing Is Believing does give us license to value other intimate, sensory experiences as sources of knowledge. Her mother’s skin touched the sari, and now the sari touches her: knowledge is transmitted tactiley rather than visually. To be able to value this kind of knowledge it is necessary to think of the skin as something that can distinguish, know, and remember. What Beharry gives us in Seeing Is Believing is not an introduction to Indian women’s sense of touch, but an awareness of the importance of the knowledge of the senses in whatever our culture of origin might be. As we begin to seek our own sense knowledges, we can evaluate how our own cultures assimilate or filter out the knowledge of the senses. In chapter 4 I will explore further how the sensorium is organized by culture.

“Sensual abandon” is a phrase of Enlightenment subjectivity, implying that the senses (except maybe vision, and possibly hearing) dull the powers of the intellect. It implies that the Orientalist desire for the sense experience of other cultures is in part a desire to stop thinking, as though sensory knowledge is radically opposed to intellectual knowledge. But when, in “Ashes to Flowers,” Beharry lights incense, washes our hands with rose water, and encourages us to dance, she is not encouraging us to “abandon” ourselves to our bodies but to respect our bodies’ capacities for knowledge. This is a knowledge that requires just as much effort to acquire as intellectual knowledge. The “Oriental” trip she gives us is not an opportunity to breathe in the smells and let it all hang out—an interpretation she circumvents when shortly into the performance she changes from romantic shalwar kameez into a frumpy slip and housedress—but a time to do a particular sort of work where bodies and minds work together. This appeal to olfactory, tactile, and other nonvisual bodily knowledges makes many participants uncomfortable, since these knowledges are little valued or cultivated in modern Western contexts, even in the art world.13 Even if we respect them, we may not know how to make sense of them. In short, stirring up the hierarchy of the senses is not a chance to play dumb: in fact it’s quite exhausting.

The Aura of the Transnational Object

Pietz’s archaeology of the fetish is essential to a critique of the hierarchical organization of the senses. Enlightenment thinkers (and many before them) separated knowledge from the body, reinforcing the hierarchy of the senses whereby vision is valued as furthest from the body and closes to the intellect, while smell and taste are considered the most bodily and least intellectual of the senses. (More on this hierarchy in chapter 4.) I propose we turn those thinkers “on their heads” and attempt to practice fetishistic thinking.

The fetish, by partaking physically of the thing it represents, threatens the idea that only the distance senses lend themselves to knowledge. Fetishism is a form of belief based in and dependent upon the body. As such it is denounced in the majority of world philosophies and religions. But thinking fetishistically allows us to take embodied knowledge seriously. In addition, to be dependent upon an object affirms not only the materiality of one’s body but also the incompleteness of one’s self: it suggests that meaning inheres in the communication between self, objects, and others rather
than in a communication mediated by the mind alone. The nontranscendence of African fetishism, as construed by Enlightenment-era Europeans, represents a strategic way of reconceiving material relations among people. Because they make the individual dependent upon bodily contact for spiritual power, fetishes, like other auratic objects, threaten the autonomy of the subject. Hence the Dutch explorer De Brosses denounced fetishism for draining the humanity from the worshipper (according to Mitchell 1986, 191): in fetishism, “humanity” or subjectivity was a function of the exchange among the worshippers and their objects. Fetishes are fellow-travelers. They are fundamentally like Balázs’s “dumb objects . . . whose fate is bound up with your own” ([1923] 1972) to which the close-up bears witness. Fetishistic subjectivity does not inhere in individual souls but rather is distributed among bodies, objects, and places.

Throughout this chapter I have been referring to objects that travel as auratic. Through their travels and through being owned and used, objects become unique. The transnational object is precisely auratic in that it testifies to “the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced” (Benjamin 1968c, 221). In the religious practices from which the word aura was borrowed, it meant the presence of the sacred. In this way an auratic object is a fetish. It holds within it the presence of the sacred, concentrated in the object through some initial contact or use. As I have noted, the auratic character of things is their ability not simply to awaken memories in an individual, but to contain a social history in fragmentary form. The bottles of oil in Woman from the Lake of Scented Souls, the carnations of Love, Women and Flowers, the sweet potatoes in Great Girl, Walid Ra’ad’s precious family objects, Rea Tajiri’s heirloom brooch in History and Memory, and the fabric whose surface Shauna Beharry searches in Seeing Is Believing are all auratic in that they have made physical contact with histories—histories too volatile and disruptive to be related as simple stories. The works I have described explore this auratic presence by following the objects back to their source of power.

Yet aura is not merely a human presence that narrative uncoils from the object like a ball of string. Objects also have a life independent of the human relations they encode, beyond their discursive and narrative significance. Their materiality itself is significant. As Peter Pels provocatively suggests,

Things may, indeed, be enlivened by their forms, uses and trajectories without recourse to materiality, through memory, written representation, or other forms of symbolic action, but that is another realization of the social life of things that is mediated entirely by materiality itself, whose forms, uses, and trajectories are apprehended, like habitual practice, “without recourse to discourse” . . . or representation. (1995, 9; quoting Pierre Bourdieu)

Meaning resides in objects, as habit stores memory in the body.

How can we account for the way meaning is mediated materially? Most current Marxist criticism has deteriorated into a dry positivism on one hand, and a Baudrillardian dazzlement at the world of self-replicating signs on the other. This, I would argue, results from Marx’s own campaign to demystify the commodity. Paradoxically, in making legible the social relations encoded in an object, one tends to lose the materiality of the object. The continuing appeal of Benjamin’s work is partly due to his provocative effort to both de- and re-mystify the object, to incorporate its inexpressible and intangible properties at the same time that he read it politically. Very controversially, Benjamin fused Cabalist and Marxist understandings of how meaning is immanent in the things of the world—immanent but veiled according to the Cabalists, immanent but reified according to the Marxists (Buck-Morss 1989, 235–40). Benjamin was roundly criticized by Adorno, Brecht, and later critics such as Rolf Tiedemann and Jürgen Habermas for these attempts to fuse mysticism with Marxism (245–49). Most of these ideas remained unpublished, or expressed only in hints in Benjamin’s published essays (Hansen 1987, Buck-Morss 1989).

But since the time Benjamin was taken to task, intellectuals’ faith in our ability to read the world wholly in terms of signs has waned. Perhaps now it is possible to contemplate how objects mean in themselves—to contemplate their aura—without being accused of obsfuscation. If this is mysticism, it is an attempt to account for an enchantment of the world different from the opiate aura of the commodity. It is an attempt to understand how meaning is conveyed through physical presence as well as through intellectual signification. The films and videos I have been examining demonstrate that
many recollection-objects are irreducibly material and irreducibly aural. To understand how objects mean in their materiality requires that we undertake a tactile epistemology, to which I will return in the next chapter.

The Dissolution of the Fetish

Earlier I remarked that when a recollection-object, like other kinds of recollection-image, successfully engages with memory, it engages with communal storytelling and its “radioactive” quality is neutralized. The way a fetish object accomplishes this, while it is not sexual per se, has to do with how the fetish is libidinally (autoerotically?) located upon the body. The dissolution of the fetish is accomplished by its reembodiment. When sense memory is revived in the body—when the body remembers—the recollection-object ceases to exist as such.

Borrowing from Michel Leiris’s beautiful essay on Giacometti, Pietz ponders the relation of fetishes—and successful works of art—to the body:

The fetish is . . . first of all, something intensely personal, whose truth is experienced as a substantial movement from “inside” the self (the self as totalized through an impassioned body, a “body without organs”) into the self-limited morphology of a material object situated in space “outside.” Works of art are true fetishes only if they are material objects at least as intensely personal as the water of tears. (1985, 11–12)

Pietz suggests that the movement from the inside to the outside—the process of concretization—is what makes a fetish a fetish. Tears are an example: they are a material expression of an internal state. The thing about tears, though, is that they do not remain a concrete object; they dissolve back into the body. Pietz provocatively refers in passing to the “body without organs” as the body that produces fetishes, or art. Only a body that is not libidinally fixated in terms of particular parts can invest with desire something outside. I picture the Deleuze-Guattarian “body without organs” (1983) as something like a water balloon. You can willfully twist shapes onto its surface, play with them until they lose their fascination, and then undo them and make others. This sort of libidinal investment, the schizoanalysts argue, is the only one that is built around desire rather than need. The appeal of this model is that, voluntaristic though it certainly is, it allows for the strange and contingent ways subjects form attachments. The body without organs produces fetishes galore, but it does not fixate upon any one of them; they dissolve back into its undifferentiated surface. Similarly, the fetishes produced in the movement between cultures are only transitory markers of a brief relation that will probably change. (Hence the perverseness of collecting “third-world” artifacts as though they are markers of a static condition, as the collectors in In and Out of Africa and Imagining Indians do: such fetishism harks back to an impossible moment before colonial and postcolonial relations of cultural mixing and transformation.) The body without organs is playful toward the object of desire, having a “double consciousness of absorbed credulity and degraded or distanced incredulity” (Pietz 1985, 14) that permits both investment and critique.

The fetish that is produced in the movement between cultures is a concrete expression of the state of longing produced when what was inside moves to the outside, when what was taken for granted of one’s culture becomes an object of contemplation. Like the fetish produced by an “impassioned body,” these only exist as fetishes for as long as they contain a cultural meaning that cannot exist comfortably in the new cultural context.

Let me return to Winnicott’s ([1951] 1958) theory of the transitional object to explore how the fetish is produced on the body without organs. Is the transitional object—the comforting blanket, the TV that hurls the child to sleep, for that matter, the smell of a familiar food—part of the body or not? Certainly it is part of the body without organs, the body that makes itself anew by organizing itself with relation to an external object. The subject’s identity comes to be distributed between the self and the object. Yet it is the self, not the object, that is in transition. The object remains the same, although it takes on layers of meaning that later, as the subject acquires some new sort of subjecthood, dissolve away.

Recall how fetishes are produced in the space between cultures. The transnational object is a transitional object not only for the person in transition from one cultural reality to another, but also for the one whose cultural reality is entered and changed. The object becomes a means of both of their projections about the other culture. As it moves, it is bound to become a lot heavier before it gets
lighter. Here is the difference between fetishes and fossils, then. Fossils retain the shape of the cultural upheaval, perpetually inviting decoding of past conflicts. Their “radioactive” quality may diminish as connections are made to the historical stratum in which they were created, but they do not go away. Fetishes, although they are similarly dense with meaning, tend to dissolve away after the need for them has dissipated.

The function of transitional objects is decidedly not to aid assimilation to another culture. For they do not simply bring an aspect of their place of origin to a new site; they also make strange the place into which they arrive. These cultural fossils are radioactive because they bring back lost histories in which both origin and destination are implicated. They reveal the radical hybridity already present at both sites.

Cinematic images, as transitional objects, retain some indexical trace of an originary event. They do not transparently reflect it, but obscure it. These images are transitional objects insofar as they are dense, sedimented, crystallized. They become unnecessary once they are dissolved. The works discussed in this chapter bring the fetishistic, auratic character of the traveling object to its apex—and then they dissolve its power, by connecting it to memory, changing fossil-images to recollection-images.

I hope to have demonstrated a combination of cinematic qualities and practices that both materializes and dissolves the fetishlike and fossil-like quality of the image. The emphasis on the nonvisual qualities of the image in History and Memory, Seeing Is Believing, and other works turns our attention away from the kind of fetishism most commonly (and pejoratively) discussed in cinema, visual fetishism. At the same time it calls attention to other material presences borne forth by the image, such as touch and smell: a process of sensory replacement that I will explore in the following two chapters. The “life cycle” of the fetish is also supported by Beharry’s refusal to let her moving images circulate, often to the point of destruction. Her practices both acknowledge the dense aura surrounding the image and aid in its dissolution.

Let me make some generalizations about the fetishistic quality of documentary. In its use as described by Pietz, the fetish seems to fix the value of those crisis moments when incommensurable histories meet. But in bringing these histories together the fetish also renders each of them unstable. The works by Beharry, Tajiri, Ra’ad, and others are pointed examples of how documentary can exploit cinema’s volatile, fetishlike quality, but all documentary has the potential to act in this way. All documentary images are fetishes, insofar as they are indexes of the event documented. However, they do not transparently reflect it, but opaquely encode it. When documentary is accused, as it often is, of fetishizing the people and events it represents, this is because it maintains the fetish in a state of fixity. But the fetish object may be coaxed to unfold into memory, as when these artists search a photograph, a scar, or a piece of tar paper for the history it encodes. As the fetishistic relations these objects embody are worked through, they cease to be fetishes. Another example is Shauna Beharry’s chappati hands.

In “Ashes to Flowers,” Beharry makes chappatis, cuts them out in the shape of hands, two right two left, smears them with the red paste used to mark a bindi on the forehead, and places them on an altar made of rice and vaguely in the shape of a woman’s body. What is shocking about these actions is the significance of the red hands. I had known that brides’ hands are decorated with henna in Hindu weddings. But I only learned later that, in the traditional practice of suttee, the last thing the widow does before she steps onto her husband’s pyre is to dip her hands in henna, red like blood, and make the mark of her two red hands on a stone. So the two sets of red hands Beharry made are not only about the tactile lineage of learning, from her mother and her mother’s mothers, how to make chappatis. Nor do they refer simply to the cultural dislocations that made the simple recipe, with all its concomitant responsibilities, difficult for the third-generation daughter to learn (as she tells us, “My father said, if you make nice round chappatis you’ll get a husband”). They also pay homage to the generations of women in her history who have been forced to burn. For those who know about the red hands, this point in the performance is physically nauseating.

Beharry could not and did not want to embrace her Hindu heritage uncritically, for it is a heritage that includes the cruel subjugation of women. In her acts of excavation she cannot discover a lost history of women, for the women are gone for good. She can only cut through the geological layers and make inert histories volatile by
crashing them into each other. Beharry is not the product of any one discourse but carries a number of irreconcilable histories with her. Her chappati hands are not the fragrant bread of nostalgia; they are radioactive fossils that destabilize everything that comes into contact with them.

3

The memory of touch

If cinema does not give us the presence of the body and cannot give it to us, this is perhaps also because it sets itself a different objective: it spreads an “experimental night” or a white space over us; it works with “dancing seeds” and a “luminous dust”; it affects the visible with a fundamental disturbance, and the world with a suspension, which contradicts all natural perception. What it produces in this way is the genesis of an unknown body.

—Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 2: The Time-Image

In the previous chapter I wrote that Shauna Beharry’s Seeing Is Believing, a tape made in mourning for her mother, uses the audiovisual image to convey the tactile memory of her mother’s skin. Here let me describe how she achieves this. The tape is built around a single still image of the artist wearing her mother’s sari. While Beharry tells her story, the camera has been looking ever more closely (“focusing” is not the right word) at the fabric of the sari in a detail of the photo, following the folds of silk as they dissolve into grain and resolve again. Eventually the tape keys in a smaller, sharp-focus image of the portrait, superimposing it on the folds of the sari.

The difference between these two ways of seeing is startling. I realize that the tape has been using my vision as though it were a sense of touch; I have been brushing the (image of the) fabric with the skin of my eyes, rather than looking at it. Beharry says she wanted to “squeeze the touchability out of the photo” (1996), and she has: the difference between the senses collapses slightly.