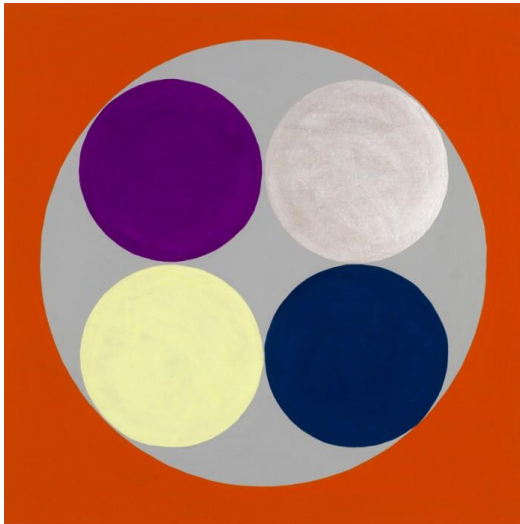


THE WHITE REVIEW

INTERVIEW WITH MAI-THU PERRET

INTERVIEWER:
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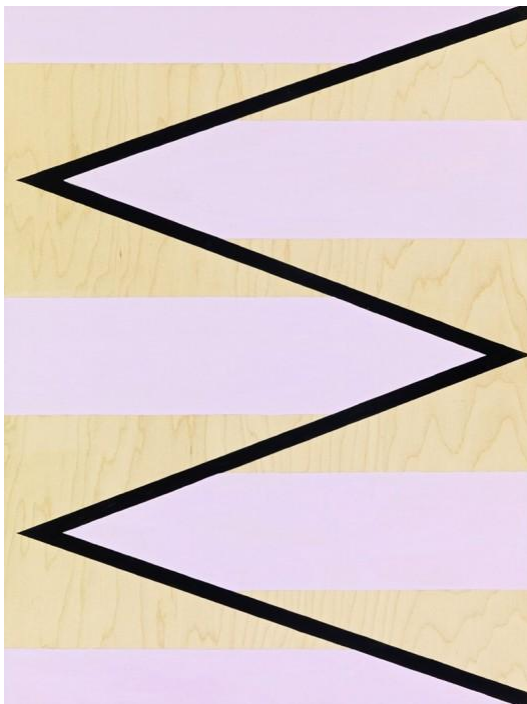
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Mai-Thu Perret, 'Untitled' (2010)

SWISS ARTIST MAI-THU PERRET'S ONGOING, FOURTEEN YEAR-OLD PROJECT *THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER* is a multi-disciplinary fiction chronicling the lives of a group of women who move to New Mexico to establish a feminist commune in the desert.

Mixing literary experimentalism with radical feminism and modernist aesthetics, *THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER*'s protagonists record their existence in this imagined enclave – which they have named New Ponderosa Year Zero – through such diverse documentation as diary entries, song lyrics and letters, artisanal objects such as pottery and textiles, paper collages and paintings on basic, perhaps found, materials. These documents, typified by their reference to the legacies of revolutionary art movements including Dada, Bauhaus and Constructivism, are collected together in Perret's exhibitions.



Mai-Thu Perret, 'Untitled' (2009)

For the 2007 Lyon Biennial, for instance, Perret presented *AN EVENING OF THE BOOK* (2007), in which three silent films present a fictional restaging of Vitali Zhemchuzhnyi's 1924 play of the same name. The films were exhibited in a room decorated with patterned wallpaper drawing on the work of the Constructivist artist Varvara Stepanova, and the roles acted out by, we must assume, the inhabitants of New Ponderosa Year Zero. For the text work 'Letter Home (After A.R.)' (2006), Perret reproduced an entire letter, with only minor alterations and the names removed, from Stepanova's husband, Alexander Rodchenko, in which he rails against the decadence of Paris in the Twenties. In a 2010 exhibition at Galerie Francesca Pia, Perret showed text works such as this alongside small abstract paintings in a Constructivist style.

Highlighting the awkward relationship between revolutionary politics and avant-garde art production, Perret's hypothetical community of like-minded radicals provides a conceptual framework for the artist to interrogate the way that we consume art and literature, and a means of exploring the notion and achievability of utopia in the twenty-first century.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Could you tell us about the background to your work and place it in context within the all-encompassing project you call *THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER*?

A MAI-THU PERRET — It's all about the idea of an autonomous community of women opting out of contemporary capitalist society and re-settling in the New Mexico desert, aiming to create a different world – their own world. They want this project to foster fairer, healthier and more egalitarian human relationships and production methods. This initiative or ideological agenda underpins everything they do and produce. They work on utilitarian objects, both from self-interest and in order to survive. To begin with their output – furniture, everyday items, clothing or architecture, which they needed to survive in the desert – paid attention to design. In one exhibition, I presented a rabbit-hutch composed of interlocking triangular boxes ('Pyramid of Love', 2003) to evoke the agricultural side of their work. There are also direct references to feminine art such as embroidery. There was even a project for musical theatricals but that never got beyond the drawing-board. The project has gradually taken on an increasingly broad range of artistic forms.



Mai-Thu Perret, 'Untitled' (2009). Courtesy of the artist and Timothy Taylor Gallery

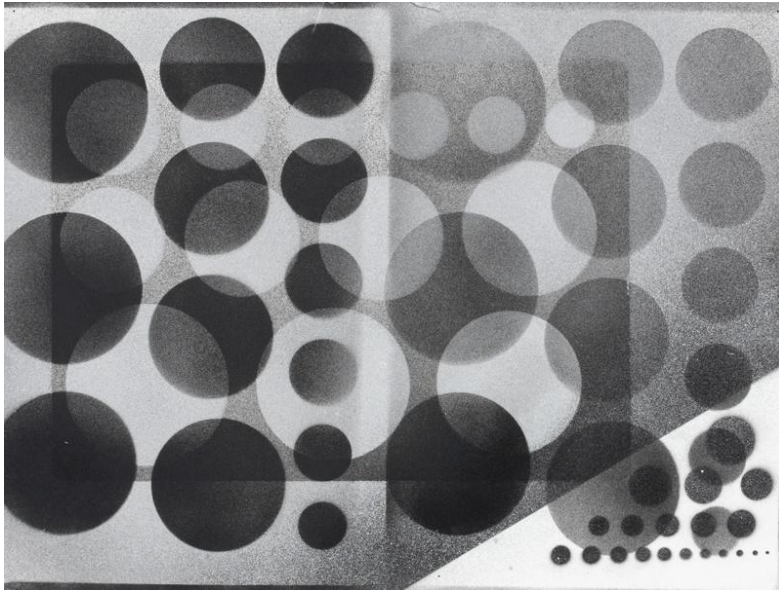
Q THE WHITE REVIEW — You say these women cut themselves off from the world and decided to exclude men. Do all utopias have to be exclusionary, in that one criterion of a utopia is the inevitable exclusion of a certain type of object or individual? The Platonic utopia, for instance, excludes poets and artists from the ideal city.

A MAI-THU PERRET — One would hope not. But in this specific case, it involves a separate exclusion conceived within a world which does not exclude anyone or anything. Or at least by not excluding anyone or anything, it excludes something else. I think the world we live in is based on systems of power and exclusion whereas the idea of this female community is to succeed in creating an egalitarian living-space. To me, their reasons for excluding men from their community are not the same as Plato's for excluding artists from the city. They refer to this in some short texts (diary entries or snatches of doctrine). Several texts explain that their goal is not to get rid of men; they are rather striving to build their utopia in line with their egalitarian ideology so as to reintroduce men once their system has been established. So we're not talking about exclusion that's meant to be total or last forever.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Have any men entered the community?

A MAI-THU PERRET — That has yet to happen. In fact, the idea was to create the opposite of the usual state of things – male domination of women – to see what would happen if we reversed the equation. It means imagining a universal feminine, even if such a universal concept would by definition include men, because the masculine neuter also includes the feminine neuter as an intrinsic sub-category. In reality, this utopia is better described as a place of tension and problems rather than as an authentic utopia that works – a peaceful universe either without problems or which has managed to overcome them. With Plato, on the other hand, I think it was more do with appeasing the city, which is a far more sweeping process. Artists are not admitted to the city because they create problems through the emotions their art inspires.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Do any individuals in the community emerge as leaders?



Black Noise Drawings, 2007

A MAI-THU PERRET — No. In any case, my work is an ensemble, more like a symphony than a single voice. I have trouble conceiving objects in isolation. My work is not about psychology, be it individual or collective.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Is the difficulty of presenting oneself as a subject part of your work?

A MAI-THU PERRET — I don't think it's a work about the difficulty of taking oneself as the subject; it's not really a work that believes in the idea of a subject. That said, the complex nature of the subject is inevitably dealt with.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — In some ways *THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER* has a link to the O-ist religion founded by Jim Shaw, in that it has a matriarchal government. What aspects of *THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER* could be said to approach, or depart from, this religion?

A MAI-THU PERRET — I haven't looked closely at Jim Shaw's work for a long time but I believe his work and mine have some things in common. To me, his work is a model of narrative construction. We share many common sources of inspiration, definitely.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — What he produces is less textual, though.

A MAI-THU PERRET — Yes, less textual and more surrealist. It's a commentary on California and the importance of cults. Sects and dissident schools of thought seem to proliferate in the west of the United States. It's no coincidence that I chose New Mexico as the setting for *THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER*. I believe it's been the perfect place for life projects or alternative projects since the early twentieth century, if not before. It's somewhere that cries out for them. The desert is a false *tabula rasa*.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Yet a perfect podium.

A MAI-THU PERRET — A podium maybe, but a false *tabula rasa* because these areas used to be inhabited by Native Americans who were hunted down and exterminated. In the end, there are no empty spaces in the true sense of the word and that's the problem with utopias.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Nor is the desert a non-space.

A MAI-THU PERRET — No, it can serve as model, just as islands have for some writers. In Thomas More's *UTOPIA* or Georges Perec's *W, OR THE MEMORY OF CHILDHOOD*, the island is an imaginary Great Beyond. Deserts and islands are places outside the world and separate from it. There is an element of refusal about their isolation; these ideas of utopia are based on the rejection of certain things or a certain world.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Does anything about these women recall the Amazons?

A MAI-THU PERRET — Yes, that's a valid image. I believe the idea is above all a play on clichés about femininity in our collective Western subconscious and that brings Amazons into it.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — 'It's better to start with a cliché than to end with one,' as Godard put it. Alongside this fiction, you create objects which you then show as things the community might have produced. Yet their relationship with the texts remains ambiguous. Do the texts engender the creation of these works or is it the other way round? Do the works operate as accessories that are part of the narrative? Are they ritual objects?

A MAI-THU PERRET — That's basically the whole problem. What I like about narrative is that it makes it more difficult to appreciate objects as simple works. Everything that we think we accept about the idea of a work of art is called into question, precisely as regards this fiction. Are they just props designed to support or highlight an object? There's something of a 'bodily addition' to this idea. But I've always left the creative process free; I've often thought about objects rather than texts. I sometimes allow myself to justify the existence of a text by means of an object afterwards – a bit like a preparatory sketch coming after the actual work. Then there are pieces that are clearly described in the texts but were never made. It's not because something appears in a text that it becomes a material object. It's important that objects function as principles of a display, like objects in space. I believe there's a ritual side to these objects.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Not to all of them, though.

A MAI-THU PERRET — No. Some are merely utilitarian. But the symbolic aspect remains important. Take the rabbit-hutch. It isn't functional in that its form (an assemblage of equilateral triangles) is not necessarily suited to breeding rabbits. This implies something symbolic, even if we don't really know what is being symbolized. It has symbolic potential, to put it in a nutshell.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Does the community differentiate between consumer objects and ritual objects?



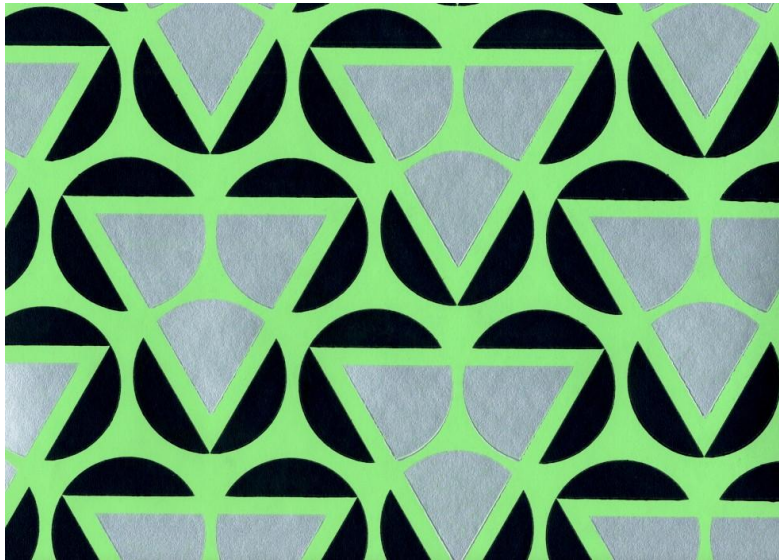
Mai-Thu Perret, 'Black Noise Drawings' (2007)

A MAI-THU PERRET — The community does not believe in consumer objects – in theory. It seeks to restore meaning to all objects as such. But this is debatable as there are disagreements within the group. Some members are more mystical or religious than others and think they should operate in a more Marxist sort of way, in a classical and rational sense. There are lots of different versions in the original conception of the objects here. But all are unanimous in their hostility to purely consumer objects. So there is a paradox as they sell the objects they make.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — So, even though the community does not believe in consumer objects, commerce exists and exchange is not based on barter.

A MAI-THU PERRET — Yes, they sell their products. The relationship is different within the group as they pool their material resources. But as they need money to survive, they sell their wares at markets outside the community – it's not an autarkic community with zero contact with the outside world.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Do you present what they make?



Mai-Thu Perret, 'Wallpaper' (2009)

A MAI-THU PERRET — Not always. For instance, my presentation at Art Basel in 2004 (Galerie Francesca Pia) was also a way of exploiting the context of the fair – a suitable response to a particular environment with clothes worn by mannequins that had been made and sold by the women, a shelf with white ceramics ('Ornament & Crime', 2004) – decorative objects which they sold themselves, a diptych of silkscreen posters ('Bake & Sale Theory', 2004) with an advertisement for the sale on one side and a diary entry written by a group-member on the other describing a person who cannot bear to sell what she produces as she likens this to prostitution. So there is criticism inherent in the display.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Why are the community's works presented in the context of exhibitions? Wouldn't you rather create individual pavilions and is this something you envisage?

A MAI-THU PERRET — It's a possibility, but I like exhibition spaces. My work is not limited to this *ex nihilo* community without any connection with the space where the work is displayed. To paraphrase Robert Smithson: a gallery is a Non-Site whereas the community's story is a Site that is somewhere else, imaginary, which we cite as a reference. The supposedly neutral space of a gallery or museum is interesting in this sense. It would be a totally different project if I abandoned that. If I used pavilions, I would not necessarily put the same objects in them. I think things are always made for where they'll be shown.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — If you had the technical and financial wherewithal, would you have liked to create this community in the New Mexico desert?

A MAI-THU PERRET — No, for me it's a story, a narrative; it's fiction. I can imagine doing plenty of things but not that.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — You say that 'for me, the whole idea in creating a fictitious background to the objects was first of all to create distance and abstract my own subjectivity from their interpretation.' Does that allow you a denial of creation?

A MAI-THU PERRET — Let's call it a shift rather than a denial, to speak in psycho-analytical terms: *it* is projected on to something else and *that* creates something. To come back to the objects' fictional reference, the work and its author are a utopian fantasy.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — In creating a utopian community, how do you deal with the naïve idealism it could arouse?

A MAI-THU PERRET — Being an artist is naïve to begin with!

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Both naïve and idealistic, in a way.

A MAI-THU PERRET — I don't know if we can talk about idealism in my case. I think it's more naïve not to imagine being naïve. An omniscient critical position is even more idealistic. So I adapt and accept the somewhat impossible side of it.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Would you be interested in abandoning that omniscience - that slightly authoritarian role in writing the community's story - and asking other artists or authors to come and add something to it, or at least to continue it, and let yourself be carried by these texts and create objects?

A MAI-THU PERRET — No, I would not like it to be a truly collective work. First, because I don't think the individual really exists. When someone speaks, we often find ourselves listening to several different people. So there is not necessarily any need to introduce other people in order to confront a multitude. Then, there are already quite a few areas of collaboration in my work and that's important. I invited some good friends (artists or not) to create 'sculptures of pure self-expression' for my project of the same name (*25 SCULPTURES OF PURE SELF-EXPRESSION*, 2003), following my precise guidelines and with a pre-defined system. Then, when I work with video or performance, I sometimes work in tandem with a choreographer or director of photography. It's a collaborative process, with ideas coming as much from others as from me.



Mai-Thu Perret, 'Untitled' (2009)

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Are your mannequins the ones used by the community for ritual purposes or are they dummies from shop windows?

A MAI-THU PERRET — I'd say a bit of both. The mannequin represents various things. The first one I did was actually a puppet, not a mannequin ('La Fée Idéologie', 2004). It was a life-size puppet in *papier mâché* with long strings tying it to the ceiling and a cross-piece like that of a traditional marionette. It was rather crudely made, with an abstract kind of face and a wig similar to how my own hair was cut at the time; it also wore some of my old clothes. I imagined it as something the women of the community had produced to remind themselves of what they used to be and what they had left behind: namely the state of alienation endured by women in the city. I thought it was funny to put her in my own clothes. That's an image I took from a book from 1971, *BE HERE NOW*, written by Timothy Leary's colleague Ram Dass. After they'd both been taking acid at Harvard, Leary went off to India to meet a guru and came back with plenty of things to communicate about - like spiritual liberation and universal love. The book is a kind of bible for spreading hippy beliefs, written (and drawn) entirely by hand. At times it's completely psychedelic, a bit like Jim Shaw's work. For instance, there's a lovely drawing of a family with pop, mom and little girl each handling a puppet which is the image of its handler and so on in a *mise-en-abyme* of puppet manipulation. It's a great image of modern alienation because it's an endless loop. So I borrowed this image to make my first puppet. For the mannequins at Art Basel, I used the same *papier mâché* technique. This technique was then perfected, ending up with mannequins holding neon hoops. They were more akin to statues, as they stood upright. They almost resembled furniture yet also evoked the human form.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — The first mannequin commemorates a vanished past. What about the others?

A MAI-THU PERRET — The meaning of the other mannequins was more open-ended. The ones at Art Basel were clearly clothes-hangers, arranged in a star and imbued with a certain symbolism but still statue-like. The origin of those with neons was not fully explained.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Why did you want the objects created by the women in *THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER* to look so assertively feminine?

A MAI-THU PERRET — I'm not altogether convinced by that definition. Maybe that's how you look at things. Sometimes I may adopt 'feminine' aesthetics, but why not? It's all a bit of a game. I also think it would be wrong to believe all women are interested in categories usually defined as feminine. It's very restrictive to view the work of any artist, male or female, in terms of gender.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — What was the influence of William S. Burroughs on your *THEADDING MACHINE* exhibition in Grenoble in 2012? The title refers to a collection of essays by Burroughs.]

A MAI-THU PERRET — The cut-up, collage, psychedelics and spiritual expansion.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Can you be more precise about the forms these cut-ups took? Are you talking about them in the context of the various exhibition halls that followed on from one another?

A MAI-THU PERRET — The basic idea was to present a set of works side-by-side, however arbitrary that might be. That was already a form of collage or cut-up.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — But isn't any exhibition a cut-up or collage?

A MAI-THU PERRET — Yes, of course. People often come up with different explanations, imagining they can tell a different story, one more coherent than it seems. There are other, less pragmatic narratives. Then there is collage within works, as with ceramics: they're systems for adding shapes, processes and objects. It's the same with films with overlapping narratives. Montage involves things arbitrarily inter-penetrating when they weren't meant to.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Do you think you excluded the overt sexuality in Burroughs' work?

A MAI-THU PERRET — Burroughs wrote a magnificent essay called 'Women: A Biological Mistake?'. I find his disdain for the female sex quite exciting, actually! That said, it's true that there doesn't appear to be the same impulsive, over-sexed, hyper-sexual side to my work. It's something less apparent in the exhibition.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Much of your work makes explicit reference to Constructivism. What does Constructivism have to say about our relationship with the world today?

A MAI-THU PERRET — Let's say that Constructivism advocated a different relationship with the world and sought a different relationship with objects. But I'm interested in Constructivism for all sorts of reasons. First of all historically, as regards the 'pure' Constructivists who abandoned art to make purely utilitarian objects or engage in propaganda and publicity. They were rooted in the revolution. That's a path and narrative which interests me. Our own era is somewhat baroque whereas the Constructivists were more classical. They felt many forms were useless. Their relationship with objects was based on necessity: the idea that making objects derives from a context or need. Constructivism was an innovative, idealistic narrative.

Mai-Thu Perret is the cover artist for *THE WHITE REVIEW* 7.
Timothée Chaillou is a Paris-based art critic and curator.