

THE PARKETT SERIES WITH CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS / DIE PARKETT-REIHE MIT GEGENWARTSKÜNSTLERN

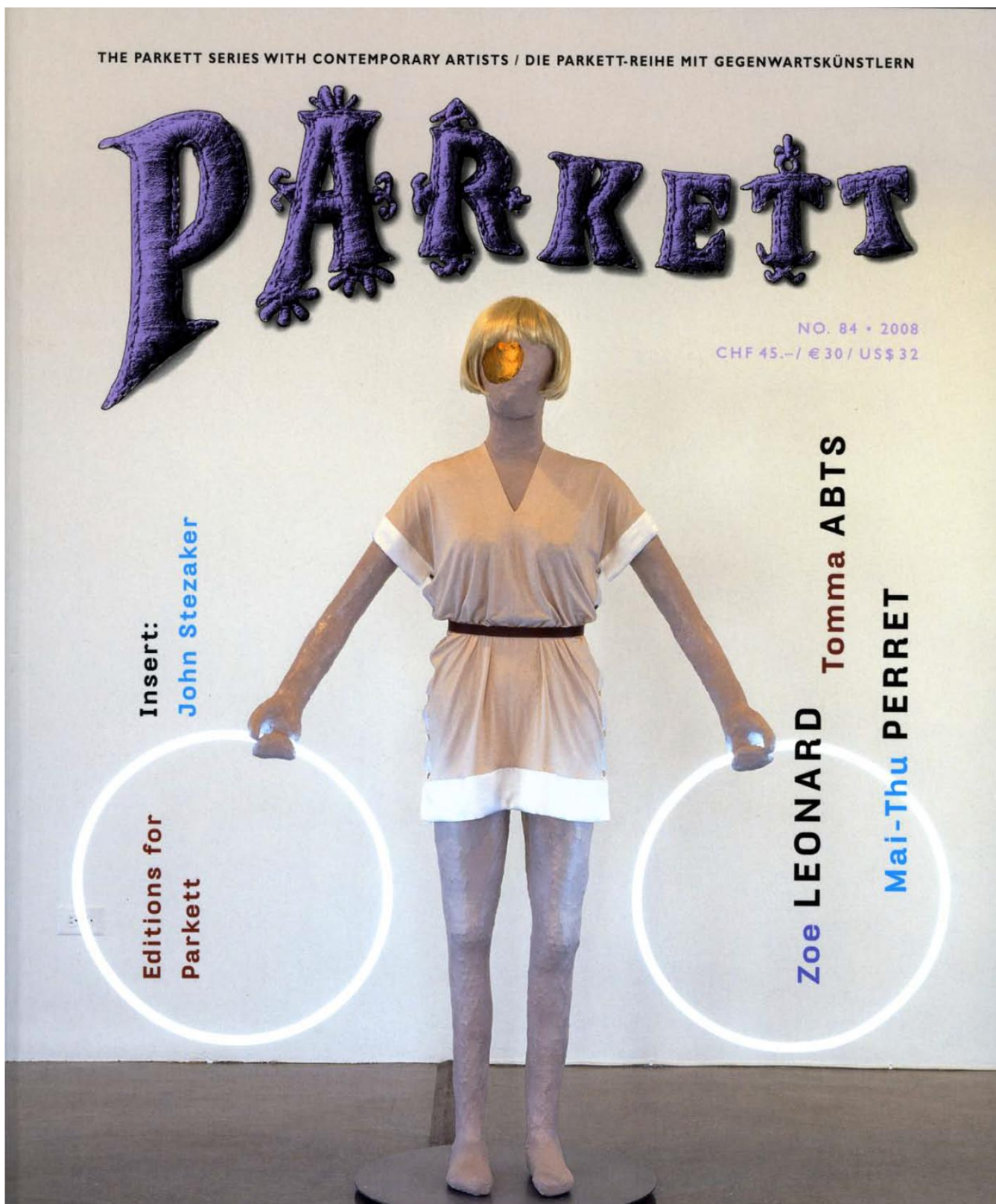
PARKETT

NO. 84 • 2008
CHF 45.- / € 30 / US\$ 32

Insert:
John Stezaker

Editions for
Parkett

Zoe LEONARD
Tomma ABTS
Mai-Thu PERRET



MAI-THU PERRET, *LITTLE PLANETARY HARMONY*, 2006, aluminum, wood, drywall, latex wall paint, fluorescent lighting fixture, paintings (acrylic gouache on plywood) inside, 140 x 253 x 143 3/4" / KLEINE PLANETARISCHE HARMONIE, Aluminium, Holz, Trockenmauer, Latex Wandfarbe, Neonröhren, Gemälde (Acryl-Gouache auf Sperrholz) innen, 356 x 643 x 365 cm.
(ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF MAI-THU PERRET)

Mai-Thu Perret





Mai-Thu Perret

Crystal FUTURES

MARIA GOUGH

There is a notorious passage in *Die deutsche Ideologie* (The German Ideology, 1845–46) where Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argue that due to the nature of the division of labor within capitalist relations of production “...man’s own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him. For as soon as the division of labor comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood.”¹⁾

To this sorry portrait of enslavement and deprivation, Marx and Engels contrast their shared vision of absolute freedom, a “communist society” premised on the abolition of the division of labor, in which “...nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd, or critic.”²⁾

This utopian prediction comes to mind whenever I think about the work of Mai-Thu Perret. For over a decade, Perret has been building a complex fiction called THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER (1998–ongoing), an engaging story of a small commune for women recently established in the New Mexico desert by an “activist,” one Beatrice Mandell. Far from presenting a conventional narrative, Perret delivers this fiction in the form of a miscellany of textual fragments penned by diverse authors in varying states of consciousness, including diary entries,

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MAI-THU PERRET, *WE*, 2007, mixed media, cotton fabric, 47 1/4 x 307 x 307" / *WIR*, verschiedene Materialien, Baumwollstoff, 120 x 780 x 780 cm.

verse, songs, plays, random jottings, manifestos, schedules, newsletter items, handbills, aesthetic tracts (on, for example, the Arts and Crafts Movement), and incomplete letters (including one based on one of Aleksandr Rodchenko's letters from Paris to his wife and fellow constructivist, Varvara Stepanova). The first traces of THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER surfaced in 2000 on the website of the Air de Paris gallery; its most complete redaction to date is to be found in the artist's ambitious new monograph, *Land of Crystal*, which appeared in English in January 2008.³⁾

By means of this compelling assemblage of fictional archival fragments, Perret harnesses an older utopian tradition of rural arcadia, premised on the rejection of the modern city and its hysterically accelerated rhythms, mechanization, and alienation, to a considerably younger but now equally august genre of feminist utopia. Refusing to cede the human will to production to the regulatory and repressive strictures of either capitalism or patriarchy,

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Perret recounts the dreams and difficulties of the commune's attempt at subsistence through animal husbandry (which also serves to lay bare the sheer romance of Mandell's choice of the desert as the locus for their experiment, as if no more fertile landscape could be found), its partial recourse to the market to make up the economic shortfall (the production of ceramic and other craft items for sale at local markets), and its evenings dedicated to group discussion. In this communist society, each woman farms, crafts, and criticizes, but none is a farmer, craftsperson, or critic *per se*. In a state of continual transformation, the fictional utopia of *THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER* serves, in turn, as the motor for nearly all Perret's work in sculpture, ceramics, wallpaper design, and, most recently, performance and moving image media. Again, Perret's experimentation in a variety of media—in none of which is she professionally trained—is exemplary of the utopian prediction made in *Die deutsche Ideologie*.

Notwithstanding its central position in the very title of the governing fiction of Perret's oeuvre, the figure of the crystal remains, however, an oddly elusive one. Perret's interest does not lie in the mystical tradition of crystal worship that courses through the correspondence of Bruno Taut and his associates in the Crystal Chain group in the aftermath of World War I, or that drives Taut's own extraordinary corpus of drawings, *Alpine Architektur: Eine Utopie* (1919), though Perret does indeed bury a couple of the latter in the multilayered sedimentation of photographic reproductions with which she "illustrates" Joris-Karl Huysmans' infamous novel, *À rebours* (Against the Grain, 1884) in her *Land of Crystal*. In a recent interview, Perret herself points instead to Robert Smithson's short and oft-cited text from the May 1966 issue of *Harper's Bazaar*, "The Crystal Land," the title of which she inverts in formulating that of her aforementioned monograph.⁴⁾ In a voice by turns droll and hallucinogenic, Smithson recounts in this text a rock-hunting trip he took near Patterson, New Jersey, in the company of the artists Donald Judd and Nancy Holt, and the dancer Julie Finch. (In this context one should probably note that "crystal" is a common nickname for methamphetamine, the recreational use of which began to take off in the 1960s, peaking in the 1990s.)

I confess to being a little skittish about titles that appear on bestseller lists. For much of the past decade it has seemed as though reference to Smithson has become *de rigueur* for



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MAI-THU PERRET, THE FAMILY, 2007, wood, wire, papier mâché, acrylic, lacquer, gouache, wigs, clothes by Susanne Zangerl and Catherine Zimmermann, MDF base / DIE FAMILIE, Holz, Draht, Papiermaché, Acryl, Lack, Gouache, Perücken, Kleider, MDF-Sockel. UNTITLED, 2007, block printed wallpaper, variable dimensions / OHNE TITEL, stempelgedruckte Tapete, Masse variabel.

cisely because we are also part of its cause: the recuperation of utopian thought and practice within the affirmative culture of capitalism. (Along these same lines, one wonders also about the overall voice or tone of THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER with respect to high-profile maneuvers in the western desert over the last decade such as, say, Andrea Zittel's A-Z ["Institute of Investigative Living, 1999–ongoing] based in Joshua Tree National Park, California; a definitive answer to this question seems difficult to come by.)

More interesting than any amount of citation and recycling of the great icons of the historical avant-gardes—which can all too easily turn into merely empty signs, as the artist her-

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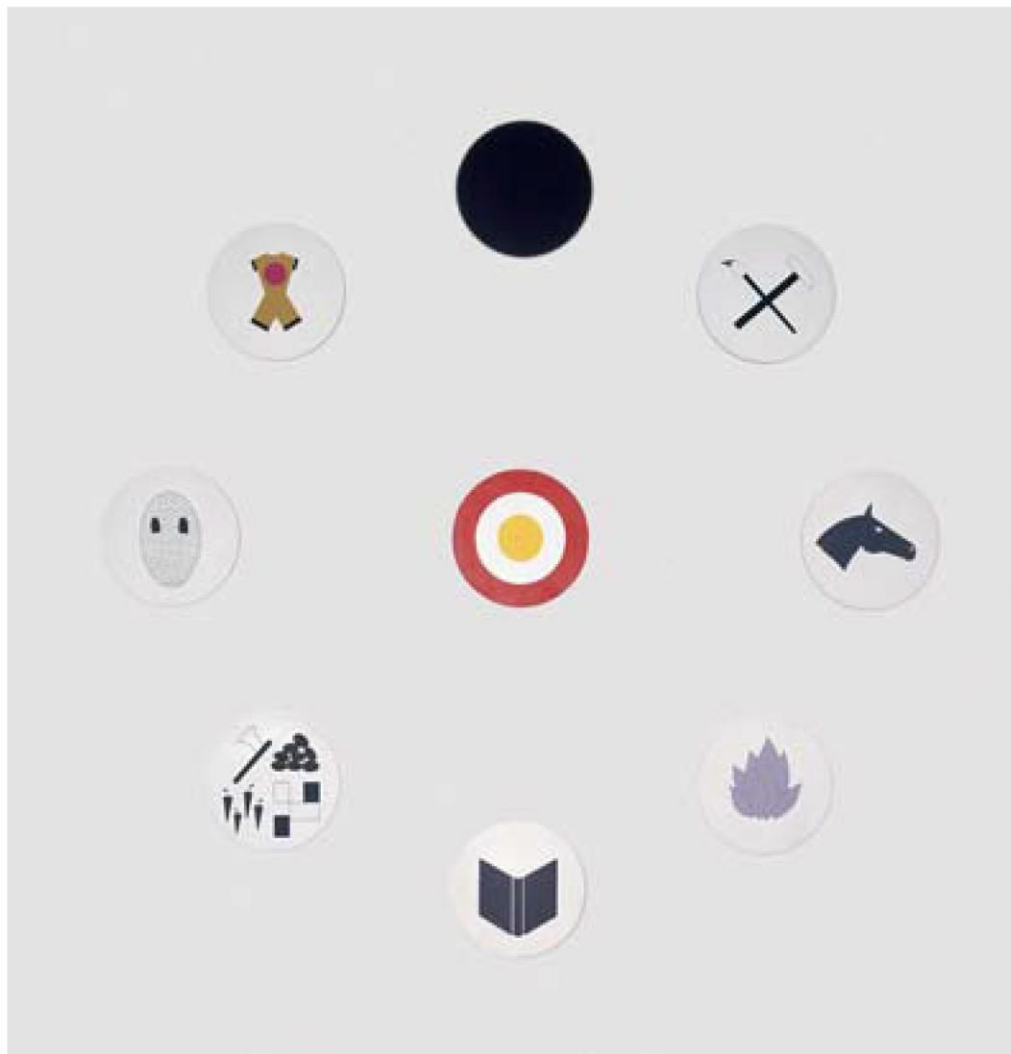
self is profoundly aware—is the way in which Perret's oeuvre, in its overall thrust, grapples with a number of problems apropos production that not only were utterly central to constructivist theory and practice but also continue to be of crucial relevance today. The first concerns the constructivists' struggle, following Marx, to abolish the division of labor, as V. Khrakovskii put it in 1921, "to make workers into artists who actively create their product, to turn the mechanistically working human, the working force, into creative workers."⁶) (That the constructivists were eventually defeated in this struggle was due not to some putatively inherent flaw in their utopian program, as is often suggested, but to the fact that they were no match for the much more powerful forces of economic rationalization within the Bolshevik leadership, which sought to raise the productivity of Soviet labor through the application of Taylorism, Fordism, and other principles of American technocracy.) A similar sentiment shapes the critique of the alienation of labor and the automation of production that lies at the heart of *THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER*, hence Perret's fabulous *PERPETUAL TIME CLOCK* (2004), which is proposed as a "clock for a society that has abolished the mechanical breakdown of time by the watch...[and] reminds the members of the group about the *essential activities* that make up their days, such as sleeping, making art, riding and caring for horses, meditation and yoga practice, reading and study, all the different types of agricultural work, the exploration of the unconscious, and various sports."⁷)

The alternative posited by both Constructivism and Perret to the alienation of labor and economic rationalization is not, however, a return to a full-blown validation of self-expression. Constructivists such as Rodchenko and Karl Ioganson, for example, struggled against arbitrariness, which led them to explore non-compositional principles in their laboratory work. Perret, for her part, is profoundly ambivalent about occupying any kind of authorial position, and manages her ambivalence by deflecting the author function onto her fictional

MAI-THU PERRET, *Land of Crystal*, double page / Doppelseite.



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MAI-THU PERRET, PERPETUAL TIME CLOCK, 2004, acrylic on wood,
94 1/2 x 94 1/2" / EWIGE UHR, Acryl auf Holz, 240 x 240 cm.

commune, irrespective of whether the object in question is produced by her own hand or by collaborators or by fabricators according to her instructions. 25 SCULPTURES OF PURE SELF EXPRESSION (2003) is a case in point.

Perret's substantial new monograph *Land of Crystal* demonstrates that, far from being a dead medium in a digital world, the artist's book is currently being rethought as a critical platform for the exhibition and dissemination of contemporary art. In addition to incorporating all of Perret's major projects to date, as well as a hefty run of plates, this most handsomely designed monograph also offers the reader a delicious conceit in the form of a sampler of Perret's latest wallpaper designs presented as an extended set of endpapers. *Land of Crystal* belongs to a new series of books edited and designed by Christoph Keller (of "Revolver—Archiv für aktuelle Kunst" fame) for JRP/Ringier in Zurich. The series is devoted

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to exploring what Keller calls the “bandwidth of artistic book making.”⁸⁾ This distinctive invocation, in the realm of book design, of a term signifying simultaneously the rate of data transfer in computing and the measure of the width of a range of frequencies in signal processing, suggests that, as Bertolt Brecht once famously asserted, technological advances most often provide critical opportunities for the radical reinvigoration rather than mere cancellation of older media. A famous case from the 1920s helps to shore up this contention.

In the July 1923 issue of Kurt Schwitters' Dadaist magazine *Merz*, El Lissitzky called for the transcendence of print media in favor of electronic delivery systems: “The printed sheet, the everlastingness of the book, must be transcended. THE ELECTRO-LIBRARY.”⁹⁾ Startling in its uncanny prescience for our own historical moment, it is equally worth noting, however, that Lissitzky made his demand in the context of promoting his latest book design for a new collection of verse by Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Dlia golosa* (For the Voice, 1923). In order to facilitate the reader's speedy location of a particular poem in this volume, Lissitzky eschewed a regular table of contents in favor of a thumb-index, a device he borrowed from the typology of the everyday address book. With each poem enjoying its own flip tab, *Dlia golosa* was the artist's most tactile contribution to date to the art of the book that would preoccupy him, along with exhibition design, for the rest of his life. Lissitzky's utopian longing for electronic delivery inspired not so much a call for the end of the printed book, therefore, as for the radical transformation of its planar habitat or environment—what he liked to call its topography. Analogously, I think of the *Land of Crystal* enacting a topographical transformation of the printed book for our digital age.

Though often ridiculed as merely the fanciful musings of youthful idealism—including by the authors themselves later in life—Marx and Engels' early utopian prediction resonates forcefully once again, against all odds, in the work of Mai-Thu Perret. Given that recent economic events have finally discredited the free-market fundamentalism in opposition to which the artist originally conceived THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER, one eagerly looks forward to its next installment, framed within the potentially—and hopefully—dramatically altered conditions of our future.

1) Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), p. 47.

2) Ibid.

3) Mai-Thu Perret, *Land of Crystal* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2008).

4) See “Paula van den Bosch and Giovanni Carmine in Conversation with Mai-Thu Perret” in Perret, *Land of Crystal*, p. 175. Perret's reference to Smithson follows from her reflection that “crystals are self-generating forms, incredibly complex forms generated from simple structures that repeat and mirror themselves. Their amazing variety is a source of endless fascination. Crystals promise an ecstasy of structure, a perfect order of the mineral.”

5) Robert Smithson, “The Crystal Land” (1966) in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), p. 19.

6) See V. Khrakovskii in “Transcript of the Discussion of Comrade Stepanova's Paper ‘On Constructivism,’ December 1921,” trans. James West in *Art Into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914–32* (Seattle: Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, 1990), p. 75.

7) See Perret, *Land of Crystal*, caption to plate no. 1 (original emphasis).

8) See http://www.curatingdegreezero.org/c_keller/c_keller.html

9) El Lissitzky, “Topographie der Typographie,” *Merz*, no. 4 (July 1923): 47; trans. (slightly modified) in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980), p. 359.

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MAI-THU PERRET, *BAKE AND SALE THEORY*, 2004,
silkscreen, 33 ¹/₈ x 23 ³/₈" each /
BACKEN UND VERKAUFSTHEORIE,
Siebdruck, je 84,1 x 59,4 cm.



MEDIUM – MESSAGE

JULIEN FRONSACQ

Some time ago, Mai-Thu Perret and I had a conversation about French and English literature during which she made a distinction between the realism of Gustave Flaubert and that of Henry James. Flaubert, she thought, deconstructed the psychology of his characters “from the outside,” while James incorporated his own voice with that of his characters. Perret was clearly leaning towards a literature in which the author’s subjectivity is tied to the inner workings of the imagination.¹⁾ Viewers are often taken aback by the stylistic eclecticism of Perret’s work. If, as Fabrice Stroun aptly summarized, “Perret’s monographic exhibitions look more like group exhibitions at first sight,” it is on account of her particular definition of the author and her subjectivity.²⁾ What counts as a typical form of expressionism in literature appears within the context of the visual arts as a paradoxical dialectic in which there is a perception that artis-

tic production has been cut loose from a specific author—as if it could only become autonomous through syncretic personifications. In a way, so many of Perret’s works appear to be a product of a different persona. In this sense, her ambitious artistic project, in part, revolves around the structure of the novel.

And, indeed, since 1998 she has written a series of texts (poems, autobiographies, and diaries), all of which she has grouped together in a single ongoing framework that she calls THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER. This publication attests to her continued interest in the literary. Some of the texts in THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER are presented as autonomous pieces on single framed sheets hung in exhibitions, where they function as counterpoints—as an off voice—to the other works in the same room: “Bake and sale economics: clothing propaganda arts and crafts higher awareness autocritique and things. Monday thru Sunday / 256 Queens Road / All proceedings to support / New Ponderosa Year Zero.”³⁾ Other texts, exhibited or not,

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are written in the voices of various women who are part of Perret's collective living project in the desert:

*She says she has come here precisely to break with what she was before. She wants to destroy everything she used to be before. She obsesses over fake relations, fake exchanges, the kind of barter that she says cost you nothing but actually eat your soul away...*⁴⁾

The work of German author W. G. Sebald (another writer dear to the artist) revolves around a similar entangling of reality and the imagination. In *The Emigrants* (1997) places from the past and the present (e.g. New York and Frankfurt, Norwich and Bern) contaminate each other and become one mental landscape over the course of a narrative that involves memories, encounters, reminiscences, ancestors, immigrants, escapes, paternity quests, and family secrets. Similarly, THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER's plot unfolds through different chronological periods and specific political contexts. Yet this collection of texts paints a cohesive universe based on certain recurring motifs: the desert, female communities, and emancipation. As expressed by one of Sebald's characters, showing how selective memory can be, "the entire world is one's domain." This is how an American character in *The Emigrants* attempts to remember the conditions of his immigration:

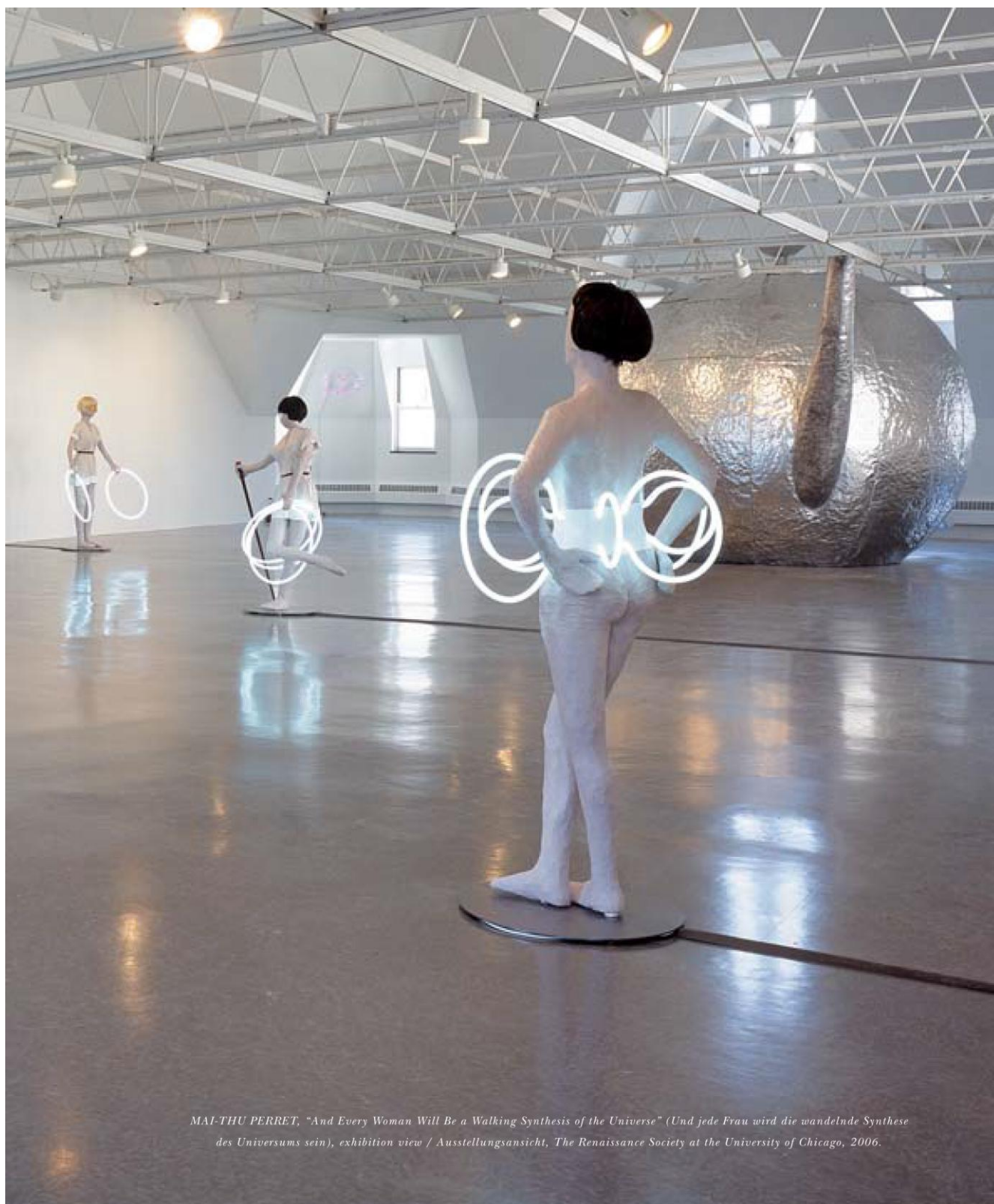
*It was no wonder that I finally decided to follow my sisters to America. Of the Rail journey across Germany I remember nothing ... But I do still see the offices of Norddeutscher Lloyd in Bremerhaven quite clearly in front of me ... Above the door ... was a circular clock with Roman numerals, and over the clock, in ornate lettering, was the motto Mein Feld ist die Welt. [The entire world in one's domain.]*⁵⁾

In THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER, narrators multiply and become stratified, parallel instantaneous voices, whose stories reverberate with one another and with the visual works. In her 2002 show at Glassbox in Paris, "We Close Your Eyes In Order To See," a timetable of daily activities was written on the wall of the entrance way—from "Morning ablutions at the well" to "Group discussion"⁶⁾—underlining varying degrees of functionality. In this context, the text might either be taken as a literal work or point to something radically absent. Nevertheless the text-work as a whole offers a dialogue as well as a sort

of mute confrontation. The feeling that a Perret show looks like a group show is thus related to her aesthetic of eclecticism, which is comprised of the sum of pre-existing formal principles. Yet, this eclecticism, in fact, reveals itself to be the product of an approach involving correspondence, resonance, and contamination.

One could say then that Perret is adopting the rhetorical stance of a "crisis of originality," which leads her to proceed from the principle of conversion. In her system of references, conversion can be envisioned in multiple ways. It is, firstly, the historical process at the heart of any event, from revolution to reification. Her first exhibition at Galerie Barbara Weiss in Berlin in 2006, for example, was titled "Apocalypse Ballet." This show included models whose poses evoked Hollywood's aquatic choreographies as well as Vsevolod Meyerhold's "Biomechanics," Russian avant-garde theater, and the gymnastics of the 1910s and 20s, whether of the emancipatory (Monte Verità style) or of the hygienic kind often associated with the Nazis. Since exhibitions enter into dialogue with one another, and works create links between several particular histories, it is significant that the announcement card for "Bikini," Perret's second exhibition at Barbara Weiss in the summer of 2008, consisted of a peculiar photograph depicting a woman wearing a bikini designed by Louis Réard, using press clippings about the atomic bomb tests over the island in the Pacific, Bikini Atoll. "Atomizing" the classic one-piece bathing suit, the new design became a veritable "bomb" creating an explosion in the fashion world. Jacques Heim, a competitor of Réard's, had already launched his own model of the two-piece suit called *Atome* in honor of its considerably reduced dimensions. Aside from such semantic games presiding over its birth, the bikini is a complex cultural object in that it juxtaposes the emancipation of the female body with newly industrialized means of mass destruction. This show also brought together a series of spray-painted resin sculptures that looked like ceramic "pastries," which were inspired by a photograph of a cake in the shape of a mushroom cloud. Like Réard's bikini, Perret's sculptures convert a sign or a symbol (e.g. the mushroom cloud) into an object.





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MAI-THU PERRET, BIKINI (WHITE CAKE), 2008, acrylic plaster, lacquer, pedestal made of steel and wood, height 23 3/4", diameter 25 3/4" / BIKINI (WEISSER KUCHEN), Acryl-Gips, Lack, Fuss aus Stahl und Holz, Höhe 60 cm, Durchmesser 65 cm.



MAI-THU PERRET, BIKINI (RED CAKE), 2008, acrylic plaster, lacquer, pedestal made of steel and wood, height 23 3/4", diameter 25 3/4" / BIKINI (ROTER KUCHEN), Acryl-Gips, Lack, Fuss aus Stahl und Holz, Höhe 60 cm, Durchmesser 65 cm.



Six months earlier, Perret's first New York solo show at The Kitchen included a film transferred to video, entitled *AN EVENING OF THE BOOK* (2007), in which female dancers performed movements in group formation along with simple acts, like cutting through a black banner, manipulating white fluorescent tubes, opening a book, or playing with hula hoops. The film itself takes its inspiration from Varvara Stepanova's set designs for an agit-prop play of the same title. Viewing the piece in the gallery's three-projection installation, one can't help but think of modernism's most emblematic objects (the monochrome, the neon tube) or of Yvonne Rainer's everyday gestures, like walking or sitting, that play down the pathos of dance. Similar to Perret's technique of endowing functional objects with strongly ritualistic dimen-

sions (a tea set, clothes, a knife), the film allowed her to explore the tenuous boundary between ordinary, everyday acts and ritual. The installation conceived to accompany the film included a constructivist wall-paper whose patterned motif—covered with silver paint where the film was projected—had a "ghostly effect,"⁷⁾ conjuring the shapes of Stepanova. In the film, a woman sitting on a chair cuts a piece of fabric and hangs it on the wall. The banner with its round, cut-out holes (negative emblems, both literally and figuratively) recalls some of Steven Parrino's shaped canvases with their violent gestures against painting, which he considered moribund.⁸⁾ After the conclusion of the projection, the lights came on and *THE SPIDER SONG* (2004)—a spectral recording realized with Parrino—could be heard throughout the exhi-

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bition space. If there can be said to be a kinship between the two artists, it is inasmuch as Perret's project takes Parrino's necrophiliac relationship with modernism and relocates it to a more mediumistic or spiritualistic genre.⁹⁾ Perret's work could be seen as a compilation of rituals used to summon the voices of history and turn them into corporeal spirits with whom to dance. Like the texts of *THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER* and their multiple fictitious authors, her art leans towards a magical polyphony used to reactivate forms, stories, and contexts, making them speak in the present.

The show also included a series of human-sized sculptures that had previously appeared as props in the film. Placed upright on the floor and on large shelves, the works looked like giant commas or enormous quotation marks, playfully punctuating the space and/or closing a quote. Being the same size as the dancers, these "props" were like parts of the book that had come to life. It certainly didn't escape Perret that the word "prop"—often associated with the work of Guy de Cointet or Mike Kelley—has a deliciously polysemic meaning: a prop is at once a physi-

cal or emotional support and a theater accessory. Might this suggest that in *The Kitchen* exhibition, Perret was seeking to bring physical action to the threshold of a psychological state?

But let us return to Perret's mediumistic aesthetic; revived in the middle of the nineteenth century, Spiritism is a ritual of communication between the living and the dead, enacted by a medium in a trance, who delivers a message rapidly and without any premeditation.¹⁰⁾ Take for example the artist Hilma af Klint (1862–1944). After losing her younger sister, the seventeen-year-old took part in spiritualist séances, which led to the creation of her own occult circle, "The Five" (women). In 1905–06, having embarked on the then fashionable pursuit of theosophy, she received a message from a spirit describing her mission, that of an artist-medium. Regardless of the degree of automatic creation it entailed, the work of the Spiritist was purely a vector for contacting spirits and translating their messages. Though exhibited as art today, it was initially conceived as a tool—even af Klint's later works (in particular the *Atom Series* from 1917) intersect with various realms of knowledge and are simultaneously schematic and experimental, like discursive figures.

Perret's work at *The Kitchen* was characterized by the same schematic quality. The dance diagrams she had created on the wall and the Rorschach blot painted on the carpet alluded to Warhol, but with a multilayered complexity. The Kitchen is well-known for being dedicated to experimentation in the realm of music and performance. That context combined with the diagrams for the film projection brought to mind their original function: to chart dance steps. In addition, as the titles indicate (*POLY-SANGKORI I*, *SINJANGKORI III*, and *TAEGAMKORI IV* [all 2008]), the steps charted here are taken from Korean shamanistic dances performed exclusively by women. Pop elegance and archaic ritual do the do-si-do! Just like schemas, Rorschach inkblots are transitive images, psychological tests aimed at observing the mechanism of projection in a patient. Painted, as it was here, on a carpet lying on the floor and combined with the seated mannequin of a woman wearing paint-smeared overalls, the Rorschach blot recalls Yves Klein's *Anthropométries*, (c. 1960). The



*Postcard of the first bikini by Louis Réard /
Postkarte des ersten Bikini von Louis Réard.*



MAI-THU PERRET, "An Evening of the Book and Other Stories"

(*Ein Abend des Buches und andere Geschichten*), exhibition view / Ausstellungsansicht, The Kitchen, New York, 2008.

overalls on view were the ones worn by Perret herself at The Kitchen where she made the painting, a few months after Fia Backström had worn the same overalls during her performance for the film *An Evening of the Book* (2007). One performance inhabits the other, and the body gives way to a phantom (a plastic mannequin, a painting, an image).

In her work as a whole, as she indexes and brings into play the conversion of forms, Perret explores the ambivalence between object and action, the gap between a transitive instrument (either revolutionary or ritualistic) and the object reified by a socio-cultural, institutional, or market-based system. Her work, as she conceives of it, is a dispassionate assessment of forms and the hypothetical permanence of their messages.

(Translation: Anthony Allen)

1) As this text was being written, we resumed our conversation. Perret has changed her mind about Flaubert's "contempt" for his often "limited" characters.

2) Fabrice Stroun, "What Art Looks Like, circa 1997– Tomorrow, as Seen Through the Eyes of Someone Else" in *Mai-Thu Perret: Land of Crystal*, ed. Christoph Keller (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2008), p. 49.

3) Hand-bill and printed poster in *Land of Crystal*, p. 138.

4) *Ibid.*, p. 136.

5) W. G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York, New Directions, 1997), pp. 81–82.

6) *Land of Crystal*, p. 122.

7) In the artist's words. *Ibid.*, p. 169.

8) See, for example, Steven Parrino, STOCKADE (EXISTENTIAL TRAP FOR SPEED FREAKS), 1988–91, or UNTITLED, c. 1988, in *Steven Parrino* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2007), pp. 23, 35.

9) Here, I would like to thank Fabrice Stroun, who has been kind enough to engage in numerous conversations by telephone and through each other's texts.

10) See the exhibition and catalog *L'art spirite: Collection de l'art brut (Lausanne)*, ed. Antoinette Pitteloud (Lausanne: École-Musée/Image, 2005).

*Mai-Thu Perret*JOHN MILLER

FOR A SET OF ABANDONED FUTURES

For several years, Mai-Thu Perret has framed many of her activities as an artist within a true life story: *THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER*. Not surprisingly, such an old-fashioned description telegraphs that the story itself is a fiction—and this is the case, at least superficially. While it may be a work in its own right, *THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER* is not even a story per se, nor even a full-fledged text. Consisting of diary fragments ostensibly written by members of an autonomous women's community formed in the desert of New Mexico, this narrative functions more as a context or a pretext for objects that Perret offers as artifacts from that collective. Founded in Year Zero, the New Ponderosa Commune, like the Jacobins of the French First Republic, initiates its own calendar. (Could the old Ponderosa

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be none other than the all-male ranch—Adam, Hoss, and Little Joe Cartwright plus their cook, Hop Sing—featured in the classic TV series, “Bonanza”?) This revolutionary nomenclature reflects her fictional activist Beatrice Mandell's goal to build a non-patriarchal society from the ground up. As expressed in *THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER*:

The decision to make [the commune] all-female did not stem from their personal hatred of men, but from Mandell's conviction that a truly non-patriarchal social organization had to be built from the ground up, starting with a core group of women who would have to learn how to be perfectly self-sufficient before being able to include men in the community. Mandell's theories were a mixture of classic feminist beliefs about the oppression of women, and what could best be described as her psychedelic-pastoral tendencies.¹⁾

Within Perret's oeuvre, the New Ponderosa persists as an epistemological horizon: no beginning nor

clockwise / im Uhrzeigersinn:

MAI-THU PERRET, *LITTLE PLANETARY HARMONY*

(detail inside the teapot), 2006, acrylic gouache

on plywood, 9 7/8" x 7 7/8" /

KLEINE PLANETARISCHE HARMONIE

(Detail in der Teekanne), Acryl-Gouache auf Sperrholz, 25 x 20 cm.

UNTITLED, 2006, *acrylic gouache on plywood, 17 3/4 x 13 3/4" /*

OHNE TITEL, *Acryl-Gouache auf Sperrholz, 45 x 35 cm.*

UNTITLED, 2005, *acrylic gouache on plywood, 9 3/4 x 7 1/2" /*

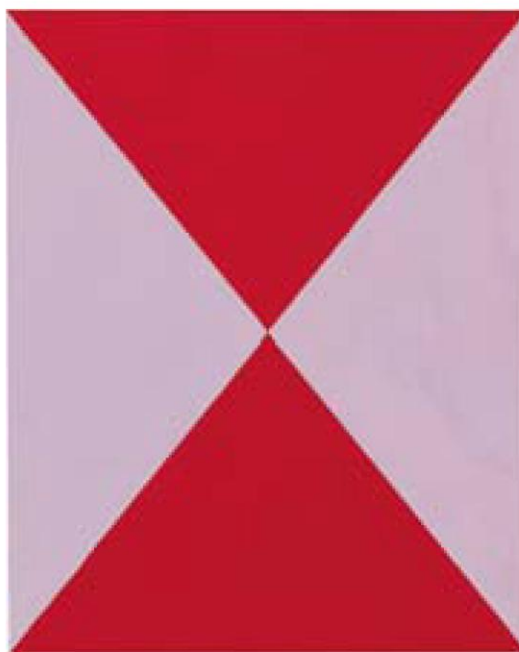
OHNE TITEL, *Acryl-Gouache auf Sperrholz, 24,7 x 19,7 cm.*

LITTLE PLANETARY HARMONY *(detail inside the teapot), 2006,*

acrylic gouache on plywood, 17 3/4 x 13 3/4" /

KLEINE PLANETARISCHE HARMONIE *(Detail in der Teekanne),*

Acryl-Gouache auf Sperrholz, 45 x 35 cm.



Mai-Thu Perret

MAI-THU PERRET, *BIKINI (MINT AND SILVER BRICKS)*, 2008, *appliqué on cotton*, 57 ³/₄ x 77 ¹/₂" /
BIKINI (PFEFFERMINZ-GRÜN UND SILBER ZIEGELSTEINE), *Applikation auf Baumwolle*, 147 x 197 cm.

end, a zero-degree referent. She leaves it up to her readers and viewers to extrapolate from the seemingly arbitrary narrative shards that offer the only proof of its existence. Curiously, although the commune projects into the future, we look back at these like relics from a lost civilization. Hypothetically, every artifact Perret produces under this rubric would have a textual counterpart—and vice versa. Thus, nothing is ever either wholly present or absent.²⁾ Of course, this arrangement, by hinting at ideology's imaginary aspect, is a subtle refutation of empiricism. Three key terms structure this evidence: feminism, handicraft, and utopia.

The New Ponderosa's stated goal is total autonomy: to begin anew, to survive outside patriarchal norms, and to forget those strictures entirely. In this, it reflects some of the feminist movement's originary impulses. For example, by raising horses and cattle and by selling handicraft products, Mandell and her followers strive for an uncompromised purity—in the desert no less, that most pure, empty, and spiritual of all places. Conversely, the city, big business, and industrialization all manifest patriarchal ills and unfreedom. In this, Perret lays out a highly roman-

ticized dichotomy, whose moral absolutism is much akin to that which inflected the liberation movements of the 1960s and 70s. Feminism, black power, and gay rights all began as separatist constituencies that contested not only the mainstream, but also the mainstream's power to define their constituents as "others." This separatist phase represented both radical self-definition and visionary utopianism. It paved the way for the more sober, integrationist phase that followed about twenty years later. Integration, or reintegration, is characterized—in the U.S. especially—by middle-class equality, namely the freedom to practice any profession for which you qualify, to marry whomever you want, to live in any neighborhood you can afford. As crucial as these freedoms indeed are, they nonetheless help reproduce a bland middle-class consensus indexed to regular cycles of production and consumption. Clearly, the New Ponderosa establishes itself outside the concerns of any real-politik. Here, freedom must be an absolute. The commune is post-pubescent and pre-menopausal: young, sexualized, yet abstinent. (None of the women whom Perret refers to as "girls" have children.) Time is suspended here. Other artists, such as

Mai-Thu Perret

MAI-THU PERRET, UNTITLED (PACIFIER), 2006, *appliqué on cotton fabric*, 57 1/8 x 58 1/4" /
OHNE TITEL (FRIEDENSSTIFTER), *Applikation auf Baumwolle*, 145 x 148 cm.

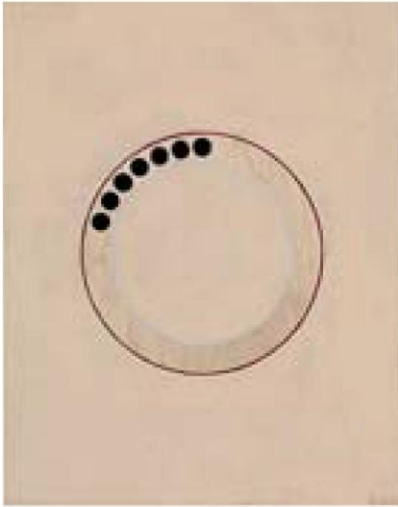
Justine Kurland and Marnie Weber, have conjured up the same demographic as an aesthetic trope, but none have so explicitly exposed its links between fantasy, freedom, and ideology. The girls (the commune members) approach the work of the commune in both a provisional and dilettantish fashion. If all else fails, they can fall back on Beatrice Mandell's trust fund. In contrast, one cannot help but wonder how so many women the world over routinely and anonymously carry out the brunt of agricultural work without the benefit of calling it a "project," or even the impulse to do so. By inviting such comparisons, Perret seems to suggest the tenuousness of ideological formulations. Nonetheless, she holds out for unbridled utopianism, where even the most fantastic imaginings of Charles Fourier, for example, might engender a revolutionary teleology.

For Beatrice Mandell, handicraft holds out the promise of political and economic autonomy. By working with their hands and a few modest tools, the commune's women can command their own means of production. They can eliminate machines and, by extension, their dependence on the patriarchy. Of course, what crafts may mean in a broader social arena is far less clear cut. Dissident sociologist Thorstein Veblen, for one, castigated the Arts and Crafts Movement as an outdated and deliberately wasteful means of facture that serves an exclusively invidious social function. Of course, this is also how Veblen construed all aestheticism. At the very least, in the wake of the technical perfection that industrial manufacture makes so readily available, craft becomes convoluted: a fetish. According to the logic of high modernism, craft is also the opposite of fine art. In mass culture, craft typically devolves into hobbies, namely the escapist pursuit of producing only nominally useful things, a pretext for busy work. In his well-known work, *MORE LOVE HOURS THAN CAN EVER BE REPAID* (1987), Mike Kelley interrogated this debasement of craft. In turn, Jim Shaw's magnum opus, *THE DONNER PARTY* (2003), allegorically reconfigured the collectivized craft of Judy Chicago's *THE DINNER PARTY* (1974–1979) via cannibalism as the



horrible price of survival. More recently, Michael Smith and Joshua White proposed a fictive artist colony, Quinquag, that first relied on reproducing JFK-style rockers to sustain itself and then tried to reinvent itself as a wellness center.³⁾ Perret's work, too, is a meta-commentary on craft as a rebus of social values. For her, however, the failure of craft does not mean that the values it aspires to are necessarily bankrupt. Rather, such failure, as unrealized aspirations, still counts as real historical material that awaits posthumous redemption: the principle of play as the basis for work. This attitude is further inflected by Perret's never having studied studio art. One might argue that, lacking the technical training to make things the "right" way, she must always resort to handicraft. Conversely, one might also argue that the articulation of theoretical discourse counts as the most important skill learned in art school, one that reduces traditional artistic techniques to mere craft. The latter, of course, would privilege Perret's conceptual position as a producer and legitimate her indifference to the properly made artwork. To complicate matters further: Clement Greenberg saw the modernist artwork's claim to autonomy as a bulwark

Mai-Thu Perret



MAI-THU PERRET, *UNTITLED (CIRCLE ON PARMA)*, 2006,
appliqué on cotton fabric, 57 1/8 x 58 1/4" / OHNE TITEL
(KREIS AUF PARMA), *Applikation auf Baumwolle, 145 x 148 cm.*



MAI-THU PERRET, *UNTITLED*, 2007,
acrylic gouache on plywood, 9 3/4 x 7 1/2" /
OHNE TITEL, Acryl-Gouache auf Sperrholz, 24,7 x 19,7 cm.

against the culture industry's ongoing instrumentalization. Embedded in Greenberg's formulation is a social model—one echoed by the New Ponderosa.

Initially, what utopia might or might not mean seems obvious: a better life than one available under current social conditions. Utopia is seldom presumed to be the product of cautious planning and compromise. Rather, it is the clearing away of anything that inhibits freedom, even though it presents itself as the opposite of coercion. Yet, freedom for one does not necessarily yield freedom for all. As Walter Benjamin argued: every cultural artifact is also a record of barbarism.⁴⁾ By situating her provisional utopia in the southwestern United States, Perret engages a specific history. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries especially, America's expanding frontier held out the promise of religious and economic freedom for waves of European immigrants. They conceptualized this frontier landscape as a blank slate, despite the very real presence of indigenous American civilizations. With no intended irony, the new settlers referred to this frontier as God's Country. Here, on the American frontier, Charles Fourier's ideas took root as well, inspiring, among others, the socialist commune *La Réunion* near what would become Dallas, Texas.

Although yoga and psychedelics are the closest the New Ponderosa ever comes to religion, Beatrice Mandell's project parallels that of the Shakers, particularly as Dan Graham portrays them as precursors to punks in his 1982–84 video *Rock My Religion*. Formed in 1747 in Manchester, England, the Shakers renounced the brutal industrialization of England and fled to the United States to form communities based on sexual abstinence and ecstatic religious experience. Among other things, the Shakers went on to produce architecture and furniture distinguished by a functional simplicity and elegance that anticipates modernist design. The Shaker practice of sexual abstinence, however, means that the sect cannot perpetuate itself, outside of the conversion of others to the faith. This would render it a kind of historical anomaly; as of 2006, the sect had dwindled to just four members.

Some passages in *THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER* seem to cast doubt not only on the universality of utopia—but also on its very recognizability. An essay appearing in the New Ponderosa's newsletter, titled "Diotima Schwarz on Drama Trance or the Shakers and the Punks," asks, "Does the trance allow you to escape the mechanization of your body and your mind by capitalist society or is it actually just another form of

mechanical compulsion?"⁵⁾ In a letter to a would-be initiate, "Marina" ruefully writes, "Although you made every polite effort to keep a restrained and gentle composure, I saw very well that you were startled by what you witnessed here. You probably thought that the decorations were bizarre, the furniture uncomfortable, and our attitude incomprehensible."⁶⁾ Here, Perret seems to relish the entire enterprise's highly mannered aspect.

Among other things, Charles Fourier can be credited with the idea of the parallel universe as well as originating the word *féminisme*.⁷⁾ Indeed, he posited an alternate universe at the juncture of every decision anyone makes. This kind of universalism implies that nothing is ever repressed and that nothing is ever lost. Indeed, everything is always recovered. In

her book, *Mirror Travels: Robert Smithson and History*, Jennifer L. Roberts argues that Smithson embraced a similarly synchronic and all-inclusive model of time via the logic of crystal growth, which is a process of ongoing accretion. In "The Crystal Land," he describes the suburban terrain of New Jersey as follows: "The highways crisscross through the towns and become man-made geological networks of concrete. In fact, the entire landscape has a mineral presence. From the shiny chrome diners to glass windows of shopping centers, a sense of the crystalline prevails."⁸⁾

Of course, if utopia were to fail to distinguish itself from what is already everyday life, the ultimate disillusionment would be mind-numbing. Is the alternative, then, science fiction?

MAI-THU PERRET, *HEROINE OF THE PEOPLE*
(*BIG GOLDEN ROCK*), 2005, wire, papier-mâché, acrylic paint,
gold leaf, 42 1/8 x 29 1/2 x 29 1/2" /
HELDIN DES VOLKES (GROSSER GOLDFELS), Draht,
Papiermaché, Acryl, Blattgold, 107 x 75 x 75 cm.



1) Mai-Thu Perret, "The Crystal Frontier," *Mai-Thu Perret: Land of Crystal* (Zurich: Christoph Keller Editions, JRP Ringier, 2008), p. 109.

2) This form of presentation is partly indebted to Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973–1979): the dialectic between object and text, the reconstruction of a narrative from artifacts, and the pretense of an empirical approach wedded to a critique of the same. In this regard, the difference between Kelly's position and Perret's is nominally that of fact versus fiction.

3) In 1955, to ease his chronic back pain John F. Kennedy's physician, Dr. Janet Travell, recommended he use a rocking chair as a mild form of exercise. Kennedy purchased an inexpensive, oak, Appalachian rocker and became so attached to it that he bought copies of the chair for Camp David, Hyannis Port, and Palm Beach. Later, this led to a popular fascination with "authentic" Kennedy rockers. See <http://www.orwelltoday.com/jfkhealth.shtml>.

4) In his last essay, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin wrote: "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain." See Walter Benjamin, "Thesis on the Philosophy of History" in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin, Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 243–264; 256–257.

5) See note 1, p. 144.

6) Ibid, p. 147.

7) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Fourier

8) Robert Smithson, "The Crystal Land" (1966) in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, (ed.) Jack Flam (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p. 8. Originally published: *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, Nancy Holt, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1979).