

Desert of the Real

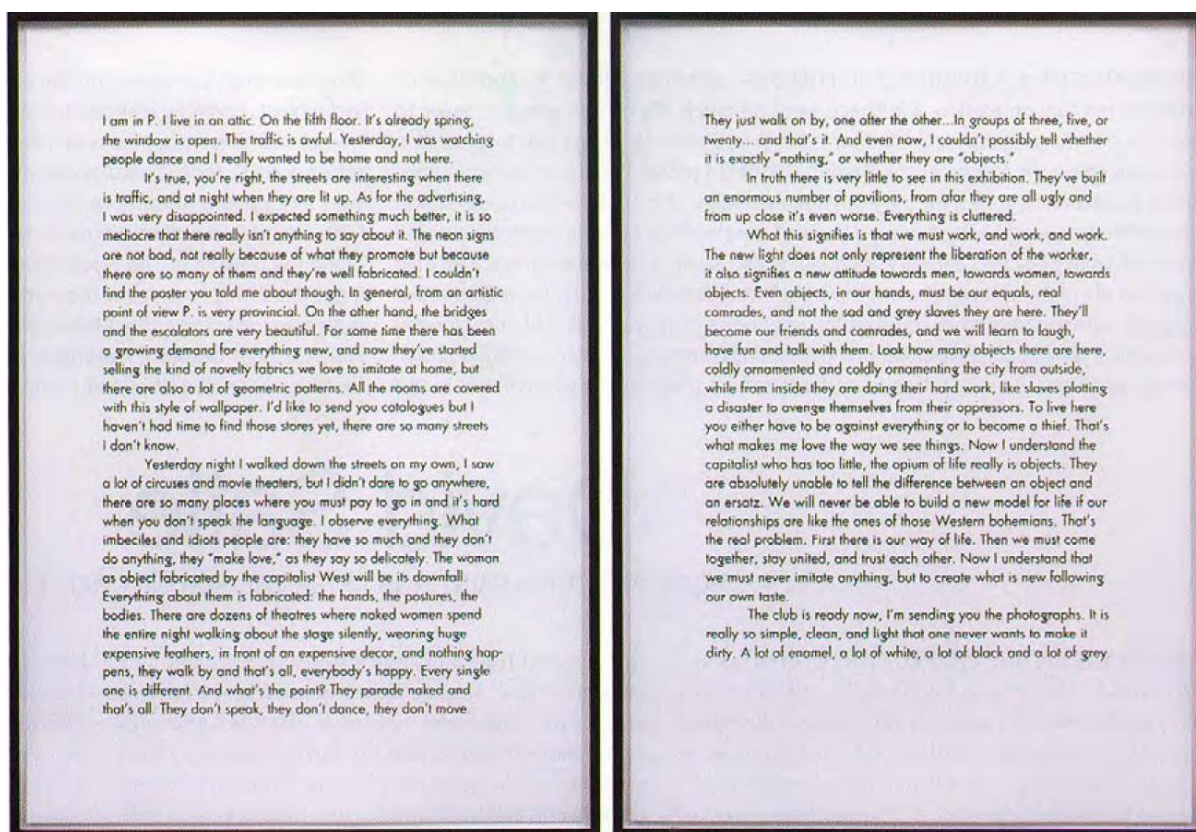
Hannah Feldman on the art of Mai-Thu Perret

THAT THE ART WORLD has something of a schoolgirl's crush on utopia is yesterday's news—but the infatuation shows no sign of waning. Aesthetics, we keep being told, are either complicit or relational, never somewhere in-between, a formulation that makes reconciling contemporary art and its oft-presumed preoccupation with social change very hard work. For Mai-Thu Perret, a Swiss-born artist (she now divides her time between New York and Geneva) who wants to distance herself from ideological absolutes without falling prey to empty relativism, this "gap between what art can do and what we wish it would do" is what "makes it interesting." Utopia, for her, is best imagined when it intersects with the real, which is to say, when it fails.

What art can offer us, in Perret's conception, is a shot at interpretive freedom, the kind of freedom more traditionally afforded the written word. In a move reminiscent of Jorge Luis Borges's famous recounting of the intrusion of an imagined world on mid-twentieth-century Argentinean society (in his story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"), Perret has invented a utopian commune and is inserting its products and commodities into the "real" world of the art institution. For the past seven years and counting, she has been building a constellation of objects and texts around this all-female commune, which she has named The Crystal Frontier and situated somewhere in the already mythologized desert of the American Southwest. While this location remains constant, other aspects of the fiction are subject to change. At any moment, there might be as few as three or as many as twelve women—Perret refers to them as "girls"—in The Crystal Frontier universe, which otherwise consists of sculptural objects, stage sets, paintings, fashion designs, and a collection of texts, placed in a decidedly ambiguous relationship to one another and to the conditions of their production. Some of the girls have names, such as Diotima Schwarz (after Robert Musil and Plato before him) and Beatrix Mendell (on whose imaginary trust

fund the commune was founded), while others have only character positions: the "impulsively angry girl," the architect, the builder, and so on. All, however, are united in having rejected the materialist and depersonalized rhythm of life in the city to build a commune in the desert. In the diaristic text piece *No More City*, 2003–2006 (which exists both as a written document and as a forty-inch screenprint on paper), one girl remembers life in the real world—here made to echo the status quo of the gallery system—as being "closed . . . the sediment of meaning upon meaning, story upon story, oppression upon oppression." The city the girls left behind, "a grey-tinged nightmare," is nonspecific: It could be any city, it seems, at any time, since all cities are equal in that they have all been pervaded by the built forms of capital. In one of The Crystal Frontier's texts, *Letter Home (After A.R.)*, 2006, the city takes the name "P," ostensibly an abbreviation for Paris used in a letter written by Aleksandr Rodchenko to his wife, Varvara Stepanova. Perret has appropriated this text, decontextualizing, despecifying, and ungending it for the purposes of her project.

In the desert, the girls begin, according to *No More City*, "building the hacienda. A pyramid of love," a form Perret first diagrammed in rigid geometric lines and later built as the commune's bunny hutch (*Pyramid of Love*, 2003). The pervasiveness of the language of love and the invocation of crystal bespeak a certain new-age optimism, not to mention a drug-friendly counterculture—indeed, an earlier work consisted of a Wonderland-ish teapot filled with mesquite and called, appropriately enough, *Mescaline Tea Service*, 2002. The '60s inevitably come to mind, and critics and curators alike have been quick to reel off the associations: Woodstock, Haight Ashbury, etc. But Perret's investment in idealist retreat probes deeper complexities, in particular the engagement of some well-known communes with the strictures of modernism's aestheticism. The "pyramid of love," for instance, recalls the Buckminster Fuller-esque



From top: Mai-Thu Perret, *Letter Home (After A.R.)*, 2006, diptych, silk screen on paper, 34 3/4 x 25". View of Mai-Thu Perret, "And every woman will be a walking synthesis of the universe," Renaissance Society, Chicago, 2006. From left: Mai-Thu Perret, *Little Planetary Harmony*, 2006; Mai-Thu Perret with Ligia Dias, *Apocalypse Ballet (Three White Rings)*, 2006.



This page, from left: View of "Fürchte Dich," 2004, Helmhaus, Zurich. Foreground: Mai-Thu Perret, *Self Expression x 25*, 2003. Background: Mai-Thu Perret, *Secret Constellation*, 2003. View of Mai-Thu Perret, "Heroine of the People," Praz-Delavallade, Paris, 2005. Photo: Eleonore Lamberle. From left: Mai-Thu Perret, *Heroine of the People (Golden Rock)*, 2005. Mai-Thu Perret, *Heroine of the People (Black Tower)*, 2005. Opposite page, from left: Mai-Thu Perret, exhibition poster for "And every woman will be a walking synthesis of the universe," 2005. Mai-Thu Perret, *Pyramid of Love*, 2003. Installation view, Kunsthaus Glarus.

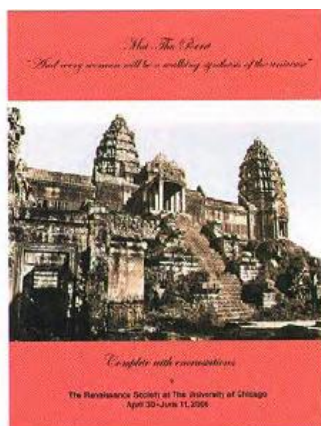


domes, made of triangular panels of recycled car roofs in the Colorado art commune Drop City (active from 1965 to the mid-1970s) and the experimental forms of Paolo Soleri's Arcosanti, a still-functioning commune in Arizona where Perret has conducted research. Add to the mix such artistic and political manifestations of early twentieth-century idealism as the Mojave Desert's 1914 Marxist enclave (Llano del Rio), Monte Verità in Switzerland, the German *Lebensreform* movement, and even the Soviet Constructivists, and it is clear that Perret's investigation is more than a probing of the generalized shortcomings of art, but also a speculative reimagining of modernism's specific failures. How else to understand the absurdity of a giant, gilded papier-mâché egg, *Heroine of the People (Golden Rock)*, 2005, placed next to the explicitly Vladimir Tatlin-derived form of *Heroine of the People (Black Tower)*, 2005, in The Crystal Frontier's 2005 manifestation at the Praz-Delavallade gallery in Paris?

These references, however anachronistic, actually distance Perret's commune from exclusively nostalgic meditations on the past—since they don't in fact purport to be keyed to any particular historical movement nor are they fake historical archives—even as they also dislocate The Crystal Frontier from the traditional domain of the utopian: the future. In an exhibition that opened in April at the Renaissance Society in Chicago, Perret invoked this temporal elusiveness with the prophetic-sounding title, "And every woman will be a walking synthesis of the universe." Viewers unfamiliar with the story of The Crystal Frontier might have had a hard time making much sense of the hybrid collection of objects featured therein, all of which endeavored to spectacularize utopia's failure and what might cynically be construed as the art world's investment in such (though how instructive these objects were meant to be was unclear). Perret made reference to ruins and misguided "discoveries" in the image she chose for the show's poster, a picture of Angkor Wat after it was "discovered" by French colonialists. Exhibited as the "encrustations," or artifacts, through which we are meant to discover The Crystal Frontier—as if it were some already-failed commune—were a framed text that read like a diary entry, a neon relief that summoned Dan Flavin and Kazimir Malevich, an enormous aluminum teapot-cum-stage wherein hung multiple, small-format Constructivist-inspired paintings, and several papier-mâché figural sculptures dressed in short, belted tunics and adorned with glowing neon hula hoops. While the hallucinogenic teapot, *Little Planetary Harmony*, 2006, which functions to engulf the entering viewer

like a sensory deprivation tank, was the most quixotic and engaging work in the exhibition, it was the figural sculptures that were most ambiguous and, somehow, provocative.

Suggestive of the ways in which Perret relies on repetition to create the sense that such sculptural objects are in fact the sedimented layers of her imaginary commune, these figures have appeared in other Crystal Frontier manifestations, always occupying a multiplicity of positions in relation to the fiction: They might represent the girls themselves—or perhaps a sort of craft the girls make to either finance their communal life or simply express and amuse themselves. (A particularly clear suggestion of the latter is offered in her 2003 piece *Self-Expression x 25*, where small ceramic objects are neatly arranged in grids on wood tables.) Even more intriguingly, however, the figures—which at the Renaissance Society were mannequins crafted by a fabricator to specs provided by Perret—might actually serve a seemingly incidental function, intended as little more than display supports for the clothing the girls make. (Further complicating Perret's relationship to authorship and any notion of an expressive subject, the dresses were designed by the artist's Paris-based collaborator, Ligia Dias.) Each figure, with one to three neon hula hoops, is caught in the act of dancing what Perret calls the *Apocalypse Ballet*. Frozen in such bizarre postures, the figures spin off a century-long chain of references: Soviet exercises meant to prepare the body for Socialist life; Hollywood musicals (especially those by Busby Berkeley); and, of course, the department-store mannequin. This last reference is particularly dear to Perret, who clearly wants to triangulate fashion with her investigations of art and utopia. As significant to the apparent suggestion here that politics may come and go, like so many styles, is the genuinely creepy effect the objects conjure. Indeed, they remind us that the categories we use to determine our aesthetic criteria—when is a sculpture a mannequin?—are determined by the economics of the commodity. Perret alludes here to Degas's bronze dancer, which shocked audiences in 1881 for having breached this line: It wore a tulle skirt. Figural sculptures were supposed to be idealized, beautiful, and undressed, or at least "dressed" in the material of the sculptural form itself. Once clad in the clothes of the real world, the idealized sculptures really became no different from the lowly mannequin. And while sculptural materials like marble and bronze were supposed to intone timelessness, the decaying fabric hollers death.



Clever as this all is—and it is—the danger remains that these loose references, these “encrustations,” threaten to repeat rather than negate the fashion impulse Perret critiques. Her Constructivism, for instance, could be someone else’s Design Within Reach Bauhaus-style knockoff. Perret concedes that she has no desire to produce “a mere image of dissent” any more than she wants to produce “one of bourgeois bliss.” But as she explained to curator and critic Fabrice Stroun in 2002, she is “producing objects for the art world. So, if the pieces do look like something, [it] is undoubtedly art.” Does their continual confinement in the realm of art limit such reference points to being recouped like the remnants of failed avant-garde strategies famously *détourned* in the work of Asger Jorn and Guy Debord? Whereas Borges’s invention of Tlön and the conspiracy that created it threatened to destabilize, and not necessarily productively, the order of the real, it remains possible that Perret’s fiction might only reaffirm the logic of the system.

Such conceptual nuances need not be taken negatively, and Perret’s posture might also be understood as a remark about—or against—the kinds of identity politics that characterized “the return of the real” for a generation of art historians. Consider the artist’s relationship to feminism, a subject strangely insisted upon in the Renaissance Center’s promotional materials for Perret’s exhibition. For Perret, the distancing of her own personal identity from the women she imagines helps to ensure that this is not an “expressive” project. The artist is careful to keep herself at a certain remove from the handcrafted hippie aesthetic privileged in popular conceptions of communal living, but she also wants to question the “hard-edged” forms of modernism’s most ardent idealists. Purity of form, despite the convictions of a Josef Albers or an Ad Reinhardt, is just as easily aped or one-offed as the sentimental, expressive objects such artists had meant it to replace. At the same time, Perret’s dance around the strictures of modern art—a kind of “apocalyptic ballet” of its own—aims to position the artist far from the patterns of mass consumption her mannequins invoke. The objects and texts she exhibits are for sale and they are

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produced for the gallery, but their genesis is not meant to be read as rooted in the locus of a single, stable creative subject, not even one of the fictive communards Perret has dreamed up. As such, it is hard to imagine her work being codified or commodified as possessing a signature style. Demonstrating the significance of her education, first as an English literature major at Cambridge and then as an acolyte of institutional critique and identity politics in the Whitney Museum’s Independent Study Program, Perret has no interest in reiterating the modern artist’s claim to control and determine the meaning of his, especially *his*, work.

All these double steps and endlessly vacillating ambiguities are central to Perret’s project, on all fronts. The destabilization reaches the point of calling into question Perret’s function as artist, completing the constellation of concerns she has mined, if not mimicked, from the history of the avant-garde. To some extent, we might see Perret’s role as closer to that of curator or gallerist, the person who arranges and displays the diaristic entries, the manifestos, and other objects produced by the girls of The Crystal Frontier. In having “found” these objects, she also acts the part of an archaeologist. Further still, in her channeling of The Crystal Frontier’s activities, she might also be described as the girls’ spiritual medium, wherein would lie perhaps the most interesting perversion of the old question of medium specificity at the core of modern-art production. In any, and perhaps all, of these cases, something like Fredric Jameson’s recent dictum on utopia echoes at the core of her work: “[I]ts function lies not in helping us to imagine a better future but rather in demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future—our imprisonment in a non-utopian present without historicity or futurity—so as to reveal the ideological closure of the system in which we are somehow trapped and confined.” While Jameson wants to hold out some hope, some desire, for what the function of utopia might allow us, his logic casts us into the interminable mechanics of a Rube Goldberg machine. If the utopian is only that: which allows us to see the skein of impossibilities that confine us, then what, if anything, marks the difference between the utopian and the dystopian? But perhaps this is where Perret’s Crystal Frontier finds its legs. In skimming the surface of the dystopian, in dancing with bad art and cliché and failure, maybe The Crystal Frontier means to put an entirely different constellation into view. Perhaps it is in imagining the worst, instead of the best, that we might find avenues to the better. □

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