Gough, Maria, “Crystal Futures,” Parkett, Nr. 84, 2008, pp. 104-111
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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)
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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.”

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.”

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,
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. 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
ambitious young contemporary artists. Sometimes this has led to fecund proposals that extend or trope Smithson’s work in provocative and engaging ways, as James Meyer argues with respect to the work of Renée Green, but at other times we find merely a mindless trivialization or fetishization of his corpus in a bid for instant market gratification. Perret’s citation belongs to neither of these scenarios. Hers is an act of both homage and redress: By means of her commune of productive women, the older artist’s no doubt inadvertent reinscription in his famous text of conventional gender relations (“For about an hour Don and I chopped incessantly at [a] lump [of lava] with hammer and chisel, while Nancy and Julie wandered aimlessly around the quarry picking up sticks, leaves and odd stones.”) is once and for all laid to rest.

Way beyond Smithson, Perret’s oeuvre is besotted with references to the history of art and literature, particularly to movements and objects in the 1920s that articulate various intersections of radical aesthetics and radical politics such as the Bauhaus, Dada, and especially Soviet Constructivism. In recycling Stepanova’s constructivist fabric designs for her own wallpaper sampler, however, Perret is not so much lost in nostalgia for a radical historical past—although there is surely some of that—as much as broaching a problem that vexes us all, pre-
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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-

UNTITLED, 2007, block printed wallpaper, variable dimensions / OHNE TITEL, stempeldruckte Tapete, Masse variabel.
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. Khakovskii 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...
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
to exploring what Keller calls the “bandwidth of artistic book making.” 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.” Starling 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.

2) Ibid.
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.”
7) See Perret, *Land of Crystal*, caption to plate no. 1 (original emphasis).
8) See http://www.curatingdegreezero.org/c_keller/c_keller.html