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Mai-Thu Perret

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Revolutions, radical women and the shifting function of objects



Little Planetary Harmony (2006)

The extensive role-call of individuals and artistic movements that make an appearance in Mai-Thu Perret's ongoing project *The Crystal Frontier* reads like the guest list for a fantasy tea party enthusiastically drawn up at a late-night gathering ('Let's put Sergei Diaghilev next to Busby Berkeley and Varvara Stepanova next to Andrea Zittel!'). Serve this motley crew with an infusion from Perret's dainty *Mescaline Tea Service* (2002) and one can begin to distil the elements of the wildly eclectic concoction of fact and fiction, avant-garde aesthetics and radical feminist politics, that contribute to Perret's epic tale.

Begun in 1999, *The Crystal Frontier's* narrative chronicles the lives of a group of radically minded women who turn their backs on the 'grey-tinged nightmare' of the city and move to New Mexico to establish a feminist commune. These women come to inhabit the real world (or at least the spaces of museums and galleries that constitute a particular reality) through texts, written by Perret, that take the form of diary entries and letters – which in themselves are often appropriated from existing fragments of historical

correspondence – and a diverse array of functional and decorative objects that masquerade as the 'hypothetical production' of the community.

It's a story of self-liberation that recalls the myriad Utopian communities that emerged throughout the last century: from the communist settlement of Llano del Rio in the Mojave Desert and Paolo Soleri's still extant Arcosanti project in Arizona to more personal retreats such as Georgia O'Keeffe's move to Taos in New Mexico or even Zittel's relocation from New York to Joshua Tree in southern California. In Perret's wilfully polymorphous notion of community these rural endeavours collide with references to some of Modernism's 'communes' – the Soviet Constructivists and the Bauhaus in particular – combining to form a cacophonous meta-community that reflects on the failures of these historical endeavours and the strained relationship between art and social revolution.

For her participation at the 2007 Lyon Biennial, Perret presented *An Evening of the Book* (2007), a *Gesamtkunstwerk* comprising three black and white films projected in a room decorated with patterned wallpaper inspired by Stepanova. The films document a group of women, whom we might assume to be Perret's enduring female protagonists, rehearsing repetitive choreographed movements and poses that evoke varying states of work, rest and play. As the films come to an end and the lights go up, the empty room is filled with the strains of a song taken from *Winter of Discontent or the Ballad of a Russian Doll* (2003–4), an unfinished play written by Perret with music by the late Steven Parrino. The work is based on a 1924 Agit-prop play directed by Vitalii Zhemchuzhnyi (with costumes and sets by Stepanova), which contrasted history's revolutionaries with those of the present, working as a metaphor for the conflict between the comforting security of nostalgia and the uncertainties of the current moment. This game of temporal push-and-pull is mirrored in *The Crystal Frontier*, which encapsulates the way in which we search for, but rarely find, fulfilment for present longings in stories from the past.

Weaving between the conjured personalities of the commune and Perret's own hand in all of this, the threads that link object to author in *The Crystal Frontier* become increasingly (and intentionally) frayed and tangled. Works such as the aforementioned tea set and other practical objects including *Pyramid of Love* (2003) – a modular rabbit hutch containing live rabbits – parade as items made and used by the members of the commune on a day-to-day basis, while the clay models in *Self-Expression x 25* (2003) are seemingly functionless objects that serve only to articulate the individuality of the members. Most confounding perhaps are the mannequins – papier-mâché figures of women and children clothed in pragmatic costumes (designed by Perret's collaborator, Ligia Dias) that neither act as representations of the women in *The Crystal Frontier* nor remain entirely true to their function as display mechanisms. Their shifting status brings to the fore questions that lie at the heart of *The Crystal Frontier* concerning the status of the art object – what it is and what one wants it to be. 'I often feel like I am hesitating in the work between the two opposing poles of use-value and cult-value,' Perret has observed; 'In that sense the objects I make are crude, hastily designed, and purposeful [which] feels like an interesting thing to explore at a time when the "autonomous" as such is no longer available and seems in danger of being replaced by pure instrumentalization.'

By engaging in systems of cultural and economic exchange with her fictionalized production, Perret plays (for her own amusement as well as ours) with these systems' powers of transformation: the museum's enduring ready-made effect that turns a rabbit hutch into a work of art, and the market's unholy equation of this act of aesthetic transubstantiation with a number. *The Crystal Frontier* is Perret's very own museological cottage industry, founded on our speculative desires and trading in histories and objects that are never quite what we think they are or what we want them to be.

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