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Mai-Thu Perret

Collection Cahiers d'Artistes 2006

Pro Helvetia

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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. She is a lifestyle totalitarian, like other people are love totalitarians. The way we survive. I think what bothers her is that we actually do survive. Before, when we were still living on Beatrix's trust fund, she found nothing to complain about, and she was the most agreeable of companions. The fact that the money we were living on was earned dishonestly, a fat check sitting in a bank accruing interest on some previously doctored deal didn't bother her at all. Everybody has a point where they stop being able to identify compromise, a kind of ethical horizon line beyond which they believe that things are no longer under their control and should therefore be ignored. But her horizon encircles everything she makes. One day I told her that wage slavery was nothing but another form of prostitution and she then pushed this idea to another level, for her parting with anything she made became tantamount to selling her own body. I ask her if she thinks we'd be better off starving. She refuses to reply, and simply tells me that every question carries the mold of the answer the one who phrases it desires to receive. She has nothing but contempt for our potential customers. She imagines corrupt yet additive-free cigarette smoking pseudo-liberals strolling along the aisles of the market place, desultorily eying our wares, holding them in their hands, maybe trying them on and comparing them to the other designer items they have amassed in their closets back home. I think she is so protective of the bond we've formed, of the freedom we've built for ourselves that she wants to deny everybody else the possibility of ever coming close to it. Her thinking regarding objects approaches the pre-modern. The only way I can explain it to myself is as a kind of voodoo. She profoundly resents providing others with a vicarious way of easing their discomfort with the alienated life they lead. Among us, she is the destructive character. Needless to say, we would never want to see her go away.

Mai-Thu Perret

1-2





I am in P. I live in an attic. On the fifth floor. It's already spring, the window is open. The traffic is awful. Yesterday, I was watching people dance and I really wanted to be home and not here.

It's true, you're right, the streets are interesting when there is traffic, and at night when they are lit up. As for the advertising, I was very disappointed. I expected something much better, it is so mediocre that there really isn't anything to say about it. The neon signs are not bad, not really because of what they promote but because there are so many of them and they're well fabricated. I couldn't find the poster you told me about though. In general, from an artistic point of view P. is very provincial. On the other hand, the bridges and the escalators are very beautiful. For some time there has been a growing demand for everything new, and now they've started selling the kind of novelty fabrics we love to imitate at home, but there are also a lot of geometric patterns. All the rooms are covered with this style of wallpaper. I'd like to send you catalogues but I haven't had time to find those stores yet, there are so many streets I don't know.

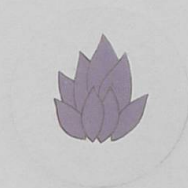
Yesterday night I walked down the streets on my own, I saw a lot of circuses and movie theaters, but I didn't dare to go anywhere, there are so many places where you must pay to go in and it's hard when you don't speak the language. I observe everything. What imbeciles and idiots people are: they have so much and they don't do anything, they "make love," as they say so delicately. The woman as object fabricated by the capitalist West will be its downfall. Everything about them is fabricated: the hands, the postures, the bodies. There are dozens of theatres where naked women spend the entire night walking about the stage silently, wearing huge expensive feathers, in front of an expensive decor, and nothing happens, they walk by and that's all, everybody's happy. Every single one is different. And what's the point? They parade naked and that's all. They don't speak, they don't dance, they don't move.

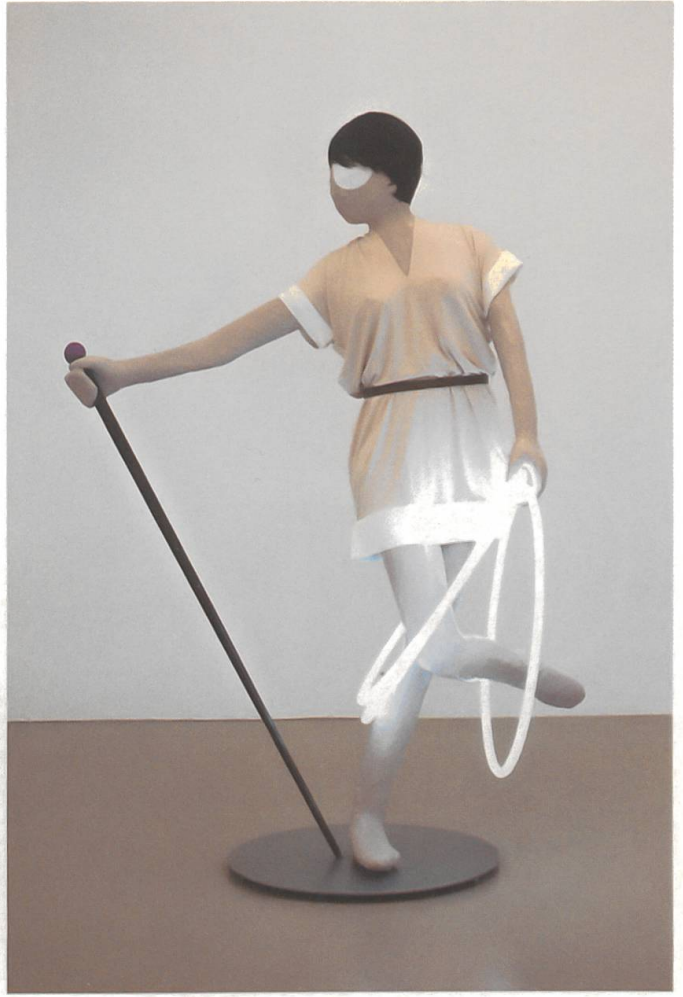
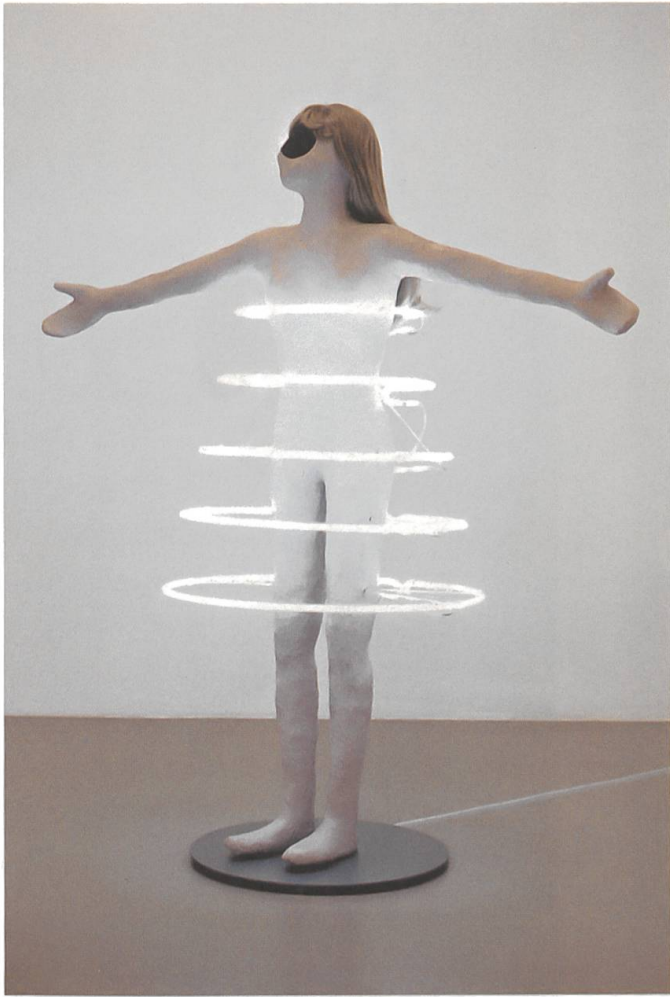
They just walk on by, one after the other...In groups of three, five, or twenty... and that's it. And even now, I couldn't possibly tell whether it is exactly "nothing," or whether they are "objects."

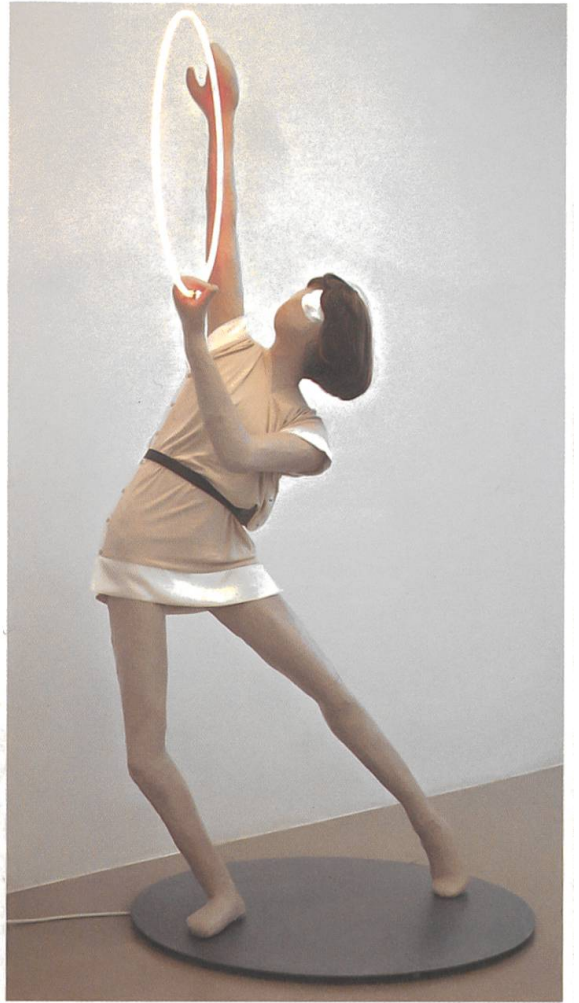
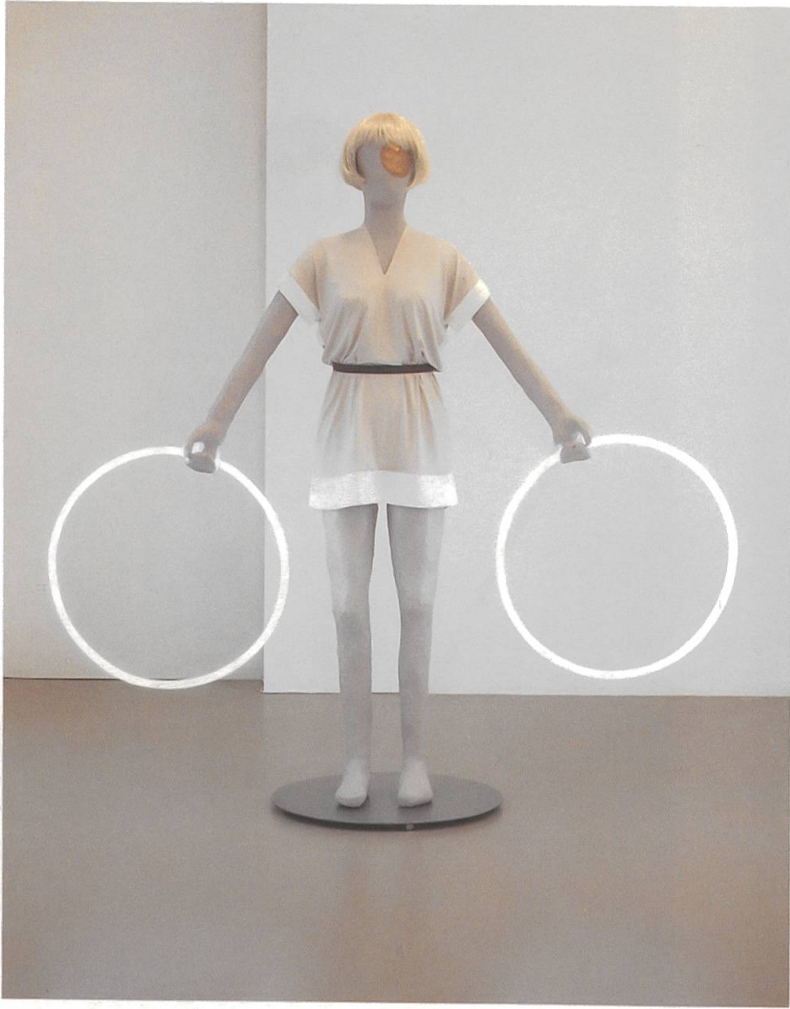
In truth there is very little to see in this exhibition. They've built an enormous number of pavilions, from afar they are all ugly and from up close it's even worse. Everything is cluttered.

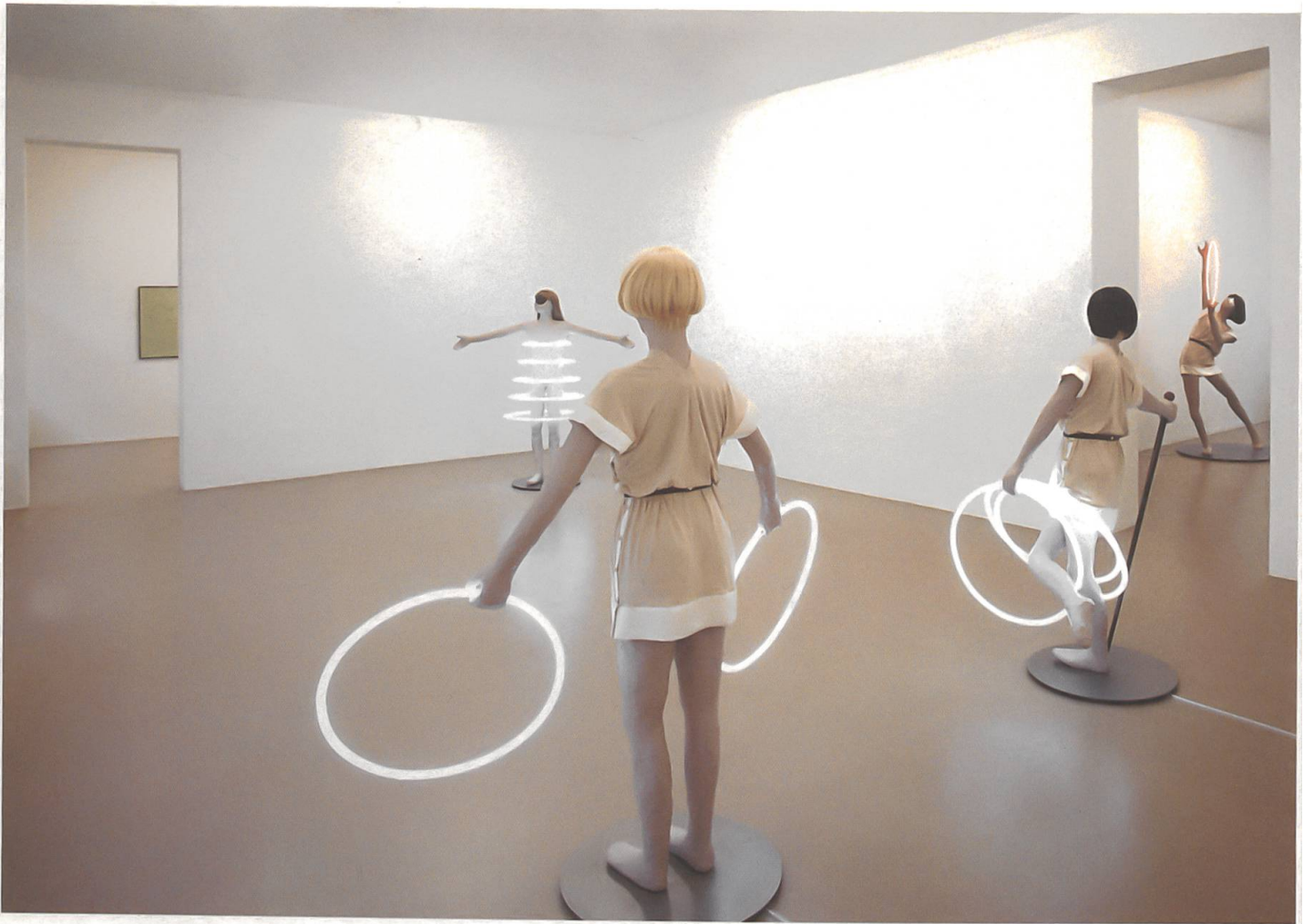
What this signifies is that we must work, and work, and work. The new light does not only represent the liberation of the worker, it also signifies a new attitude towards men, towards women, towards objects. Even objects, in our hands, must be our equals, real comrades, and not the sad and grey slaves they are here. They'll become our friends and comrades, and we will learn to laugh, have fun and talk with them. Look how many objects there are here, coldly ornamented and coldly ornamenting the city from outside, while from inside they are doing their hard work, like slaves plotting a disaster to avenge themselves from their oppressors. To live here you either have to be against everything or to become a thief. That's what makes me love the way we see things. Now I understand the capitalist who has too little, the opium of life really is objects. They are absolutely unable to tell the difference between an object and an ersatz. We will never be able to build a new model for life if our relationships are like the ones of those Western bohemians. That's the real problem. First there is our way of life. Then we must come together, stay united, and trust each other. Now I understand that we must never imitate anything, but to create what is new following our own taste.

The club is ready now, I'm sending you the photographs. It is really so simple, clean, and light that one never wants to make it dirty. A lot of enamel, a lot of white, a lot of black and a lot of grey.

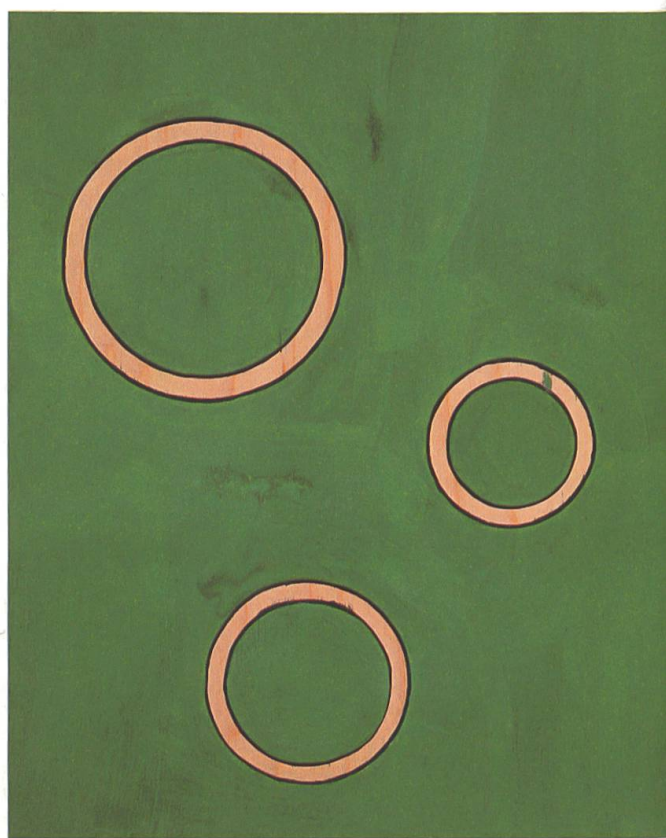
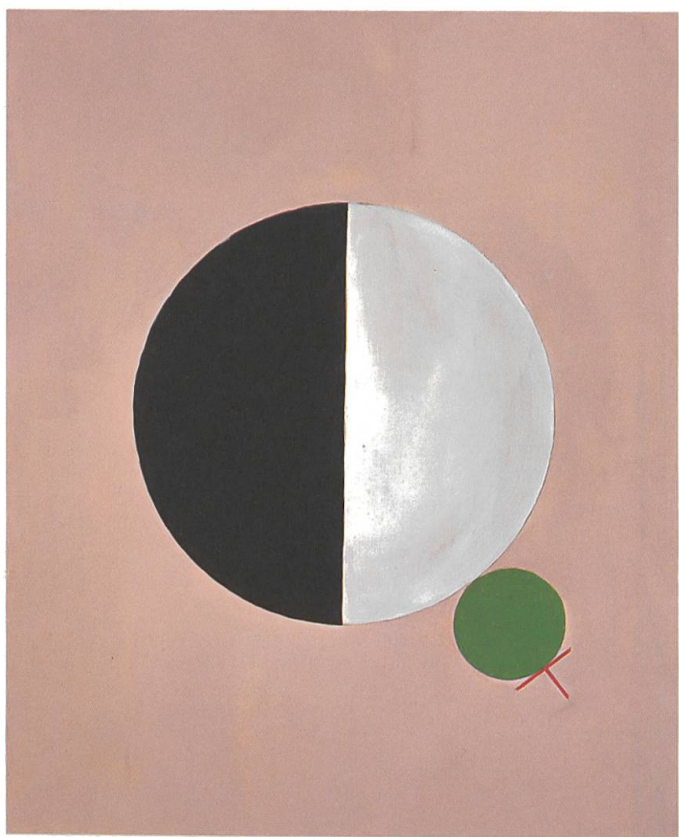


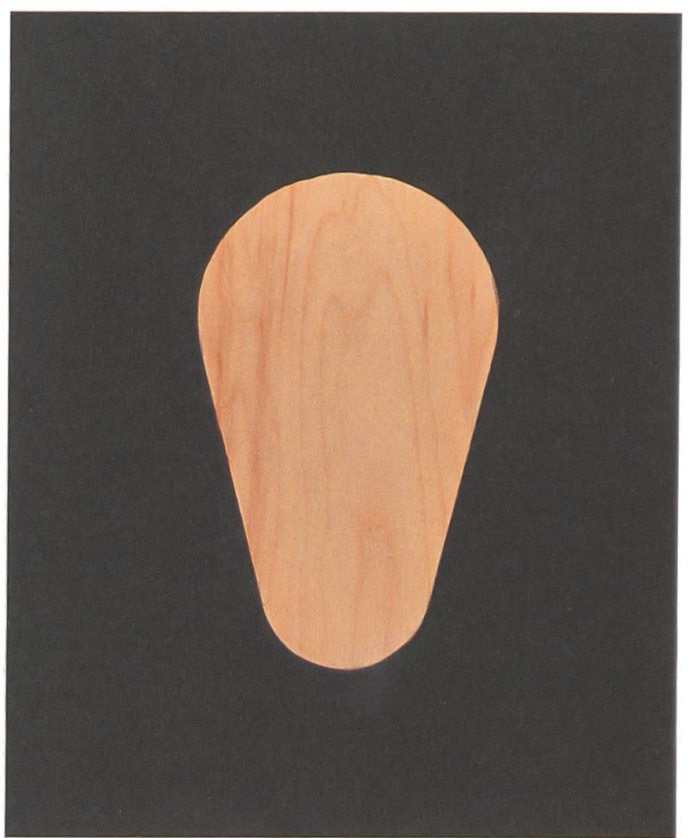






















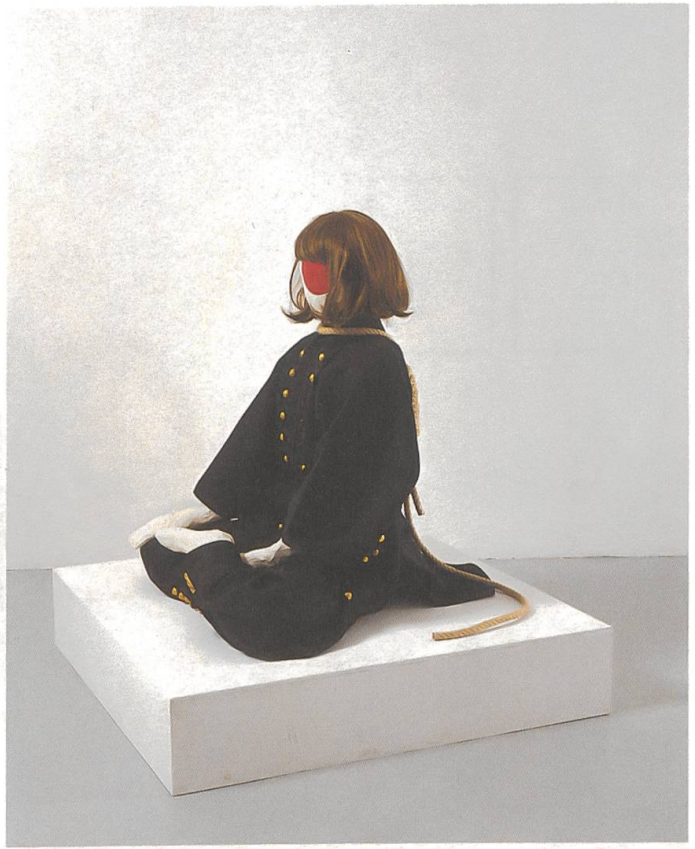
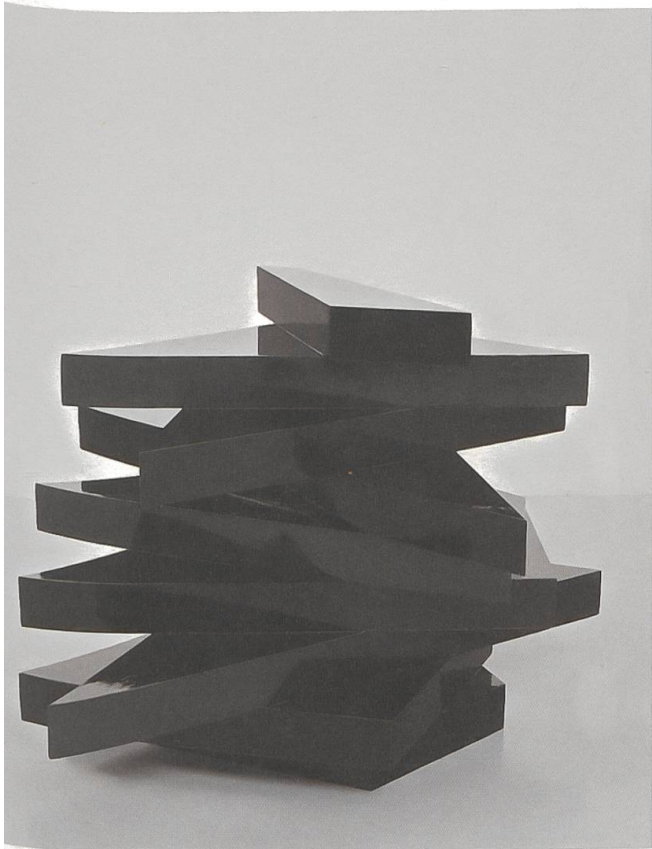


















Mai-Thu Perret

On pourrait faire l'hypothèse que l'objet d'art, en tant que catégorie spécifique dans le régime des choses, possède la particularité d'être hanté. Il est, d'abord, porteur de la subjectivité de son auteur (à des degrés extrêmement divers), mais il est également « habité » par les multiples résonances qu'il a provoquées au fil du temps et de ses contextes « d'apparition ». Au début du XXe siècle, Freud et Marx s'entendent d'ailleurs pour reconnaître à l'objet en général une qualité particulière répercutée dans de nombreux autres domaines des sciences humaines : celle de fétiche. Dans la critique marxiste du spectacle et du fétichisme de la marchandise, c'est l'objet lui-même qui s'anime pour envoûter le consommateur, l'inciter à acheter et par conséquent à oublier tout le travail qui a présidé à sa production. Pour Freud, ce sont les projections du sujet sur des objets spécifiques qui génèrent cette identité spectrale et obsessionnelle qu'acquiert tout support ainsi désigné. Dans cette perspective, le domaine de l'art, qui tente de susciter ou de programmer des projections interprétatives, qui orchestre la spectacularisation d'une lecture du monde, qui prétend par simple « nominalisme » transformer valeur d'usage en valeur d'échange, serait en quelque sorte le paradis du fétiche, et la pratique artistique marquerait l'acmé de ce devenir-fétiche de l'objet.

Dans les maisons hantées que sont les musées et les galeries, un service à thé en porcelaine réveille ainsi l'esprit du Bauhaus et des Vhutemas ; un mannequin de papier mâché portant une tunique ceinte de néons fait apparaître le spectre de Schlemmer dansant avec Flavin sous les yeux attendris de Stepanova ; alors que l'on sent l'espace vibrer sous l'influence conjuguée du Kunstwollen de l'artiste, du Kunstmachen des travailleurs (couturière, potier, technicien, etc.), du Kunstwissen du commissaire et des critiques, voire du Kunstmanagement¹ des propriétaires ou marchands de ces objets... Photographiés, commentés, reproduits, transportés, démontés, refaits, les objets plient sous le poids des renvois, reflets, référents : fantômes de ceux qui les ont précédés, de ceux qui les suivront, ils se déconstruisent sous nos yeux en une myriade de molécules infiniment recombinaisons. Ou, pour prendre une comparaison plus appropriée au travail de l'artiste, les récits s'enchâssent les uns dans les autres,

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L'histoire de l'art classique, après Alois Riegel, établit généralement une distinction entre les intentions présidant à la création de l'œuvre d'art (Kunstwollen), sa matérialisation, et le savoir que l'on peut en extraire (Kunstwissen); il pourrait s'avérer nécessaire aujourd'hui d'ajouter à cette terminologie la gestion de la réception de l'œuvre d'art, sa médiatisation et son marketing, notions résultant de la pénétration progressive de l'art dans l'industrie culturelle.

à l'infini, combinatoire improbable de narrateurs fictifs, de fragments intertextuels, de mises en abyme et de citations. *Smithson* avait tort de penser que le lieu d'exposition était un non-site de l'art, que l'art pouvait se jouer ailleurs, dans le réel : ce (ou ceux) qui habite(nt) les objets d'art ne se révèle(nt) si bien que dans ces lieux, qui agissent comme autant d'écrans fixateurs pour ces ectoplasmes. Dans le réel, les fétiches peuvent redevenir des choses et le fétichisme une simple opération commerciale. Dans le réel, les jeux de miroirs sont les reflets des boutiques dans les arcades, les référents des systèmes de garantie et les fantômes des copies.

En écrivant les textes de « *Crystal Frontier* » et en les attribuant aux femmes d'une communauté modelée sur celle de *Llano del Rio* ; en demandant à diverses personnes de réaliser une des 25 sculptures de « *Self-Expression* » comme autant de résultats d'un atelier de création collectif ; en collaborant avec la designer *Ligia Dias* pour réaliser des vêtements évocateurs tantôt de costumes militaires, tantôt de comédies musicales ; en construisant une théière géante pour y exposer des petits tableaux abstraits ; bref : en déployant ses objets dans l'horizon d'une fiction et dans l'univers des objets d'art, *Mai-Thu Perret* fait ce que d'aucuns ont fait au roman naturaliste : elle en révèle les artifices, les effets de réel, pour mieux explorer les écarts entre ce que l'objet est (matériellement, subjectivement, etc.) et ce que l'on voudrait qu'il soit (matériellement, subjectivement, etc.), entre ce qu'il est « réellement » et ce qui le « possède ». Le coefficient d'art, pour reprendre l'expression de *Duchamp*, c'est ce degré de « possession » de l'objet par d'autres subjectivités.

En 1925, à l'occasion de la fondation du *Cercle des Travailleurs pour l'Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes*, *Rodchenko* écrivait de *Paris* à *Stepanova* : « Les choses que nous tenons dans nos mains doivent être nos camarades, nos égaux et non ces esclaves noirs et lugubres qu'ils sont ici »². S'il n'est pas dit qu'il ait réussi à libérer les objets utilitaires de la tyrannie de la marchandise, du moins cette ambition qu'ils deviennent des interlocuteurs semble hanter le travail de *Mai-Thu Perret*.

Lionel Bovier

2
Christina Kiaer,
Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism,
(Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005)

Mai-Thu Perret

Speaking hypothetically, the art object, as a specific category, could be said to be haunted. While it carries the subjectivity of its author (to greatly varying degrees), it is also "inhabited" by the multitude of responses it has provoked through the years and the various contexts in which it "appeared." At the beginning of the 20th century, Freud and Marx were in agreement when they granted the object in general a peculiar quality which would leave its mark in most branches of the human sciences: that of the fetish. In the Marxist critique of commodity fetishism and the spectacle, the object itself comes to life and casts a spell on the consumer, enticing him to buy and consequently to repress the labor involved in its production. For Freud, the subject's own projections can generate a spectral and obsessive identity in any object it selects. In this perspective, the domain of art, which attempts to arouse or programme interpretative projections, which orchestrates world views into spectacles, which pretends to transform, through mere "nominalism," use-value into exchange-value, could therefore be seen as the paradise of the fetish, and artistic practice to represent the climax of the transformation of the object into a fetish.

In the haunted houses of museums and galleries, a porcelain tea set awakens the spirit of the Bauhaus and of the Vhutemas; a papier-mâché mannequin wearing a tunic encircled by neon lights evokes the ghost of Schlemmer dancing with Flavin under the tender gaze of Stepanova. One can feel the space vibrate under the combined influence of the Kunstwollen of the artist, the Kunstmachen of the workers (seamstress, potter, technician, etc.), the Kunstwissen of the organizers and critics, as well as the Kunstmanagement¹ of the owners and dealers of these objects... Photographed, commented upon, reproduced, transported, dismantled, reassembled, the objects bend under the weight of references, reflections, referents: phantoms of those who have preceded them, of those who will follow, they deconstruct under our very eyes into myriads of molecules that can be infinitely recombined. Or, to use a comparison more akin to the work of the artist, the stories are embedded into one another, ad infinitum, improbable combinations of fictional narrators, of intertextual fragments, of mises-en-abyme and quotations. Smithson was wrong in

1

Following Alois Riegl, classic art history always made the distinction between intentions presiding to art making (Kunstwollen), its result and fabrication and the knowledge one can derive from it (Kunstwissen); it seems necessary to add today to this terminology the management of the reception of the artwork, the communication and the marketing of it, all notions stemming out of the penetration of art into the culture industry.

thinking that the exhibition space was a non-site of art, that art could happen elsewhere, in real life: that which (or those who) inhabit(s) art objects reveals itself (reveal themselves) best in these places that act like so many fixing screens for these ectoplasms. In real life, fetishes can become things again, and fetishism a simple commercial operation. In the real world, games of mirrors are the reflections of boutiques in shop windows, references are systems of guarantee and ghosts no more than copies.

By writing the texts of “The Crystal Frontier” and attributing them to the women of a community modelled on that of Llano del Rio; by asking different people to create one of the 25 sculptures of “Self-Expression” and passing them off as the products of a collective creative workshop; by collaborating with the designer Ligia Dias to create clothes that sometimes evoke military costumes, sometimes musical comedies; by constructing a giant teapot in which to exhibit small abstract paintings—in short, by deploying her objects on the horizon of fiction and in the universe of art objects, Mai-Thu Perret does what others have done with the naturalist novel. She exposes their tricks, their “reality effects,” in order better to explore the gap between what the object is (materially, subjectively, etc.) and what one wants it to be (materially, subjectively, etc.), between what it is “in reality” and that which “possesses” it. The coefficient of art to borrow a phrase from Duchamp, is the degree to which the object is “possessed” by other subjectivities.

In 1925, when Rodchenko was building the Workers’ Club at the International Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Paris, he wrote to Stepanova: “Things in our hands must be our equals, comrades, and not these dark and mournful slaves, as they are here.”² Although he may not have succeeded in liberating everyday objects from the tyranny of the merchandise, his desire to see them become interlocutors continues to haunt the work of Mai-Thu Perret.

Lionel Bovier

2
Christina Kiaer,
Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism,
(Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005)



Mai-Thu Perret

Née en 1976 à Genève, vit et travaille à Genève et New York. Elle a étudié à l'université de Cambridge et au Whitney Independent Study Program, New York.

Born in 1976 in Geneva, lives in Geneva and New York. She has studied at Cambridge University and at the Whitney Independent Study Program, New York.

Expositions personnelles/Solo Exhibitions

- 2006 And every woman will be a walking synthesis of the universe, *The Renaissance Society, Chicago*
Apocalypse Ballet, *Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin*
Solid Objects, *Chisenhale Gallery, Londres (avec/with Valentin Carron)*
- 2005 Heroine of the People, *Galerie Praz-Delavallade, Paris*
Solid Objects, *Centre d'art contemporain, Genève (avec/with Valentin Carron)*
- 2004 *Statements, Galerie Francesca Pia, Art Basel 35, Basel*
Centre d'édition contemporaine, Genève
- 2003 Pure Self-Expression x25, *Galerie Francesca Pia, Bern*
- 2002 *The Modern Institute, Glasgow*
We close our eyes in order to see, *Glassbox, Paris*
- 2001 Land of Crystal, *Le Studio, CAN, Neuchâtel*

Expositions collectives (sélection)/Group Exhibitions (selection)

- 2006 The Gold Standard, *P.S.1, Long Island City, New York*
Shiny, *Wexner Art Center, Columbus, Ohio**
Modus, *Neue Kunsthalle, St. Gallen**
Bring the War Home, *Gallery Elizabeth Dee, New York, et/and QUED, Los Angeles**
Visioni del paradiso, *Istituto Svizzero, Roma**
The Endless Summer, *West London Projects, London*
Objets d'hier et d'aujourd'hui, *Galerie Edouard Manet, Gennevilliers*
Again For Tomorrow, *Royal College of Art, London**
Madame la baronne était plutôt maniérée, assez rococo et complètement baroque, *Centre d'Art Mira Phalaina/Maison Populaire, Montreuil**
Eine Person allein in einem Raum mit Coca-Cola-farbenen Wänden, *Grazer Kunstverein, Graz*
- 2005 Wednesday Calls the Future, *National Art Center, Tbilissi, Géorgie/Georgia*
In the poem about love the word love does not appear, *CCA, Glasgow**
Paralleles Leben, *Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt a.M.**
NY Twice, *Air de Paris, Paris**
Model Modernisms, *Artists Space, New York*
Situational Prosthetics, *New Langton Arts Center, San Francisco*
- 2004 None of the Above, *Swiss Institute, New York*
Tuesday is Gone, *Tbilissi, Géorgie/Georgia*
Fürchte Dich, *Helmhaus, Zürich**
Leviathan Under Moon's Influence, *Champion Fine Arts, Brooklyn*
Archives Generation Upon Generation, *Year, Brooklyn*
- 2003 Form/Kontext/Troja, *Secession, Wien**
Fink Forward: The Collection/Connection, *Kunsthau, Glarus**
The Return of the Creature, *Künstlerhaus Thurn & Taxis, Bregenz*
- 2001 Rock Paper Scissors, *Galerie Francesca Pia, Bern*
Get Angry – Perspectives romandes 3, *Espace Arlaud, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne**
Wahrscheinlich (vraisemblablement), *Alimentation Générale Art Contemporain, Luxembourg*
The New Domestic Landscape, *Galeria Javier Lopez, Madrid*
- 2000 Dr Wings, *Air de Paris, Paris*
Why can't monsters get along with other monsters, *Galerie Francesca Pia, Bern*
Etat des lieux #2, Préfiguration du Museum of Contemporary Art, Tucson, *Fri-Art, Fribourg*

Bourses et prix/Grants and awards

- 2006 *Prix fédéral des Beaux-Arts**
*Prix Kiefer Hablitzel**
- 2004 *Prix fédéral des Beaux-Arts**

* avec/with catalogue

Lionel Bovier

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An art historian and independent critic and curator, he is the Director of the publishing house JRP|Ringier in Zurich (www.jrp-ringier.com).

[*Couverture/Cover*] Heroine of the People (Fabric Designs), 2005
[*Couverture intérieure/Inside cover*] Bake and Sale Theory, 2004

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[| 2] 9 Sculptures of Pure Self-Expression (The Male Principle), 2003
9 Sculptures of Pure Self-Expression (The Female Principle), 2003
3 Sculptures of Pure Self-Expression (Landmarks and Chronograms), 2003
4 Sculptures of Pure Self-Expression (The Arts and Crafts Movement), 2003
Secret Constellation, 2002
Vue d'exposition/Exhibition view, Helmhaus, Zürich, 2004
- [3 | 4] Letter Home (After A.R.), 2006
[| 5] Perpetual Time Clock, 2004
[| 6] Apocalypse Ballet (Neon Dress), 2006
[| 7] Apocalypse Ballet (3 White Rings), 2006, *avec/with Ligia Dias**
[8 |] Apocalypse Ballet (2 White Rings), 2006, *avec/with Ligia Dias**
[9 |] Apocalypse Ballet (1 Pink Ring), 2006, *avec/with Ligia Dias**
[10 |] Apocalypse Ballet, 2006
Vue d'exposition/Exhibition view, Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin, 2006
- [| 11] Little Planetary Harmony, 2006
Vue d'exposition/Exhibition view, The Renaissance Society, Chicago, 2006
- [12–15] Little Planetary Harmony, 2006
Peintures exposées à l'intérieur de la théière/Paintings exhibited inside the teapot
- [16 | 17] Pyramid of Love, 2003
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- [| 18] Heroine of the People (Big Golden Rock), 2005
De gauche à droite/From left to right
- [19 |] A Uniform Sampler, 2004, *avec/with Ligia Dias**
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[| 22] La Fée électricité, 2005, *avec/with Ligia Dias**
Peinture murale sans titre/Untitled wall painting, 2005
Affiche sans titre/Untitled poster, 2005
- [23 |] The Objective Incarnation of Our Girlhood, 2002
[| 24] Happy Together, 2002
Secret Constellation, 2002
Peinture murale sans titre/Untitled wall painting, 2002
Vue d'exposition/Exhibition view, The Modern Institute, Glasgow, 2002
- [| 25] They Made No Attempt To Rescue Art From Ritual, 2002
[| 26] Heroine of the People (Black Stack), 2005
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Heroine of the People (Big Golden Rock), 2005
Heroine of the People (Black Tower), 2005
Heroine of the People (Revolutionary), 2005, *avec/with Ligia Dias**
Vue d'exposition/Exhibition view, Galerie Praz-Delavallade, Paris, 2005
- [| 29] Secret Lover Room Divider, 2001
Affiche sans titre/Untitled poster, 2000
Vue d'exposition/Exhibition view, Glassbox, Paris, 2002
- [| 30] A Uniform Sampler, 2004, *avec/with Ligia Dias**
Solid Object, 2005, *collaboration avec/with Valentin Carron*
Vue d'exposition/Exhibition view, Centre d'art contemporain, Genève, 2005
- [31 |] Death Valley 69, 2000

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