

# ARTFORUM

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

April 2008

## Mai-Thu Perret

### THE KITCHEN

For an artist whose work is peopled only by women and thus clearly seems in some way to be “about” gender, Mai-Thu Perret nonetheless confounds attempts to understand its function in her practice. To some critics, Perret’s variations on the theme of “All women, all the time” add up to a clear investment in and contribution to “feminism, as a distinct tradition of self-empowerment.” But such an assessment (this one made by Hamza Walker in 2006) and others like it are just as often refuted. In the pages of this magazine, for instance, in an essay detailing the work of the Geneva-based artist, critic Hannah Feldman testily acknowledged the *woman question* but only in order to deem it *retardataire*. Arguing that Perret’s project bucks the dreariness of identity politics, Feldman found it surprising that feminism would ever be “insisted upon” in conversations about the artist. Indeed, for Feldman, Perret has liberated herself from such discourse by refusing any signifiers in her work that might be read as either “personal” or “expressive.”

While this implied assessment of the operations and aesthetics of feminism seems to me neither accurate nor especially productive, it does raise some important attendant questions. When considering Perret’s works—nearly all focusing on the activities and products of a fictional all-woman commune known as the Crystal Frontier—*must* her unrelentingly separatist construction have feminist implications? Would a similar commune made up only of men necessarily be read politically? In other words, does the mere presence of women imply feminism?

Perret’s most recent exhibition, “An Evening of the Book and Other Stories,” at the Kitchen in New York this past winter, perhaps went some way toward addressing this quandary. The artist’s first New York solo exhibition included one of her trademark mannequins (though a mass-produced as opposed to handmade version, faceless and bewigged); a ball made of neon tubing; a gaggle of oversize, handmade, handpainted cardboard commas; and a number of wall paintings, reminiscent of Warhol’s *Dance Diagrams* though enumerating not the foxtrot but the steps of shamanic Korean dances performed solely by women.

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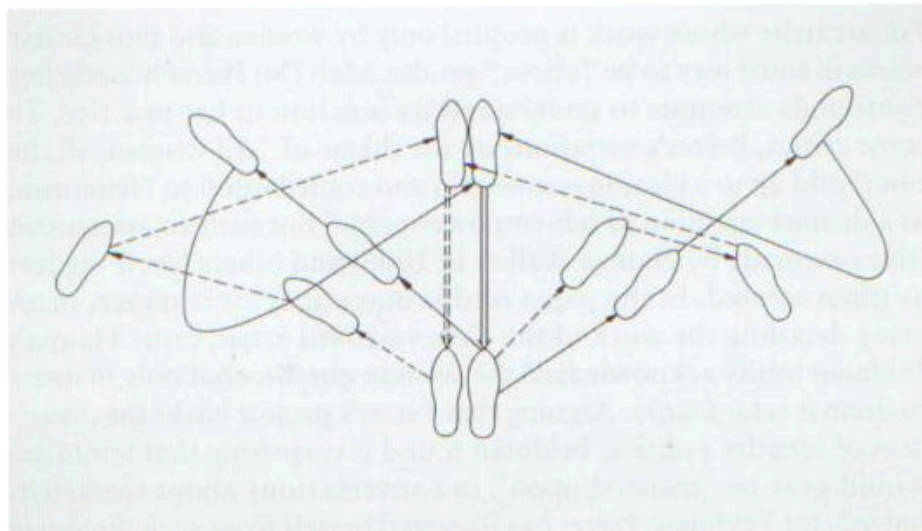
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The centerpiece of the exhibition, however, was a video installation, *An Evening of the Book*, 2007–2008, whose three channels were thrown at as many walls in the Kitchen’s small back room. Here, black-and-white footage of young women dressed in matching uniforms (save one participant—artist Fia Backström—who wears an all-black jumpsuit) was projected against a backdrop of geometric wallpaper, a tight tangle of repeating circles and triangles that both mirrored and obscured the assembly-line choreography of the women going through a series of movements and activities.

It is significant that Perret’s *An Evening of the Book* pays direct homage to the Constructivist Varvara Sepanova, who organized, and designed the costumes for, a 1924 student performance of the same name (at the Academy of Social Education in Moscow); for those who know of the original piece, Perret’s costumes will look familiar indeed. As art historian Christina Kiaer has pointed out, these “sports” costumes, though designed to deaccentuate gender and afford a kind of androgyny, nevertheless fail at any real leveling. However sexless on the hanger, once filled out by human bodies they are hard-pressed to sustain any theoretical conceit of neutrality.

This failure, however, hardly reflects badly on Sepanova’s extraordinary work, which strove to effect real social change. The 1924 *Evening of the Book*, it should be remembered, had a distinctly pragmatic desire: Its goal was to promote universal literacy, in part through Sepanova’s symbolic, egalitarian imagery. That Perret’s version would seem to hold out no similarly readable message (indeed, Sepanova’s labors and intentions are rendered rather abstract by Perret) doesn’t



Mai-Thu Perret,  
*Polysangkori I*, 2008,  
acrylic on wall,  
114 x 46".

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keep the stubborn corporeality of her own performers' gender from being asserted. This, in turn, and of necessity, brings up complex questions about how gender operates in, and *as*, representation. (That young women artists are regularly dissuaded from openly asserting their dedication to honing practices informed by feminism is another matter, for another time—though quite urgent in its implications.)

—*Johanna Burton*