



projects **84** josiah mcelheny

The Alpine Cathedral and the City-Crown. 2007

Essay by Josh Siegel, Assistant Curator, Department of Film

The Museum of Modern Art

For *Projects 84*, Josiah McElheny (American, b. 1966) has created a room-sized sculptural model of crystalline glass, metal, painted wood, Plexiglas, and colored electric lights. In this fantastical installation, which stands nearly ten feet tall, McElheny exploits the material properties and metaphorical power of glass to reimagine an earlier idea of utopia and transplant it to the present. Like much of his recent work, *The Alpine Cathedral and the City-Crown* is a meditation on how modernism's changing ideas of reflectivity and transparency have affected our perceptions of the world, our language, and our metaphysics.

The new installation is a materialization of and commentary on the visionary writings and sketches of two glass-architecture visionaries: Paul Scheerbart (1863–1915), a Berlin novelist and utopian fabulist, and Bruno Taut (1880–1938), the leader of a circle of revolutionary architects that emerged in Germany after World War I.

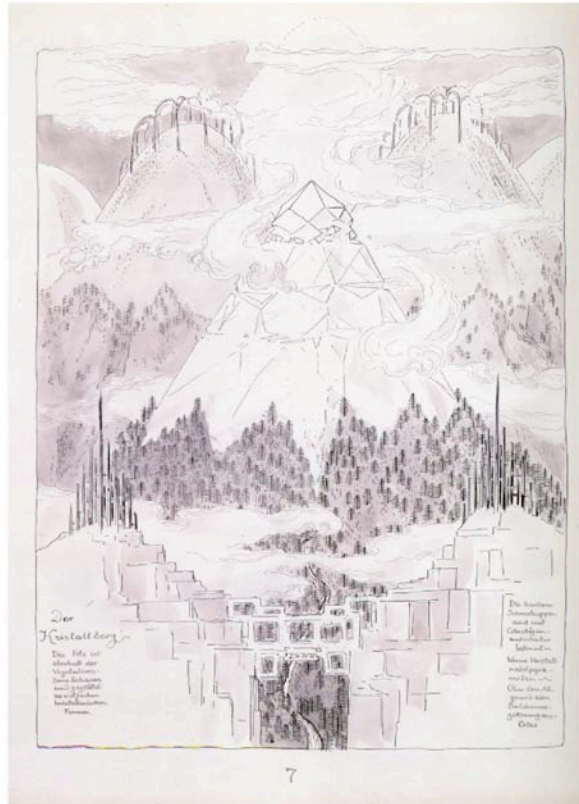
Intellectually compelling and jewel-like in its complexity and brilliance, McElheny's sculptural model occupies the terrain between art and architecture, the fanciful and the useful, the visionary and the real. It is a work in which McElheny successfully avoids the twin pitfalls of postmodernism, neither succumbing to simplistic appropriation nor adopting a glib, hyper-ironic stance.

Scheerbart and Taut were evangelists for glass, believing that it possessed spiritual qualities that would transform, and reform, humanity. They envisioned a brave and perfect new world of illuminated colored-glass architecture rising out of the ashes of war-ravaged Europe. In their dreamscape, glass towers would crown every mountaintop and the world would be drenched in brilliant color and dynamic light. "It would be as if the earth were adorned with sparkling jewels and enamels," Scheerbart wrote, "...as splendid as in the gardens of the Arabian Nights. We should then have a paradise on earth, and no need to watch in longing expectation for the paradise in heaven."

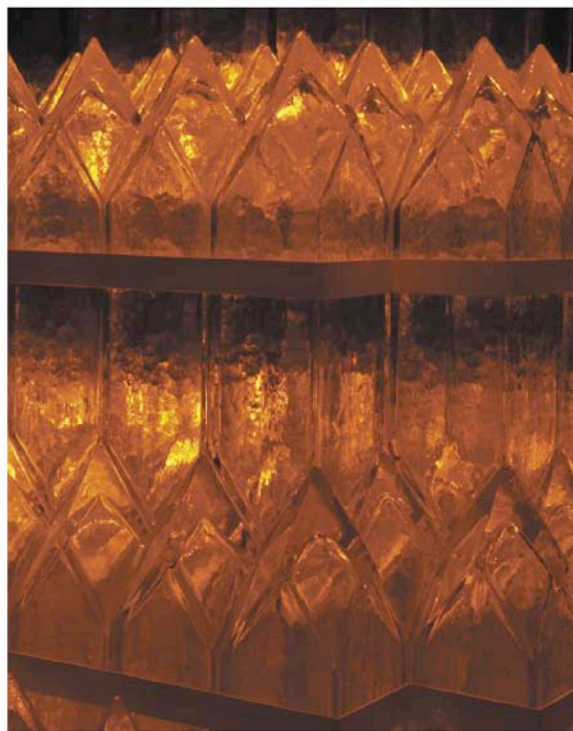
The kaleidoscopic visions of Scheerbart and Taut were decidedly not in keeping with the doctrines and restraints of many other modernists. In some of his previous work, McElheny has explored the modernist philosophy of one such visionary, the Austrian architect Adolph Loos. In 1908, Loos wrote a controversial but highly influential essay, "Ornament and Crime," in which he advocated abolishing the use of superfluous ornamentation in design. Loos regarded the needlessly decorative, the non-functional, as primitive and narcissistic, an impediment to progress and a perversion of truth to materials. He deplored "the great damage and depredations the revival of ornament had done to our aesthetic development," but proclaimed, "We have gone beyond ornament.... Soon the streets of the cities will shine like white walls! Like Zion, the Holy City, Heaven's capital. The fulfillment will be ours."

"I feel a certain sense of repulsion at Loos's belief that the human impulse to decorate was wrong, that formal purity was somehow more 'moral,'" McElheny has said. "Perhaps this attempt

Cover: Josiah McElheny. *The Alpine Cathedral and the City-Crown*, 2007. Installation of glass, metal, wood, Plexiglas, colored electric lights. 14' x 8' x 9' 9". Courtesy of the artist and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, and Donald Young Gallery, Chicago. Installation photography by Robin Holland



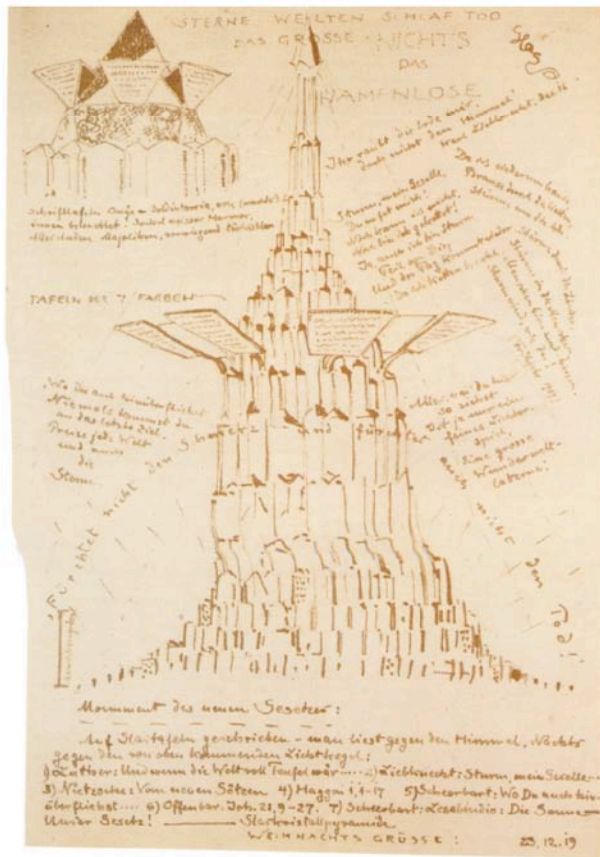
Bruno Taut, *The Crystal Mountain*. From *Alpine Architecture*, Hagen, 1919–20. Pen and gray and black ink, brush and gray ink, preliminary pencil drawing, on paper. 49.6 x 50 cm



Josiah McElheny. *The Alpine Cathedral and the City-Crown* (detail)



Josiah McElheny, *Ornament and Crime*. 2002. Handblown glass, wood, fabric, electric lighting. 5' x 4' x 1'. Image courtesy of the artist and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, and Donald Young Gallery, Chicago. Collection of Los Angeles County Museum of Art



Bruno Taut, letter to the Crystal Chain, December 23, 1919

to eradicate difference in the name of progress is the crime of modernism itself."

McElheny confronted Loos's modernist polemics by taking them to their most ominous and forbidding extremes. In such works as *Kärntner Bar*, *Vienna, 1908*, *Adolf Loos* (2001) and *Ornament and Crime* (2002), he described a process of erasure of anything flawed, deviant, or anomalous in favor of an abstract, reductivist purity.

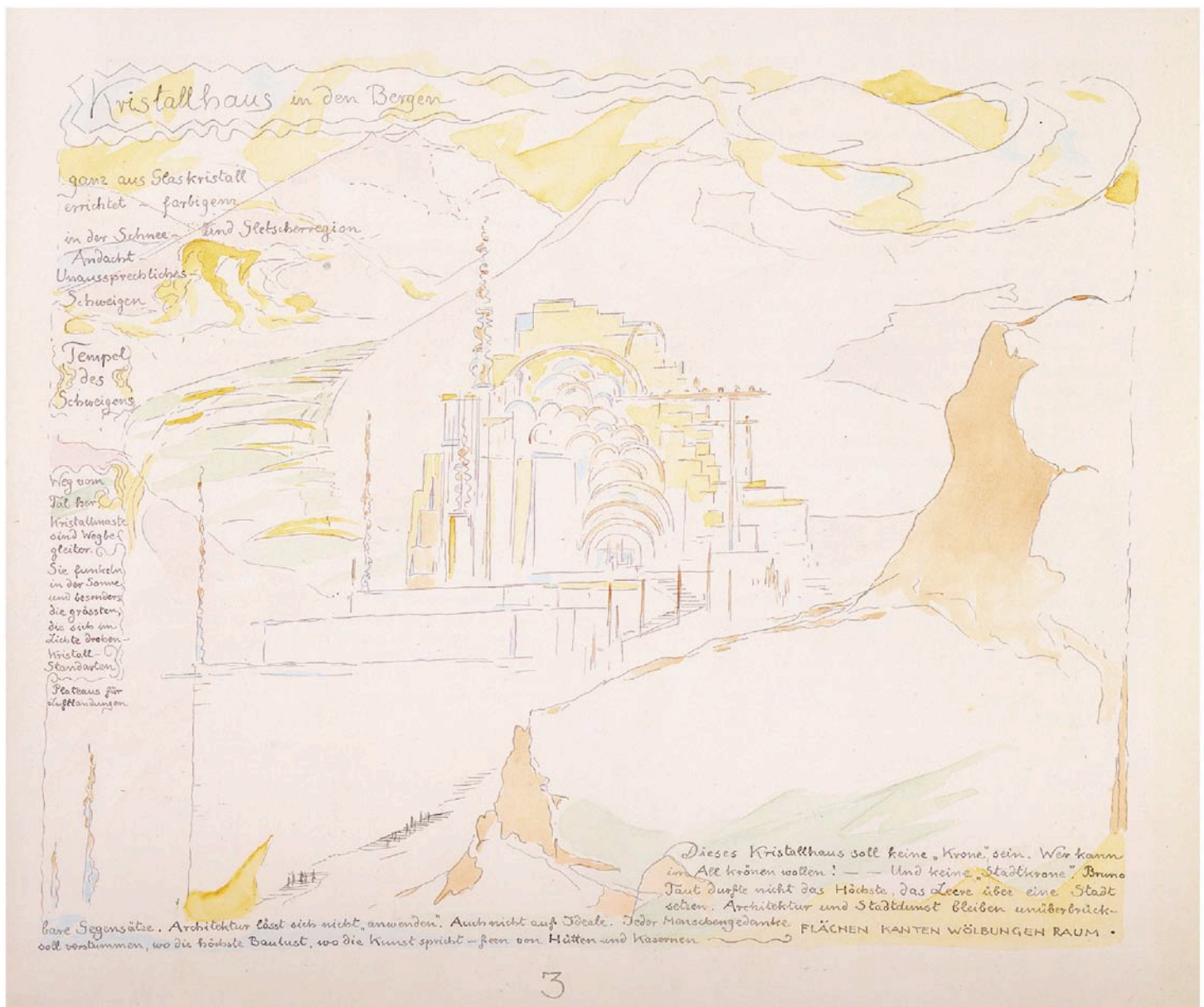
In his newest work, *The Alpine Cathedral and the City-Crown*, McElheny moves in a different direction. He reimagines the visionary schemes of Scheerbart and Taut by celebrating their virtues of excess, emphasizing the sensuous, the theatrical, the irrational, the impure, and the transcendent. In this installation, McElheny offers a contemporary perspective on Scheerbart and Taut's aspirations and ideals, but he goes deeper, asking what it means to be visionary. He evokes their sublime glass utopia, and their dreams of spiritual fulfillment and social amelioration, in his model-scale landscape of two abstract, crystalline structures, the *Alpine Cathedral* and the *City-Crown*. These "glass houses" are three-dimensional manifestations of what Scheerbart and Taut had only created on paper.

The two prismatic glass modules are displayed on a contoured wooden base—the *Alpine Cathedral* on mountain topography and the *City-Crown* on an octagonal grid—and lit from above and below by kaleidoscopic lights. By fabricating a series of glass planes whose crystalline surfaces constantly shift, shimmer, and dissolve depending on the viewer's relative position and the changing effects of colored light, McElheny makes a unified view impossible, and encourages imagination and irresolution to come into play.

In addition, McElheny has chosen to make his glass modules recognizably crystalline, but intentionally imperfect. This rough-hewn, handcrafted appearance emphasizes the work's resemblance to an architectural model: an ideal concept becoming a tangible reality. But its very imperfections also suggest why pure utopian visions cannot be realized. And by calling attention to the beauty and attraction of imperfect elements, McElheny seems to be criticizing the modernism that sought to erase them from the face of art and architecture.

Scheerbart and Taut were political activists with pacifist yearnings, and they shared with Loos a faith in architecture to heal and improve mankind. They, too, took a pragmatic interest in technological innovation, and promoted materials like glass for their hygienic, durable, and spiritual properties. But they foresaw other means to achieve their ends. In 1914 Scheerbart exclaimed, "I should like to resist most vehemently the undecorated, 'functional' style, for it is inartistic.... Ornamentation in the glass house will evolve entirely of its own accord." Five years later, following the end of the Great War, Taut decried "incessant utility...forks, railway trains, lavatories and not to forget cannons, bombs, murder implements! Merely desiring utility and comfort without a higher idea is boredom, causes quarreling, strife and war."

After a failed attempt at parliamentary politics, Taut and his fellow architect-activists (among them Walter Gropius, the future inaugural director of Bauhaus) turned inwards; they formed a secret epistolary society known as the *Gläserne Kette*, or *Crystal Chain*. Although it lasted only from November 1919 through December 1920, the society provided a setting in which they could



develop many of their utopian ideas.

Taut's own architectural fantasies would be published in a book entitled *Alpine Architecture* in 1919. In one evocative series of drawings, Taut envisions a sublime journey along "The Path in Wildbrook Canyon," a progression upward along a raging stream spanned by aqueducts of thick glass, beyond a dam ringing with the bell-clear notes of harmoniously tuned Aeolian harps, to a snow-capped mountain peak. There, literally carved out of mountain rock, can be found "The Crystal Building," a temple for silent, peaceful contemplation, a tower consecrated to beauty and decorated with natural *jugendstil* forms, a dazzling profusion of colored glass, and reflecting pools of water.

In celebrating this vision and transplanting it to the present, McElheny proposes not an anti-modernism but an *alter-modernism*, an idea of utopia that is inclusive and embraces a diversity of thought and feeling. To better appreciate this, it is revealing to consider three vital aspects of McElheny's sculptural installation: the material of glass, the form of the crystal, and the structure of the model.

Bruno Taut, *The Crystal Building*. From *Alpine Architecture*, Hagen, 1919–20. Pen and gray ink and watercolor, preliminary pencil drawing, on paper. 41.8 x 55.2 cm

Glass

Depending on light conditions, viewing positions, and degrees of transparency, glass can be experienced and read in different and sometimes contradictory ways. Glass has a literal, tactile presence when light reflects off its surface. But when light passes through it completely, glass can signify an absence or even a void. This paradox can be understood both materially and metaphorically. Transparent glass, by dissolving the boundary between interior and exterior, hides no secrets; reflected glass, by creating a membrane, obscures or veils what lies within.

For centuries, architects have experimented with this phenomenology of glass, motivated by both aesthetic and moral concerns. As the historian Anthony Vidler has observed, “Modernity has been haunted by the myth of transparency: transparency of the self to nature, of the self to the other, of all selves to society, and all this is represented, if not constructed, from Jeremy Bentham to Le Corbusier, by a universal transparency of building materials, spatial penetration, and the ubiquitous flow of air, light, and physical movement.” Taut and Scheerbart did not regard this perfect exposure of the self to the world as an ideal. Instead they advocated using various layers of glazed colored glass, opaque glass, and clear glass to create a kind of illusionistic transparency. Effects of distance, proximity, and silhouette would reveal and conceal themselves in seductive fashion as the viewer progressed through their spaces.

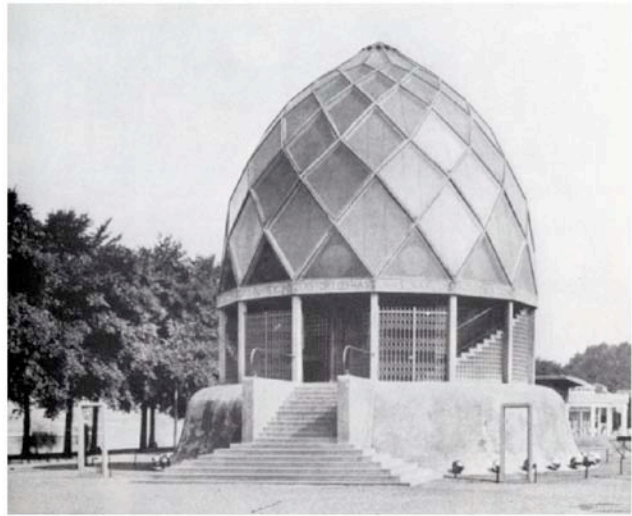
In many of their descriptions and visual renderings, glass seems to move ceaselessly among various states: frozen, sharp, and brittle; iridescent, nacreous, and opaline; shimmering, soft, and fluid. The architectural critic Adolf Behne, in praising Taut’s Glass House, a pavilion built for the German Werkbund Exhibition in Cologne in 1914 and dedicated to Scheerbart, extolled glass as “the least fixed of materials transformed with every change of the atmosphere, infinitely rich in relations, mirroring the ‘below’ in the ‘above,’ animated, full of spirit and alive!”

McElheny’s sculptural installation playfully calls attention to these illusions and allusions. He uses glass as Scheerbart and Taut did: as a stimulant for the imagination. The glass within *The Alpine Cathedral and the City-Crown* appears to be in perpetual flux, both as a material and as an idea.

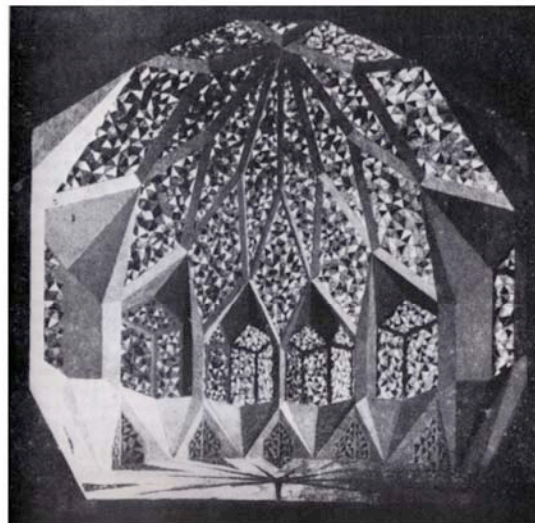
Crystal

Scheerbart and Taut sought nothing less than individual salvation and the regeneration of society. They envisioned a synesthetic environment of trembling light, flowing water, dulcet music, and crystalline glass to bedazzle the senses and effect a spiritual and political transformation. In “The Interpretation of the Glass Dream: Expressionist Architecture and the History of the Crystal Metaphor,” Rosemary Haag Bletter writes, “Behind such intentionally disorienting and novel forms lies an extended, if not always continuous history of glass and crystal symbolism. Bruno Taut’s statement ‘The Gothic cathedral is a prelude to glass architecture’ and one of the couplets written by the poet Paul Scheerbart for Taut’s Glass House of 1914, ‘Light seeks to penetrate the whole cosmos / And is alive in crystal,’ give a clearer indication than the designs themselves of the mystical tradition behind this imagery.”

The glass dream dates to descriptions of King Solomon’s Temple in the Old Testament, and has been sustained and reinvented throughout the centuries in Christian, Jewish, and Arabic literature and visual culture. As a potent symbol of transcendence and metamorphosis, the crystal held great appeal for Taut and



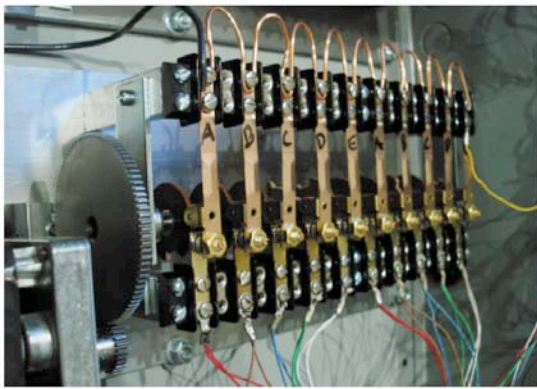
Bruno Taut, Glashaus, Werkbund exhibition, Cologne, 1914



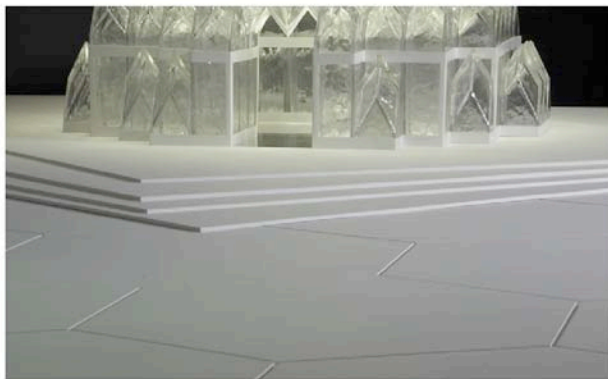
Wassili Luckhardt, *Cult Building*. From *Ruf zum Bauen* (Berlin: Verlag Ernst Wasmuth, 1920). Luckhardt was a member of the Crystal Chain.



Wenzel Hablik, *Crystal Castle by the Sea*, 1914. Oil on canvas. 200 x 100 cm. Hablik was a member of the Crystal Chain



Josiah McElheny, *The Alpine Cathedral and the City-Crown* (detail view of mechanical lighting system)



Josiah McElheny, *The Alpine Cathedral and the City-Crown* (detail)

Scheerbart, and they took particular pleasure in its Oriental and Gothic iconographies. With the intimate scale of a late Gothic chapel, and a pear-shaped dome that evokes an Islamic mosque, Taut's Glass House of 1914 is a syncretic blend of Eastern and Western architectural styles.

In addition, Taut's vision of a purely crystalline glass structure that "lets in the light of the sun, the moon, and the stars" recalls an Arabic legend of the early Middle Ages, an account written by Abu Mansur around the tenth century: "The aerial city is erected by the genii at the order of Solomon, who bids them build a city or palace of crystal a hundred thousand fathoms in extent and a thousand stories high, of solid foundations but with a dome airy and lighter than water; the whole to be transparent so that the light of the sun and the moon may penetrate its walls."

A light that penetrates and dissolves forms, that opens outward to the cosmos, could also be found in the stained glass windows of Gothic cathedrals. As Bletter notes, medieval legends of the Holy Grail and the Gothic cathedral derived their glass-crystal symbolism from the Revelation of St. John in the New Testament: "John's vision of the New Jerusalem... points up the interchangeability of light, glass, crystal, precious stones, and gold as metaphors of a transcendent life." Taut and Scheerbart had an almost medieval faith in the regenerative powers of the crystal. They, too, would erect a crystalline paradise to be inhabited by the saved: an Alpine Cathedral in which to contemplate the heavens, and a City-Crown in which to instigate radical political change here on earth.

But like any fairy tale, this glass dream represents a wish that has yet to be—and perhaps never will be—fulfilled. And it is this aspect of the crystal metaphor that is particularly significant to McElheny's project. His sculptural model, with its opulent colors and shape-shifting crystal forms, is Oriental and Gothic in spirit. He has even devised a mechanical system to create kaleidoscopic lighting effects—much like Taut's mechanical lighting system in the Glass House—that compel the eye to wander, with no fixed point or sharply defined space on which to rest.

The crystal modules of the Alpine Cathedral and City-Crown seem to dissolve in a wash of color. Like the Grail, tantalizing yet elusive, they represent both a desire for a lost paradise and a yearning for a golden age that is yet to come.

The Model

Gothic cathedrals embodied what the twentieth-century American architect Louis Kahn called "the great scale model of the Medieval universe." They answered man's longing for a building that would show him his place in the universe, his ethos.

For Scheerbart and Taut, the horrors of World War I shattered this holistic sensibility. They believed that in the face of such all-encompassing death and ruin, man had lost faith and had become despairing and alienated. Their dream was to create a new "great scale model"—a total architecture that would restore order, harmony, and providence. Josiah McElheny's sculptural installation offers one view of how that dream might have looked. His model can be understood in both the literal and figurative senses of the word, both as a structure (a model *of* something), and as a concept (a model *for* something).

Architects today differentiate between two types of models: the *study model*, which they use to explore ideas and solve problems, and the *presentation model*, which portrays their vision to the client. Because McElheny's sculptural installation is not meant to be

functional and would never actually be built as architecture, it can playfully subvert this conventional dichotomy. If a study model reveals flaws and virtues, and if a presentation model manifests an ideal, then McElheny's project is able to do both at once. It can point to a past vision of a future paradise—Scheerbart and Taut's utopia. But it can also call attention to human imperfections, through its worn-down glass surfaces, and human follies, through its self-conscious theatrical effects, that make this vision of utopia so difficult to realize.

The Idea of Utopia

Cynicism and scorn at the idea of human progress, of the dream of a perfect society on earth, are not unreasonable after a century of totalitarian experiments, whether Stalin's Russia, Mao's China, or Hitler's Germany, all driven by the murderous conceit that future bliss justifies present sacrifice.

But McElheny passionately evokes another, more hopeful kind of utopia: the kind that offers a precious glimpse of an impossible world in which we give everything we have to others, but lose nothing of ourselves. It is the utopia of the artistic imagination, democratic and open-ended, inventive and unresolved.

This is art as a collective, humanist enterprise, a *conspiracy* in the original sense of the word—as in, a *breathing together*. The visionary, the artist, and the viewer conspire to give meaning and value to the work.

This notion of a conspiracy unfolding in the present requires a continuity with the past. McElheny's project is rooted in a secret oral tradition of glassmaking practices that have been passed down through the ages, often by craftsmen whose names have been lost to history, and yet its provocative and knowing confu-



Josiah McElheny. *The Alpine Cathedral and the City-Crown* (detail)

Josiah McElheny. *The Alpine Cathedral and the City-Crown* (details)



sion of fact and fantasy invites the contemporary viewer's active engagement. "The subject matter of my work," McElheny has observed, "assumes that the anonymous, artisanal, industrial activity of specific glass-factory cultures could be viewed as a complex, creative, and meaning-generating activity."

Without a profound knowledge of these cultures, as well as his own remarkable skills, McElheny could not have created the different types of glass modules contained in this work. His unique process, the result of countless hours of experimentation, combines ancient glassblowing techniques with state-of-the-art graphite molds. This alliance of artisanal traditions and cutting-edge technologies extends to many other aspects of the project. McElheny enlisted twenty specialists, each belonging to a discipline with its own rich traditions and secrets, to assist him in fabricating the installation. Among them were an industrial designer who develops computer models, a moldmaker, a lighting engineer, an architect, a metalworker, and a cabinetmaker.

By collaborating with such a community of specialists, and by encouraging the viewer's open-ended engagement with the work, McElheny has kept faith with the idea of art as a conspiratorial endeavor. In a letter written in 1919 to his wife Hedwig, Taut envisioned a day when like-minded souls would join together for this singular purpose: "Lonely great beauty as the work of men—can't this be piety as well? ... It is so marvelous not merely to carry the great sensations alone and silently into the woods, but to let them become art." Seen in this light, McElheny's *The Alpine Cathedral and the City-Crown* is a continuation of the ancient glass dream, a dazzling link in Taut's Crystal Chain. It is both entirely of the moment and rooted in the tradition of utopian visionaries.

By erasing the boundaries between the pleasures of the mind and the delights of the senses, McElheny has created for the viewer an impossible space of simultaneous excitement and satisfied yearnings. The three defining elements of his installation—the model that measures reality against an ideal; the crystal as a timeless symbol of desire; and the glass with its illusionistic transparency—coalesce to form an image of utopia as a shimmering, beckoning mirage.



Bruno Taut, *Firs in Ice and Snow*. From *Alpine Architecture*, Hagen, 1919–20. Pen and gray ink and watercolor, preliminary pencil drawing, on paper. 46 x 41.5 cm

The artist's biography and selected bibliography are available on pages 9–11.

The Museum of Modern Art

Projects 84: Josiah McElheny

BIOGRAPHY

Josiah McElheny

BORN

1966, United States

Lives and works in New York, New York

SELECTED EDUCATION

1989 BFA, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2006 *Modernity 1929–1965*, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, New York

2004 *Total Reflective Abstraction*, Donald Young Gallery, Chicago, Illinois

2003 *Antipodes: Josiah McElheny*, White Cube, London, United Kingdom (catalogue)

2002 Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, Santiago de Compostela, Spain (catalogue)

2001 *The Metal Party*, The Public Art Fund, New York, New York (catalogue)
The Metal Party, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, California

1999 The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, Massachusetts (catalogue)
An Historical Anecdote About Fashion, Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington (catalogue)

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2006 *Super Vision*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Massachusetts (catalogue)

2005 *Part Object Part Sculpture*, Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio (catalogue)

2004 *Printemps de septembre à Toulouse: In Extremis*, Les Abbatoirs, Toulouse, France (catalogue)

2003 *Warped Space*, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, California (catalogue)

2001 *Beau Monde: Toward a Redeemed Cosmopolitanism*, Fourth International Biennial, SITE Santa Fe, Santa Fe, New Mexico (catalogue)

2000 *2000 Biennial*, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York (catalogue)

1998 *Young Americans: Part II*, The Saatchi Gallery, London, United Kingdom (brochure)

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2006 Molesworth, Helen, ed. *Notes for a Sculpture and a Film*. Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, 2006. Texts by Josiah McElheny, Helen Molesworth, and David Weinberg.

2002 Morrill, Apollonia, ed. *Josiah McElheny: The Metal Party*. New York: The Public Art Fund; San Francisco: Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2002. Texts by Glen Helfand, Christine Mehring, Peter Nesbit, and Ingrid Schaffner.

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1999 *Josiah McElheny*. Boston: The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 1999. Texts by Jennifer R. Gross and Dave Hickey.

An Historical Anecdote About Fashion. Seattle: Henry Art Gallery, 1999. Texts by Richard Martin, Victoria Milne, Ingrid Schaffner, and Mark Wigley.

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