

They Wanted to See the Stars Again

Lenore Malen's *New Society for Universal Harmony*

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By Nora Griffin

“The construction of life is at present in the power of facts far more than of convictions, and of such facts as have scarcely ever become the basis of convictions.”

--Walter Benjamin, “One-Way Street”

“She did not notice the noise, for she had been born with it in her ears”

--E.M Forster, “The Machine Stops”

A visitor to Lenore Malen's *New Society for Universal Harmony* could be forgiven for not knowing how to interpret the objects, texts, photographs and video on view. They are displayed in a manner that is equal parts school science project, surrealist parlor game and historical re-enactment, leading to the assumption of a reality that may or may not be only an artist's fantasy. The presentation is bookmarked between two thoroughly absorbing and maddeningly elusive figures: Dr. Franz Anton Mesmer, the 18th century practitioner of magnet-induced psychic healing and hypnotism; and Dr. F.A. Mesmer, his 21st century disciple.

Mesmerism, from which we get the word “mesmerize”, was based on the belief in the power of “animal magnetism,” the idea that a physician could manipulate the human body's magnetic fluids in order to bring about an equilibrium curative to physical and emotional suffering. Well into the 19th century, Dr. Franz Anton Mesmer's healing treatments gained widespread fame and notoriety, in large part due to their theatricality. Patients were treated collectively around an alleged magnetized object, such as a tree or a vessel filled with fluid. Mesmer was a steadfast believer in the scientific platform for his patient's bouts of hysteria and trance-induced obedience. After being thoroughly sanitized of its latent mysticism and pseudo-science, 20th century psychoanalytic practice came to understand Mesmer's discovery as a prototype for patient-therapist transference and hypnotism.

Malen assumes multiple roles as an artist, from Mesmer scholar and archivist, to performer and writer. Her chief role is that of F.A. Mesmer, the female leader of The New Society For Universal Harmony, a present-day utopian cult that revitalizes her namesake's lost healing practice in the bucolic setting of Athol Springs, NY. First conceived in 2000, Malen has expanded her project to encompass a wide-range of media to reach an equally broad audience. She has delivered lectures as F.A. Mesmer in art galleries as well as scientific institutes, created video installations, and even performed a magnetic healing as F.A. Mesmer for the BBC miniseries, "Dickens in America." Malen transforms her living artwork effortlessly from an art world in-joke, to an almost plausible science lesson, to pop culture entertainment. In 2005 Granary Books published *The New Society for Universal Harmony*, a comprehensive narrative of the cult told through the testimonials of "harmonite" members, and accompanied by essays on contemporary supernatural phenomena presented as scientific "discoveries." The book's appendix alone can be read as a poetics of historical research and fabrication that takes its cues more from the dream-logic of Jorge Luis Borges than from traditional scholarly annotations.

The current installation presents the two Mesmers, side-by-side, as equally accomplished cult figures. Their histories are laid out as archives, displayed in portable, cardboard vitrines, a no-frills approach that one might expect from a utopian cult with a mission to educate the public. Franz Anton Mesmer's illustrated writings, reminiscent of Paul Klee, are presented alongside the ever-expanding archive of images and texts that make up The New Society. The conflation of historical records with personal inventions can also be found in David Wilson's Museum of Jurassic Technology, in Culver City, Los Angeles. In Wilson's "museum" the implicit fact-based authority of a historical display is undermined by improbably fake dioramas juxtaposed with straight-faced wall text. As with Malen's installation, the visitor is constantly sifting through levels of reality to find the "truth" of the exhibit, that obscure comfort zone which never fully rears its head.

The photographs on display are both candid records of The New Society's experience with magnetic treatments and depictions of staged mini-dramas. Men and women of all

ages are dramatically lit while engaged in Mesmer-inspired treatments with various props such as ropes, magnet blocks, and blankets. The strangeness of these activities is reinforced by a minimally designed backdrop which at times suggests an ad-hoc basement laboratory. The tension between theatricality and psychic documentation is reminiscent of the photography of Roger Ballen and Francesca Woodman. In “Blocks Were Coalescing in His Head,” a man’s face is obscured by a sculptural formation of blocks, striking a pose similar to Man Ray’s portraits of sitters overshadowed by totemic everyday objects. In “The Color Lesson” A woman with a magnetic probe attached to her head is supported in the arms of a younger man, the Mesmer accoutrement of curling wires and magnetic pieces joining them in an alien embrace. This is a form of intimacy that is as difficult to define as it is hard to dismiss.

Like the “magnetic fluid” of the human body, Malen’s project is itself fluid, bridging disciplines and subverting the notion of a single authorship or creative voice. “Portraits 2000-2007” presents black and white headshots of un-identified harmonites, behind whose dreamy countenances emerge the faces of recognizable artists, art critics and writers. Many have contributed first-hand testimonials, ranging from the tongue-in-cheek humor of Jonathan Ames to art historian and curator Pepe Karmel’s straightforward historical analysis. In keeping with a real cult’s uniformity, there is never an overt hint at dissension in the ranks of The New Society. A steadfast belief in the importance and ingenuity of the Mesmer cure remains the lodestar.

“Be Not Afraid” (2007), a twin channel video, is the latest installment in the on-going documentation of The New Society for Universal Harmony. Edited by Malen and Rupert Bohle, “Be Not Afraid” is a re-enactment of one of the first documented cases of magnetic healing in the late 18th century. The action is played out amid the derelict monuments of the 1939/1964 World’s Fair site in Flushing, Queens. The harmonites wear trademark all-white lab suits and matching caps with mysterious black X’s; a science-fiction vision of sanitized, attractive people cavorting on a planet all their own. A woman member assumes the role of a Greek chorus, singing in serious intonations about “electro magnets” and “sappy juices of animal fluid,” as the text of her song appears below on the

screen, a touch of self-parody as well as an incitement for the viewer to take part in the song. Vintage footage of families entering the fair and witnessing the pavilions that offered “better living through technology,” is juxtaposed with harmonites entering trances, tossing beach balls, joining hands around a magnetized tree and other jovial behavior befitting a sunny day with like-minded friends. As another example of futuristic dreams put into action, footage of NASA astronauts buoyantly entering a spacecraft also conveys the optimism of mid-century America.

The polish of the video’s conceptually framing doesn’t take away from the intensity of the harmonites’ seemingly real transformative experience. Their behavior is reminiscent of the Hauka, a religious sect in Africa, seen through the lens of Jean Rouch in his documentary “Les Maitres Fous” (1955). In the film, townspeople gather at a meeting-house to assume, in trance-like states, the identities of 19th century French colonial rulers. Frothing at the mouth and screaming orders to each other, the ritual-drama culminates in members eating the “forbidden” food of dog meat, and subsequently “awakening” as if from a dream, to their former selves. Like the Hauka, the harmonites embody the ghosts of the past as they enter a space of paranormal adventure and transcendence.

At the 1939 World’s Fair, a time capsule of the minutiae and masterpieces of the day was buried in the earth with instructions that it be opened in 5,000 years. Malen’s living artwork, The New Society for Universal Harmony, shares the same delicate balance of a philosophical conjecture posed as science experiment. In the end, we can’t help but speculate if the capsule will ever be opened, or if the harmonites have found an inner peace through Mesmerism. To be given the chance to believe is all that matters.