

MESMER AS METAPHOR

LENORE MALEN'S FICTIONS OF UTOPIA

In a 1964 conversation with Theodor Adorno, Ernst Bloch describes the utopian wish in terms of the irrepressible: "Each and every criticism of imperfection, incompleteness, intolerance and impatience already without a doubt presupposes the conception of, and longing for, a possible perfection." The word *possible* entwines the wish with something perpetually out of reach. There is the problem of death, which, Bloch says, "disturbs one constantly so that one cannot be satisfied, no matter how great the satisfaction is and no matter how many economic miracles and welfare states there are."

Lenore Malen's multimedia project "The New Society for Universal Harmony," documented in a recent book and in several gallery and museum presentations, simulates the spell of utopian yearning (and its familiar decay into authoritarian ideology) in a slyly deflationary paradigm of illness and heal-

ing, expanded outward from individual malaise and cure to an idealized, therapeutic communitarianism. Malen's model utopia is an elaborately woven fiction—a restaging, in photographs, videos and texts, of the "magnetic healing" practiced in the years leading up to the French Revolution by Franz Anton Mesmer and his followers at the Bourbon court, where Mesmer established himself after leaving Vienna in indignation (and some disgrace). *Sociétés de l'Harmonie Universelle* were established throughout France, with scattered branches in Switzerland, Italy and Germany, by Mesmer's disciples (and later adversaries) Nicolas Bergasse and Guillaume Kornmann.

Mesmer hypothesized—or rather, claimed as ontological fact—an invisible "magnetic fluid" permeating all matter, which could be healthfully redistributed in the human body by means of small magnets directly placed on the patient. Later, he found that the same salubrious effects could be produced by "magnetized" baths; for large group treatments, patients were roped to "magnetized" trees. Mesmer further discovered that the mesmerist's own magnetic charge could induce a cathartic crisis in patients, who underwent this trauma in pad-



View of Kathryn, performance and videos, from Lenore Malen's ongoing project "The New Society for Universal Harmony"; at Participant Inc., 2005.

BY GARY INDIANA

tion of patients' facial expressions, which he correlated with universal emotional states, and Jean-Martin Charcot's production, via hypnosis, of hysterical symptoms, both working with patients at Salpêtrière Hospital.

Charcot's demonstrations, landmarks in the theatricalization of medicine, had a significant influence on Pierre Janet and Freud (though Freud soon favored private therapy and minimized the role of hypnosis in psychoanalysis), while Duchenne's photographic records served as a primary source for Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. As Robert Darnton illustrates in *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (1968), mesmerism was not fundamentally out of step with the experimental medical practices of its time. Mesmer's therapy often produced empirically verifiable results, though Mesmer and subsequent magnetizers misinterpreted what brought them about. (The *Sociétés* themselves, with which the apolitical Mesmer had little to do—though they are of interest to Malen—frequently functioned as safe cover for revolutionary meetings.) Do-it-yourself science, particularly anything to do with ballooning, electricity or defiance of gravity, was a veritable mania in France before the revolution (and remained so, in the figure of the wild-haired, crackpot

ded rooms, emerging calm and much improved. The role of suggestion in Mesmer's therapy was always disputed. This barred him from the important medical societies of France. With Marie Antoinette's patronage, he simply founded his own "alternative" medical establishment, setting criteria for training and licensing mesmeric practitioners. A certain proprietary megalomania on the part of Mesmer apparently became onerous to those best disposed to support him. Mesmerism gradually lost its cachet, though not before numerous schisms and breakaway groups formed around discrete elements of magnetic therapy. One schismatic technique was "magnetic sleep" (a less crisis-provoking phenomenon), or induced somnambulism, practiced by Armand de Chastenet, Marquis de Puységur; later treatments included G.-B. Duchenne de Boulogne's electro-stimula-

"The New Society for Universal Harmony," Malen's imaginary community of modern-day mesmeric healing, takes the form of pseudo-documentary photographs, videos, case histories and testimonials. Together they evoke the utopianism, terror and inadvertent comedy of historical precedents.

inventor, right up through Céline's *Death on the Installment Plan*); works central to the Enlightenment, like Rousseau's *Social Contract*, reached a much smaller public in pre-revolutionary France than did pseudo-scientific and spiritualist pamphlets.

While science and technology largely define the modern world, mysticism and irrationality pervade it in a paradoxical way. In our peculiar time, it's unremarkable to find superstition and magical thinking disseminated through the hyper-rational vectors of mass media. Surveys indicate that a huge percentage of Americans, for example, not only believe in God, but also in angels, the devil and other invisible beings. This may or may not reflect a general somatic awareness of Sartre's "God-shaped hole" as the salient feature of personal experience under the dominion of commodity capitalism. Or, as the title of the Adorno-Bloch dialogue has it, "Something's Missing."

Within Lenore Malen's pastiche of defective utopias (which incorporates, as overt anachronisms, the social utopianism of Fourier and other fabulists of the ideal), there's an earnest trace of Bloch's unassuageable "yearning for home." Simply stated, human beings want the impossible, a wholeness that the reality of death denies us. Although Malen's *gesamt-kunstwerk* is partly an intellectual burlesque, an ingenious send-up of true believers following a charismatic leader, it's also a work of mourning—for the past, for noble ideals that came to grief in the last century, and perhaps for the optimistic perspectives that science itself has demolished.

In her remarkable book published last year (*The New Society for Universal Harmony*, Granary Books, 2005, for which I'll here disclose having given a fulsome jacket quote), Malen documents a recrudescing "Society for Universal Harmony" located in Athol Springs, New York. She writes in the guise of an investigative reporter who becomes, equivocally, a devotee; Malen also assumes the identity of "F.A. Mesmer," a female scientist



View of a 2003 installation from "The New Society for Universal Harmony"; at Castle Gallery, College of New Rochelle, New York.

incarnating Mesmer. Case studies document symptoms and treatments of numerous "Harmonites." Testimonials from real individuals—Irving Sandler, Geoffrey O'Brien, Nancy Princenthal, Jonathan Ames—complement the book's mixture of historical materials (engravings, formulae, photographs, book frontispieces) with staged photographs of magnetic therapy.

The narrative Malen constructs around the Harmonite colony follows the arc of many such endeavors (of which quite a few have originated in upstate New York, before migrating to Utah and California): after a period of separation, Malen's investigator returns to Athol Springs to discover the New Society split into factions. One has repudiated the "communal wish" in favor of

a private desire, based on the intrinsic inequality of people; these cultists have constructed (shades of Fourier) a seasonally re-created city on a frozen lake, its economy exclusively based on ice fishing. The remaining Mesmer loyalists vow to carry on the egalitarian dream.

Malen's book is a fascinating artifact, darkly funny and troubling, that taps into the restive spirit and far-ranging anxieties of the protracted millenarian moment we seem to inhabit. Its eerie echoes of Anna Kavan, Virginia Woolf and Aldous Huxley mingle the delirium of liberation with the constriction of dreams that won't come true. The book gives a storybook roundedness to a many-jointed work, though "The New Society" is, in fact, more open-ended, speculative and restless than its narrative condensation suggests. Parts of the project directly refer to the iconography and speculative writing of spiritualism, others to Duchenne's Salpêtrière exhibitions; there is even reference to a possible afternoon tea shared by James Ensor and Madame Blavatsky. Malen also invites an intensely skeptical, often droll view of psychotherapy as a fragmentary response to a collective malaise.

Malen's choice of Mesmer, rather than Freud or Darwin, as the presiding spirit of "The New Society" reflects an interest in "the madness of

Even the most casual-looking photos convey a spectral remove from quotidian reality, an involvement with things unseen.

crowds,” in manipulative ideas that move like brush fire through societies and in the trance-work of mass media; while scaled like a cottage industry, “The New Society” has distinct undertones of “New Age” preoccupations, with electromagnetic data and astronomical curiosities standing in for zodiac charts and healing crystals. As a totality, Malen’s work seems most directly influenced by Arendt, Adorno, Bloch and other analysts of mass phenomena as expressed in the trope of collective hypnosis.

Collective hypnosis is itself a metaphor for the scientifically engineered inculcation of beliefs and belief systems. A century after Freud’s nephew, Edward Bernays, invented public relations, beliefs in Western societies are so readily sculpted by mass media that their utter transience is taken for granted. In Asia, where the culture of technology has been superimposed on agrarian, animistic societies, a lot of contemporary works of art depict hypnosis as capable of overcoming individual will—the very thing hypnosis (as conceived by Mesmer and his followers) is said to be incapable of. This concept of mass hypnosis, deployed as the embodiment of dark social and



Benny, 2003, digital photograph.

utopian conundrum: the clarity of the wish, perpetually muddled by irremediable reality. History isn’t pushed out of the frame; as narrated in the book’s “postscript,” the society fractures, in fact, as a result of personal and communal stresses precipitated by 9/11.

Some of the strongest features of “The New Society” figure in its performance and installation pieces—for example, videos of Harmonite talking



Six stills from the video *I Don't Have Proof*, 2001-05, approx. 9 minutes. All images this article courtesy the artist.

political forces molding collective affect, appears in modern Western art as early as Fritz Lang’s *Mabuse* films; Siegfried Kracauer’s *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* charts the career of this metaphor throughout early German Expressionism.

The theme predominates in the contemporary genre cinemas of South Korea and Japan, in the films of Kiyoshi Kurosawa (*Cure*, *Séance*, *Doppelgänger*, *Bright Future*), Lee Jong-Hyuk (*H*), Yoon Dae-Hyun (*Face*), Takashi Miike (*Audition*, *One Missed Call*, *MPD Detective*), Hideo Nakata (*Dark Water*) and Park Chanwook (*Oldboy*). These films take the total malleability of consciousness for granted as a condition of commodity capitalism. They indicate a rupture of a previous state of wholeness or completion, which may itself be a nostalgic fiction.

Malen complicates the metaphor of hypnosis and the theme of manipulation by making “The New Society” and its avatar quite benign, compared with similar entrepreneurial ventures in “self-liberation.” Her therapeutic community shows no inclination to turn into the Manson Family, and F.A. Mesmer, if a little brusque with interviewers, is more absent than present, and seems committed to making people less miserable. Without this ambiguity, Malen’s project would simply become a polemical illustration. Instead, it carries the ineluctable force of Bloch’s

heads recounting their symptoms, their faces and voices dissolving into one another; Harmonites in orange robes and lingerie-like headgear performing ritual movements in an austere mountain lake; Harmonites with conical appendages strapped to their bodies, basking around a needle-like flume emitted from a massive rock. Malen has staged enactments of pseudotherapy in galleries (as at Participant Inc. in Manhattan in April 2005, where she used professional actors), and delivers deadpan lectures as F.A. Mesmer. Spectators at these events sometimes believe them to be “real” in ways they’re not intended to be—Malen’s enterprise doesn’t function literally (except as esthetic experience), but as a metaphor for the unknowable, and for Bloch’s “inconstruable question.”

In installations, Malen presents archival and manufactured documents in vitrines, while her photographs, mixed with pictures of long-ago hypnotherapy sessions, experiments in levitation, and magnetization, are attached to mesh screens projected a few centimeters from the wall. The imagery includes head shots of Harmonites, frequently perforated with pushpins and colored magnets, that suggest mesmeric therapy via effigy. (Curiously, in connection with this ritualistic image treatment, animal magnetism was introduced to Haiti by Antoine Hyacinthe de Puysegur, the brother of the Mesmer follower, who “combin[ed] it with native voodoo techniques.”) By puncturing the prints, Malen also gives these photos a horrific sort of inti-

macy; viewing them is like looking at someone's X-rays. As with Mesmer's magnets, the pins are sited, it seems, at the exact nodes of distress. (These stress points are evident despite Malen's instructions to her sitters, who are simply told not to assume any expression at all.)

Some of Malen's photographs of "clinical" conditions, shot in a crisper and less sensationalized way than those of Duchenne or the spirit photography of the 19th and early 20th century, show individuals and people in groups with Rube Goldberg-like contraptions attached to their bodies; in others, faces gaze into the camera lens as if stunned from an ordeal. Some feature Harmonites communing with nature, often in contorted positions, frequently naked.

Even the most casual-looking photos convey a spectral remove from quotidian reality, an involvement with things unseen. At the extreme end of Malen's iconography, catharsis and torture have virtually the same appearance; the devices clamped to people's heads, arms, torsos and legs resemble those invented as pedagogical instruments by the father of the world's greatest paranoiac, Daniel Paul Schreber (the "Wolf Man"), who comes unavoidably to mind. Malen casts in haunting relief the medical dramaturgy of Mesmer and the savants of the Salpêtrière: therapy is necessarily convulsive, traumatic, invasive and terrifying, an edifying spectacle for practitioners, an unavoidable ordeal for their subjects.

In the photos where groups of people wrangle with medical devices, or each others' bodies, the viewer is meant to notice that the arrested



Elke and Todd, 2003, digital photograph.

Malen's texts "explains" the information in her photographs, as does a voice-over featured, along with a Mozart sound track, in the video *What Really Exists* (which could easily be a slow-motion Pina Bausch ballet)—up to a point. Malen's visual and audiovisual works have an autonomous suggestiveness that's more cryptic, and in many ways more evocative



activity is pictured *to be seen*, that something is being simulated, reenacted, offered up for scrutiny. The picture is the memory of something else, a gestural pentimento of something hidden. We have to invent our own

therapeutic narratives, complete the treatment in our imaginations. The peculiar tactility of these photos is heightened when mounted against the silvery mesh screens, in proximity to Malen's videos—their interwoven voices, similar to the polyphonic vocal effects in Glenn Gould's composition "Solitude Trilogy," create a dense aural background which, mysteriously, makes the photographs appear free-floating in space.

The narrative scaffolding of

Likes Repel, But Unlikes Attract, 2001, digital photograph.



of occult or paranormal forces, than might be inferred from the mock romanticism of the investigator's journal, or F.A. Mesmer's pataphysical expositions of her therapies.

It's only an impression, but Malen's work often reminds me of the Borgesian cartographical project in which a map is drawn in such intricate detail, on such a large scale, that it coincides with the territory it charts. "The New Society" represents what's sometimes termed "stigmatized knowledge," and can be seen as a parable about the progressive discrediting of the imperfectly understood. What it visualizes is more provocative than demystification. As Bloch might say, despite what we know to be true, we still have our wishes, which resist any documentary reality. □

"New Society for Universal Harmony" was on view at the Slough Foundation, Philadelphia [Feb. 28-Apr. 15, 2005] and traveled to the Schick Art Gallery at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, N.Y. [June 17-July 6, 2004]. The video *I Don't Have Proof* was on view at Participant Inc. in New York City on Apr. 26, 2005.

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