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Wespeaks	In the vein of one of those old "Choose Your Own Adventure" novels, let's try a hypothetical scenario about the multimedia exhibit "Lenore Malen and the New Society for Universal Harmony," showing at the Zilkha Gallery until March 2. We'll say that, after winding your way through the art installation, you come upon a writing desk with two drawers occupying the back corner of the gallery. A placard above the desk directs visitors to jot down their questions for someone known as Dr. Mesmer and to slip the queries, along with an email or postal address to enable a reply, into the bottom drawer of the desk. Because it is not mentioned in the placard's instructions, it seems evident the desk's top drawer must not be a part of the exhibit.
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Current Issue	Do you (A) assume the placard's instructions are facetious, and keep moving? If you do sit at the desk, do you (B) dutifully compose a thoughtful query, slip it in the bottom drawer, and move on? Or do you (C) on a whim, have a quick and covert peek into the top drawer just in case?
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Search	Those visitors curious and irreverent enough to have chosen "C" will, upon rifling through the top drawer, find a seemingly random jumble of academic and archival miscellanea testifying to the shadowy workings of the New Society for Universal Harmony. This hidden cache of information (if you visit the exhibit, be sure to check it out) is a testimony to the fine attention to detail that characterizes the entire installation.
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Advertiser Info	Buried beneath a pile of scientific scribbles and diagrams, there is the rough draft of a speech that seems to have been written by a New Society adherent obsessed with the social dynamics of a beehive as a metaphor for the organization of the New Society itself. Under another dozens of pages of dry scientific papers, there is a small notebook with mostly illegible handwriting, although after close study, the words "irony" and "transcendence" emerge. Wedged towards the back of the drawer, there is a small slip of paper with the sentence fragment, "to escape from their home planet."
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	<p>Lenore Malen is the artist behind this alternately ominous and wryly funny multimedia exhibit. The installation playfully purports to document the activities of a modern-day group of people who have exhumed the work of the eighteenth-century scientist Franz Anton Mesmer from the graveyard of discredited scientific ideas. Mesmer...quot;and this is some of the only verified information in the whole exhibit...quot;captivated the imagination of all of Paris in the 1700s with his theories of animal magnetism. His fumbling attempts to harness the healing power of what he termed "magnetic fluids" were precursors to modern hypnosis.</p> <p>The exhibit offers lithographs of Mesmer's experiments, along with related historical artifacts. The explanatory note next to a yellowed playbill reads "Charles Dickens was a mesmerist." "E. A. Poe was a mesmerist," proclaims the next note, and immediately beneath the ostensible message that Mesmerism must be credible, because after all such illustrious cultural figures have subscribed to it, there is the disquieting implication that seemingly timeless artists have held such laughably outmoded ideas. This tongue-in-cheek history lesson sets up the interplay between scientific ideas, culture, and spirituality that permeates the entire installation.</p> <p>The New Society, as the artifacts and papers that follow explain, was formed in the twentieth century by a woman who coincidentally happens to be named F.A. Mesmer. (A snippet of her charmingly weird autobiographical profile notes the weather conditions around the time of her birth and proclaims, "I am the oldest of three girls, all brilliant.") The rest of the exhibit is devoted to the practices of the mysterious New Society. Stark photographs portray people, some joyful, others hysterical or solemn, undergoing various esoteric treatments. A small library occupies the back wall of the exhibit. Three video screens loop montages of New Society members reenacting Mesmer's experiments in hypnotically ritualistic fashion.</p> <p>When on one of the screens a white-robed adherent intones, "Life force of animal fluid/ life force of plants and trees/ flowing through our fingertips/ and flowing through our knees," her deadpan delivery is hilarious but also surprisingly creepy. The rituals that next unfold, involving trees and rubber balls and strange magnetic instruments, are reenacted with great panache by a troupe of New Society members on the tranquil grounds of the 1964 New York World's Fair. In case you miss the setting's significance, the videos have spliced in old clips from past world's fairs, and their strident retro-futuristic kitsch ups the weirdness of the display and adds emphasis to the questions the videos ask about cultural reactions and overreactions to the promises of science.</p>

Like the entire exhibit, the videos tend to exist in an uncanny space between chilling earnestness and zany parody.

This dual quality was something that attracted Art History Professor and the curator of exhibitions Nina Felshin to the New Society exhibit.

"I am interested in humor that is subversive, not conventional; that has an irony, or is dealing with serious issues in some way that makes them more accessible," she said. "The fact that it's dealing with the difference between truth and fiction seems very timely. You don't always know whether what is being communicated is fabricated or factual by institutions such as the press or government. I'm not sure that those issues specifically were part of Lenore Malen's intent, but I'm fascinated by this notion of constructing reality."

Foster Nichols '10 also stressed the attraction of the installation's carefully fabricated facade of truth.

"The exhibit constructs its fake reality though documentary evidence...quot; photographs, video, old books and papers. It also invites participation in a couple of activities. The interactivity opens up a whole new dynamic to the exhibit. In becoming part of the faux reality, the participant becomes aware of the artificiality of the show, but also perpetuates the illusion for those who are to come," he said.

It is an illusion that lingers even after you leave the Zilkha Gallery. Emerging from the intricately constructed microcosm of the exhibit, don't be surprised if everything you see...quot; those two girls in matching red coats walking side by side, the weird shadows cast by trees at twilight, a lonely glove in the middle of the sidewalk...quot; seems as if it's part of some cosmic inside joke, a world designed with your own personal amusement in mind. This is the defamiliarizing power of art at its most palpable, and it alone is worth a trip to Lenore Malen's funny, unsettling and wholly original alternate universe.

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