



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – DECEMBER 2003

Free Reception: Saturday, February 28, 2004  
6:30 – 8:30 PM

### The New Society for Universal Harmony

February 28, 2004 – April 15, 2004

Featuring Lenore Malen. Curated by Aaron Levy.

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Slought Foundation, a non-profit organization rethinking contemporary art, presents *The New Society for Universal Harmony*, an installation by Lenore Malen that reinvents in contemporary terms *La société dell'harmonie universelle*, established in Paris in 1783 by Nicholas Bergasse and Guillaume Kornmann, followers of Franz Anton Mesmer. Bergasse's and Kornmann's *société* offers interesting parallels with contemporary healing practices. Bergasse, borrowing from Rousseau, said: "we owe almost all the physical ailments that consume us to our institutions." The "new" society examines our own culture's yearning for the perfect cure; what the members undergo is darkly funny and impossible, pointing to our often-illusory search for spiritual harmony and utopian life.



At the opening, Malen will lecture about the society and its origins (presentation at 6:00pm). A book titled *The New Society for Universal Harmony* will be co-published by Granary Books, Inc. and Slought Foundation, forthcoming in Fall 2004. In keeping with Slought Foundation's mandate to encourage interdisciplinary practice, a one-day symposium will be held on Saturday, April 3rd, 2004 addressing the history of Mesmerism in 18th, 19th, and 20th-century literature, political and social philosophy, medicine, and dynamic psychotherapy.

Franz Anton Mesmer's thesis, combining Newtonianism and astrology, was that a universal magnetic fluid linked all forces in nature and that an imbalance of the fluid caused illness in human beings. Mesmer initially used magnets as a curative agent but eventually dispensed with them, considering himself to be an "animal magnet." He induced an altered state of consciousness in his patients through auto-suggestion, a technique later developed into hypnosis. Mesmer's theories established a medical and psychological tradition that affected practitioners in every Western country in the 19th century and ultimately influenced Charcot and even Freud. Treatments at the "New" Society have been adapted from the original cures at *La Société*. *The New Society for Universal Harmony* is a constellation of factual formats, pseudo-documentary photos, video and audio narratives, testimonials, and case histories in a stage-set environment. The pseudo-documentary photographs show the putative members of the society undergoing therapy by performing acts based on Mesmer's actual treatments. The photographs rely on theatrical and narrative conventions, particularly the tableau vivant, and make reference to documentary photos from the Kinsey Institute Archives, stills from productions of Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade* (both theater and film stills), the photographs of 19th century French anatomist G.B. Duchenne de Bologne, the work of the Czech photographer Frantisek Drtikol, and the photographs of Calvin Watkins, among others. The audio tracks present pseudo-biographies, philosophical musings, and scientific explications to explore the ways in which the institutional and communal identities of the society have been shaped.

Lenore Malen is an artist and writer. In the 1990s she was executive editor of *Art Journal*, published by the College Art Association. Her work has been shown nationally and internationally with reviews in the *New York Times*, *Art in America*, *Art on Paper*, *The Village Voice*, and *BOMB* magazine. Currently she teaches cultural studies in the MFA Painting and Sculpture Program at Parsons School of Design, a division of the New School University. *The New Society for Universal Harmony* (on the web at <http://thenewsociety.org>) was originally commissioned as a photo and text work for 9/9 revue d'art pratique, Paris in 2000. It has been presented as a performance at the College Art Association NY, at Apexart, NY, and at Artists Talk on Art, NY. The New Society has been seen on the web, on Jochan Gerz's anthology-of-art and at the Centre Pompidou. The photographic prints have been installed at Klenova Castle, Klatovy, Czech Republic, and Trynarstarka Tower in Lublin Poland and at The College of New Rochelle. In 2004 the work will be shown at Martin-Gropius-Bau (Berlin, Spring 04) and The ZKM (Karlsruhe, Fall 2004).

Slought Foundation encourages new futures for contemporary life through art and theory. Information available online: <http://slought.org>  
**For press materials, including high-resolution images, please consult our website or contact Aaron Levy at the address listed below.**

This program is made possible in part through the generous sponsorship or support of Granary Books, Inc.

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