

REVERSIBLE DESTINIES
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Under Xerces' Wings:

Laleh Mehran's Laboratory Politics

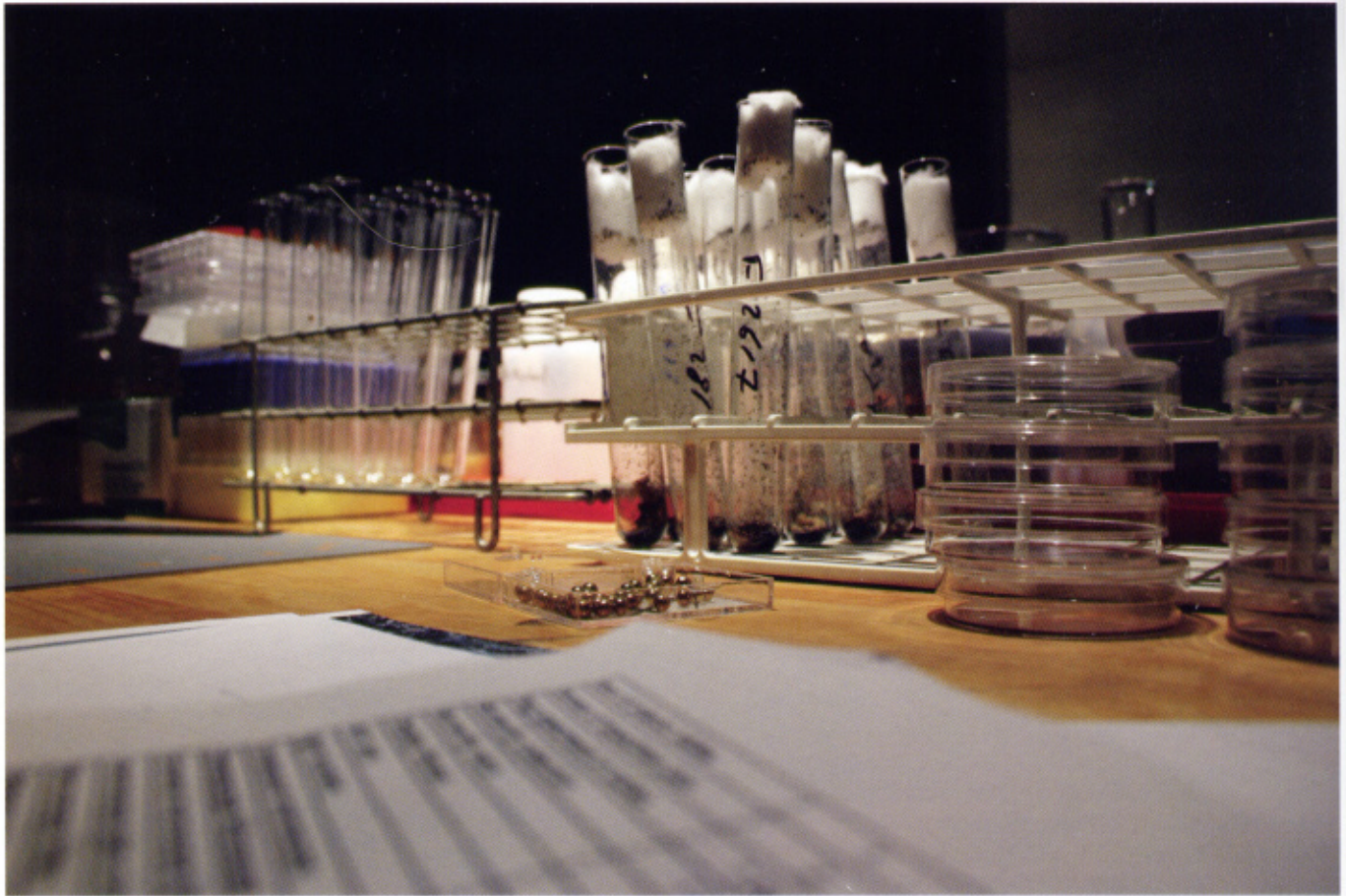
BY LIZZIE ZUCKER SALTZ

Laleh Mehran's *The Xerces Society, Installment VI: Sir Samuel Cropia's Public Laboratory* is one of the most elaborate stagings of a fictitious setting—in this case, the working laboratory of a world-renowned lepidopterist—to be presented under the guise of contemporary art. An intricate alternative reality on the scale of Mathew Barney's, Mehran's eight-year old Xerces project is politically tinged installation-performance masquerading as science. A cast of no less than thirteen rotating lab-coated scientists conduct actual research, including observation, identification and documentation of the DNA of species from around the earth, in the installment recently presented at Letitia and Rowland Radford Study Collection Gallery (Georgia Museum of Art in Athens, GA; September 11—October 10, 2004) which constitutes Mehran's most ambitious exposé of the Machiavellian Sir Cropia to date. Invited to sift through stacks of notebooks, DNA films, boxed moths and butterflies, bottles and Petri dishes of parasites, viewers were likely to encounter at least three understated, yet intensely dedicated lab workers on any given visit—never Sir Cropia himself, however. The presence of Mehran's protagonist was felt—like many a real-life Principal Investigator—through his subordinates' clue-laden dialogue. We learn of his mandate "to preserve and conserve at any cost," see Marxist-heavy book shelves and, most compellingly, are surrounded by a visually-alluring array of tiny squares pinned to the dark green walls. The elusively nomadic Sir Cropia had the squares delivered each afternoon via FedEx™, along with their exact coordinates. The suspense inherent in witnessing the proliferation of squares enticed repeat visitors who, in turn, were rewarded by a fitting final image—an elegant delineation of butterfly veins. Close inspection revealed that the squares were, in fact, tiny segments of satellite maps. Geo-savvy viewers, taking a tip from a laptop twinkling the global locales of Sir Cropia's field workers, recognized political hot spots such as North Korea, the Gaza Strip and Iran.



All images: Laleh Mehran, *The Xerces Society, Installment VI: Sir Samuel Cropia's Public Laboratory* (detail), September 11—October 11, 2004, multimedia installation and performance (photo: Emily Gomez; courtesy of the artist)

The blithely upheld pretense was that Sir Cropia, in a deferential gesture to his patrons and fans in Athens, temporarily relocated one of his labs here as a public-outreach project. Details such as the satellite-map-squares, however, led Mehran's ideally inquisitive audience to suspect that he may be in on shadier deals. If some un-inquisitive visitors never got farther than the pretense's particulars, the actors were nonetheless given overarching directives to encourage suspicion, and to use keywords drawn from the FBI's list of Patriot Act e-mail flags, such as "satellite," "research," "followers," "private funding," "martyr," or "for the good of the cause." We are never certain whether Cropia's political maneuverings are driven solely by his fanatical desire to become the ultimate collector—an uncertainty which in itself raises timely questions about the misuse of scientific authority and, by extension, collectors'



priorities—or if other goals take precedence. (*Installation IV: Manuel's Disappearance*, 1998, involved audience members in a daughter's search for her ominously missing father.) While the paranoia that infects the *Xerces* series clearly relates to Mehran's history—her parents fled Iran to Miami when she was ten—the piece also resonates because paranoia is now shared by so many Americans, whose distrust of leaders' stated goals to spread democracy through peacekeeping has never been higher. *Xerces'* characteristic malaise was further informed by Mehran's research at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History archives, where masses of communiqués written by desperate scientists caught in various coups over the decades revealed the inextricability of scientific inquiry, politics, economics and academic egoism. Her parents were also scientific researchers who exposed her to both lab gossip and instruments on workplace weekend stints. This facet of *Xerces* seems doubly timely given the war currently being waged on scientific institutions by the Administration.¹ Mehran has a penchant for layering references; Sir Cropia's name is an in-joke for entomologists as a near-homonym for the well-known cecropia moth. The word *Xerces* is multivalent; it is the name of the famously extinct Bay Area *Xerces Blue Butterfly* whose habitat loss exemplifies our failure as earth's guardian. It is also the name of a murdered 450 B.C.E. Persian King whose heirs killed each other after



ruling an area larger than the Egyptian and Assyrian empires combined, touching on Mehran's thorny relationship with her heritage. The eponymous Xerxes Society is the name of a thirty-three year old, five thousand-strong American butterfly society, whose existence legitimizes the fictional Sir Cropia's obsessive passions. The choice of Lepidoptera itself is wildly polysemic. If bees or ants often symbolize the oppressed masses, butterflies are endlessly fascinating because of their self-protective ability to mimic other species. This, in turn, corresponds to Mehran's fascination with camouflage as a strategy. Growing up during the Iran Hostage Crisis, she pretended she was Greek well into her college years. Post-9/11 terrorist hysteria has, obviously, not made it any easier to publicly identify as Iranian-American. The butterfly's status as both a gorgeous, exotic, and precious transnational commodity and a host to hoards of parasites appeals to Mehran's desire to allegorize contemporary colonialism's oblique methodologies.

Mehran's work however tends to be seen as art addressing science rather than politics, such as Mark Dion's meticulous Natural History recreations, David Wilson's delightfully anachronistic *Museum of Jurassic Technology*, the science-as-art experiments of Eduardo Kac and the activist work of Critical Art Ensemble (CAE).² To grasp the political import of Mehran's project, it is more productive to consider an artist she deeply admires, Mark Lombardi,³ writers such as Milan Kundera and Samuel Beckett, or Persian cinema's Rakhshan Bani-Etemad or Abbas Kiarostami. Mehran extols the latter's films, such as *The White Balloon*⁴ and *The Taste of Cherries*, whose subtle metaphors were designed to pass the scrutiny of Iranian censors.

Allowing viewers to connect the surprisingly textured scales of butterfly wings to global topographies, the microscopes illustrate the impact of arcane tactics. The curtailment of both ends of the observational scale is

highlighted. We garner that, pressured and observed, research assistants can't grasp the larger meaning of each other's micro-level tasks. Specialization creates dividing walls between them. Communications are filtered and distributed through a lab manager, enabling Sir Cropia's appalling insensitivity to the human toll left in the wake of his greater ambitions. Cyrus, another field worker, disappeared during this installment. The dramatic revelation came as a telegram delivered to the lab manager in the presence of the victim's fiancée at a special September 29th performance. In Mehran's work, even the layers of meaning beneath the façade are veiled, demanding commitment and empathy from viewers. To this end, curatorial context including a complete cast list and plot summaries of previous Xerxes installments could be discretely and advantageously provided.

Ultimately, just as Mehran's biography makes some of her artistic choices seem inevitable, American culture's intolerance for complexity and enduring arrogance partially inform the artist's esoteric *modus operandi*, which sadly resonates for all of us at this fraught political juncture. ■

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¹ See the Union of Concerned Scientists' *Reports on Scientific Integrity in Policymaking* at www.ucsusa.org for hair-raising examples.

² CAE's piece *Free Range Grains* led to member Steve Kurtz's tragic and outrageous mistreatment by the FBI, purportedly acting in the name of *The Patriot Act*. His rights continue to be severely curtailed, and his defense has incurred \$150,000 in legal fees (see www.caedefensefund.org). If Kurtz's work is markedly different in intent from Mehran's, his influence can nonetheless be detected in *Installation VI*'s concerns. Kurtz was, in fact, chair of Mehran's thesis committee at Carnegie Mellon University.

³ ART PAPERS 29:1

⁴ Written by Abbas Kiarostami; directed by Jafar Panahi.