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Liz Magic Laser's "Tell Me What You Want to Hear"



photos: Patrick Bresnan left to right: Shannon Buggs, Nick Anderson, Linda Lorelle, Lizette Garcia

Liz Magic Laser's Diverseworks commission *Tell Me What You Want to Hear* began by enlisting professional empathy conjurers to cull, perform, and refine their methods of influencing public opinion. Directed to play heightened versions of themselves, participants were asked to narrate a moment of performance when they were entirely authentic, spectacularly engaging, and not at all manipulative.

The Media Training

To this elusive end, media training was conducted at Houston Media Source in February. The storytellers were interviewed on camera and live feed went to a conference room for screening by panelists Nick Anderson, Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial cartoonist; Shannon Buggs, journalist and Director of Communications for the University of Houston's College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences; Felipe Campos, artist, producer, and educator; Maurice Duhon, realtor, former political

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candidate, musician, and reality TV personality; Lizette Garcia, Broadcast Journalism major at the University of Houston; Linda Lorelle, Emmy Award-winning journalist and former KPRC-TV news anchor; Sue Lovell, former Houston City Council member; and Mustafa Tameez, founder and managing director of Outreach Strategies, one of Texas' leading public affairs firms. Once interviewed, each participant was seated in front of their muted footage to receive criticism according to the amalgamated tricks of the charismatic communication trades.



Panel reviews of participant's on camera interviews took place during media training workshops at Houston Media Source in February. left to right: Mustafa Tameez, Nick Anderson, Shannon Buggs, Liz Magic Laser

In addition to attention span considerations: keep it direct, on task, brief, energetic, and assertive, the main point is that the audience cannot digest you unless you are not refined. The key to success is refusing to exhibit natural responses of the human body to its environment-- scratching, sipping, shifting eyes or shifting in your seat-- that could make you appear unattractively like a person in front of the persona capturing camera.

The disavowal of maintenance is not new, but it was eerie to hear the body's need for rest and support flatly deemed unacceptable. And although disturbed by these rules, I nonetheless later found myself irked at Lorrelle for wearing a pair of distractingly bobbly earrings on camera-- she should hold her head still!

The Screening and Recording Before a Live Audience

In keeping with Laser's compelling investigations of potentially democratic forms gone awry (majority rule in focus testing, voting in political polling, and authority leveling in the interview) *Tell Me What You Want to Hear* used the multi-vocal judicial panel and the audience-input inclusive talk show.

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Shannon Buggs hosts a talk show style screening before a live audience at Diverseworks. The audience watched and responded to a projected live broadcast of the participants performing across town at UH's School of Communications news studio

For last Wednesday night's screening before a live audience at Diverseworks, Shannon Buggs played a talk show host whose emphatic "We are all so comfortable here with one another!" manner (of a focus group leader or a fish camp counselor) waned over the course of the show. Her scripted questions "Do you respond to this? Would you like to have media training? Is performing a skill that every person should have? Is there a difference between trying to influence and manipulating?" were asked politely and elicited polite responses from a hesitant audience, able to see themselves on camera and adjusting accordingly.

The Studio Performance

The participant's performances at an offsite studio, UH's Valenti School of Communications news studio, were also projected in front of the audience at Diverseworks. Relentlessly on-camera, the preened personalities looked like animatronics after the lights ignite but before the electricity flows. Each was activated to deliver highly refined, empathy-inspiring sound bites, intercut with footage from their pre-media training interview and previous TV appearances. To my ear, their stories had the bizarre quality of Toastmaster speeches, so smoothed

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over by abstract principles that they lose their spark and credibility. The art crowd audience seemed to agree, asserting that mistakes and vulnerability make it seem more real.



Participants perform at UH's School of Communications for a live broadcast to a studio audience at Diverseworks

Which Criteria are We Following

Back at the media training in February, in an on-the-spot moment, the award winning, show stopping Linda Lorrelle shared her experience reporting on a competing anchor and eventual friend's struggle with cancer. The room was emotionally saturated and we were all cancer-awareness champions, when, in an emotion-barring voice, Laser offered incriminating and inconsistent feedback. At times she echoed grooming tips on posture, gesture, and inflection, and at times she seemed to be working against it to deliberately pale the evocative.¹

The same week of this media training, Laser's own delivery during her artist talk at Rice University was long and drawn out. As her voice slid into a grating and disaffected monotone, it seemed curious that someone so steeped in methods of effective communication would fail to deploy any of them. Maybe it's a deliberate modulation to avoid spectacle or celebrity, but it is also recognizable as the designated artist affect.²

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Alongside a requisite cynicism, the wry reveal has risen to prominence as the most recognizable artistic gesture of our times. This was exactly the case in Laser's Armory Show contribution, crowd sourced from art consumers in focus groups. As in *Push Poll*, Laser looked at the feedback loop, how behavior is generated based on response, and on and on and on. In this case, Laser's approach of asking the consumer what they want to consume produced something novel, but pre-digested.³



photo of Laser's Armory Show swag from Kareem Estefan's post

The Armory Show all too easily swallowed Laser's critical stab at its "lend your artist identity to the fair" demands, so instead of causing a rift in the system, Laser's process generated swag that brands its bearers as self-aware and its profit driven fair as avant-garde.

Sometimes, overestimating the institution's intention to take advantage, the artist gives support a preemptive thrashing that the harshest neoliberal would applaud. Sometimes, underestimating the institution's ability to take advantage, the artist as a whistle blower merely creates on-demand disruptions too reliant on support to effectively address issues or implicate the host.

Considering this minefield, kudos to Laser and to Diverseworks. She let down some of her well justified guard to conduct a less predetermined examination of authenticity in performance, and they continued to support dynamic work in its unruly but rich experimental stage.⁴

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Degrees of Consumability

Earlier this March, Laser answered an interview invitation with an insightful investigation of the interview as a form. She mentioned resentment at having to stand outside her work and reveal its truth, and having to perform her authentic self.

This is understandable, especially with lifestyle questions asking, "What bar do you like? What books do you read? What art do you buy?" that seem designed for fans to consume like her in addition to consuming her. Like others in the spotlight, artists can't afford to drop a rich thought just once or slow down the personal divulging—getting off the conveyor belt means becoming obsolete.

If Laser has figured out that resistance's next turn will, in fact, be a very purposeful invisibility, she has a given us a head start on how to tactically disappear behind performed affectations.

At a time when the public is not only media literate but increasingly fluent, from entertainment (reality TV) to political spectacle (Mission Accomplished) Laser is hung up on why performances are still effective even when we know how they are constructed.⁵

The Art Show

Tell Me What You Want to Hear is represented for subsequent audiences as three channels of synced video: from the control room of Laser and the production team, from the studio of the participants as they performed (intercut with previous media training and TV appearance footage), and from Diverseworks of Buggs and the live audience.



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Liz Magic Laser, Tell Me What You Want to Hear 3 channel videos projected at Diverseworks. left to right: of the control room at the news studio, of the studio feed, of the audience at Diverseworks. Diverseworks audio design installed headphones around the seating area playing audio from the control room, speakers at this front wall playing audio from the studio, and speakers behind the seating area playing audio from the live audience.

As you enter the space, perpendicular to the posted script, shiny and smiley photographs of each participant greet you. In these photographs as well as in the video, the participants appear stacked into frames with their previous appearances, pinpointing degrees of refinement throughout the media training process, and forcing a collapse between personality and performance.



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The Participants

In projects such as *In Camera*, *The Digital Face*, and *I Feel Your Pain*, Laser used actors to play media professionals and politicians. In *Tell Me What You Want to Hear*, she seems in pursuit of a less removed representation. She used people, who have actually performed these roles, to perform heightened versions of themselves. This is where things may have gotten interestingly off-kilter for Laser. Not only could she not control the non-actors, but she had to contend with their expertise.

Although Laser "see[s] camera and camera operators as playing constitutive roles in the scenarios [she] create[s],"⁶ the project's lack of clear intention was a point of frustration for some participants. "This is what we do," asserted one of the media production students who did the camera, sound, and editing for work *Tell Me What You Want to Hear*. Although appreciative of the unique, hands on experience, they wanted to be respected for and directed in their craft.

At times, I wondered if *Tell Me What You Want to Hear* was another absorption of a non-art field into the art world to be observed, examined, and teased - not necessarily with anything being teased out. Critical distance has such cache that artists who operate at a remove can be valued more than artists who work near enough to perceive the essential.

Without acknowledging why Lorrelle, Buggs, and Offerman are compelled to get their message across with as much impact as possible, and thus without understanding their motivation, *Tell Me What You Want to Hear* could fail to go beyond faulting them for their method.

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UH School of Communications Media Production students did the camera, sound, and editing work for Tell Me What You Want to Hear

When Does Media Become Mass

But, what at first seemed like antagonism directed at the wrong people (not having access to the president's coaches or the news media giants and picking on local professionals who volunteered for her project instead) turned out to be a question of "When does media become mass?"

This inquiry hung in the air most starkly during young, aspiring broadcast journalist Lizette Garcia's moments on camera. She earnestly described how she wants to influence people's opinions and amplify the Latino perspective, but she couldn't help mechanically repeating the questions and agreeing that she must straighten her hair to be camera ready.

When the artist's deconstructive unraveling lacks a simultaneous additive process to create new meaning, the *gotcha!* impulse makes for art that is not only paranoid, but also predictable. Where *Tell Me What You Want to Hear* does manage to raise questions without falling flat is in Laser's own use of the feedback loop and the participants' contributions- pivotal elements of a show that, in the end, echoes its own multilayered process.

In the case of Lorrelle, the virtuosity of her performance disarmed the examination of it. Those tense moments between Lorrelle and Laser also created some of the weirdest disconnects between the art worker's propensity for deconstruction and the media worker's aim to perfectly refine.

Something generative came from the clashing between the current art world

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formula: irony + opacity = sophisticated art and the media standard: easily consumable entertainment = successful journalism.

Surplus Value

The fact that artists can take extant but untapped parts of life; garbage collecting, luchadors, shrimping, focus groups, and reconfigure them in an art context to generate cultural value⁷ is one example of what experts artists can be at manufacturing meaning--or in Marxist terminology-- surplus value. The charismatic talking head that makes the news seem real is not all that different from the brand that makes a product twice as expensive is not all that different from the extra white space around a print that takes itself more seriously and so fetches a higher price.

The moral of the story, that we can all deploy these tactics for good or for ill, was offered by Offerman, echoed by the audience, and affirmed in Buggs' "this process has made me think" wrap-up. With this, the participants signed off to an outro of spacey theme music, applause, warm handshakes, and congenial conversation--suspiciously framed but not necessarily suspect.

As Maurice Duhon said when asked what he saw in artists' investigations of his roles as a political candidate (*City Council Meeting*) and as a reality TV star (*Tell Me What You Want to Hear*), "More than anything, it all relies on what the audience is willing to receive."