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22 Questions for Performance Art Star Liz Magic Laser



Courtesy the Artist and Derek Eller Gallery

Liz Magic Laser's "I Feel Your Pain," 2011-2012, featuring Ray Field and Kathryn Grody (video still)

By Chloe Wyma



Liz Magic Laser / Photo by Ari Marcopoul

Name: Liz Magic Laser

Age: 30 **Occupation:** Artist and Teacher

City/Neighborhood: New York City

What project are you working on now?

I am about to start on a project for Malmö Konsthall that will take the structure of the television news format for an adaptation of Jean-Paul Sartre's play "No Exit." The three characters in "No Exit" will be recast as archetypal roles on television news programs: a newscaster in the studio, a reporter on location and a "real" person who gives testimony. I am also developing a short performance that

continues to compare the use of gesture in filmic melodrama and televised politics. I will likely stage it at the opening of my show in May at Various Small Fires in L.A.

Your most famous piece, "I Feel Your Pain," mined interviews of political players like Glenn Beck, Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, Barack Obama, and John Boehner for humor and absurdity. Originally acted out live at Performa 11, video documentation of the piece is now being shown at Derek Eller Gallery. How might "I Feel Your Pain" take on new meaning in today's political climate, versus that of 2011?

The way a politician's performance is being engineered to evoke our empathy has not changed drastically since last year. However, the fact that it's an election year means it is "show time" for this affective manipulation to reach new heights. The nature of the dialogue between the left and right in this country has changed dramatically in the past year and I think the video of "I Feel

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Your Pain" will resonate differently as time goes on. When I started writing the script for "I Feel Your Pain" in early 2011, I was thinking about the struggle over polemic rhetoric. I was looking at how the language of political activism was being recuperated by the Tea Party movement to great effect. It appeared the left had lost its claim on affective language and meanwhile on the right, Andrew Breitbart was successfully deploying agitprop tactics that originated with the Soviet avant-garde. By the time the performance of "I Feel Your Pain" took place, the Occupy movement was in full swing and it appeared the left was reclaiming its activism. Yet this struggle over the affective strategies that sway public opinion will continue and take forms I cannot predict.

In the performance/video installation "The Digital Face," dancers juxtapose the gestural movements of Barack Obama and George H. W. Bush. How did this project come about?

After focusing so closely on the emotional manipulation engineered by the language spoken on the political stage with "I Feel Your Pain," my mind bounced back to the body language, the choreography, that I had omitted. I looked back at the interviews I had adapted in my script, but the casual, intimate conceit of the interview did not call for the gestures I was thinking of and it became clear I had to look at how gestures were now being contrived for formal speeches.

When I saw Obama's last State of the Union Address, it immediately clicked. Obama's hands were so active and precise, he might as well have been signing. With [François] Delsarte's method in mind I turned to previous State of the Union Addresses and imagined I'd find a nice starting point for virtuosic gesticulation with Reagan's speeches. However I was stunned to discover that Reagan barely moved at all and his hands remained glued to his visible script. Additionally Reagan was predominantly filmed in a close-up that cropped out his hands and script. I discovered the same static hands and close-up framing in the formal speeches of his predecessors.

While some presidential gesticulating comes into play with debate scenarios and the like, it turns out that H.W. Bush is the one to bring gestures back to the formal speech. So his first State of the Union Address became my starting point for the contemporary oratorical performance, a physical display that pleads with the public.

I worked closely with two dancers, Alan Good and Cori Kresge, to replicate the gestural movement from the first and last State of the Union addresses to feature gesticulating hands: President Barack Obama's 2012 speech and President George H. W. Bush's 1990 speech. Both Alan and Cori were involved in Merce Cunningham's dance company, and the meticulous precision they were able to bring to the project was significant to me. I wanted to force the orchestrated body language of these two presidents into dialogue and to highlight the evolution of the politician's performance. The mechanical efficiency of the American president's performance continues to be maximized further with the aid of speech coaches and advisors along with focus groups and market research. In 1990 H.W. still scratched his face, stopped to drink water and revealed his script. Now these signs of human fallibility have been fully concealed by teleprompters and fine-tuned training. Yet our empathy has only increased along with our politician's streamlined performance.

Why make theater out of political theater?

Four years ago I was researching the melodramatic gestures of early film and came across the work of François Delsarte, who developed oratorical theories and exercises in the early 19th century. Delsarte's ideas and exercises became the basis for Stanislavski's model of acting. It seemed the methods of the modern stage actor and the methods developed for the politician or lawyer to plead for their cause were one and the same. I've become fascinated by this inextricable link between theater and politics that goes back to ancient Greece and then gets updated in tandem and codified by Delsarte at the dawn of the industrial age. His theories seem to presage

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scientific management and the drive to maximize the efficiency of every gesture performed in the workplace, and on the theatrical or political stage.

You've created site-specific performances in ATM vestibules, movie theaters, the crowded streets of Times Square, and a bubble-shaped performance space. What are the joys and the challenges of displaying work in a more conventional art venue, such as a gallery space?

No space is neutral for me so I approach each of these spaces as a type of place that conditions a type of behavior that I might engage with and disturb on its own terms. I do enjoy working in art venues and the gallery opening scenario has been a generative context. Perhaps the short attention spans that seems to coincide with art venues these days is the easiest challenge for me to identify, but it's also a challenge I have taken as a fruitful provocation.

You've written that politicians and artists have undergone "similar changes in the 20th century." In a culture where Charlie Sheen, Mitt Romney, Sarah Palin, and Lady Gaga have all been labeled performance artists, what's the relationship between artists and politicians?

I wrote that in the context of an essay about the interview that came out in "Art in America" last month. I was saying that the politician was revered with a greater sense of decorum in the 19th century. America's democratizing sensibility demoted the politician from a superior to a social equal, while the artist has likewise been demoted from the status of genius.

Though you primarily work in theater and video, you started out as a photographer. How does that background influence your work?

My mother is the choreographer Wendy Osserman, so I grew up with rehearsals in our living room. I did start as a photographer and I would often make photographs of dancers for press and invitation fliers. We ended up participating in one another's projects frequently. Since I was collaborating with dancers, I confronted the issue of mediating performance with the camera early on. This concern has continued in my work and I usually cast the camera in a constitutive role in my performances.

What's the last show that surprised you? Why?

Andrea Fraser's "Untitled" (2003). I wandered into the show without prior knowledge and only read the press release later as I made my way down the street. I talked about how awful it was for weeks, but eventually I did a complete 180 on the show when I realized I couldn't stop talking about it. Then I read Fraser's essay, "Why Does Fred Sandback's Work Make Me Cry?" and became a total fan.

What's the most indispensable item in your office?

My hard drive collection.

Where are you finding ideas for your work these days?

The news.

Do you collect anything?

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No.

What's the last artwork you purchased?

Not Applicable.

What's the first artwork you ever sold?

A self-portrait photograph.

What's the weirdest thing you ever saw happen in a museum or gallery?

A few years ago I saw Ann Liv Young squirting her breast milk at a purple Peep (the marshmallow Easter candy) that she made a man hold up as a target in a gallery. The performance featured more provocative moments, but this odd combination of elements does stand out in my mind and seeing the Peeps on the shelf at Duane Reade today sparked the memory.

What's your art-world pet peeve?

Posturing.

What's your favorite post-gallery watering hole or restaurant?

Billymark's West or Mooncake.

Do you have a gallery/museum-going routine?

I usually meet a friend for a coffee in Chelsea, we see a dozen shows, get demoralized and have a drink.

Know any good jokes?

No.

What's the last great book you read?

Yvonne Rainer's "Feelings Are Facts."

What work of art do you wish you owned?

Fountain.

What would you do to get it?

Use it.

What international art destination do you most want to visit?

Japan.