

Diehl, Travis, "Critics' Pick: Liz Magic Laser," *Artforum*, January 19, 2015, page 1 of 1.

ARTFORUM

Liz Magic Laser

VARIOUS SMALL FIRES
812 North Highland Avenue
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A synthetic spot, resembling the brand color of TED Talks, holds the center of the gallery like a spotlight circle of red stage (*Parenthesis* [all works 2015]). Yet, as if to retract the reductive optimism of the inspirational-speaker format, this rug is branded with curly brackets. Liz Magic Laser is known for putting on bizarro versions of Western media's discursive tropes. If TED's chosen often exude childlike gumption, pacing across said circle in the video *The Thought Leader* is an actual child (Alex Ammerman). Rigged with LAV mic and sports shirt, this kid is eerily practical—as when he quips, for example, how we all want a perfect world, but your perfect world makes his impossible: "I can't even stick my tongue out at it," he says. Not that he loves sticking his tongue out. "But I resent systems that stop me from doing so." He's an actor, of course—a precocious one—but not a philosopher. Laser feeds him lines from Dostoyevsky.

Cut to a shot of the boy executing a fidgety plié. The montaged audience, meanwhile, laugh or jab out their tongues at improper times—punctuating the contrarian nature of free choice. Cast a parenthesis around (free choice) too, though. A sound work in the entrance hall (coming through the walls, as it were) oozes dark mantras—"my mind is my own," "miles and miles of golden sand"—drawn from the show's second/companion video (*My Mind is My Own*). Here, a young girl (Ella Wilson, whose mother is a professional voice coach) leads a group of grownup actors in what the press release calls "sinister versions" of public-speaking exercises. Again, Laser's scripting exacerbates the thought-violence of the form, using art as inspirational crowd control. Still, the "thinking actor" might reject the prompts of paid motivators.



Liz Magic Laser, *The Thought Leader*, 2015, single-channel video, 9 minutes, 22 seconds.

— *Travis Diehl*