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## Los Angeles Times

### Review Liz Magic Laser subversively splits medium from message



Video still from Liz Magic Laser's "The Thought Leader," part of her exhibition at Various Small Fires. (Various Small Fires)

By **LEAH OLLMAN**

JANUARY 14, 2015, 7:00 AM

**"I** am a sick man. I am a spiteful man. Are you a good person?... Or do you only want to seem like a good person so that people will like you?"

So begins "The Thought Leader," an intriguing new video by Brooklyn-based Liz Magic Laser and the centerpiece of her show at Various Small Fires.

The nine-minute work borrows the format of a TED talk -- slick but spare staging, poised and practiced speaker, live audience -- but tweaks it, in both subtle and substantive ways. What results is something between parody and critique, a layercake of discomfiting seduction.

Laser adapted the script from Dostoevsky's 1864 novella, "Notes From the Underground," itself an inconsistent, alternately apologetic and aggressive address about the relationship between self-interest and the social good.



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Delivering such pricklers as "Can the decision to be less selfish ever be anything other than a selfish decision?" is a 10-year-old actor, a suave mini-man in dark pants and gray dress shirt. Slippage No. 1: hearing the cynical convictions of an adult voiced by an innocent child.

TED talks have an indisputability about them, a seamlessness. They are meant to motivate and inspire. Speakers don't typically ponder "the dark chasm of meaninglessness," nor do they provoke laughter in the wrong places.

By subverting the form, Laser breaks the spell cast by the tropes and trappings of skilled oratory. She separates medium from message and positions us smack in between the two -- critical, alert, amused and bemused.

Various Small Fires, 812 N. Highland Ave., (310) 426-8040, through Feb. 21. Closed Sunday and Monday. [www.vsf.la](http://www.vsf.la)

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