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Liz Magic Laser's Armory Show Souvenirs



The European avant-garde crashed onto American shores with the 1913 Armory Show, introducing New York's art-going public to many of today's most revered modern painters, among them Cézanne, Kandinsky, Matisse and Picasso. With radical works like Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase," the exhibition both fascinated and disturbed; many visitors regarded the paintings, with their brash colors, warped perspectives and semi-abstract figures, as assaults on the virtues of classical beauty.

Fast-forward a century to the current Armory, a sprawling contemporary art fair that will mark the centennial of its namesake this week. Unlikely to generate the shock its forebear did, it still serves up a dose of provocation in an unexpected form: official paraphernalia. Armory staff T-shirts boldly brandish the average household income of visitors (\$334,000). Tote bags state the cost of an average booth (\$24,000). V.I.P. cards expose their holders' less-than-peerless status ("..... of 12,365"). These are the works of Liz Magic Laser, whom the Armory commissioned to produce the "visual identity" of this year's fair.



The artist Liz Magic Laser (far right) behind a one-way mirror at a focus group for her project at the Armory Show.

Except these items are not quite “by” Laser, whose performances typically dissect the gestures, media strategies and rhetoric of American political and financial institutions with biting humor and guerrilla tactics. Instead, she assembled focus groups to propose designs for her. “What are the issues that Liz needs to address to optimize what she is offering to Armory Show visitors?” asked Ben Allen, a market research professional, during one such group. Hidden behind a one-way mirror, Laser observed the responses.

“It felt like watching my own funeral,” said Laser, who listened silently as art-world professionals scrutinized her previous work. But she also relished the role reversal: art viewers were transformed into producers, while the artist was rendered a passive spectator.

Laser relinquished some agency over her end products, yet her process still reflects signature concerns. Before the 2012 election, she directed a video for CNN, “Push Polling,” that involved focus groups and man-on-the-street interviews. She made the questions “as manipulative as possible, in order to force people to say that this form itself was manipulative.” Calling polling and market research “the fabric of public discourse today,” Laser continues to examine how ideas about what a public believes and desires are formulated. Ironically, a century after the Armory scandalized the public, visitors to this year’s fair will — at least where Laser is concerned — get exactly what they want.