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Liz Magic Laser's Armory Commission Attacks Profit-Driven Art Fairs From Within



Film still from Liz Magic Laser's "The Armory Show Focus Group" (2012), an Armory Show Commission

When the Armory Show asked Liz Magic Laser to serve as the commissioned artist for this year's fair, she immediately was skeptical. "I don't pay close attention to art fairs," says the New York native. "I didn't even know what a commissioned artist was." She became even more confused when she found out.

Since 2002, the Armory Show has appointed an artist to establish the visual identity of the fair and design its catalogue, VIP cards, tote bags, employee t-shirts, and benefit editions. Previous participants include Theaster Gates, Karen Kilimnik, and John Waters.

How could an artist like Laser — who works primarily in performance and video and whose previous projects include staging Bertolt Brecht's play "Man equals Man" inside ATM vestibules throughout New York City — produce a series of marketable

objects while staying true to her artistic convictions?

She decided to ask for help. In November, Laser invited members of the art community — collectors, curators, dealers, lawyers, and writers (including this reporter) — to participate in a series of focus groups at the offices of a Midtown marketing firm. The moderator asked participants to brainstorm how Laser might bring her artistic point of view to the Armory’s prescribed, object-based commission. Applying a corporate marketing strategy to the commission “seemed like the appropriate answer to something that was all about public relations spin,” says Laser, who watched every focus group from behind a two-way mirror.

Suggestions ranged from the use of serif typefaces to a push for greater transparency in the fair’s mechanics, such as numbering the 12,365 VIP cards and printing wristbands that disclose the average income of an Armory Show visitor (one out of seven report an annual income of over \$500,000).

Rather than soften the Armory Show’s corporate edge, as the artist’s commission often does, Laser’s products look as if they were designed by Bank of America or another faceless corporation. And that’s precisely the point, according to Laser’s gallerist, Esther Kim Varet of Los Angeles’s Various Small Fires. The project intends to raise the curtain on what is, at the end of the day, a moneymaking venture.

“As with all commissions from for-profits, a savvy calculation is at work here,” Varet explains. “For the amount of work required to produce the fair’s identity, the artist compensation was close to nothing. They save costs on brand consulting while packaging the commission as a way of celebrating an artist — and well, selling booths.”

Indeed, the Armory Show declined to provide a discount for Laser’s booth beyond the 20-percent markdown given to all galleries in the Focus section, despite the fact that it reportedly offered blue-chip galleries reduced rates last year in an effort to encourage participation.

The Armory Show’s executive director Noah Horowitz notes that the fair paid the commissioned artist an honorarium for the first time this year — previously, they worked for free — in addition to financing Laser’s focus groups and other production costs. “This is a unique relationship with artists and we felt it appropriate to restructure that,” says Horowitz, though he declined to specify the size of the honorarium.

For her solo presentation at the Armory Show, Laser sought to transform Various Small Fires’s booth into a space for critical dialogue about the nature of art fairs. “I think there’s been a solid history of artists doing institutional critique in museums and galleries, but now is a moment for the art fair,” says Varet. Laser installed a fourth wall and a two-way mirrored glass window so that visitors can enter the booth and observe the fair without being seen from the outside.

Gallery staff will read a script written by Laser to guide visitors through the objects on display, including the products she created as the Armory Show's commissioned artist.

The booth also features a framed certificate for three shares of the Vornado Real Estate Trust, the publicly traded company that owns the Armory Show. Laser purchased the shares herself before the fair. "It's a gesture that says, 'I'm betting on this, too,'" says Varet. "The entire booth is about Liz's identity and how she's given it over to the Armory."

In the end, however, Laser may have the last laugh. Treating Various Small Fires's entire booth as an assisted readymade, she is offering it up for sale as an independent artwork. A collector can purchase it — walls and all — for \$100,000. If the Armory Show wants to make her into a commodity, Laser seems to say, then she will commodify it right back.