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Liz Magic Laser and Ideas Worth Spreading: A Dostoyevskian Take on TED

BY CHLOE WYMA | JANUARY 21, 2015



Alex Ammerman in Liz Magic Laser's "The Thought Leader," which places Dostoyevsky in a TED Talk format. (Courtesy Various Small Fires)

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LOS ANGELES — "Creativity," cultural critic Thomas Frank [once quipped](#), referring to the reams of management literature urging us to think outside the box, "is too important to be left to the creative."

Inspiration, innovation, and originality — once the critical yardsticks of "great art" — have become Silicon Valley buzzwords and the sacred cows of TED, the inspirational lecture series juggernaut devoted to circulating "ideas worth spreading" in the format of slick, fun-sized sermons given at elite \$7,500-a-head conferences and streamed online to [over a billion viewers](#). Convened in 1984 as a four-day conference on "Technology, Entertainment, and Design," the self-proclaimed incubator of creativity and innovation has ballooned into a cottage industry of subsidiary "TEDx" talks on everything from [big data](#) to [whale poop](#). If TED stole creativity from the arts, Liz Magic Laser's new video "The Thought Leader," the centerpiece of her show at [Various Small Fires gallery](#) in Los Angeles, returns the favor, parodying the format of the famous lecture series.

Dubbed "[the John Stewart of performance art](#)" by the post-Internet trend magazine *Dis*, Laser is well-known for a body of performance and video work that toys with the aesthetics of the media and public relations machines, treating the speech and gestures of politicians and news anchors as readymade public theater. In her 2011 Performa commission "I Feel Your Pain," Laser staged a performance that transformed excerpts of interviews with Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin into a romantic soap opera. As the 2012 Armory Show's commissioned artist, she hosted a series of focus groups with art world professionals to conduct market research on the fair's visual

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branding, extending the Armory's commercial ethos to its logical conclusion.

Shown alongside the new video "My Mind is My Own," which features Laser's 11-year-old daughter leading a cultish motivational seminar and mirrored glass sculptures based on diagrams from 19th-century public speaking manuals, "The Thought Leader" slyly skewers TED's brand of panglossian technological evangelism. Clad in business casual and TED's signature neutral-toned headset, 10-year-old actor Alex

Ammerman struts around the dramatically lighted stage in front of a rapt audience, his face doubled and enlarged on the Jumbotron behind him. His routine, created with the help of a professional speech coach, is full of pregnant pauses, pithy, declarative statements, and pensive pacing, mimicking the motivational oratory style of a self-help guru.

But the content of Ammerman's speech is hardly your typical TED Talk faire. Instead of refried platitudes about the panacea-like effects of innovation or [the hidden power of smiling](#), Ammerman delivers a diatribe against enlightened self-interest adapted from Fyodor Dostoevsky's choleric proto-existentialist novella "Notes from the Underground." Human nature, he argues, ventriloquizing Dostoevsky's neurasthenic narrator, is inherently violent and self-destructive: "They say man does dirty things because he does not know his own interest and that if he were enlightened he would at once become good and moral because he would see his own advantage in caring for the good of all." "But this," he tells his audience, "is the golden dream of an innocent child." Rather than attempt to build "a perfect world, crystal palace that can never be destroyed... it is better to do nothing" — a conclusion that is greeted with anxious laughter.

"Do nothing" was Dostoevsky's caustic response to feminist and democratic socialist Nikolay Chernyshevsky's revolutionary novel "What Is to Be Done?" Snubbing both the rational egoism of capitalism and Chernyshevsky's utilitarian socialism, Dostoevsky's Underground Man argued for the untrammled exercise of one's free will, no matter how dark, irrational, or masochistic it might be. While it goes without saying that this romantic nihilism is politically irresponsible — if not utterly reactionary — the bitter proclamations of Laser's child-orator throws a welcome wrench in the gears of TED's soft machine of "world-changing ideas." Like Chernyshevsky, TED aspires towards the "crystal palace," not through anything resembling socialism, but through the benevolent intervention of techno-humanitarianism and enlightened entrepreneurship (in 2012, TED [refused to post](#) venture capitalist Nick Hanauer's talk on income inequality, titled "Rich People Don't Create Jobs," for being "overtly partisan").

Laser isn't the first to turn the TED talk format against itself. Claiming to be war journalist back from an assignment in Mogadishu, comedian Sam Hyde [infiltrated a satellite "TEDx" event in Philadelphia](#) in 2013, delivering a Potemkin talk filled with middle-management mumbo jumbo ("What inspires me is teaching African refugees how to program Javascript"). A little more than a year ago, Benjamin Bratton, a visual art professor at University of California San Diego, [delivered a TEDx talk](#) denouncing TED as "middlebrow mega-church infotainment" propagating "placebo politics and placebo innovation." In 2010, Sarah Silverman launched a Twitter fight with TED curator Chris Anderson when she used her talk as a pretext to do a characteristically raunchy [standup act](#) titled "A New Perspective on the Number 300," complete with scatalogically suggestive visual aids.

Laser's subtler parody may lack the direct impact of these non-art world send-ups, but "The Thought Leader" surpasses them in its satire — not only of TED and its goofy techno-utopianism — but of the trickle-down diffusion of official rhetoric, the obfuscatory power of readymade language, and the legitimizing props of the podium and the PowerPoint presentation. In Laser's video, nothing is sacred — even Dostoevsky's negative crypto-anarchism can be instrumentalized. "At some point in our lives," Ammerman proclaims, "we all wake up and stand before the insatiable chasm of meaningfulness" — a piece of existentialist boilerplate here sounds like Dostoyevsky by way of

Werner Herzog. On Googling it, however, I found that it is actually paraphrased from TEDx organizer Jeremy Donovan's instructional manual, "[How to Deliver a TED Talk](#)."