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## HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

### Broadcast Muse: Liz Magic Laser's Bystander

by Paul David Young on April 5, 2014 0



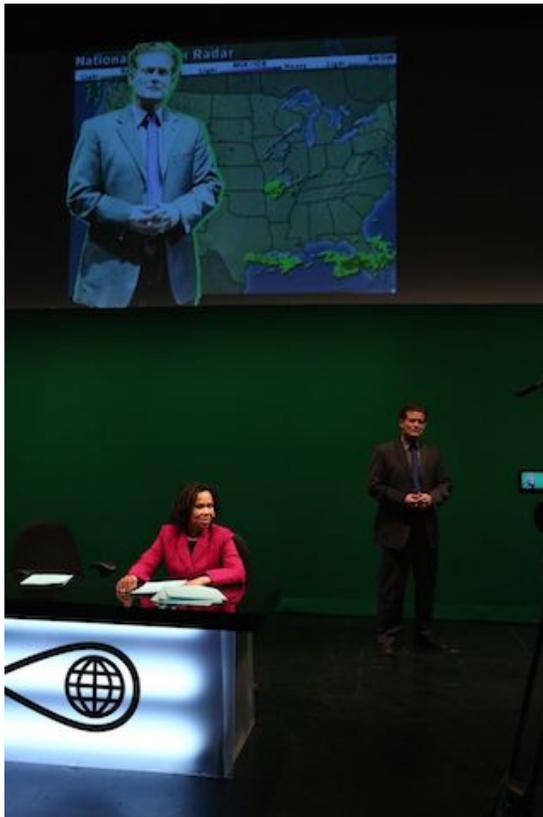
*Liz Magic Laser, "Bystander" (2014), performed at the Kitchen (all photos by Paula Court)*

The script for "[Bystander](#)," Liz Magic Laser's performance at The Kitchen, consists principally of two types of statements about current events — the personal and the reportorial. The first type is apparently drawn from interviews with New Yorkers done by Laser's team. The other is a straight news story, told in the familiar style of TV journalism, about issues ranging from the Russian takeover of Crimea to New Jersey Governor Christie's political flameout. Laser's concept is to switch up both the speaker and the speaking style for these two kinds of text.

Part of Laser's cast consists of local TV veterans — Roger Clark, Maria Trice and Jon Wright, all very game even if they stumble sometimes as actors — who begin the deviations from the norm by reading straight news and then launching into rambling personal reflections taken from the interviews. Clark moves among the audience, asking questions of planted actors (Audrey Crabtree, Annie Fox and Michael Wiener) who deliver standard, newscast-style monologues.

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Thus, the "spontaneous" responses of the planted actors in the audience, in contrast to the digressions of the real-life newscasters, become the more factual, disciplined parts of the spoken text. There is an effort to blur the lines between the two factions of the cast by putting questions to some truly anonymous members of the audience. But Clark reverts to the planted actors frequently with his questions, and they recite rehearsed lines that are easily distinguishable from the speeches of even the most articulate audience member. Another actor, Lynn Berg, dressed in black, stands in for the public figures whose images are projected behind him as he recites their speeches and imitates their gestures, enacting a film clip as part of a news story.



Liz Magic Laser, "Bystander" (2014)

Laser and two other technicians face upstage, sitting at tables piled with video monitors, downstage right. Trice and Wright sit at a table in the center, a "green screen" behind them. The footage of the newscasters and audience interviews is projected live above them. Sometimes Trice and Wright are surrounded by a green glow.

"Bystander" is decidedly topical (other news stories include the early stumbles of New York Mayor Bill de Blasio, the NSA's invasion of privacy and Pussy Riot's protests at the winter Olympics) and good for some laughs as the switch-up in roles and speaking styles unfolds. Trice, who appears to be African-American, improbably refers to herself as Swedish, and Clark, who hardly seems Asian, declares that his native language is Vietnamese. These odd personal remarks

obtained from the interview texts, along with the spontaneous non-actor audience comments, form pointed contrasts to the norm of factual reporting.

In the end, Laser literalizes the role reversal as one of the planted actors seizes the microphone

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from Clark and the two others take places at the newscasters' desk beside Trice and Wright, symbolically enacting a revolt against the dominant media on behalf of the passive audience.

In some ways, "Bystander" resembles Laser's 2011 project, "[I Feel Your Pain](#)," for Performa. There she planted actors in the audience of a cinema who broke out into dialogues taken from interviews with Glenn Beck, Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, Barack Obama, and John Boehner. The actors were filmed while seated among the audience, and this was projected live onto the cinema's screen.

The script for "Bystander," attributed to Laser and Sofia Pontén, is described as being "based on" interviews conducted by the cast, which leaves some ambiguity about the extent to which the material has been massaged or invented. The 75-minute performance is divided into several scenes, in between which the filming in the mock television studio shuts down and Trice and Wright make modest costume changes. Although this device does provide an opportunity to see the beast of TV news go dark, it also creates a fair amount of dead time in a brief show.

Large claims are made on behalf of the performance in its promotion: "By re-contextualizing the television news scenario as theatrical dialogue, Laser lays bare the mechanisms at play in the presentation and reception of current events."

It is uncertain how this is accomplished. The shifting styles of the different parts of the script (news versus personal response) do implicitly address subjectivity in the reception of current events and the objectivity of news reporting, albeit not in a particularly revelatory way. Television news is already self-parody. The showmanship is no longer concealed, but celebrated. If this were not already obvious, popular movie send-ups like *Anchorman* (2004), *Anchorman 2* (2013) and *To Die For* (1995) and more refined treatments such as the exquisite *Network* (1976) long ago revealed the underbelly of TV news to anyone still in the dark.



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Late in the show, the script has a reference to German philosopher and Nazi Party member Martin Heidegger's interpretation of truth as "unconcealment," though it is unclear to whom, other than the impaired and small children, the mechanisms of television news, to the extent that they are revealed here, remain unconcealed.

But then again, millions of Americans regularly watch Fox News, still ranked number one in cable news viewership. Maybe for her next project, Laser can sneak onto Fox and spread the word to those most in need.

*Liz Magic Laser's "Bystander" took place March 27–29 at The Kitchen (512 West 19 Street, Chelsea, Manhattan).*