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Liz Magic Laser's Guerrilla Theater

by Jonathan Munar / Dec 20, 2013



Liz Magic Laser, "Flight", production still, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

How can changing the context for a performance alter its meaning? In this film, artist Liz Magic Laser directs a group of actors performing theatrical scenes in public locations throughout New York City. "There's a respect for the material but then there's a complete disrespect for how they're supposed to be done," explains Laser, who describes her approach as "playing with the tension between script and context and somehow a mismatch between the two." For Laser's performance *chase* (2009-10), Bertolt Brecht's play *Man Equals Man* (1926)—an allegory of capitalist greed and militarism—is staged in public bank vestibules throughout New York City in the aftermath of the 2007-08 financial crisis. Laser worked with each actor individually, rehearsing and filming scenes one-on-one, and later edited the footage together to reconstitute the play's plot and dialogue. Improvising in each location, actors also deliver dialogue to unsuspecting customers, bank signage, and ATMs. "It was like playing a practical joke on someone over and over, but there was never a punch line," says Laser, who was frequently kicked out of the banks during filming only to move to a vestibule on the next block. For Laser's *Flight* (2011), the artist choreographed six actors performing staircase-based chase scenes from 23 films on the Times Square TKTS booth bleachers. Tracing the history of trauma in cinema—in films such as *M* (1931), *The French Connection* (1971), *The Shining* (1980), and *A History of Violence* (2005)—the performance is conceived as a 30-minute climactic moment, with actors quickly switching roles from victim to villain throughout. "We're rehearsing for emotions through this material constantly," says Laser, "It doesn't matter that we know it's fake. It still has a pretty intense impact on us psychologically." Performed amidst a live audience, *Flight* invites viewers to shift from passive witnesses to active participants, interrupting violent acts in a way that's impossible to do at the movies. Featuring additional commentary from the actors Nic Grelli, Michael Wiener, Lia Woertendyke, and Max Woertendyke.

Liz Magic Laser (b. 1981, New York City, NY, USA) lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.



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