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Liz Magic Laser Takes On Congress



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Photo: Thorsten Arendt

Installation view of Liz Magic Laser's "Public Relations/Öffentlichkeitsarbeit" TV set

by Rozalia Jovanovic

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Video still from "In Camera" (2012) /
Courtesy the Artist

Liz Magic Laser's latest performance piece is inspired by *Cyrano de Bergerac*, but don't expect men in doublets, neck ruffles, and wide-brimmed hats. "Absolute Event," which will open in November at the Paula Cooper Gallery project space at 197 10th Avenue, will feature a "television-studio scenario with a situation-room-slash-war-room that will also incorporate elements of a disco club," Laser said in a recent interview. "It's about how reality is staged on the news."

"Absolute Event," in other words, is very much in keeping with the celebrated artist's body of work over the last couple of years, which has kept returning — always in surreal ways — to current events and their mediation by media. For her 2011 Performa commission "I Feel Your Pain," she had actors read from scripts derived from interviews with politicians, including a televised chat between Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin that she transformed into a 1980s-style romantic drama. For her "Living Newspaper" performance at the Swiss Institute in 2012, Laser had actors and audience members recreate handshakes between political leaders and other images from the front page of the *New York Times*. And for 2012's "In Camera," three actors were simultaneously filmed, from different locations, reading lines from Jean Paul Sartre's "No Exit" in a dry, perfunctory style, and their performances were presented on monitors in a newsroom-esque set-up in a gallery. (Three is the magic number of voices, Laser said, required to lend a piece of televised reportage an air of authority: "You need those different layers of telling the story to construct this convincing portrayal of reality.")

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The new project will feature two actors in that TV-studio-situation-room setting, one playing a political strategist and the other an "unnamed world leader." They will perform a scripted dialogue based on a mixture of sources and inspirations: the Cyrano de Bergerac legend (or rather three versions of it, including the Gerard Depardieu film); reported news about the recent government shutdown ("the rhetoric from those disputes will play a major part," Laser said); and language evocative of a "Shakespearean scenario of the lady being wooed on the terrace." All of this will be shot on '80s-era video equipment (recently acquired from a defunct television station) in the front room of the gallery and projected onto screens in another room. Visitors will either watch the performance live, on November 14 and 16, or in an installation up through November 30.

In addition to the Cyrano research, Laser conducted interviews and workshops with news anchors, media coaches, and political strategists, as well as one of her lead actors, Gary Lee Mahmoud, a former Congressional-aide who left Capitol Hill to pursue the dramatic arts. She recently selected her second actor, another former Congressional staffer named Daniel Abse, after a search that drew 200 applicants.

This is the second time, and the first in her home city, that Laser has conducted a casting call for one of her productions, built a full set for it, and had the privilege of finessing her vision with the help of set and costume designers. (The first instance was "Public Relations," a two-channel video installation she did earlier this year at the Westfälischer Kunstverein in Munster, Germany.) A somewhat large-scale production in New York is a significant shift from the impromptu stagings she's put on thus far. She once had a team of actors read a Brecht drama in an ATM vestibule at a Chase bank for no one but the people getting cash and the security guard who eventually kicked them out. As Laser breaks new ground for herself in the art world, one wonders how essential that fast-and-loose feel is to her work, and whether she may quickly be approaching the end of her time as a small-budget artist. Laser is adamant that smaller productions are still vital to her practice, and as evidence points to the performance "Stand Behind Me," recently staged in Europe, in which one actor re-enacts the oratorical gestures of politicians in famous speeches.

Still evident as ever is Laser's particular talent for creating bridges between seemingly unrelated parts of the culture (political interviews and romcoms, war rooms and discos, Cyrano and Obamacare). Even the title, "Absolute Event," embraces the kind of double meaning that makes Laser's work vital. "It's something that has a precise start time, like the beginning of a show" she said of the phrase, a term of art in broadcasting. "I came to the title before the shutdown happened," she added, but during a drama like the recent one in Washington, "all of the dialogue in the news very much lends itself to that premise of an impending deadline."