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## PUBLIC THEATER

John Beeson on Liz Magic Laser at Westfälischer Kunstverein, Münster

To the sound of a camera shutter clicking, Liz Magic Laser's 2012 video work "Push Poll" opens with a series of still images depicting the outside, then the inside, of a Lower Manhattan project space-turned-television news studio. The subject of the video, a commission from the news network CNN for its "digital election art gallery", can be summed up as: "How does a series of seemingly simple questions become a powerful tool of manipulation?" – a line delivered by an actress playing a news anchor in Laser's work. The video also includes scenes of a focus group on push polling (a type of polling consisting of leading questions) as well as manneristic vox populi-style interviews (assessing "the voice of the people") conducted on the streets of New York.

"Push Poll" functions well as a prelude of sorts for "Public Relations/Öffentlichkeitsarbeit", Laser's recent multipart work and eponymously titled exhibition at Westfälischer Kunstverein in Münster. In the Kunstverein's foyer, a monitor hanging on the wall of a mock café is set to play the video on repeat. One of three earlier works by Laser incorporated into the exhibition, it is an essential element of the café's *mis-en-scène* – which also includes a rack of international newspapers updated daily, a café-themed painting (by New York-based painter Sanya Kantarovsky), hand-finished cast iron tables, chairs, a black-and-white checkerboard floor, and a green wall with red velvet design touches. Altogether, these parts comprise the stage on which Laser filmed one half of a new video, and they also embody a once important, and perhaps long-lost, site of discussion about society and politics. Café culture is a

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curious focus for an American artist like Laser, since the tradition was much more prominent in Europe; it's a romantic stereotype of Paris, for example. But perhaps in this way, and not only by making the aforementioned video bilingual (German/English), Laser was responding to the cultural context – its history, and her capacity for understanding it.

Around the corner from the café, a meticulously crafted model (half of which depicts the café set) stands on a pedestal under a Plexiglas cover. Made by Christian Kiehl in collaboration with Laser, the model emphasizes the constructed nature of the video and its now-interactive stage sets. It also thematizes the performative aspect of the art-going experience – the theatricality of exhibition design; the constructed nature of subject matter and viewer perception; that, in actuality, it's all conceived and produced in anticipation of a viewer. In several ways, the exhibition lays its own constructions bare so as to return to this perspective, casting both Laser's work and her subject matter in a reflexive light.

Behind a curtain leading to the exhibition's main room, viewers glimpse the largely ethereal structure behind Laser's theater. Wooden trusses, refracted light, and skins of translucent paper serving as projection screens embody the breakdown of the construct in life-size. To the right, along the backside of the café set (although the museum walls might cause some spatial confusion), viewers find an extraordinary sculptural arrangement: Set between two wooden trusses extending into the room through an open doorway, and hanging in front of a translucent sheet of paper (stenciled in black with the word "CAFÉ" and casually adhered to the structure with black tape), spins a disco ball. Light erupts off of it in

all directions, except where the ball has been painted black with a design of the Earth's seven continents. Three videos showing the rotating disco ball from various close-up ranges are projected onto a large hanging sheet of translucent paper that spans nearly the width of the main room. It is hung on a wooden structure constituting the backside of yet another set: Referred to as a "TV Set", it actually combines the design of a news anchor's desk with that of a bar – replete with shelves of highball glasses and liquor bottles. Mounted above the bar is a monitor screening the video shot in the café. It depicts the outbursts and mumblings of an outspoken patron. His monologue, which appears to disturb the other guests just as often as they smile politely or nod in agreement, at times responds to the statements or actions of an on-the-scene news reporter seen in a video projection on the facing wall.

"Today, we'll be asking the people of Münster what they think about the news," she announces from her post outside on the city's streets. Shortly thereafter, the man in the café asks aloud, "OK, Hände hoch: Wer schaut Nachrichten im Fernsehen?" ("OK, raise your hands: Who watches the news on TV?") The people that the news reporter approaches on the street are ostensibly locals, not actors, and they seem to reply earnestly to her questions (at other times, speaking to the camera, she recites absurd one-liners like advertisements for a news station). In that he is a purely fictional character, the man in the café serves as a foil for the public but also legitimately bemoans the constructed nature of such interviews, especially when mediated by film and television – thus returning to the subject matter of "Push Poll", but with more discursive results, meditating on the relation between the media and the public

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interest. In the video component of "Public Relations/Öffentlichkeitsarbeit", Laser undermines both the perspective of the man in the café and that of the news anchor filmed on location. The following symbolic element discloses the theater in each case, suggesting that neither can be held above the other: In separate moments, both actors turn away from the camera, revealing that their costumes, created by Berlin-based tailor Nils von Berg, have zippers running all the way down the backs of them. What look like normal clothes are merely a façade. Thus their physical appearance, like the many other details of the video's *mise-en-scène* as well as its dialogue and outlook, are a well-orchestrated illusion.

The final work in the exhibition, "Stand Behind Me" (2013), a video documenting a performance at Lisson Gallery in London, emphasizes the concerted subtext at play in politicians' gestures. A performer stands in front of the audience present at the gallery and pantomimes the hand

gestures of several politicians corresponding to how they delivered the speeches that scroll on monitors installed below the projection. A work such as this reveals that even when Laser imports the politics themselves into the work, her focus remains the nature of its mediation. Whereas her works have previously attended to the performative – that is to say, often immaterial – aspects of sociopolitical concerns, "Public Relations/Öffentlichkeitsarbeit" shows that the artist is entirely as perceptive, and perhaps even more gainfully expressive, when she gives physical form to the structures of that theater.

Liz Magic Laser, "Public Relations/Öffentlichkeitsarbeit", Westfälischer Kunstverein, Münster, Juli 13–September 22, 2013.