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## Liz Magic Laser, Commissioned artist, The Armory Show Focus Group, 2013



The Armory Show Focus Group (2012), Liz Magic Laser, an Armory Show Commission produced in association David Guinan of Polemic Media. Featuring focus group moderator Ben Allen of Labrador Agency.

On the occasion of the Centennial Year of the Armory Show in New York, native New Yorker Liz Magic Laser was selected as the 2013 commissioned artist. The Armory Show commenced in 1913 in New York showing such artists as Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, Wassily Kandinsky and others. At the time, these artists were fresh and exotic to American eyes and as a homage to the unexpected and new in art, the committee chose Liz Magic Laser who is known for composing participatory performances, documented on film. Her work is non-narrative and has an element of theatricality. Inspiration arises from the political and comedic gesture however is non-didactic and relies on the removal of information and moments that are quiet. In the official press release Michael Hall, Creative Director of The Armory Show, states,

"Laser's work operates within the connections and disconnections of satire,

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absurdist theater and public life. Her work frames and theatricalizes the ubiquitous, yet critically important noise of political speech: twenty-first century America's ultimate readymade."

First discovering Liz Magic Laser's work in 2010 while she was a resident at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC) her popularity has since grown, as has her CV, having participated in multiple fairs, exhibitions and residencies such as Smack Mellon and is currently part of the Marie Walsh Share Foundation both in Dumbo, Brooklyn. We recently sat down to discuss her practice, her aesthetic likes and dislikes and what it is like to be the commissioned artist for the Armory 2013.

**KATY DIAMOND HAMER:** Hi Liz, why don't we start with your description of the project you've put together for The Armory Show. You have some visual concepts on the wall that I'm curious about as well.

**LIZ MAGIC LASER:** Well, the whole premise [of the project] is that I set up a series of focus groups and worked with a focus group moderator named Ben Allen, and he is a market research CEO who does this professionally for companies like Axe Body Spray, a tequila company and many others. The focus group is basically how every major brand is operating, it's also how the news media and political campaigns find their target audiences. Somehow for me it's like campaign meets a bank. Market research is all about using a democratic model of voting to figure out what the public wants. But the methods they use the techniques and questions, to me are somewhat questionable. Is it taking the temperature of public opinion or is it engineering public opinion?



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KDH: You were given a list of requests as the commissioned artist by Armory Show staff asking that you meet specific criteria and produce two limited edition objects that will be sold to benefit the Museum of Modern Art and the Pat Hearn & Colin de Land Cancer Foundation.

LML: It's been a battle for me the whole way through where I feel manipulated and I know I'm being manipulated and I can't stop it because I'm fulfilling a role.

KDH: Sounds like it's been frustrating but I'm sure rewarding at the same time. Will you be showing in a booth during the fair?

LML: I'll be featured in Eric Shiner's (Director of the Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh) curated section titled FOCUS with Various Small Fires. I took photographs of myself and Armory staff watching the situation of the focus group and merged the two digitally in order to visually describe the concept. The booth will be small and at the end of a long hallway and feature a one-way mirror so people can get behind the mirror and watch in a way that almost feels like live cinema. You have to be in the dark, there is an illuminated rectangle and movement is observed from this control room environment.

KDH: How did you find the participants for your focus group? What were you selling or claiming to sell?

LML: I sent some criteria to the staff of the Armory telling them what I need. I arrived at a motif that I will use in the booth that is a model of the manipulated spectator. It's something that keeps recurring in the last few projects where I'm interested in the Walter Benjamin type of thought where the spectator can be activated. My thought is that we have already activated the spectator and now it is something used by those who are in positions of social control although it is part of the bureaucratic system.

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Still of thearmoryshow.com website Image courtesy of the artist

KDH: Before you mentioned cinema and the concept of a silhouetted figure standing in front of a rectangle. My first visual was of that of viewers standing in front of a painting in a museum. I like that your thought and vision actually transporting the concept to a more contemporary time, dealing with celluloid. The scene, or image of the silhouetted figure in front of a rectangular shape is not new but changes and evolves over time. What you are talking about also seems to have a direct relationship to voyeurism.

LML: Definitely. We're turning the smallest available booth into a replica of the back room that we used during the focus group. Also some of the editions that I made to benefit MoMA and the Pat Hearn & Colin de Land Cancer Foundation will be featured along with some of the prototypes for those editions. We basically did two phases of focus groups. My criteria was to work each day to do two groups of art consumers. My criteria was that they be collectors, art advisors, art critics, museum trustees or directors, and curators. My thought was that they could all be considered art consumers. We had two groups like this and then a more general group, and the criteria for that was for people who buy art books and occasionally go to museums,

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but are not necessarily involved in the art world. I worked with a discussion manual which talks about points and phases that you go through with the group to establish a level of comfort. Then he (Ben Allen) would ask more pointed questions regarding The Armory Show.

KDH: Did all the participants have to sign a release?

LML: Yes, we had all of the invited participants sign a release and they also were given my artist statement and resume stating projects I have done and what their participation would require (filming, etc.).

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## The Armory Show

Piers 92 & 94

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New York City

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The Armory Show, a leading international contemporary and modern art fair and one of the most important annual art events in New York, takes place every March on Piers 92 & 94 in central Manhattan. The Armory Show is devoted to showcasing the most important artworks of the 20th and 21st

@TheArmoryShow:

"The Armory Show Anniversary Alert: Lick This!" on The L

Still of thearmoryshow.com website Image courtesy of the artist

An edited video has been made from the experience, cyclical documentation of research that has come full circle. Through the focus groups Laser arrived at designs and a 'readymade' that will be used for the Armory Show.

Participants were invited to suggest or discuss font choices, colors, and layout design. The result was sent out to VIP's as invitations, will appear on the official tote bag and be present throughout the duration of the fair. The project of seeking out public and industry opinion to arrive at the most effective marketing tool as it was derived from the participants and expected viewers who will be "sold" the concept of an idea taking its cue from branding, corporate identity and democratically pleasing the public. The result is meant to be a corporate solution, not necessarily aesthetically

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pleasing; it's the anti-art art. As the Armory Show celebrates the one hundred year anniversary, let's not forget the amount of art that has crossed our paths. In reference to a Duchamp readymade, Laser removes the object, the signature (no R. Mutt here), and for many a comfort zone regarding how one might want to experience art. Then again, the distorted female form and faces made by Picasso on large, painted canvases were probably not always comfortable, easy to understand or digest. As the commissioned artist for 2013, Liz Magic Laser dives head first into a conceptual well, filled with thirst and willing to yield a particular unexpected water for those ready to drink.



Rendering of Limited Edition trophy for The Armory Show, 2013 Courtesy of the artist