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Art in America INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

Liz Magic Laser Focus-Groups Armory Show Contribution

by *brian boucher* 11/16/12

In one of the more unusual art-world events I've attended lately, I joined a focus group Monday evening at the beige Lexington Avenue offices of Focus Suites. We were there at the Armory Show's invitation to brainstorm ideas for Liz Magic Laser's contribution—very much in development—as the commissioned artist for the fair's 2013 iteration, a role that requires her to "inspire the visual identity" of the fair, according to a handout given to participants. In a windowless room, under fluorescent lights around a conference table laden with Chex Mix and peanut M&Ms, art-world professionals talked, while the artist and Armory Show reps watched from behind a two-way mirror.

Laser's assignment includes designing items like T-shirts, tickets and tote bags--presumably unfamiliar formats for an artist acclaimed for performance and video work that deals with modern mass media, politics and entertainment. She'll also produce two limited-edition artworks to benefit the Museum of Modern Art and the Pat Hearn and Colin de Land Cancer Foundation.

The participants, all New Yorkers, included writers (author Amelia Stein along with Blouin Media's Julia Halperin, *The New York Observer's* Michael H. Miller, the *Village Voice's* Christian Viveros-Fauné, and Artfagcity's Paddy Johnson), a dealer (Maxwell Graham of Essex Street Gallery), an attorney who focuses on art and law (Amy Goldrich of LynnCahill), an artist (Christopher Rivera) and a curator (Rocio Aranda-Alvarado, of El Museo del Barrio).



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Moderator Ben Allen started out by asking what group members were thinking about. The aftermath of Storm Sandy was on many participants' minds, as well as various market trends, especially with postwar and contemporary art auctions taking place this week in New York.

Viveros-Fauné professed to be thinking a lot about a split he purported to exist between "art" and "life," and suggested that the term "swag" might just as well stand for "silver, wine, art and gold," all currently sought after by investors. Johnson reported being very concerned with the idea of whether art can still change the world, while Aranda-Alvarado talked about the job of bringing people into the museum, where, she confirmed, people are still changed.

After showing a 10-minute reel of clips from Laser performance pieces, Allen asked what Laser's role should be as the Armory Show's commissioned artist. Well, a participant suggested, she's a director. How can she direct people's experience with the products she creates? Graham proposed a more radical intervention. If her strategy is normally about revealing, perhaps this time she could conceal, and refuse to create the commissioned objects.

Halperin pointed out that one theme in Laser's work is asymmetry of information. She suggested that Armory Show paraphernalia might be a good place to level out asymmetries by disseminating information about the art world and the Armory Show that is usually unspoken. The group imagined T-shirts emblazoned with the price of a booth at the Armory Show or with information about the costs of putting on the show overall.

Allen came back to the question of just what an artist like Laser *does* as the show's commissioned artist.

A blasé Miller said, "Oh, you know. You stage a performance during the first hour, and then you design the tickets and the tote bags." I forget if he said "whatever." He may have shrugged.

The challenge for a critical artist, invited into the belly of the commercial beast, was the most difficult question for the group to tackle. For all the informed and opinionated people taking part, the discussion proceeded haltingly, despite the self-deprecating moderator's best efforts to lighten things up, as when he asked Graham why he was leaving all the yellow M&Ms on his plate.

Allen asked us to close our eyes and picture an invitation to the Armory Show, in a literal as well as metaphorical sense. What does it look like? What does it invite you *to*? "It should be on nice paper," Graham recommended, in dead earnest. "With bold type. I like serifs."

"Oh, please," Johnson countered. "I just want a press release." With these conflicting demands from the focus group, Laser certainly has her work cut out for her.



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Laser takes nothing for granted; when *A.i.A.* invited her to do an interview for its "Muse" column, she took as her subject the interview format itself. So during the discussion and afterward, the participants wondered: Was the focus group part of the work itself, and not just part of the development of it?

Perhaps the market-oriented nature of the focus group enterprise serves, for Laser, as a metaphor for the corporate image of the Armory Show itself, the once-scraggy hotel art fair founded by de Land and other dealers and now perceived as a commercial behemoth.