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Focus: Liz Magic Laser

Newsrooms, agitprop theatre and the 'living newspaper'



Liz Magic Laser Flight, 2011, performance and single-channel video, 30 minutes, Times Square, New York City, 2011. Featuring actors Michael Wiener, Max Woertendyke and Lia Woertendyke.

Liz Magic Laser is an artist based in New York, USA. This year, her solo shows have included *'I Feel Your Pain'* and *'The Digital Face'* at Derek Eller Gallery, New York, and at Various Small Fires, Los Angeles, USA. Her forthcoming exhibition, *'In Camera'*, opens at Malmö Konsthall, Sweden, in October.

'Right now I have a fantasy of what I'll do with the space,' Liz Magic Laser tells me, a month or so before the start of her residency at Forever & Today, Inc. in New York. 'I keep playing with the idea of a situation room or a newsroom.' When I visited her at the non-profit space – which, during the summer, runs a 'Studio on the Street' programme specifically aimed at artists like Laser, who do not have their own studio or a traditional studio-based practice – the fantasy had partly become a reality.

To call it a 'situation room' – that is, a control centre fitted with a bank of television monitors such as can be found at, say, the White House – would be stretching things. Three monitors stacked up at the back of the compact Lower East Side shopfront played newsfeeds culled from Reuters and Al Jazeera that morning, while two smaller screens mounted next to these on the wall showed video clips from Laser's recent projects scrutinizing the workings of the media. One of these, *In Camera* (2012), based on Jean-Paul Sartre's play *Huis-Clos* (No Exit, 1944) but cast in the mould of a news broadcast, was produced by Malmö Konsthall in collaboration with the Swedish public television channel SVT inside a real news studio.

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Liz Magic Laser, *In Camera*, 2012, five-channel video installation, with actors Anders E Larsson, Karin Hallén and Maria Lindh. Produced by Malmö Konsthall in collaboration with SVT, with a script adapted by Liz Magic Laser and Sofia Pontén from Jean Paul Sartre's *Huis Clos*.

Whether fully functional or not (the Internet connection, for one thing, would not allow for a constant news stream at the time of my visit), the TV and video screens formed a convincing enough backdrop for the artist to assume her self-appointed role as anchorwoman seated at her desk in a news studio. More than just a set, Laser considered the multi-channel video installation to be fragments and sketches of work in progress, not unlike those found in a more traditional studio.



Liz Magic Laser in the studio at Forever & Today, Inc., New York during her residency as part of the 'Studio on the Street' programme, 2012

Though she typically dons multiple roles in any given project – writer, director, editor, camera operator, photographer – Laser sees herself most like a filmmaker working in the montage tradition. This is clearest in a piece such as *Flight* (2011), which welds together 23 iconic chase scenes that take place on stairs, excerpted from cinema classics and re-enacted by six professional actors on crowded steps at MoMA PS1 and in Times Square. Strung together, the film clips make up a 'structure list video' that often serves as an initial draft script from which the final script, containing detailed stage directions (including optional ones such as: 'if possible use people as a door to hide behind' or 'appeal to audience members for help') is written. Along with the storyboard used to map out where the performers would be, what their movements would be and where the cameras would be located in each scene, these scripts are Laser's basic working tools.

They go through dozens of revisions and much reorganizing. In the case of *I Feel Your*

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Pain (2011), it took months to come up with a script because the work involved isolating individual sentences or sections from political speeches and interviews, making minor word changes, splicing and reconstituting the material. Her most challenging piece to date – performed, filmed and simultaneously screened before a live audience inside a movie theatre with Laser acting as real-time editor – it is yet another collation of fragments held together by a loose narrative arc: that of the kind of romantic relationship familiar to us from rom-coms.

Laser's latest projects, *I Feel Your Pain* and *In Camera* especially, have tended to rely heavily on technology, in a way that is at once elating and frustrating for all involved, according to the artist, since so much can go wrong in the impossible scenarios she sets up. To make up for this, and also to transform her studio practice into a more active environment, Laser has decided to explore dramatizing daily news in a series of 'living newspaper' performances staged as part of her 'Studio on the Street' residency.

Laser became fascinated with the concept of the 'living newspaper' – a form of agitprop theatre elaborated in the early days of the Soviet Union to disseminate current events to illiterate masses – in the context of Performa last year. Whereas for *I Feel Your Pain*, a Performa commission, Laser used the more fine-tuned, highly rehearsed model of us 'living newspaper' as developed under the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s, in the new project she would like to experiment with a more slapdash-style 'living newspaper' that effectively reverts to the Soviet original. Appropriately, given its affinities with street theatre, the 'living newspaper' will operate for the duration of Laser's 'Studio on the Street' residency out of Forever & Today, Inc., established as its temporary headquarters.

Agnieszka Gratza