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New York artist Liz Magic Laser discusses her performance pieces—and their unusual settings, conceptions, and influences—with Amanda Valdez.



Rehearsal for *I Feel Your Pain*, by Liz Magic Laser with actors Lynn Berg, Audrey Cratree, Ray Field, Annie Fox, Kathryn Grody, Rafael Jordan, Liz Micek, and Ryan Shams.

Liz Magic Laser has staged her work in bank ATM vestibules, on a staircase in Times Square and, for her Performa 11 commission, in a movie theatre. Equal in range is her cast of collaborators: dancers, actors, cinematographers, surgeons, and a motorcycle gang. Though she started out as a photographer, over time her art practice has become predominately performance-based. In the 2010 Greater New York show at PS1 she exhibited *Mine*, an installation of her ransacked purse in a vitrine, accompanied by a video projection of a set of hands using surgical tools to pull apart the purse and its contents. Another piece, *chase*, is an epic adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's play *Man Equals Man*. Every line creates a new frame in the film from a different location in which the actors delivered their lines to ATM machines, other patrons, and within the general contained space of bank locations. *I Feel Your Pain*, a feature length film created while the audience watches the performance take place in the same space recently premiered at Performa 11. In the work, the American political scene is set up as a romantic drama as seen through the lens of Russian agitprop theatre techniques. I spoke with the artist before the premier.

AMANDA VALDEZ In your last several projects there's a clear shift into theatre. *chase* was developed from Bertolt Brecht's play *Man Equals Man*, *Flight* combines live acting with mashed up film scenes, and your latest piece is invested in theatre practices. How did this develop?

LIZ MAGIC LASER My background is in photography but it was very directorial. It was never a decision to transition, but I will say my mother, Wendy Osserman, is a choreographer, so I grew up in a rehearsal space and around performance. I've always collaborated with dancers. In the summer of 2007, I tried my first scripted performance piece—it was a conversation I had with an ATM, I was working through this fraught

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relationship with it. Within a few weeks of trying this, a theatre director named James Dacre, who was at Columbia at the same time that I was there, saw my photographic work and asked if I would collaborate on a video-based set for a production he was working on at Here Art Center. The conversations with James and actress Annika Borrás that surrounded it were very generative. I kept working and trying experiments with actors that I meet through these collaborations, so the transition was gradual over the course of a few years. Then I tried a second experiment at the bank: I tried to deposit prosciutto into an ATM it disabled it and I took a few photos. Later I kept thinking about the ways that surveillance cameras function in that space. I reflected on how bringing my camera to the bank was perceived as a threat to other people's privacy, to all the codes that are established around people's daily interaction with money. It was something that took on a life of its own and I came to a more ambitious endeavor with that space. Since then I have continued working with theatre as material but I haven't done anything in a proper theatre space.

AV Are you looking at a specific development in theatre coming from Augusto Boal, *The Theatre of the Oppressed*? Your work seems to be developing out of this vein.

LML I only started looking at Boal's writing after I had done this project in the Chase bank, so I can't say I was directly informed to begin with by his work. I started to read him after I had done that project and I very much related to it, especially with the latest project because he played a lot with this "living newspaper" form.

AV I'm not as familiar with the "living newspaper" that you're using in the upcoming *Performa* piece *I Feel Your Pain*. Where does it come from?

LML One of the themes of this *Performa* is Russian Constructivist Theatre. I got into thinking about this moment when the Soviet Avant-Garde reacted against traditional theater's use of emotion and empathy to manipulate the audience, to keep them seduced and hypnotized. This is often mistaken as a reaction against the use of emotion, when really they did want to use emotion, but in a more critical manner that doesn't simply place the audience in a position to be manipulated. In reading through a course packet prepared by RoseLee Goldberg and Jess Wilcox about Russian Constructivism I found a footnote about the "living newspaper." I had already set about developing a script from transcribing interviews and knew that this was going to take place in a movie theatre. The footnote about a "living newspaper" form actually mentions it as a Works Progress Administration project, so it happened here, in the U.S. Finding that led me on this "living newspaper" trail. It was originally a soviet agitprop method in the 1920's. There was a group called Blue Blouse group enacting the day's news to spread it to the illiterate masses; their approach was more slap-dash. American theatre practitioners saw this, and in bringing the idea over here it became a stage form. I looked at one living newspaper by Joseph Losey called "Injunction Granted," and it's about the history of labor rights in this country. I used some structuring principles from the "Injunction Granted" script and fixtures like a live voice over which is the voice of the "living newspaper" and clown character that's woven throughout.

AV Was this an idea you had and then *Performa* called? Or did *Performa* call and this idea formed?

LML I started working with *Performa* before this idea materialized. I starting meeting with RoseLee a year and half ago, it was a long development process. I proposed a few ideas before this one. Misunderstanding Boal sparked the first idea; I got very excited about this idea of legislative theatre and imagined it was more in line with his other exercises, when it was actually about him becoming a politician himself. So I've gone at

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these ideas from a variety of angles before this emerged. I started being interviewed more and one of the first opportunities where I had some control over that was with Christopher Lew, a curator that I've worked with at PS1. He got to know all the actors I was working with for *Flight*, the staircase project. We decided to make a project out of a group interview and it was published on Art Journal's website. I was looking at the interview form and how the interview produces a script or vice versa. The interview is always edited or contrived in some sense. There's this premise of revealing who someone really is, their intentions, or some authentic view of a person.

Then I saw an interview between Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin and it was the first time they had ever met. He starts by saying, "I want to read to you what I wrote about you in my journal last night." This sort of adolescent flirtation was embedded in their exchange and it sounds quite intimate if you put it in another context; and that became the first scene of my piece. Looking at the Avant-Garde, looking at the interview as a form and how it is used by politicians to display their humanity, to garner support, such that emotion supersedes the content of what they're saying . . . all this cross-wired for me.

AV You've found another space similar to the ATM foyers in which society has a pre-conditioned passive set of behaviors and relationship to the space— in this piece it's located in a movie theatre. I'm curious to see if this piece can disrupt my extremely conditioned relationship with that contained space. How did this develop?

LML In the past the movie theatre carried this utopian potential for collective reception and activation, but now it's quickly becoming outmoded. The movie theatre will persist but it's heyday passed and clearly the radical potential is outdated. I started developing the script before I knew it would be in a movie theatre. It didn't totally gel until I came to this as the setting. It's a space where you're supposed to go for this vicarious experience of highly private intimacy on screen. And I'm using this scenario to look at how those manipulative techniques are being used on the political stage now, the dramaturgy of politics right now. All these politicians have speech coaches who have backgrounds in theatre and advisors that serve as dramaturges by looking at what's worked in the past and how it can be re-performed now to further effect. I'm putting it back in its proper place. Seeing all the apparatus that produce the film while you're seeing it will disrupt the experience of viewing this. The entire scenario is a disruption in the viewing situation of the movie theatre, one disruption after another.

AV Were you starting to connect how you could play with this form from 100 years ago and connect it to what is happening right now? Are you making the same critique of the use of emotion?

LML I started with wanting to look at how empathy was working on the public in this country. Despite your awareness of the manipulation and the mechanisms at play, it still works on you. In the art world we're so over emotion and empathy; however, they are in full swing on the political stage and this quintessential bad method acting plays on our heartstrings. Bad method acting is ruling the world. How can you find some agency within that? Clearly being put in a critical position in which you're aware of the manipulation that's being done to you isn't enough. When I started I was thinking about the Tea Party and the left seemed wary of being polemic or emotional. The context has now changed overnight with Occupy Wall Street. The kind of conversations that we're playing with in the performance take on a different character now than they did at the beginning of the rehearsal process. Now, I can't even imagine how it would be if these dramatic changes didn't take place because it became part of the work and the slippage in language between the left and right. A year ago we were at a place where the right had completely appropriated every tactic that the left had

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developed: protest, activism, and agitprop. Andrew Breitbart was doing it more effectively than The Yes Men unfortunately and it's not the fault of The Yes Men. This has changed in the last six weeks. It's a struggle over this language and these methods.

AV Have you considered presenting or creating a work at Occupy Wall Street? Back to the Theatre of the Oppressed, which is the idea of creating a stage to bring the problems of the society and rehearse new solutions. The temporal and immediate nature of what's going on down there has a connection to your work and in the creation of a contained stage.

LML Definitely, I've been talking to the actors I've been working with about doing something down there after Performa but we don't know what form that would take. We were talking about doing something that's more in-line with the earlier "living newspaper" construct of improvising on the rapid pace of events that had just taken place over the course of a day or two.

AV There is a very tangible aspect of fear in your projects. You've remarked in the past that *Flight* focuses on cinema's ability to allow us to rehearse how to deal with trauma. The film industry is a very potent cultural fear producer. In *I Feel Your Pain* you're taking on politicians, another potent cultural fear producer. This insidious nature comes out in *chase's* ATM vestibules, the aspect of fear in protecting what you have or fear of observation or fear of the collapse of the individual within capitalism. I would say that fear is a material you work with.

LML Fear-mongering has been a consistent point of interest and part of the material that I'm working with; looking at how the fear mongering takes place, its tactics, the strategies, and how they play out. I'm happy you brought up the rehearsing issue, but in *I Feel Your Pain* I'm not focused on the use of fear, I'm looking more at empathy and politicians showing their intimate selves as the method to manipulate, some fear is sprinkled in there. Reception becomes rehearsing. Our behavior is based on watching movies or politicians perform; watching becomes psychologically rehearsing for a specific relationship to government, to politicians, to intimacy, to romance, to sex, to how to deal with birth, life, and death. There are behavioral emotional responses that are conditioned through receiving this material and we all know this. A lot of people recognize this operation takes place but recognition isn't enough to dispel the spell.

Amanda Valdez is a New York based artist and critic. She received her MFA from Hunter College and her BFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and is a regular contributor to Dossier Journal.