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Liz Magic Laser "The Thought Leader"

2015, Single-channel video, 9'22"

In her latest work *The Thought Leader* (2015), a 10-minute single channel video, New York based artist Liz Magic Laser combines the format and particular uniformity of the TED conferences with Fyodor Dostoyevsky's dark novel *Notes from the Underground* (1864). A young boy, Alex Ammerman, recites Dostoyevsky's text speaking in the most cheerful way about an individual on the margins of modern society and the effects modern life has on the human condition.

Introduced by Jens Hoffmann

Jens Hoffmann: What made you combine the format of a TED talk, a young boy and parts of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *Notes from the Underground*?

Liz Magic Laser: I became interested in working with the TED Talk format because it is a highly cultivated performance of one's hyper-professional yet "all too human" self. The TED Talk has codified an odd yet timely form of self-promotion that aims to benefit society at large. I see TED's underlying ideology of enlightened self-interest as the capitalist incarnation of the socialist ideal of individualism which was promoted by Nikolai Chernyshevsky's 1863 novel *What Is to Be Done?* Dostoyevsky actually wrote *Notes from the Underground* (1864) as a direct attack on Chernyshevsky's utopian fantasy of how selfish pursuits could benefit the common good. I chose to use Dostoyevsky's caustic language as the basis for my version of a TED Talk because it provided an uncomfortable and revealing counterpoint to the current form of techno-idealism promoted by TED. Since children are commonly used as symbols of hope and change, I felt a young boy would be a perverse and thus well-suited spokesman for my anti-idealistic TED Talk.

JH: Can you tell me more about the whole TED phenomenon and it's ideology?

LML: The average TED talk offers strategies for success in business and life. The orator offers herself as an example to emulate. She shares her story of personal struggle to overcome adversity. This brand of entrepreneurial evangelism subscribes to a questionable belief that technological innovation will save the world.

JH: Do you feel this work is a departure from some of your previous concerns, both formally and intellectually?

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JH: Do you feel this work is a departure from some of your previous concerns, both formally and intellectually?

LML: In my past work I've been concerned with how techniques developed for the theater are used by politicians to maximize the impact of their speeches. My interest in TED was a natural extension in that TED Talks have further enhanced the significance of public speaking skills across a wide range of professions. I've heard stories about scientists rehearsing for their TED Talks a year in advance because their performance stands to make or break their careers. On the other hand, The Thought Leader is a departure in terms of form: I played down the importance of the live event and I amped up the production values in order to simulate TED-style cinematography.

JH: How would you distinguish between the socialist idea of individualism and the capitalist idea of individualism? It seems to me they are two sides of the same coin called humanism. Is that something you thought about?

LML: The ideal socialist individual actively subordinates her own benefit to pursue the greater good of society because she understands that true personal advantage is found in the benefit of all. The ideal capitalist individual pursues her own benefit tenaciously and thus innovates or at least inspires competition which leads to innovation that benefits society at large. Both of these idealisms rely on the humanist notion that we are all inherently good and honest beings that behave rationally. The 1980s saw numerous critiques of humanism on the basis of difference. Yet the humanist ethos is still reigning supreme through the reductive lingo and pseudo-activities of phenomena like TED. The post-modern critique of humanism was clearly vital yet insufficient, that's why I'm interested in more performative models of polemic critique like Dostoyevsky's sardonic argument for a negative and erratic human nature.

JH: I am curious to know more about what you describe as "techno-idealism." Having lived in San Francisco for many years it is something that is very familiar to me and I am interested in hearing you speak more about it and why you think it is so questionable.

LML: By "techno-idealism" I was referring to the unequivocal belief in the positive impact of technological innovation. Technology is a tool, just as journalism or agitprop theater is, and no tool is inherently predisposed to good or bad acts. Our technological innovations often grow out of research affiliated with the military industrial complex, so a healthy dose of skepticism about the pure intentions and structures of new technologies seems only wise. On the flip side unintended consequences regardless of the intended purpose of research also seem common. Yesterday I was reading the obit for the inventor of the laser, Charles Townes, and his research was fueled by Cold War era demands and now here we are using laser technology to broadcast ideas through fiber optic cables.