

PERFORMA 11

## Liz Magic Laser Feels Your Pain

Against the backdrop of Occupy Wall Street, an artist gives us a political performance; its title grabs a page from the Clinton playbook

By Jillian Steinhauer • 11/08/11 4:39pm



Performance still of “I Feel Your Pain” by Liz Magic Laser. (Courtesy the artist and Performa)

**The improbably named artist Liz Magic Laser** has been watching and reading a lot of political interviews. “The conceit of the political interview,” she told *The Observer* in her studio in Dumbo, “is that you’re getting to see the real person, that they’re exposing themselves in some way—that this important, influential figure is performing a breach in their performance. I started to look at this as a form of dramaturgy.”

Ms. Laser’s words call to mind the ancient Greeks, who brought theater, oration and representative politics into the world. They could hardly have imagined that the combination of them would result in today’s political circus, where an entire nation tunes in to watch Sarah Palin go hunting, John Boehner cry, the government nearly shut down, the president purchase a dog.

Politics has largely become a reality TV show, a situation absurd enough to be beyond artistic

critique. In this climate, it would seem altogether too obvious to put political episodes on a stage. Not to Ms. Laser, who will attempt just such a feat next Sunday and Monday, at the School of Visual Arts Theatre, with a piece titled *I Feel Your Pain*, commissioned for this year’s edition of the performance-art biennial *Performa*.

*I Feel Your Pain* examines the role emotion plays in politics by taking particularly charged dialogue from interviews and press conferences with political figures—mostly contemporary material involving the likes of Sarah Palin and Glenn Beck, but also some text from the 1990s and earlier—and scripting it as a romantic drama. Actors will perform mainly in the seats and aisles of the theater while three cinematographers film the show. Their footage will stream live to a screen onstage, and Ms. Laser will edit it on the spot, directing the cameras and selecting angles and shots she wants the audience to see. Her production draws on the techniques of agitprop theater—in particular the Russian Constructivist idea of the “living newspaper,” which used theater to enact current events, with a push toward social action—and includes voice-overs, pantomime fight scenes and a clown.

There’s a self-referential aspect to all of this, Ms. Laser explained in her studio. Around the same time she started reading and watching all those political interviews and conceiving of the piece, she found herself increasingly cast in the role of interview subject. Back in May, the art world was abuzz about the performance of her piece *Flight* in Times Square. Ms. Laser enlisted actors to perform a bill of famous

steps scenes from movies like *Vertigo*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *American Psycho* live on a staircase. The scenes involved pursuit, violence and, often, death.

“The fact of starting to get interviewed had a large bearing on the genesis of [I Feel Your Pain],” she said. “I became interested in how this form becomes a performance of one’s authenticity; it’s the stage upon which people are allowed to—are supposed to—are egged on to demonstrate their real commitments.”

“Are allowed to—are supposed to—are egged on to”—Ms. Laser edits as she speaks, homing in on an idea until she’s arrived at exactly what she means to say. One could take it as her own performance of authenticity, although it seems more genuine than preconceived, the product of an active mind that has trouble translating thoughts into words. Such a comment does, however, leave an interviewer slightly ill at ease.

During our interview, Ms. Laser, dressed in a trim, sober, predominantly gray and black outfit, gave off an air of comfortable cordiality. Her calm, professional demeanor belies her name—the one her parents gave her—which sounds like the diminutive with which a video-game-loving 13-year-old boy would anoint his dream girl. When Ms. Laser gets excited, it is likely to be about Bertolt Brecht or photomontage.

Photography, in fact, was her original artistic medium, the subject in which she received an M.F.A. from Columbia University and the one she now teaches at S.V.A. Her photos landed Ms. Laser a spot in her first large international group exhibition, the Prague Biennial, in 2009. Most of her success, however, has come since she transitioned to video and performance. This wasn’t a clear, conscious choice; at some point, she simply couldn’t distill her concepts down to single, static pictures anymore. “I started having ideas where one image wasn’t going to do it,” she said. In 2007, she made a video for the set of a fellow graduate student’s play. The project served as a turning point, bringing her into the world of theater.

But performance was written into her inheritance long before that. Ms. Laser’s mother, Wendy Osserman, is a dancer and choreographer who came of artistic age amid the New York experimental dance scene of the 1960s and ’70s, when choreographers began introducing everyday movements and improvisation into their works. Ms. Osserman has run a company nearly since her daughter’s birth, which meant that her daughter, from a young age, was constantly surrounded by performers. “I grew up in a space with these improvisational rehearsals,” said Ms. Laser. “It seemed quite visceral and humiliating to have that in your living room. But eventually I came around and got into it myself.”

For her that meant ditching dance but keeping the improv. Her works, though scripted, are often a form of extemporized theater. They become unpredictable though their unconventional locations—the stairs in Times Square, for instance—and the direct interaction between cast and audience: in *Chase* (2010), actors performed Brecht’s play *Man Equals Man* individually in A.T.M. vestibules, reciting their lines to customers.

Ms. Laser remains connected to her photographic roots, most obviously by filming her projects, but also in a more conceptual way. Much of the strength of her work lies in its tactic of decontextualization: bringing chase scenes out of the movies and into a live public space, or performing Brecht’s plays in loci of capitalism rather than on stage. She began plucking texts and dialogue from the cultural ether and recomposing them long before *I Feel Your Pain*. For *Service* (2009), she used lines from disaster films like *Armageddon* to create a script set at a dinner party, where the hosts and guests frantically argue about saving the world. The result is an absurd conversation that highlights just how far-fetched and cheaply sentimental our notions of heroism are. Ms. Laser reappropriates images and words offered up by the culture, and then alters or subverts their original meanings—which is, almost by definition, the practice of collage, an art form born of photography. Her projects are, in essence, performative collages.

But they are also, according to Ms. Laser, akin to research projects. Her work usually begins with reading about and investigating an idea; the results crystallize into a performance rather than a paper. For *I Feel Your Pain*, she had been thinking about political activism in two senses: first, how the contemporary right wing had co-opted activism in the U.S. (this was a year ago, long before *Occupy Wall Street*), and second, how the Soviet avant-garde had pioneered agitprop techniques to protest traditional theater, which its members felt used emotion to manipulate the masses into complacency.

“The avant-garde was not antiemotion,” Ms. Laser explained in her studio. “It was this specific, manipulative use of emotion. They were interested in manipulating emotion to produce critical thinkers.” She was describing a movement from the early 20th century, but could as easily be defining her own work. Ms. Laser’s projects transform their source materials enough to make us think, but they hardly do away with emotion. Often, because of their direct relationship with the audience, they do the opposite.

During *Chase*, an actor delivering a line about the British army offended an onlooker, a Vietnam vet, who cursed off the crew and called the authorities. In *Flight*, actors touched and fell to their deaths on audience members, resulting in complaints to Times Square’s public safety division.

“In Liz’s pieces, we’re not playing characters,” said Max Woertendyke, an actor who has collaborated with Ms. Laser on numerous projects. “So much of the work becomes about impulse. In a traditional play or film, you want impulse, but there’s a certain point where you have to make sure you’re telling the story the author wrote. In Liz’s pieces, the idea is more to give the audience a visceral sensation that they can take home with them and translate however they want.”

What are audiences likely to take away from *I Feel Your Pain*? According to Ms. Laser, the piece investigates “how the contrived emotional manipulation of a romance has completely infiltrated and overtaken the dialogue the public has with the government”—and not only that, but how these political performances affect us even when we are aware of them. In this sense it echoes *Flight*, harnessing dramatic scenes while also calling attention to their artifice, examining how emotion can be used as a tool to create further emotion.

Ultimately, the reactions to her piece are unpredictable, not least because the context of this kind of political discussion has changed radically in the past two months. “Up until September,” Ms. Laser said, “when you heard about an activist on the news in this country, for the last few years it was a right-wing activist.” Now, with Occupy Wall Street demonstrations taking place in nearly every major U.S. city, the left has gotten back in the game. Ms. Laser finds this exciting, but more to the point, maybe, is the simple fact that whatever happens, politics remains a game. Emotion is just one of the ways to play it.