

Fabricius, Jacob, "Performance: Liz Magic Laser," *Art Review*, May 2012 (in-print).

ISSUE 59

MAY 2012

£5.00

Art Review:

Contains 7% LIZ MAGIC LASER; 22% FLUORESCENT PANTONE 802;
7% LA PERFORMANCE ART; 1 AWKWARD MOMENT IN A PHARMACY

CONTRACT

The parties to this agreement ('the Contract') are:

SUPERFLEX, Blågårdsgade 11b, DK-2200 Copenhagen N ('SUPERFLEX')

and

ArtReview Limited, a company limited by guarantee and incorporated in England and Wales (company number 02720767) having its registered office at 1 Sekforde Street, London, EC1R 0BE ('ArtReview').

The parties agree to enter into the Contract and to be bound by its terms.

ArtReview shall not for a period of one year from the date of the signing of the Contract save for the purpose of publishing the Contract as set out below reproduce the word, 'SUPERFLEX' in any material published by ArtReview, including in all editions and online editions of ArtReview magazine.

ArtReview shall publish a copy of the Contract executed by the parties in the October 2010 edition of ArtReview magazine, including in the online version of ArtReview magazine.

SUPERFLEX shall for the duration of the Contract immediately notify all organisations involved in exhibiting and promoting the work of SUPERFLEX of the existence of the Contract and its terms.

SUPERFLEX shall subscribe to Artreview for the period of the Contract.

In the event of breach of the Contract by ArtReview, SUPERFLEX shall be entitled to take editorial control of ArtReview magazine for one edition and ArtReview shall publish this edition within one year of the date of the occurrence of the breach.

All claims, disputes, suits or demands between the parties to the Contract shall be arbitrated under Danish law and brought before an ordinary court of law in Denmark.

For SUPERFLEX 14 October 2010

For ArtReview 14 October 2010

Rasmus Nielsen

Jakob Fenger

Bjørnstjerne Christiansen

Mark Rappolt, Editor



SUPERFLEX

Liz Magic Laser

The weirdness of public space, being hassled at a cash machine, the romance of politics, George Bush Sr's body language

words JACOB FABRICIUS

Have you ever felt uncomfortable when someone moved a little too close to you at an ATM, post office, pharmacy or any other place where you needed a little privacy to count your pennies or buy something personal? I'm sure you have.

Confess it. Public space is a weird thing. You need to interact, and you really want to, but at the same time you want to give people some room of their own: privacy. And you want to protect yours, too, of course. Keep those curtains closed!

But what happens when the line marking such discretion is crossed, or that zone of intimacy is punctured?

Liz Magic Laser uses actors in her performances and theatrical works, which take place in public or semipublic spaces. She stages situations, dialogues, monologues or plays and uses the urban environment and its population – a clever way of getting audience and extras at the same time – as the context for her artworks. Sometimes the people around the actors (Laser's extras) mingle and interact, sometimes they respect the 'abnormal' behaviour they witness – public fights or loud monologues – by offering nothing more than a secret glance, and sometimes their dropped jaws are a little bit too conspicuous. The point is that we all react differently when confronted with another person's private moment – a lonesome speech, an argument, a fight – in a public setting. And it is by using precisely this kind of unusual choreographed behaviour that Laser brings political speeches



top:
Gary Lai as Mr Wang (bonze of a Tibetan pagoda) in 'Man Equals Man' at the Korea Town West 32nd St Branch of Citibank, NY, June 19th, 2009. Wang offers his captive soldier some beefsteak in Scene 7.
production still from **Chase**, 2009-10, digital c-print, 46 x 61 cm

middle:
Andra Eggleston as Galy Gay (an Irish porter) in 'Man Equals Man' at the Seventh Ave and 37th St branch of Washington Mutual, NY, June 22nd, 2009. The soldiers blindfold Galy Gay and pretend to put him in front of the firing squad.
production still from **Chase**, 2009-10, digital c-print, 46 x 61 cm

bottom:
Cat Yezbak as the Widow Begbick (canteen proprietress) in 'Man Equals Man' at the Sixth Ave and 18th St branch of Chase, NY, June 15th, 2009. Begbick sings about the flow of things in Scene 9. production still from **Chase**, 2009-10, digital c-print, 46 x 61 cm

all:
Performance work for **Chase**, 2009-10, was developed in collaboration with actors Annika Boras, Andra Eggleston, Gary Lai, Liz Micek, Justin Sayre, Doug Walter, Michael Wiener, Max Woertendyke and Cat Yezbak



out into a public sphere that has been increasingly depoliticised. In New York City (Laser's hometown), economic and social inequities that were once visible on the street and in parks and subways have been obscured by ever-tightening systems of regulation (such as via policing and policies for urban renewal).

Last November, as part of Performa 11 in New York, she produced a new work, *I Feel Your Pain* (2011), which turned a number of recent American political interviews into what appeared to be a romantic drama. As part of the project, Laser had surreptitiously embedded actors amid the audience in various rows of the venue, a movie theatre. At a certain point the kiss that begins a dialogue between two of these actors appears onscreen and the audience realises that the entire performance will be filmed, edited and projected as a live feed on the cinema's screen. Their conversation, in turn, kickstarts the other dialogues among the eight actors, jumping from row to row, across the aisle and so forth, with occasional pantomimelike fight scenes thrown in. The dialogue is cut up and fragmented, but elegantly mixed and intertwined so as seemingly to trace the progression of a romantic relationship. However, the words used in this conversation (divided into four acts) are borrowed from political interviews, press conferences and speeches by Barack Obama, Bill and Hillary Clinton, Ed Muskie, George W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, John Boehner, Carl Paladino, Mary Landrieu, Joe Wilson, Arnold Schwarzenegger and, last but not least, John McCain's former protégé Sarah Palin. To add further spice, here and there the dialogue is interrupted by quotations from, among other texts, Neil Strauss's *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists* (2005).

The political interviews and texts are of course taken out of their original context, placed into a theatrical one and, to top it all off, accompanied by a mute commentary enacted by a female clown, Audrey Crabtree. *I Feel Your Pain* (the title quotes Bill Clinton's answer to ACT UP member Bob Rafsky's confrontational statement – 'We're not dying of AIDS as much as we are dying of 11 years of government neglect' – during a presidential campaign rally in 1992 creates a multilayered and satirical view of recent US political history. By transforming some of the most important voices in that history – and, by extension, the history of international politics over the past 30 years – into bittersweet romantic comedy, Laser manages to play

politics, an achievement that is as extraordinary as it is comic.

Laser's most recent work, *The Digital Face* (2012), once again examines political speech. But rather than using politicians' words, this time she isolates their studied gestural and bodily language – specifically that accompanying George Bush Sr's and Barack Obama's State of the Union addresses in 1990 and 2012 respectively. A male dancer (imitating Bush) and a female one (imitating Obama) are dressed in grey-legged unitards. They perform their 'speeches' silently, facing one another from opposing ends of a room (with the audience caught in between), while the sound of two still cameras programmed to photograph once per second provides a metronomic soundtrack. The performance ends after approximately ten minutes, when the performers, like the presidents, begin to shake the hands of people standing nearby. Through this subtle work we get a chance to look at two politicians' carefully orchestrated movements without being distracted by their words and messages. Watching the accumulated gestures and interpreting their expressions of power and/or powerlessness offers up the kind of study that Charlotte Wolff, author of *The Psychology of Gesture* (1945), would have loved.

In *Chase* (2009–10), nine actors perform Bertolt Brecht's 1926 play *Man Equals Man*. Each is videotaped separately, delivering their lines to various ATMs around New York City. Brecht's play was originally set in colonial India and portrays British soldiers and the dehumanising face of war as it is established through the corrupting forces of greed, power and the loss or malleability of identity. Laser, however, has removed the play from the colonial setting, placing it in a modern setting of dependency – upon money – using the cash machines at Amalgamated, Chase, Citibank and Washington Mutual as backdrops and stages for her piece. The actors enter the banks' vestibules and recite their lines as customers try to make their deposits and do their other daily bank business. Some customers react playfully, interacting with the players, but in the main they are silent and try to ignore them. What does this tell us? That we have become afraid? I am afraid so, and I cannot help thinking that by ignoring



both:
I Feel Your Pain, 2011, a Performa
Commission. Photo: Paula Court.
Courtesy Performa, New York.



above and below:

Flight, 2011, performance, Times Square, New York, Liz Magic Laser with actors Nic Grelli, Elizabeth Hodur, Liz Micek, Michael Wiener, Max Woertendyke and Lia Woertendyke. *Flight* debuted at MoMA PS1 on 10 April 2010. The performance was later adapted for Times Square in New York with support from the Times Square Alliance and the Franklin Furnace Fund for Performance Art on 3, 6 and 7 May 2011

right:

Poster for the Times Square performances of **Flight**, 2011



interaction, the customers sometimes regard them as homeless, as slightly insane or as undesirably lost souls in New York City.

Even though there are human faces (well-known politicians, kings and queens, cultural personas deemed national heroes) on most of the world's banknotes, money is a dehumanising force, one that encapsulates Brecht's themes of greed, power, loss of identity and war. Linking a colonial past with NYC cashpoints both brings the play and its setting up to date, but also reminds us of the constant search for value and the greedy chase after money that runs like acid through our history, our present and, inevitably, our future.

Flight (2011) took place on the red staircase in Duffy Square, at the northern triangle of Times Square. Laser selected 23 chase scenes from 22 movies – *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *M* (1931), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *The Spiral Staircase* (1945), *Cinderella* (1950), *Niagara* (1953), *Night of the Hunter* (1955), *Vertigo* (1958), *Marnie* (1964), *The French Connection* (1971), *The Shining* (1980), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *The People Under the Stairs* (1991), *The Fugitive* (1993), *Scream* (1996), *Titanic* (1997), *American Psycho* (2000), *28 Days Later* (2002), *National Treasure* (2004), *A History of Violence* (2005) and *Final Destination 4* (2009) – and had six actors

perform the scenes. Fight by fight, each segment segues into the next. And so, with very simple means, Laser manages to create a narrative history of film, popular culture and cinematic violence, conveying perhaps not any of the direct violence, but the aggression and fear that we know so well and have learned through the films that are constantly presented to us.

Flight was rehearsed and performed amidst a live Times Square audience, so practice and final execution of the work melted together into an intense emotive physicality of filmic aggression. Twenty-three violent fights, where the roles of victim and aggressor are constantly shifting, in front of an audience of passersby in Manhattan (did anyone say friction?) must have been one mouthful to deal with and swallow both for actors and audience. Indeed, the way Laser works with performers to instigate audience participation is both challenging and daring. The artist's agenda and interest seems clear: she wants to discuss politics and socioeconomic structures within society, and alongside that, she wants to discuss human relations. She thereby taps into a long tradition of political art and political performance – as enacted by artists such as Adrian Piper, Yvonne Rainer and Andrea Fraser. It's a tradition that lays claim to a position of radical vulnerability that becomes an empowered retort to the dominant culture – and Laser does this without being dogmatic. As a native New Yorker, she knows better than most what she is dealing with; she knows how strict the unspoken codes of privacy are there, and maybe this is why she is so good at dissecting some of our worst fears and anxieties within urban spaces. Her theatrical interventions make even fight scenes or ATM vestibules political. Laser reaches out to the audience by simply staging her work and projects among them on the street. While museums and institutions prioritise outreach, creating and greeting new audiences, she engages public space directly, makes it her own space, by creating a platform for her own voice and interpretations of cinematic and political figures. In so doing, Laser manages to fuse the reality of life, the reality of fiction and the reality of her message. •

*We all react differently
when confronted with
another person's private
moment – a lonesome
speech, an argument,
a fight – in a public
setting*