

Kitamura, Katie, "Liz Magic Laser," *Frieze*, October 2010 (in-print).



Liz Magic Laser



Liz Magic Laser
Chase
2010
DVD still

Derek Eller Gallery, New York, USA

Chase (2010) is a ramshackle performance – or restaging, or re-enactment, depending on your point of view – of Bertolt Brecht's 1926 play *Mann ist Mann* (Man Equals Man). Liz Magic Laser swaps Brecht's setting of British colonial India for that of another dying empire: America. Performed and filmed entirely within the ATM lobbies of various corporate banks in New York, *Chase* draws a series of deliberately loose political analogies, and then observes the discord and coincidences that both follow.

The exhibition at Derek Eller Gallery featured video performances of both the play and its prologue, as well as a live performance of *Das Elefantenkalb* (The Elephant Calf), a play-within-a-play that Brecht eventually annexed from the original text, suggesting that it be performed in the lobby of the theatre. Laser has produced a faithful line-by-line rendition of the play, but she chops and slices the footage so that the lobby setting is only one of several alienation techniques at work.

The implicit political commentary of *Chase* is clear. In the accompanying programme notes, Laser describes the play as recounting 'the dehumanizing metamorphosis of an ordinary man into an instrument of authoritarian and capitalist design [...] man being forced into the machine's condition, he is "de-assembled and reassembled like a car".' Late-Empire America is a decent parallel world in which to set the Brecht text; the play is loosely about the link between war and capitalism, and it's not difficult to see the relationship between America's capitalist machine and the geopolitics of war. But there is still a disjunction between play and setting, which actualizes itself both in terms of speech (the lines are delivered in a manner that sounds both arch and arcane) and plot (which concerns a group of soldiers run amok in the Indian countryside).

A sense of absurdist humour arises in *Chase* from the ad hoc and uneven results of its restaging. For example, Laser uses ATM machines as a material embodiment of Brecht's primary metaphor of man as dehumanized war machine; the mechanical presence of the machines acts as a reminder, or external manifestation, of the mechanization of man. It's a deliberately literal move, and that literalness creates a set of images and associations that are unexpected and provocative – on occasion even nonsensical or oblique. This is part of what gives *Chase* its madcap energy, and what makes the work formally interesting.

Laser also uses the lobby setting in innovative and frankly hilarious ways: ATMs are treated as though they are characters in the play, and the varied and incredulous responses of passers-by are also incorporated. Even better is the integration of ambient noise (tinned music, the beeps and whirs of the ATM machine), the text of the screens ('Enter pin code', 'Choose withdrawal amount') as well as the branding of the individual corporations (at moments, the actors energetically address inanimate human figures featured in posters and wall decorations).

In this sense, it is not only the characters themselves that are 'de-assembled and re-assembled like a car', but also the texture and material form of the work itself. Both *Mann ist Mann* and *Chase* are about a kind of madness, couched within and engendered by the institution (of the army, of capitalism). *Chase* externalizes the voices in our heads into the cacophony of the city street, the instructions of the automated machine, the muzak that is constantly piped into the atmosphere around us.

In this way, the hysterical energy of Brecht's play finds a clear outlet in Laser's deliberately shoddy, nonsensical staging. The internal madness of the characters is manifested in the peculiarity of the setting – already strange, and set into high relief by the play's narrative. 'The ground on which you stand shivers beneath your feet like shifting sand,' intones the prologue to Brecht's play. We are already standing on shifting sand – Laser's aim, it seems, is just to make us look down.

Katie Kitamura