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## Liz Magic Laser's Performance Art Includes Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin on a Date and an Obama-Bush Mime Faceoff

By Carol Cheh



Courtesy of Performa

Actors Annie Fox and Rafael Jordan in Liz Magic Laser's work *I Feel Your Pain* (A Performa Commission)

Shakespeare famously wrote, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." He was speaking metaphorically of course, but in this age of total media saturation and dominance, when everything we see on TV and in the movies is choreographed and manipulated for maximum audience response, his words now have the disturbing ring of literal

truth.

It is this observation that galvanizes much of the work of [Liz Magic Laser](#) (her real name), a New York-based artist who just opened "The Digital Face," a show of videos and collages at [Various Small Fires](#) in Venice. Laser is an up-and-coming young artist known for directing provocative performance art pieces with a heavy degree of audience interaction. She has been receiving strong notices for her work from New York art critics, and this is her first showing in Los Angeles.

The centerpiece of this well-curated introduction to Laser's oeuvre is *I Feel Your Pain*, a long video work with several tricky layers. Laser first pored over thousands of hours of news interviews, political speeches, press conferences, and even self-help and advice books, adapting and splicing together chunks of their texts to shape a melodramatic narrative script.

She then hired professional actors to bring life to the script and had them enact the play while sitting amongst a theater audience that had been gathered for this purpose. The play was filmed in episodic scenes and projected onto the screen of the theater, at the same time that it was being acted out. Thus, the audience members were both viewers of the play and extras acting in it.



Yola Monakhov, Courtesy of Performa

The audience watches the play and is in the play at the same time.

The first scene zeroes in on a boy and a girl who are apparently on their first date. Their hands touch as they reach for the popcorn at the same instant, and they shyly kiss. The audience around them laughs with curiosity. They begin talking, and as the titles have indicated, their dialogue is largely drawn from Glenn Beck's 2010 interview with Sarah Palin. The boy teasingly asks the girl if she'd

like to hear an excerpt from his journal entry of the night before. "It's about you," he says. The rest of their date unfolds in a flurry of excitement as the two of them discover many points of philosophical agreement.

The shifting of context from supposedly unscripted talk show to professionally acted play serves to highlight just how ridiculous the words spoken are, and how they draw on the emotional pulls of fiction to elicit certain audience responses. In scene after scene, this idea is explored from different angles. Two couples get into heated fights, using lines from an Anthony Weiner press conference in the middle of his recent scandal. A pair of male friends talk about the assassination of Osama bin Laden as though going over the details of a sexual conquest. The fact that these take place within -- not in front of -- the audience shows the degree to which their effectiveness depends on the illusion of the audience's intimacy with the players involved.

Another video piece titled *The Digital Face* is a more bare-bones examination of public manipulation techniques. Inspired by the work of 19th century teacher François Delsarte (who pioneered the influential Delsarte Method of effective gestural communication) and early 20th century scientific management techniques for maximizing worker efficiency, *The Digital Face* takes the oratorical gestures employed by Barack Obama and George H. W. Bush and puts them in a silent mime face-off with one another. In videos that face each other across the gallery, two actors in grey suits re-enact the presidents' gestures without words, accompanied only by the creepy, metronomic sounds of a camera steadily snapping. Standing between the two videos, the viewer feels the tension of being preached to, which comes through even without the aid of any didactic content.

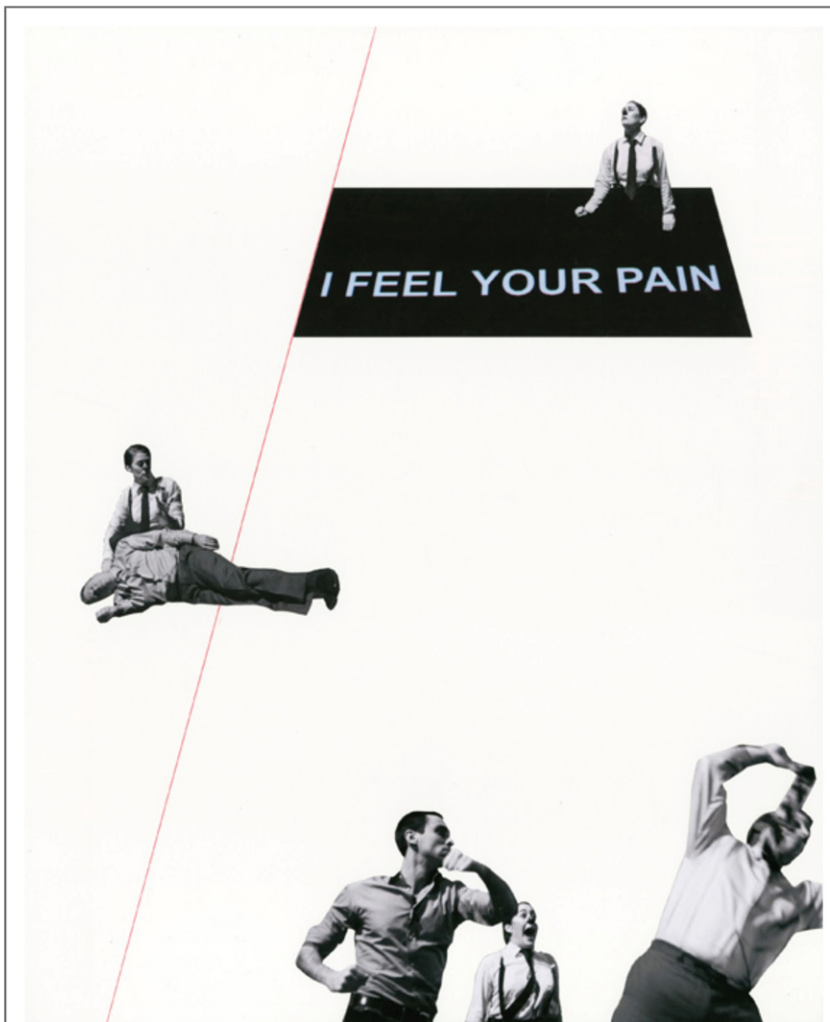
The show at Various Small Fires is nicely rounded out with a series of photographic collages that depict some of the intricate relationships you see in the rest of her work. In one, the performers



Courtesy Liz Magic Laser

Actor Alan Good mimes the gestures of George H. W. Bush in Liz Magic Laser's work *The Digital Face*

appear to be caught in the radius of the camera's eye, while in another, a placard with the words "I Feel Your Pain" serves as a life raft for a clown. These collages have the dynamic style of old Soviet agitprop posters, but instead of pounding a prescribed message into our heads, they ask us to question the ones we receive.



Courtesy Liz Magic Laser

One of Laser's agitprop-style collages