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Liz Magic Laser Assumes the (Poll) Position

Mad as hell, and shilling brilliantly for the Armory art fair

The improbably named Liz Magic Laser (yes, that really is her name) is a 21st-century Paddy Chayefsky. A hugely talented, unlikely 31-year-old art star who became famous in 2011 for staging *I Feel Your Pain*—a piece of interactive theater combining transcripts of interviews with politicians, *Sleepless in Seattle* recitations, actors performing among live audiences, and live streaming—Laser shares an uncompromising idealism with her famous predecessor. So how on earth did she come to accept what she describes as the glamorous but exploitative Armory Show Artist Commission?

I went to visit Laser in her DUMBO studio last week expecting to find her trembling with anticipation about unveiling a new work at the Armory Show, the two-decade-old expo that takes place every March on the West Side piers; instead I encountered a grumpy, disillusioned artist mad as hell about what she called "the hidden expectations of business as usual" surrounding art and art fairs.

A prestigious yet highly commercial commission that usually requires an established artist to gin up what Laser calls "the overriding motif for the fair," the Armory Show gig also calls for the lucky "winner" to design editioned artworks, advertisements, invitations, admission tickets, T-shirts, print materials, signage, Jack Spade totes, and scads of additional product. Less a freewheeling art project than a mercenary merchandising mission, the role invariably entails hundreds of hours of unpaid spec work, the kind of fine-print obligation that can easily turn an idealistic young creative into a raging, "can't take it anymore" Howard Beale.

Laser, a New York City native, is a type more likely to devote her talents to subverting the needs of what she once called "the Smarmory" than to filling

the shelves of its gift shop. But when representatives of the show approached her after she made a Web video for CNN about the recent Presidential contest, she says she found conceptually she couldn't resist the draw of working within its tight commercial restraints. "After all," she added, "long odds often produce better returns."



"I had made an earlier video called *Push Poll*," she recounts, "which explored the power of polls to influence public opinion and the persuasive effects of the so-called 'man on the street' news segments. . . . [For the Armory] I assembled six focus groups in a suite with a one-way mirror. The Armory Show staff and I were able to watch and analyze the conversations without the participants seeing us, and that's how we determined the nature of the art objects and paraphernalia made for the show."

Organized into clusters of "art world consumers," the moderator-led groups of art-world professionals—I participated in one that included four journalists, an artist, a gallerist, a curator, and a conference table laden with bowls of Chex Mix and Peanut M&M's—helped devise what may be the first instance of market research as art. One videotaped participant in Laser's focus groups found Laser's boosterish advertising campaign, "We're Looking for You," to be "in-your-face and confrontational." A second panel member characterized the artist's use of printed proprietary information (one staff T-shirt declares that "one of seven" of the Armory's 65,000 visitors "report annual income in excess

of \$500,000") to be "a gesture of transparency that falls totally flat." Yet Laser's corporate-analysis answer to a corporate commission doesn't just acknowledge the marketing functions of an art fair—it actually calls bullshit on its intellectual window dressing. Laser herself now openly admits to badly underestimating how much an organization like the Armory "uses artists and intellectuals as cultural capital before discarding them altogether."

Art fairs—famously described by one artist as akin to watching your parents fuck—have long been known as places where artists venture at their peril. According to Laser, she learned that lesson the hard way. "At the end of the day, it's like I'm paying for this commission," she told me over coffee inside her Jay Street studio, as she described the lack of resources she says the Armory made available to her. (She was given \$2,000 to work with, a pittance when you consider that a single small booth at the fair costs \$18,000, and that the event rakes in approximately \$2 million per year.) "Now, I have to make work for the fair and make a booth of highly sellable work for myself and my gallery just to break even."

A successful turn at the Armory Show can make a young artist, or push an emerging one into the limelight. Laser could get the same sort of lift—or not. Whatever the case, her dissection of the art fair's corporate structure, along with her unusually frank account of its behind-the-scenes stinginess, perfectly describes what one piece of Armory commission literature characterizes as "the complex web of opportunities and compromises that define the relationship between market forces and artistic production today."

At the fair you may actually peruse Laser's ubiquitous merch (it begins at the door, where in exchange for \$30 you receive an entry wristband proclaiming "We're Looking for You"), hear her come clean on her fraught relationship with her putative patrons in a discussion on the "Psychology of Consumerism" (at 1 p.m., Thursday, March 7), or simply head over to the curated "Focus" section to visit her ingenious solo installation at the booth for L.A.'s Various Small Fires gallery. There she will be screening her video *The Armory Show Focus Group* inside a one-way-mirrored room that replicates the space she used to observe her art-world subjects. Here, everyone outside the room looks like a massive focus group, busily enacting what one of Chayefsky's characters in *Network* called "the immutable bylaws of business." It's a perfectly unromantic view of how the sausage gets made.