

# DAILYSERVING

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## Performance in Context: Interview with Liz Magic Laser

by Bean Gilsdorf

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*Though I can't remember the first time I saw Liz Magic Laser's work (and yes, it's her given name), I was entranced by this video of her commission for the 2013 Armory Show in New York. So much artwork these days looks like it was made by committee, so why not explicitly use the methodology of a focus group to create the work for the commission? It's one of those simple but brilliant maneuvers that defines Laser's practice. This year, Laser was also presented with the Southern Exposure (SoEx) Off-Site Graue Award, "an opportunity to...develop and present an ambitious public art project in the San Francisco Bay Area." Laser came to San Francisco earlier this month to work on The Living Newspaper, a series that uses performance as a way investigate and embody the daily news, which Jerry Saltz called, "a fantastic cracking of the news-cycle codes." I caught up with Laser on the first day of her tenure at SoEx.*



Liz Magic Laser. Forever & Today, Inc.'s Studio On the Street program with Liz Magic Laser, artist in residence, working in studio, 2012. Courtesy of the artist and Forever & Today, Inc.

**Bean Gilsdorf:** Let’s talk about the project that brings you to San Francisco. What was the inspiration for *The Living Newspaper: Extra Extra* (2013)?

**Liz Magic Laser:** The concept of the living newspaper came through the research materials that all the Performa commission artists received in 2011. In one essay I found a footnote that mentioned a “living newspaper,” and I started to look up more information on it, although there’s not a lot available. I found this Soviet theater troupe called the Blue Blouse group, and they used it as a method for spreading the news to the masses, who were largely illiterate. They were connected with an association of journalists, and they did street theater and stage productions. A number of other people have also claimed the living newspaper as their concept, including J. L. Moreno, who initiated psychodrama, and Augusto Boal, a Brazilian theater maker.



Liz Magic Laser. *The Living Newspaper*, view of students at Watkins College of Art, Design & Film, re-enacting the December 3, 2012 cover of *Financial Times*; 2012. Courtesy of the Artist

**BG:** How has your use of the living newspaper form evolved since 2011? What’s going to be different about the SoEx project compared to the last couple of iterations?

**LML:** The living newspaper is an idea that I’ve been exploring in different ways and formats. I did a series of experiments last summer, and three live performances, and one video for CNN’s website—those were all under this title. What drew me in was the feeling of wanting to do more process-oriented work, and both the cast and how we approached these experiments was shifting. It’s a constantly shifting form of how we discuss current events and engage with them. Sometimes it takes the form of a performance with the actors improvising the previous day’s news events, or sometimes it takes the shape of a conversation with the audience.

What I’ll do here in San Francisco is codify some of the improvisational methods that we’ve developed. The two performers who are coming out to San Francisco, Audrey Crabtree and Michael Weiner, have worked with me before, and we’ll hold workshops in which we physically and verbally discuss the news; that will inform how we deliver the news performatively every evening to these news kiosks downtown. There are very planned parameters for these improvised translations. I’ve developed a series of assignments about how we can translate each news item in a gestural way, in a man-on-the-street interview scenario, and through issuing slogans through megaphones. The idea really is to deliver the news in an embodied way and to engage people in conversation about the news in a more personal way.



Liz Magic Laser. Living Newspaper: Friday, July 13, 2012 Edition, 2012; performance at Family Business (New York); featuring actors Audrey Crabtree, Annie Fox, Frederic Nwaha Lindjeck, Liz Micek, Jeff Seal, Michael Wiener, and Lia Woertendyke. Courtesy of the Artist

**BG:** In most of your projects, including this one, you are the director or architect, and I wonder how you balance the need to execute your particular vision of the project with the needs of your collaborators.

**LML:** It's very much the model from film and theater, where I'm the writer-director and I work with performers or editors or other artists, so there's not a lot of tension because the projects are definitely my responsibility: envisioning, writing the script, pre- and post-production issues. I work with people who are used to that form of collaboration. The visual art world is more self-conscious about naming that collaboration. That said, it's important to me that everyone is properly credited, that people are recognized for the contribution they're making to the project.

**BG:** Do you have an academic background in theater? I didn't see anything like that in any of your bios.

**LML:** My background is in photography, but my mother is a choreographer, so I grew up in a rehearsal space. I was doing directorial photography, and then I would photograph my mom's dance company at least once a year to make press materials. Then some of the dancers went on to become choreographers, and they asked me to do their photos, and I asked some of them to be in my photo projects, so I was always working with performers. When I was in grad school, a director at Columbia asked me to make photographs and videos that would be the set for a Fringe Festival production, and so I worked a lot with the actors to make that material, and I loved it, and I continued to work with two of the actors after that for photo and video shoots. It was a very natural transition to performance.



Liz Magic Laser. *The Living Newspaper*: Monday, August 19, 2013 Edition, 2013; performance with Audrey Crabtree and Michael Wiener. Courtesy of the Artist

**BG:** So what was the moment at which you said to yourself, “Okay, this needs to be live, in the moment.” What was the first occasion where you were like, “I need to cross this threshold”?

**LML:** It’s hard to say, because a lot of the things that were produced live were still most often experienced through video. The play I did in bank vestibules, called *chase*, was the defining one where I said, “Okay I’m going to cast this play and work with a lot of people.” I met with the actors in these bank vestibules, at the ATMS, four times a week for six weeks, just running between appointments with my backpack full of camera equipment. And in the end, I did call that a performance, and a video installation, but it was only a performance for the passersby and bank clients.

**BG:** Yes, I wanted to talk to you about that. One of the things that’s super interesting about *chase* (2009-2010) is that you have two layers of audience: the first layer is the vestibule audience that interacts with the performers, by ignoring or laughing—or there’s that guy who claps—and then you have a secondary audience, the gallery viewer who gets to watch the performer but also watches the audience watching the performer. It brought up some questions for me about who the intended viewer is: is it the accidental viewer or the meta-viewer?

**LML:** For me, it’s both. With *chase*, more people were aware of receiving it in the gallery scenario, but I am really interested in this audience-to-audience empathy. It’s something that I’ve tried to set up in a number of projects. In the Performa one, as well, you watch the audience watching this live performance. For *Flight* (2011), the project that I did in Times Square, more people who are in the first kind of audience—an accidental or native audience—experienced it. Here at Southern Exposure, I think we’ll reach more people through that first audience than the second one, but the plan is to make a final video from the material.

**BG:** Where does theater stop and performance art begin?

# S O U T H E R N E X P O S U R E

**LML:** I think it completely has to do with context. It's all about what audience you hail—is a theatrical production hailing the same audience as when you go out on the street or in a bank vestibule or a newspaper kiosk? That's addressing a different audience than the one that goes to a theater play or a gallery. I think these boundaries are not so strict, but in my mind it's about the context. We are about to do a project at the Philly Fringe Festival, and that will be the first time that I do something in a proper theater or under the umbrella of a theater context.

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