

BIOGRAPHIES

Liz Magic Laser (b. 1981, New York) earned a BA from Wesleyan University (2003) and an MFA from Columbia University (2008). She attended the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture (2008) and the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program (2009). Most recently, her work was the subject of solo exhibitions at Wilfried Lentz, Rotterdam (2015); Various Small Fires, Los Angeles (2015); Yale Union, Portland (2013); Paula Cooper Gallery, New York (2013) and The Westfälischer Kunstverein, Münster (2013). Her work has also been shown at The Whitney Museum, New York (2015); Galerie Andreas Huber, Vienna (2015); Art Space, Sydney (2015); Nam June Paik Art Center, Korea (2014); Carolina Performing Arts, Chapel Hill (2014); KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (2014); The Kitchen, New York (2014); Lisson Gallery, London (2013); the *Performa 11 Biennial*, New York (2011); The Pace Gallery, New York (2011) and MoMA PS 1, New York (2010). Laser is the recipient of grants from Alfried Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach Foundation Grant (2013), the Southern Exposure Off-Site Graue Award (2013), New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship (2012), the Times Square Alliance (2010) and the Franklin Furnace Fund for Performance Art (2010). She lives and works in Brooklyn.

Georgina Jackson is the Director of Exhibitions & Publications at Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art.

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Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art

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Cover image: Liz Magic Laser *Kiss and Cry*, 2015, single-channel video, 20 minutes, video still. Featuring figure skaters Anna MacKenzie and Axel MacKenzie and coach Marie Jonsson MacKenzie. Commissioned by Mercer Union.

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Steps/ Mesures

Mercer Union is delighted to partner with the Institut Français and the Consulate General of France in Toronto on a new platform entitled *Steps/Mesures*. This program will invite artists and curators living in France for a series of short-term residencies in Toronto between Winter 2015 and Summer 2016 to forge conversation between cultural ecologies.

The first guest of the program is Paris-based independent curator and writer Caroline Hancock. Between 1998 and 2009, Hancock worked at the Centre Pompidou and MAMVP/ARC in Paris, Tate Modern, and was a curator at The Hayward Gallery, London, and the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin. In 2008, she was awarded the Joanna Drew Travel Bursary to travel to Algeria which led to long-term research on art and culture in Africa and the Middle East. With the curatorial platform On The Roof, she has co-curated projects with work by artists from Africa and the African diaspora, *Synchronicity* in Paris and London, and *Cyclicalities* in Dakar. In 2013, they co-organised Virginie Yassef's performance "Investigations of a Dog" on LE SOCLE, Parc des Buttes-Chaumont, Paris, as well as the IKT Lab#3, "African Art. What For?," with Chantal Pontbriand at Gulbenkian Foundation, Paris. Forthcoming and recent exhibition include; *My Love is like a red red rose: Scottish Art from the 18th to the 21st century*, Musée du château des ducs de Wurtemberg, Montbéliard; *The Untold Want* at the Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin; *PAC*, a city-wide Spring contemporary art festival, in Marseille, as guest-curator, all 2015. She writes regularly on modern and contemporary art and is a member of AICA and IKT.

Destination Mars: A conversation with Caroline Hancock Thursday 3 December, 7PM

Please join us for a conversation with Caroline Hancock who will discuss her recent curatorial projects and ongoing interest in language, literature and translation. Free and all welcome.



With special thanks to Selma Toprak at the Consulate General of France in Toronto, and Vincent Gonzalez at the Institut Français, Paris.



Olivia Plender, *Many Maids make Much Noise* (2015)

SPACE: Olivia Plender

12 September 2015 – 15 January 2016

The fourth artist to create a commissioned work for SPACE, Mercer Union's billboard project, is Olivia Plender. Plender's research-based practice interrogates the ideological framework around the telling of history, focusing on altering attitudes to education and value. Her work encompasses installations, workshops, comics, board games, lectures and sometimes exhibitions.

This new work *Many Maids Make Much Noise* (2015) offers a series of instructions to speak pushing the motions of the mouth to form sounds. However, in this series of reparative instructions subtle political positions emerge such as "Militant miners means more money." The invitation to chant collectively asserts that "Many maids make much noise," subverting consistent patriarchy and asserting the collective female voice.

Plender has exhibited widely with recent solo exhibition *Rise Early, Be Industrious* touring to MK Gallery, Milton Keynes, Arnolfini, Bristol and CCA, Glasgow, UK (2012). She lives and works in London, England, and Stockholm, Sweden.

SPACE is a series of commissioned works for the billboard space on the side of Mercer Union. The series began in the spring of 2014, previous contributing artists include: Liz Knox (CA), Giles Round (UK) and most recently Walter Scott (CA).

Mercer Union Members

Thank you to our members for helping us support exciting new projects like Abbas Akhavan's first solo exhibition in Toronto. If you haven't heard, Akhavan was announced as the 2015 recipient of the \$50,000 Sobey Art Award, given to a Canadian artist age 40 or under. We congratulate Abbas and look forward to realizing his public art project in 2016 with the support of Partners in Art, and members like you!

"My most recent show at Mercer Union really made me feel anchored in a local ecology and dialogue that I never felt a part of—in its entirety, not just in Canada."

- Abbas Akhavan discusses winning the Sobey Award, *Canadian Art*

Not yet a member? Help Mercer Union support the work of artists by becoming a member, and join the community of art enthusiasts contributing to present exciting practices and new contemporary art for Toronto audiences. Enjoy a closer connection to the gallery and its unique mix of artist-run culture.

Visit www.mercerunion.org/join-support to subscribe as a member with access to special benefits and programs like the ones below.



Jennifer Marman & Daniel Borins, *Pavilion of the Blind* (2014)

IN STUDIO: Jennifer Marman & Daniel Borins

Tuesday 24 November, 7PM

IN STUDIO: Laurie Kang

Tuesday 8 December, 7PM

Join Mercer Union for an intimate view of Marman & Borin's, and Kang's studios and current practices over snacks, refreshments and convivial conversation. Free for Sustaining Members and above; open to other members and select non-members for \$15. RSVP to York Lethbridge, Director of Operations, at york@mercerunion.org or 416.536.1519.

Jennifer Marman and **Daniel Borins** have been making large-format sculpture, mixed media, installation and electronic art since 2000. Marman received a BA from the University of Western Ontario, and Borins a BA from McGill University. Both Marman and Borins are also graduates of the Ontario College of Art and Design in 2001 – where they first began collaborating together. Marman and Borins' work exists in both museum and public settings. In the fall of 2008 they participated in a group sculpture show at the National Gallery of Canada entitled *Caught in the Act*. In 2009 Marman and Borins completed a commission of a large-scale interactive work for the Martin Prosperity Institute at the Rotman School of Business. Amongst their recent public art projects in 2015 is a newly installed commission at the West Don Lands in Toronto. Regarding their recent exhibition record: in the fall of 2013, Marman and Borins had their first New York solo show at Cristin Tierney Gallery. From 2013 on, their solo exhibition *The Collaborationists* has been on tour; most recently in Canada at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, and at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Arizona.

Laurie Kang (b.1985) works in photography, sculpture and installation. Recent exhibition sites include Raster Gallery (Warsaw), Camera Austria (Graz), Parisian Laundry (Montreal), 8-11 (Toronto), and a collaborative exhibition at The Power Plant Gallery with Nadia Belerique and Lili Huston-Herterich. She holds an MFA from Bard College.

Winter Holiday Closure

Please note the gallery will close Sunday 20 December 2015 and will reopen Tuesday 5 January 2016.



Liz Magic Laser
Kiss and Cry

20 November 2015 - 23 January 2016

Artist talk Friday 20 November, 7PM with reception to follow

Kiss and Cry

Georgina Jackson

Within a darkened stage a small boy emerges to stand in front of rows of spectators prompting welcoming applause. As the camera focuses on his authoritative yet diminutive figure, he asserts, "I am sick man, I am spiteful man. Are you a good person? Deep down, do you even really want to be a good person?" The audience stares blankly. He urges "Or do you only want to seem like a good person, so that people will like you?"

This scene is the opening sequence of a recent video work by artist Liz Magic Laser entitled *The Thought Leader* (2015) in which the ubiquitous form of the TED talk (Technology, Entertainment, Design) and its promise of global change through the spreading of ideas becomes increasingly ominous. The stage setting, the technological trappings (large projected image, spotlights and small mobile microphone), and performance style, gestures and posed humour, re-stages the form of the global phenomena that is the TED talk, and yet it is a child who is centre stage. It is the same child who questions the incessant urge of benevolence, asserting, "the reality is that it's better to do nothing." Weaving lines from Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground's* (1864) attack on the socialist ideal of enlightened self-interest and a David Foster Wallace essay about it, the script underlines the sinister tones of self-improvement, aligning it with its contemporary capitalist and evangelical incarnation. The boy, a ten-year-old actor named Alex Ammerman, is convincing, as he acknowledges a present crisis, questions free will and at one point calls on the audience to stick their tongues out at him. And yet, he concludes, "perhaps I'm only imagining an audience in order to feel more dignified as I stand here in parenthesis." As the camera pans over his location standing on a rug with parenthesis woven in black, it is clear that the quotation marks are not just the excerpted and woven script, but the construct, form, gestures, and the division between audience and performer.

A perceptible tension between the assertion of one position and manifestation of another, and underlying paradoxes, is central to the practice of Liz Magic Laser. Emerging from an early interest in movement and the body, her work explores the processes instrumental in forming opinion, engaging with the mechanisms of how we perform and how we are performed through multiple modalities. She stages situations, dialogues, monologues and plays, using the urban environment and its population as the context for her work. In an earlier work *Flight* (2010-2011) Laser staged a series of chase sequences from iconic films such as *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), to *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *Final Destination 4* (2009)¹ on the red glass stairs of Times Square in New York. Laser worked with six actors to stage everything from revolutionary struggle to private drama, each actor slipping from role to role, villain to victim, witness to perpetrator. The recognition of a violent action became increasingly opaque along with the perceptible division between performer and audience. Locating these scenes within a crowded public space, nothing is outside of the performance forming, as she outlines, a constitutive presence.

In 2011 Laser staged *I Feel Your Pain* (2011) as part of *Performa 11*, working with a series of actors to perform in a crowded movie theater while a live-feed played on screen. The sequence begins with a couple sitting amongst the audience, the man turns to his date to utter the words, "Hey, can I read you what I wrote last night in my journal, it's about you." This quote was excerpted from the beginning of an interview between Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin on Fox News in 2010. Shifting from lovers' quarrels, to a physical fight refereed by a clown, gesture, language, ideology and assorted registers of performance were intertwined. This 'romantic drama' played out in four acts, borrows from political interviews, press conferences and speeches by Barack Obama, Bill and Hilary Clinton, Ed Muskie, John Boehner, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, Joe Wilson, and Arnold Schwarzenegger, along with quotations from Neil Straus' *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup artists* (2005) among other texts. Mobilising tropes of political interviews with traditions of theatre, agitprop, rhetoric and performance, there is an exploration of the means of persuasion in an increasingly depoliticized, if existent, public sphere. As Laser has outlined, "In an era when the authentic self has been so thoroughly deconstructed, our demand for authenticity seems only to grow. The pervasiveness of the interview corresponds to this ever-increasing desire. But the interview is perhaps better understood as a transformative instrument that produces its subjects as much as it reflects their intentions."²

From political interviews, to State of the Union³ addresses and fictional chase scenes, for Laser communication is not only what is spoken but what is enacted through multiple means. The location of these activities within the social, what is perceived as the everyday, the norm, conceals their role in hegemony. As Peter Osborne argues,



Top image: Liz Magic Laser *The Thought Leader*, 2015, single-channel video, 9 minutes, video still. Featuring actor Alex Ammerman.
Bottom image: Liz Magic Laser *My Mind is My Own*, 2015, single-channel video, 8 minutes, video still. Featuring actor Ella Maré.

If, classically, politics has been an active conflict between parties competing to institute different forms of the social (paradigmatically, in the modern period, in the historical forms of revolution, conservation, or reaction), it is overwhelmingly the developmental logic of capital (the social relations of the production of exchange-value) that constitutes the social form in Western capitalist societies.⁴

He outlines that "politics takes places within or on the margins of this development, regulating, facilitating, impeding or inflecting a power that social organizations at all levels appear unable fundamentally to counter or even significantly deflect."⁵

In My Mind is My Own (2015) a young girl, Ella Maré, whose mother is a professional voice coach leads a group of actors in public speaking exercises. She commences, "Okay, so everyone circle round. Now, so, imagine you're this big petulant infant...gaga...ga-ga." As the actors perform the role of the child, this utterance, the first acquired by a baby, the instructions become more obtuse, "Imagine you're the lone ranger and it's been a long hot day." These machinations resonate with the belief systems that one person can be a stand-in for another, that a mother can be a child, a child can be the mother, again the parameters of any role become elastic.

Laser's new work, *Kiss and Cry* (2015),⁶ re-approaches the role of the performance coach with figure skating coach Marie Jonsson MacKenzie training her two children, seven year old Anna MacKenzie and eleven year old Axel. The title, *Kiss and Cry*, is the phrase used to designate the area to the side of the skating rink where coaches and competitors gather after performing to await the judges' verdict. Echoing the role of empathy within political speeches and interviews, it was coined by Jane Erkkö, a Finnish figure skating official in denoting the area for television technicians mapping the arena in advance of the World Figure Skating Championships held in Helsinki in 1983. In the film, the children shift from prescribed roles as the student learning new skills, to a spotlight performance emanating a romantic narrative, to tiring rehearsals, to a revolutionary standing up for her rights. Laser's script weaves together quotations from *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), parliamentary debates, calls for family values in right wing rhetoric, child custody trials and excerpts from Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004).⁷ The omnipresence of the child is unravelled as it haunts the world "as a phantom of freedom: the uncompromised, authentically experiencing subject in a world that was otherwise alienated from itself." As the adult in the film states "This image of the "innocent child" is everywhere in our lives as adult freedoms face constant threat of legal curtailments out of deference to imaginary Children. We value the freedom of this imaginary Child more than actual freedom itself."⁸ The centrality of this role is suspended in the slow motion footage of Axel and then Anna as they spin around and around.

Kiss and Cry (2015) is the third in a series of video works⁹ which have mobilized the child. From the inhabited role of the TED performer taken up by ten-year-old Alex Ammerman to the vocal coach performance by Ella Maré, to Axel and Anna McKenzie's roles as competitive figure skaters, it is the child that has taken center stage in Laser's recent work. However as Lars Bang Larsen has argued, it is also the child that "is the blind spot at the core of the culture, an absent presence - a phantom of liberty."¹⁰ Since the 1950s there has been a marked reorientation towards the child, the precious sanctity of the child emerged - but what agenda does this fit and does this disable thinking of the future anew? As Larsen has argued, "While philosophy and twentieth-century art have used the children and play as "culture's others" in the pursuit of the authentically free or prospective subject, in our age they have instead become productive within existing social frameworks. If the difference between the child and the adult, work and play, is in the process of being eliminated, the child and the ludic no longer inhabit the margins of culture or embody states of proto-being, but rather disappear inside the social."¹¹

As the orphaned child character Annie sings and dances, "Tomorrow is only a day away..." If we consistently defer, when do we act in the present? Moreover, Laser asks "what agenda does this myth of the lost utopia of childhood serve?"¹² It is perhaps here that the chant given by Ella Maré to her students comes to the foreground, "my mind is my own, my mind is my own, my mind is my own."



Liz Magic Laser *Kiss and Cry*, 2015, single-channel video, 13:30 minutes, video still. Featuring figure skaters Anna MacKenzie and Axel MacKenzie and coach Marie Jonsson MacKenzie.



Liz Magic Laser *My Mind is My Own*, 2015, single-channel video, 8 min. Featuring actor Ella Maré. Credits: Featuring actor Ella Maré. Script written by Liz Magic Laser in collaboration with Kate Wilson and Ella Maré. Vocal coach: Kate Wilson; Directors of Photography: Chris Heinrich and Tom Richmond; Audio Engineer: Nikola Chapelle; Sound Mixer: Scott Benzel; Color Correction: Alejandro Wilkins; Production Manager: Anna Riley; Production Assistant: Esther Hayes; Participating actors: Travis Branch, Virginia Ferrer, Clara Pagone, Noniko Sato, James Pyecka, Mike Quinn, Khalid Rivera, Isaiah Seward, MaryAnn Siwek, Stephanie Sanford, CharliiTV and Alex Xenos. Produced with support from Various Small Fires Gallery, Los Angeles.

Liz Magic Laser *Kiss and Cry*, 2015, single-channel video, 13:30 min. Featuring figure skaters Anna MacKenzie and Axel MacKenzie and coach Marie Jonsson MacKenzie. Video Editors: Liz Magic Laser and Naomi Spiro. Director of Photography: Nikolay Michaylov; Second Camera: Daniel Froidevaux; Camera Assistant: Dan White; Audio Engineer: Dallas Boyes; Sound Designer: Jakob Thiesen; Production Manager: Georgina Jackson; Production Assistants: Nick Torok and Andrew Hoekstra. Costume Adviser: Felicia Garcia-Rivera. Voice Overs: Boston Flannery and Jenna Iacono. Commissioned and produced by Mercer Union.

¹ There were 23 chase scenes from 22 films, the other films were: *M* (1931), *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) and *A History of Violence* (2005).

² Laser, Liz Magic. "The Interview." *Art in America*, March 2012, 2.

³ A later work *The Digital Face* (2012) physically opposed the bodily gestures made by Barack Obama and George Bush Sr. delivering their State of the Union addresses in 2012 and 1990 respectively. One female and one male dancer performed in silence to each other across a crowded room, with the sound of a camera's shutter providing an unnerving metronomic soundtrack.

⁴ Osborne, Peter. 2006. "Imaginary Radicalism: Notes on the Libertarianism of Contemporary Art." In *ISMS: Recuperating Political Radicality in Contemporary Art 1. Constructing the Political in Contemporary Art*, edited by Marta Kuzma and Peter Osborne. Oslo: Verksted Office for Contemporary Art, 2006, 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶ This work was commissioned by Mercer Union.

⁷ This text problematizes the fundamental role of the child in conceptions of the future.

⁸ Larsen, Lars Bang. "The Phantom of Liberty." In *The Phantom of Liberty: Contemporary Art and the Pedagogical Paradox*, edited by Tone Hansen and Lars Bang Larsen. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014, 245.

⁹ *The Thought Leader* (2015) and *My Mind Is My Own* (2015), both produced in early 2015.

¹⁰ Larsen, Lars Bang and Tone Hansen. "The Phantom of Liberty: Contemporary Art and the Pedagogical Paradox." In *The Phantom of Liberty: Contemporary Art and the Pedagogical Paradox*, edited by Tone Hansen and Lars Bang Larsen. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014, 6/7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.9

¹² Liz Magic Laser, "The Missing Child," Unpublished paper, 2009.