



- L. Liz Magic Laser, Gary Lai as Mr. Wang (bonze of a Tibetan pagoda) in *Man Equals Man* at the Korea Town West 32nd Street Branch of Citibank, New York, NY, June 19, 2009; Wang offers his captive soldier some beefsteak in Scene 7; production still from *chase*, 2009–10; digital c-print; 12 x 18 inches; courtesy Derek Eller Gallery, New York
- R. Michael Wiener as Jeraiah Jip (a private in the British Army) in *Man Equals Man* at the 52 Broadway Branch of Amalgamated Bank, New York, NY, June 14, 2009; Jip finally finds his comrades and they act like they don't know him in Scene 11; production still from *chase*, 2009–10; digital C-print; 12 x 18 inches; courtesy Derek Eller Gallery, New York

NEW YORK

Liz Magic Laser Derek Eller Gallery

For *chase*, Liz Magic Laser's New York solo debut, the artist restaged Bertolt Brecht's play *Man Equals Man* (1926) by hiring nine actors to perform their individual parts in the ATM vestibules of different banks across New York City. Recording the performances, Laser later edited the footage to reconstitute Brecht's narrative into a 145-minute video, presented at Derek Eller Gallery along with props used in the filming and a makeshift set from a performance of the play's interlude, *Elephant Calf*, at the exhibition opening. Through these works, Laser imparts a contemporary resonance to Brecht's allegory about the mischief of four British colonial soldiers who forcibly transform an innocent simpleton into the perfect soldier. Laser's video, in particular, stands out for innovatively updating the playwright's socio-critical theater and reiterating the lesson that capitalism transforms individuals into mindless consumers.

The obvious theatrical element of *chase*, viewed as documentation, is a live actor in front of a live "audience" of bank patrons. Laser's performers, despite the conspicuous accompanying camera crew, blend into the urban backdrop as typical, New York crazy-persons or obnoxious art students, and the bank-going public, more often than not, simply ignores the histrionics. One woman appears to mockingly attempt to interact with a performer, but she seems more eager to insert herself into the spectacle for her "15 minutes" than anything else. The failure of the live performances of *chase* to produce any effect in the bystanders speaks to the potential obsolescence of theater, and its inefficacy in commanding the attention of today's public. Contrastingly, Laser recognizes the power of the moving image as a form of theater itself, and as a medium with both contemporary mass appeal and global reach.

Laser's videographic and editing techniques, by intentionally highlighting her work's means of production, assert the artificiality of the moving image and facilitate a detached, critical spectatorship—the "alienation effect" definitive of Brechtian theater. In one scene, for example, as an actor delivers a monologue from the counter where patrons fill out deposit slips, the camera and its technician become visible in the security mirror, breaking the illusion of seamless representation. The amateurish feeling of the editing, with its deliberately choppy cuts and rough transitions, further effects, as Brecht said of his plays, a "changeover from representation to commentary."

According to the exhibition press release, "*Man Equals Man* is both a comedy and a disturbing social parable that recounts the dehumanizing metamorphosis of an ordinary man into an instrument of authoritarian and capitalist design." Today, global financial institutions, corporate banks and the credit industry play this role, abstracting consumption until it becomes a mindless, knee-jerk behavior. As we withdraw cash from ATMs, shop online, pay bills and receive paychecks with automatic deductions and deposits on a daily basis, we become alienated from the objects of our consumption and their means of production. In today's screen-saturated society, a video, utilizing Brecht's alienation effect, may indeed be one of the most effective ways to create a space within which we can contemplate capitalism and shift our patterns of consumption for a different future.

Stewart Campbell is a critic living and working in Brooklyn.