Look Cool Sound Good Feel Real

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Answers: A Monologue was a performance piece I did in 2011, during the second year of my MFA. It resulted from a presentation everyone in the program had to do when introducing our work at the beginning of the fall semester, and I was sick of repeating myself: “Hi, I’m Casey, a visual artist working in film, video, text, collage.” Who cares? I had these cultural figures I admired, and quotations from them that I found insightful, informative, relatable. Bob Dylan, Lauren Bacall, Felix Gonzalez-Torres are the ones I remember. A musician, an actress, a visual artist.

I can’t find the text document of the piece, or else I would have included it with this response. It was a 15-minute-ish performance, maybe 4 pages of quotations that lead from one to another, not unlike Andrea Fraser’s performances Inaugural Speech and Official Welcome, which parody the rhetoric of art openings by sourcing quotations from important speakers. Whereas Fraser works within the canon of institutional critique, my approach was more ambiguous in its criticality. Dylan, Bacall, and Gonzalez-Torres are icons, and what they say has weight when their words have been recorded, transcribed, printed, sold, collected, and digitized: kept alive and made sacred over the years, but at the same time, not. I say ‘not’ not as a critique of celebrity fetishism but because I simply lost the file.

Celebrities are not sacred people but are sacred images. Their aura makes whatever they might say quotable, flushes it with genius and immediate context, thereby packaging the statement into an image itself. These aren’t real conversations. They are edited, approved, re-edited, re-approved. The responses are rehearsed in front of a mirror, practiced over thousands of hours, filmed in front of a crew and a studio audience. They’re affirmations of the parts of myself I want to project into the world that I can see in their words. When I want to express myself, and my artistic intent, it’s basically a selection, a curation of ideas that already have existed for a long time. Remembering the quotations was easy because I could have said them.

I chose Bob Dylan because I thought (and still do) that he was just so cool, Lauren Bacall because her voice sounded so good, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres because he was so romantic. I think Answers drew on a few more
celebrities, but I don’t remember. I remember enjoying doing the Bob Dylan voice and taking a moment to apply red lipstick before changing my register to the huskier, sultrier tone of Lauren Bacall. For Felix Gonzalez-Torres, I spoke precisely and evenly, like an academic. I was nervous and found authority in the fact that the monologue I was delivering contained only powerful words spoken by revered people. I remember wearing red acid wash jeans and a grey blazer. I was 25.

Afterwards, at the closing reception, I was introduced to an older male artist who taught at the university where the symposium was held, and his first words to me were: “I thought your performance was annoying … but that was the point, right?”

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In “We Spoke Again: Dialogue in Display,” Lois Klassen writes that my performance was “puzzling and funny,” the “out-of-context words… spoken in fractured pieces through the voice of a young woman on stage…. For that moment, the authority of mass culture was disempowered” (54).

It wasn’t my intention to disempower the authority of mass culture with this performance because I do not think that is possible; I give into it and look for the parts of it I can feel as real. Maybe that is why I never saved the file of the quotations. I want to remember the performance as a feeling rather than recall it in a text. For me, the Real is a feeling, and that is the pleasure of art: the ability to move in parallel to inequalities and injustices of capitalism, always looking for glimpses of that Realness. I can sincerely love such images because I see myself in Bob Dylan’s gait, Lauren Bacall’s pout, Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s candies.

* 

We Spoke

about transgression, and I said I didn’t believe in it.

He asked me, “Then, why do you like rock music?”

I said, “Because it sounds good.”
Works Cited