

## Madonna Made Me Do It

How to appear profound when talking about your photographs

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I have been attending psychological analysis for the past year in order to discover who I am.

It worked.

I am now able to reveal for the first time in public that, in actuality, I am Madonna.

And that's not ail. I have discovered that I am also Napoleon, and Elvis.

I only mention this fact to you because I might say things in the future that will irritate, anger and offend you. Also, I am likely to contradict myself. The point to remember, therefore, is that *none of this will be my fault*. (Elvis and Napoleon argue about everything).

I now feel wonderfully liberated. Through proper professional therapy, I have discovered a delicious secret: I can now say and do whatever I like because I do not have to take personal responsibility for anything.

In my newfound enlightenment, though, I feel a little embarrassed that so many artists and critics discovered this secret long before me. They have been talking and writing all this time while I was struggling, silly me, to understand what they said, as if they actually took personal responsibility for their remarks, expected them to mean anything, or cared if they were true or not.

Now, of course, I know better. It is gratifying to find out that artists and critics invent their nonsensical sayings because they are nice people. And if they are asked a dumb question, or do not know the answer to a good one, they will make the effort to think up a response. So they are not only generous but also nimble of mind. That's to be applauded.

In the past, when I heard an artist talking a load of old codswallop I would inwardly, and outwardly, groan and presume the speaker was endowed with an

I.Q. approaching that of a deep-sea sponge. Now, I think: heh, quick-thinking old buddy!

Let us see how this works in practice. Here's how you too can be considered a profound thinker and maker of deep images ...

1. Get a rap. Copy down a paragraph (any one will do) from a current critical theorist. Memorize it. Then, in front of a mirror, practice a halting, stumbling delivery with screwed up face until you can recite it as if the words were being laboriously dredged up from deep in your psyche with gut-wrenching sincerity.

Here's a good example, culled from a recent, review of an exhibition: The artist was "connecting the illusion of perception with the reality of thought - the inner reality that is beyond perception of the tangible. At this junction the unperceivable self joins with the unperceivable realities ... The unseeable realities become the force of knowing everything and knowing nothing, and knowing reality."

And may the force be with you.

Don't worry if you flub the lines. "The tangible reality that is beyond perception of thought" sounds just as profound and meaningless as "the inner reality that is beyond perception or the tangible." The point is that your delivery must be intense and convincing.

I know, it would sound more sincere if you made up your own verbal rubbish rather than scrounge around in the garbage heaps of critical theory. Fortunately, with a little practice, you too can learn to gibber. Here's how.

List a few buzz words and phrases beloved by the pseudo-photo-thinker. Here are some appropriate examples: contextualize, taxonomy, dialogical ethics, multicultural, signification, metaphysics, rerepresentation, polysemy, semiotic subversions and revisions. I stole (appropriated) these in a few minutes from one issue of a particularly unintelligible periodical. Now all you have to do is string them into a verbal sausage. Like this:

"Metaphysically, I employ the theory of signification in order to contextualize the polysemy of semiotic subversions and revisions."

Or:

"Subverting; semiotics, I metaphorically and metaphysically empower multicultural rerepresentation"

Or:

"I contextualize the taxonomies of dialogical ethics by revisioning and representing the polysemious multiculturalism."

I *know* they do not mean anything. Wake up, there! Their only purpose is to *sound* dense and important.

Now the beauty of these incomprehensible chunks of verbal offal is that they are useful in any circumstances, not only to describe your own image as it is being scrutinized, upside down, by a baffled gallery director, but also for impressing dates. What you do is this: meander around an art gallery and come to a jarring halt (enough to startle your date and capture his/her attention), squint at a particularly hideous piece, scratch your chin thoughtfully, bend at the waist and, without taking your eyes from a blob in the lower left corner, move crab-like to within a few inches, then slowly back up and mutter (loud enough to be heard by all - but as if musing to self. This takes practice.): "An interesting semiotic subversion of multicultural contextualization ..."

2. Stick to banalities. I am well aware that many of you have trouble pronouncing "aperture" let alone "polysemy." There is no point in flubbing a lot of complicated words (their effect is somewhat diminished if some egghead starts correcting you) when there is a simple (minded) alternative.

In this strategy the idea is to say the most trite thing in such a manner that it sounds like the deepest profundity. This is a technique which has been perfected by fine-art photographers who lecture at academic institutions. In a voice oozing deep sincerity, say: "I'm interested in [pause...] *Time*." Can you manage that? Good. Now try it while pinching the bridge of your nose - to some members of the audience this will indicate that you had to think long and hard to utter such a banality. (To me, it looks as though the speaker is attempting to stifle a sneeze. Still, by all means add it to your repertoire).

Once you have mastered "Time" you can try the same sentence but substituting "Space" or "Light".

Another banal sentence which is frequently used for the same purpose of

deception is:

"I have a profound respect for... Nietzsche/spirituality/God /preliterate societies/relativity/Foucault (or whoever is the thinker -of -the-month)." And so on.

3. Pollock it. So far you have been required to memorize up to three sentences. That's tough. So here's a strategy for those with brains composed of Brillo pads, just say, "It works." That's it - no more, no less, in every circumstances, for all images in every medium.

Its effectiveness increases, however, if you practice saying it with multiple emphases, with a nonchalant shrug or eye-bulging ferocity or with an astonished lilt - as if the questioner is obviously a nincompoop if your assessment is not immediately apparent.

This is the Jackson Pollock defense, and the world of contemporary art (especially photography students) owe him an immeasurable debt for these two words. Not that Pollock was much of a thinker - he hated verbal theories. He was a redneck and an alcoholic; he didn't read much, he punched people who offended him, and tended to piss in the fireplace when at parties. Use him as your role model.

This is an *approved* tactic. Owen Edwards, an astute critic, once wrote: "the better a photographer is, the more miserable and neurotic he or she seems to become." Well, you see the wisdom (mine) at work: if Edwards is right, then you can train yourself to become a miserable, neurotic human being first, and *then* you will be known as a great photographer, no matter how stupid your pictures.

4. Create a diversion. And the most effective means of not answering any question is to say: "I'm glad you asked me that..." and then ramble on about a childhood event, preferably one including dogs and sex. Of course it's irrelevant! But if you make it long enough and tedious enough no one, least of all the questioner, will remember what you were first asked. Ok, I hear you. Most of you have led sheltered, boring lives. So ask your friends for a dog/sex story - its amazing what hidden aspects of their past you did not know. Whether you want to remain friends with them is your problem.

So your friends are boring, too. In which case, fake it. There was the time, remember? when you burst in on Aunt Edna, stark naked, playing with her Saint Bernard in a bath of Jell-O ... The rest, is up to you. Now embellish the story with

a profusion of irrelevancies and trivialities. If anyone seems bored, remind them that you are conducting "emotional archaeology" (a popular concept nowadays).

5. Be political. This is another hot topic right now, especially if your diatribe reeks of leftist cant and is uttered with ferocity and indignation. Practice speaking sentences containing a lot of sibilants through pursed lips in order to get the spittle flying. Strangely, this strategy is particularly effective when talking to arty capitalist nerds in suits and ties. The point here is to intimidate, and you accomplish this most effectively by ranting and by cultivating a wild-eyed manic appearance.

6. If all else fails, act dumb. This is the cleverest ploy of all because it plays right into the minds of those who believe the true persona of the creative genius is inarticulate insensibility. These people, you must realize, do not *expect* you to be able to hold an intelligent conversation because you are VISUAL. The smart strategy, therefore, is to act as dumb as possible. Give them what they want. If pushed, mutter: "Uh?" or "I dunno." Your piece-de-resistance is: "Like, yer know, it just sort' a, yer know, uh .. comes out like ... uh ... like that."

I could go on providing you with effective strategies but why should I? I don't get paid by the word. Usually I don't get paid at all.

You might be wondering, therefore, why I am revealing, for the first time anywhere in print, these secrets of critical thinking. There was, I admit, some internal squabbings about the wisdom of revealing these conclusions to people like you who have not had the benefit of deep psychoanalysis.

Elvis, taking time out from his job as a bag boy at the Piggley Wiggley's in Dubuque, Iowa, was all for maintaining a low profile. Napoleon wanted to send in his army to obliterate all critics. This led to an acrimonious exchange with Elvis calling Napoleon "shorty". Napoleon indignantly insisted he was not short, but merely "vertically challenged." We were getting nowhere; until Madonna sashayed into the fray and insisted on getting her way, which she usually does. "Let it all hang out," she said. And she did.

So remember, if you don't like this article, don't blame me. Madonna made me do it.