

Dickie Beau, LOST in TRANS, The Theatre Centre, Toronto

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[See table of contents](#)

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Dickie Beau

LOST in TRANS, 2018.

Photos : Joel Fildes (left),
courtesy of the artist

Dickie Beau

LOST in TRANS

In a recent episode of the podcast *Food 4 Thot*, a discussion on queer vocality began with one host revealing, “People’s voices are pretty much my favourite thing... their singing voices, their speaking voices. How they express themselves and how they modulate, and even what they betray.” These words could almost as convincingly be attributed to performance artist Dickie Beau, the persona of Richard Boyce, whose mining of the voice in his multimedia practice implies a similar sense of rapture. If Narcissus, one of the many characters elliptically portrayed in Beau’s *LOST in TRANS*, drowns in self-love, it is into the aesthetic and sensory pool of the voice that Beau himself delves with equal ardour.

LOST in TRANS collects an idiosyncratic array of sound fragments, songs, props, and visceral images, suturing them to form a mythical love-letter. For Beau, the initial recipient was Echo, the nymph whose unrequited desire for Narcissus led her to retreat, as Beau writes in his production’s post-script, “to a cave where she wasted away, until all that was left of her was the sound of her voice.”

And yet, for all this talk of lost bodies, the voice is undeniably corporeal—“a vibration... something you can feel,” observed the aforementioned podcast host. It’s when Beau invests in the intimate matter of embodiment that the work is most alluring. In one especially captivating moment, Beau lip-syncs with an audio love-letter “made by an anonymous woman in Canada sometime in the mid 1960s, and found on the floor of a commuter train in New Hampshire.” In the recording, quotidian reflections abruptly shift into intense projections of erotic fantasy, and Beau follows every tender articulation and fibrous utterance with deft and virtuosic physicality.

Speaking after his show’s opening, Beau observed that it felt good for the piece to be on this side of the Atlantic. His intimation that the work belongs most in North America seems rooted in the fact that many of the voices

in *LOST in TRANS* belong here, too. This notion, however, raises questions around belonging and identity that feel tricky when a white artist like Beau takes on the vocality of artists of colour. Two prominent voices in the work are those of Harlem ball starlet Venus Xtravaganza and vogue House Mother Pepper LaBeija, heard in recordings culled from Jennie Livingston’s 1991 documentary *Paris is Burning*. Of course, this film was famously critiqued by feminist scholar bell hooks who suggested that the white director “assumes an imperial overseeing position that is in no way progressive or counterhegemonic.” We might wonder, then, at what point Beau’s project of becoming “a live performing archive of the missing” risks co-opting. We may also contemplate how embodying the voices of those who speak a very different corporeal experience feels more fraught than analogous practices in other media, like textual citation. And we should reflect on the social and cultural conditions that mean some bodies live, perform, and conduct, while others don’t survive. These are immense questions to direct toward a single performance. They remain, nonetheless, important to consider.

Fabien Maltais-Bayda

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