The Cultural Ambassador

Laurie Anderson

Anyway, I was in Israel as a kind of cultural ambassador and there were lots of press conferences scheduled around the performances. The journalists usually started things off by asking about the avant-garde.

So, what's so good about new? they'd ask.

Well, new is... interesting.

And what, they would say, is so good about interesting?

Well, interesting is, you know... it's... interesting. It's like... being awake, you know, I'm treading water now.

And what is so good about being awake? they'd say.

Finally I got the hang of this: never answer a question in Israel, always answer by asking another question. But the Israelis were vey curious about the Gulf War and what Americans had thought about it, and I tried to think of a good question to ask and answer to this, but what was really on my mind was that the week before I had myself been testing explosives in a parking lot in Tel Aviv. Now this happened because I had brought some small stage bombs to Israel as props for this performance and the Israeli promoter was very interested in them. And it turned out that he was on weekend duty on one of the bomb squads, and bombs were also something of a hobby during the week. So I said:

Look, you know, these bombs are nothing special, just, just a little smoke

And he said:

Well, we can get much better things for you.

And I said:

No really, these are fine...

And he said:

No but it should be big, theatrical. It should make an impression, I mean you really just the right bomb.

And so one morning he arranged to have about fifty small bombs delivered to a parking lot, and since he looked on it as a sort of special surprise favor, I couldn't really refuse, so we are on this parking lot testing the bombs, and after the first few explosions, I found I was really getting pretty... interested.

They all had very different characteristics: some had fiery orange tails, and made these low paah, paah, paah, popping sound; others exploded mid-air and left long smoky, slinky trails, and he had several of each kind in case I needed to review them all at the end, and I'm thinking:

Here I am, a citizen of the world's largest arms supplier, setting off bombs with the world's second largest arms customer, and I'm having a great time!

So even though the diplomatic part of the trip wasn't going so well, at least I was getting some instruction in terrorism. And it reminded me of something in a book by Don DeLillo about how terrorists are the only true artists left, because they're the only ones who are still capable of really surprising people. And the other thing it reminded me of, were all the attempts during the Gulf War to outwit the terrorists, and I especially remember an interesting list of tips devised by the US embassy in Madrid, and these tips were designed for Americans who found themselves in war-time airports. The idea was not to call ourselves to the attention of the numerous foreign terrorists who were presumably lurking all over the terminal, so the embassy tips were a list of mostly don'ts. Things like: don't wear a baseball cap; don't wear a sweat shirt with the name of an American university on it; don't wear Timberlands with no socks; don't chew gum; don't yell "Ethel, our plane is leaving!". I mean it's weird when your entire culture can be summed up in eight giveaway characteristics.

And during the Gulf War I was traveling around Europe with a lot of equipment, and all the airports were full of security guards who would suddenly point to a suitcase and start yelling:

Whose bag is this? I wanna know right now who owns this bag.

And huge groups of passengers would start #170430 out for the bag, just running around in circles like a Skud missile on its way in, and I was carrying a lot of electronics so I had to keep unpacking everything and plugging it in and demonstrating how it all worked, and I guessed I did seem a little fishy; a lot of this stuff wakes up displaying LED program readouts that have names like Adam Smasher, and so it took a while to convince them that they weren't some kind of espionage system. So I've done quite a few of these sort of impromptu new music concerts for small groups of detectives and customs agents and I'd have to keep setting all this stuff up and they'd listen for a while and they'd say:

So uh, what's this?

And I'd pull out something like this filter and say:

Now this is what I'd like to think of as the voice of Authority.

And it would take me a while to tell them how I used it for songs that were, you know, about various forms of control, and they would say:

Now, why would you want to talk like that?

And I'd look around at the ###170549 and the undercover agents and the dogs and the radio in the corner, tuned to the Superbowl coverage of the war. And I'd say:

Take a wild guess.

Finally of course, I got through, with this after all American-made equipment, and the customs agents were all talking about the effectiveness, no the beauty, the elegance, of the American strategy of pinpoint bombing. The high tech surgical approach, which was being reported by CNN as something between grand opera and the Superbowl, like the first reports before the blackout when TV was live and everything was heightened, and it was so... euphoric.

Song Discussions is protected by U.S. Patent 9401941. Other patents pending.

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