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THEATER & PERFORMANCE

Performance Review: Jack Callahan Slides Into His DMs and Creates Something Like Art

by [Robert Ham](#) • Jun 3, 2019 at 11:07 amLike 7 Share Tweet 

PHOTO: RH

For time immemorial, artists have used their work to try and reckon with or reflect the times that they're living in. Which is why a steady wave of artists are using or commenting on the current age of digital communication—in particular the stranglehold that social networking has our lives.

That appeared to be the thesis behind New York-based sound artist and composer Jack Callahan's work "Developed in the DMs," which he presented on **Friday at Yale Union**. The short piece was fueled by conversations from the direct message stream of a Twitter account. Callahan took these online chats, fed them through text-to-speech software, and gently manipulated them to sound even more surreal and unnatural.

To give the conversation a visual element, Callahan used a DMX-controlled stage light and a fog machine to represent the two sides of this intimate and inane conversation. Corresponding to the first voice, the stage light moved in erratic patterns. Its internal motor churned, amplified by a microphone directed at its pivot point. Then, as the companion voice replied, the stage light pointed to the fog machine, which began to gently spew clouds of unnatural smoke.

The execution of the piece was flawless and undeniably interesting to watch and listen to, especially as the messages Callahan used were recent (there were references to the Lil Nas X/Billy Ray Cyrus "Old Town Road" collaboration and HBO's *Chernobyl*). This gave the work a thrilling spark, knowing that he was constructing it all on the fly. But, as

voyeuristic as it was to dip into someone else's private conversations, the piece smacked of self-indulgence. Did we really need to know about their McDonald's orders or that one was re-watching the Austin Powers trilogy in reverse order? Definitely not. That information hasn't added anything to my life in the time since I absorbed it.

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That was, perhaps, Callahan's larger point: We've ascribed so much importance to tools for dumbshit small talk that it now fills a good chunk of our waking hours. If so, he hit the mark with a healthy thump.



Jack Callahan PHOTO BY RH

A concern that I haven't been able to shake has to do with the gendered tone that the voices took on. The DMX light was subtly feminine in tone (as well as carrying the hint of an English accent), which came across like a commentary on the flightier tone of the messages it read and the bird-like movements that light undertook. The voice of the fog machine was,

by contrast, deeper and flatter to match up with the starker, more measured comments ascribed to it. Whether Callahan meant to present the “conversation” in this manner or not, it reinforced some unfortunate stereotypes.

Just as unceremoniously as the performance began (45 minutes after the scheduled start time and with little fanfare), it ended. Callahan snapped on the overhead lights and said, “thank you” before vanishing from his post—a small table to the left of the audience. There was some applause, but little conversation afterward about the work itself. Like so many of our online interactions, “Developed in the DMs,” fell into the background, as everyone moved forward with their evenings.

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