Dialogue with Ann Liv Young:
on voyeurism and vulnerability.

I encountered Ann Liv Young, American performer and choreographer born in 1981, through a documentary that was to her dedicated. I was forced to watch this movie for a university class and by the end I felt like I lost one hour thirty of my time. The film is a collection of interviews of the artist and excerpts of her performances. These are generally very loud, chaotic and with a lot of scatological elements and sexual scenes, with funny costumes and wigs looking sloppy on the performers' heads. After a prestigious dance education, Young starts a flourishing career with *Micheal (*2005), a high paste dance performance where she combines elements of pure theatricality - loud mannerism and highly precise and synchronised choreographies – and hyperrealism - through non-simulated masturbation and nudity. The scenography is a very detailed reproduction of a house interior where four girls live and experience intimacy under the gaze of the audience that is put in the position of a voyeur.

Later in her career, Ann Liv Young develops further this particular relationship to the audience. The viewers keep on playing the role of voyeurs and, in addition to that, are being asked to respond of it. The artist develops her most famous character in 2011, Sherry, an alter ego through which Young creates performances improvised with the audience (*Sherry Show* in 2011, *Good Sherry: Save your Soul* in 2018). Sherry addresses the viewers directly and, most of the time, very aggressively. She is definitely Young's character who fascinates me the most and yes, a week after watching the documentary I started to realise that maybe I did not waste an hour thirty of my time. As a matter of fact, even though it was almost painful to watch parts of her performances and watch the audience go through what Sherry was doing, those images stayed in my mind. After the film I was very upset, just like probably most members of her live audiences. She was so provoking and mean, pushing every limits possible, from those of privacy, respect of other people's boundaries to those of discrimination. And my question was, does she even have a point? What is she trying to say? I really could not find an answer.

Some months after having watched the movie, I still thought about it but without the first feelings of being uncomfortable or angry. Only the curiosity persisted. Her way of doing theatre

make me think and reflect on my own practice for many reasons. First of all I see some similarities between our aesthetics: I also like to use a very chaotic and minimal stage, with raw and cheap materials and objects. Real things that do not belong together in real life but that create meaning when they are combined on stage and manipulated by the performer. To say it in other terms, I also choose, like her, an aesthetic of the cheap and the ugly. She also uses many codes of performance art, like improvisation and the belief that every action that happens on stage must be real, meaning non-simulated. This is something I would like to develop further in my work, but I have the feeling that I miss the courage. Maybe by talking with her I will find it. Last but not least, I also use a very direct way of referring to the audience and wish to develop a dialogue with them on stage. I want to reflect on how she does it and on the reason why she decides to develop such an aggressive way of performing. Ultimately, my question is: did I hate her work or was I simply envious of the freedom she displays on stage? For all these reasons I engaged with her the dialogue that follows:

YASMINE : I am going to be honest: I do not like you but I am sure you don't care.

ANN LIV : No indeed, I do not care. I think you are right not to like me. You are not the first nor the last one. I am absolutely not offended by it.

Y: Yes, I imagined. But also, I want to be honest with you. I think what you do on stage works. In some ways. I am just not sure I would like to be in the audience.

A-L: That's okay. Why would you go if you do not want to be there. Also, if you come to my show with this attitude, you can be certain I am going to be bothering you. I only mirror the audience. My characters, especially Sherry, are not mean, they only reflect the atmosphere in the audience.

Y: Would you say your characters are intrinsically provocative?

A-L: No, I would not. My aim is not to shock the audience. I just find that they are easily shocked.

Y: Okay, but to say that if the audience is aggressive towards you than you are aggressive in return, means that your aim is to provoke them. Someone else, for example, would react to an aggressive audience by trying to calm them down and to make them feel better.

A-L:Yes okay, good for them! But for me is a reflexive reaction. By showing them their own aggressiveness, I make them realise it. Also, to be honest, I really do not care about being sweet and mellow.

Y: Do you think it is bad to be sweet and mellow?

A-L: No, it's just not what Sherry is. Sherry is basically a therapist. She is a character, someone from the outside asking you difficult questions, confronting you with the parts of yourself you do not like. You cry when you go to the therapist, right? So I do not see the problem if my audience feel uncomfortable and wants to leave.

Y: Okay, but if they leave feeling angry, do you really think they will reflect on the performance again? Do you really think they will not just say "It was shit" and forget about it?

A-L: No, I don't. You thought it was shit and hated it and still think about it, right? You should ask yourself why.

Y: I am! I am asking myself why! This is the reason why I am here asking you all these questions. I think I was fascinated by how you don't care. By how you own your body on stage without any feeling of shame. Showing it with with no complexes. And I was fascinated by the fact that you go all the way through it, unapologetically. You always say that Sherry (and the other characters you impersonate) is “theatre”, is only fictional and what the audience see it's not real.

But at the same time, everything is very real when it happens in your performances: you improvise all the time, every sexual act is non-simulated, if the Little Mermaid (one of Youngs's characters from *The Mermaid Show*, 2012) eats a raw fish, then you eat a raw fish, when you pee, you actually pee. All the things that generally do not belong to theatre but real life are present in your shows. And you incarnate your characters, from the beginning until the end, without ever stepping out of them. So when a member of the audience gets upset and leaves insulting you, you do not stop being Sherry to calm them down. You never stop being Sherry.

A-L:Yes. It is the principle of theatre: when I am playing a character, I am that character. End of the story. I don't get why people get upset. They come to see theatre, in a theatre room... It is not like I am tricking them.

Y: Yes, but you see how it is confusing for them. Since, as I said before, you use the codes of performance art, which is non fictional.

A-L: Yes but no. Performance art does not mean I cannot have a character. It only means that everything that will happen on stage will be present and real. So yes, when I eat a raw fish is for real. But it is not Ann who's eating it. It is the little Mermaid.

Y: I get the "it is not for real part"... and you do it really well. But i feel like some artists use their freedom of speech and freedom of being creative to say whatever they want. Not having to respond of their actions. I think it is too easy. For example, you used the n-word and reproduced a black

face in one of *The Good Sherry* performances in Berlin in 2018[1]. The show was actually cancelled after this episode...

A-L: But good! Good if people react strongly when they see a white woman putting on a black face and say the "n-word". Good! It means that it does something to them.

Y: Don't you think that you reproduce oppression by doing so? Also, you often address to the people of colour in the room when you say the n-word. Do they really need to be oppressed again the time of the show? Is this art of pure provocation? Aren't you just crossing a boundary? Is their lives and their traumas you are touching at that moment. They are not a character. Sherry maybe is, but they are not.

A-L: The thing is that Sherry is a southern woman. I say it and I explain it very clearly in the beginning of my play. She is strongly inspired by my parents who grew up and lived all their lives in a very racist small town. This is Sherry's reality. It is the truth of a fictional character. Why should I change it in order to please a woke audience? This is not what I think, this is what Sherry thinks. It's a character, it's theatre, it's not real.

Y: I think I just would like you to be honest about your way of doing. Just say that you play with the boundaries between real and fictional, between the performer Ann Liv Young and the characters she plays. Because it is not clear. And you play with it. And that's okay, since this is what makes theatre and performance so powerful, but just be honest about it!

A-L: If I was honest, then people would stop questioning themselves. If I would say: "what I just said is Sherry's opinion, but Ann Liv's opinion is different, I am not a racist", then the audience would be reassured and would start get comfortable on the chairs. If they would be sure that I will not cross the line between me and them, then they would start falling asleep.

Y: But what are you actually questioning the audience about? What is your point? I think this is my problem with you - sorry to be frank about it! What you do is not political. It does not carry any political reflection. What are you proving them for? There is no social theme in your plays, nothing. Just sex and screams.

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1 "The Good Sherry", Sophiensaele Berlin, November 2018, https://sophiensaele.com/en/archiv/stueck/ann-liv-young-good-sherry : «We have decided to discontinue performance of "Good Sherry" on November 9th because racist violence has been reproduced on the basis of a case of cultural appropriation. We apologize for the violent speech acts and thank the audience for the intervention and the resulting discussion. In the show on November 10th, the performance of the song will be changed and the N-word will not be used, which was the starting point of the escalation. Nevertheless, we would like to issue a general trigger warning and point out that Ann Liv Young as *Sherry* is highly confrontational and can be disturbing through explicit language and content.

We invite the visitors of the first performance to the second show free of charge. After the show on November 10th there will also be an audience discussion moderated by Nisha Sajnani in the presence of Ann Liv Young and Joy Kristin Kalu.»

A-L : Oh yes there is a lot of reflection! Believe me. As I said before, my characters work as a mirror. They reflect the audience, so I guess reflection is really the basis of my performance.

Y: Yes... and a part from that?

A-L: It is a reflection of society! An audience into a theatre room is a small society. They come in with their social background, with their stories and, especially, with their expectations. It is very political to ask the question: "what do you expect?". I conceive performances where nothing happens. Nothing. There is no structure, it is chaos. How it will go it'll depend from them. From what they expect. I come and confront them with their expectations.

I always ask them, "Why did you come here?". And they very often answer: "Because I was curious. Because I heard of you and I wanted to come and see how it was". They are never unaware of what I do on stage before they come in. They want the show, they want to be shocked and provoked. They want to see how long they can endure it. They want to see the crazy lady, the last hottest crazy thing on the art market.

Y: So it's about voyeurism? It's about confronting them with their sick curiosity?

A-L: Yes, maybe. They want to see something raw, something real, and then they cannot accept the fact that it's fake.

Y: I get that. Sometimes I feel like the audience expect something real but in a fake form. In a sweetened shape. They want art to feel raw and vulnerable, but in the most constructed and non-real way possible. I feel like your hyperrealism confront them with this expectation. Did you come to see something real? Here! You have it. Now don't complain if you can't handle it.

A-L: Yes.

Y: And sometimes life is hard and harsh things happen in the world, in society, in someone's life. They happen everyday, but then we, as artists, are not allowed to talk about it because "We would shock". But these things already exist. Even if you close your eyes and do not want to see them. They still will exist. Why are you being so hypocritical about it.

A-L: Yes.

Y: I also hate that. Not being allowed to talk about things. Or better... not being allowed to openly talk about things. People ask me to be sensitive, not to shock, to be nuanced, to pay attention. But I am not inventing this things, I'm only putting it on stage for you to see. They were already there, in the world, I'm just changing the context and making it visible.

A-L : Yes.

Y: It is actually a very violent thing, not to be allowed to talk about things. A sort of shaming, of repression.

A-L: Yes. Shame. This is also a good topic. Maybe you are starting to see my point.

Y: Yes...

I guess this is why I talk about myself. This is why I do documentary theatre. To show people that what I am saying is not invented, it is real, it is there. You cannot deny it. I don't want to tell a "universal" story. I do not believe in "the universal" and sometimes I feel fictional stories tend to that idea. "Everyone can recognise themself in that". But it does not have to be that way. I do not want my audience to recognise themself in what I show, in the stories I tell. I want them to feel touched, to listen, without judgment. To stop shaming and feeling shame by assisting to something intimate. The access to someone's intimacy is something so powerful and a privilege, but it can also be disturbing.

A-L: Oh yes! It is disturbing. My way of being on stage crosses the boundaries of intimacy, clearly. I force the audience to be intimate with me, to be uncomfortable. Why should I be the only one being vulnerable and uncomfortable and you can just watch me? I want you to also feel like the spotlight is on you, like you feel vulnerable. And this is what happens when I address someone in the audience, isolating them, by forcing them to talk on the microphone or making a lap dance on their knees. It is intimacy pushed to its limits.

Y: Yes, I get that. But I have the impression you feel a lot of hostility towards the audience. It is like you are punishing them for coming to watch your performances. Punishing them of their voyeurism by saying "here, it's now your turn to feel vulnerable!".

A-L: Yes, I am not hiding from that. Sherry is a character who was invented as a protection. I made her when I was pregnant and asking myself how to make art and support a child. Sherry is indestructible, you cannot ruin her show.

There’s this idea, in theatre, that we have to impress the journalists and that people have to like the performance. And Sherry’s just like, “Fuck all of you. This is my show.” I think I was worn-down by people working in the arts. Everyone is coming to your show looking for something sensational, and they had a morbid fascination towards what I do. And then, they leave without saying a word and reverse all their judgement on an article. It is very violent. Much more violent than a Sherry coming directly to you and saying what she thinks to your face.

Y: I understand, it can be harsh. I think your art really forces me to ask myself the question : "What do I want from the audience. What kind of relationship do I want to build with them. How do I feel about them?". Do I disdain the audience? Do I love the audience? Is the audience a vehicle of dialogue? When Sherry says “this is my show, you shut up”, she goes against everything we are told as performer, which is to please and integrate the audience. You do integrate the viewers but in a very aggressive manner. You build this dialogue with them through confrontation. And this is what I like, I think. The idea of confronting someone with themselves.

A-L: If you find a way to confront them in a nice and gentle way, then let me know.

Y: This is why I do a lot of humour in my shows. It is my gentle way to tease them. What stops me to go further is that I am afraid of consequences. But you do not seem to. The art world loves you and hates you at the same time.

A-L: Yes they are all so hypocritical. They book me because my shows are the way they are, provocative and unapologetically, and then they get mad when I criticise the institutions or when I do not give a damn about their rules.

Y: Yes.

A-L: If they book me they should just accept the whole package. But to go back to your humour thing yes, it is nice. But stop hiding behind it too. Also, stop caring about being liked. It is not going to take you anywhere.

Y: This is true. Yes, a persona is a mask, an armour. This is why I am so fascinated by the way you developed Sherry. I feel like I also need a persona to vehicle what I want on stage. I think it's the side effect of wanting to do such a real and vulnerable theatre: I need to protect myself in some ways.

If I say it is not actually me who is talking, then no one can attack me personally. But then of course, this character is also very much me, which creates a confusion for the audience. I know where the line between me and the persona is, but they don't. The limit between reality and fiction should not be so important, but for some reason people are always eager to find out what is real and what is not.

A-L: Yes.

Y: I think I need time to reflect about everything we said.

A-L: It's okay honey.

Y: I understand better my fascination towards you, I think.

Even though I don't want to do an art that resembles yours, I still understand that I must go all the way, as an artist. Doing theatre or performance art, we are asked to invent a parallel world that seem very much real, that is tangible and imaginary in the same time. And yes, in this parallel world oppression, discrimination, fear, shame, violence still exist. They are just more visible.

Sometimes all I want to say to people is that I know it is hard and unpleasant, but we cannot always cover our eyes. If they came into this theatre space is because they wanted to see: not to see something else, but to see real things differently. So here you go.

A-L: Yes. Here you go.

The dialogue with Ann Liv Young confirmed me in the idea that I do not fully support this artist. I believe that reproducing discrimination is also discrimination and that being an artist is not a justification to do whatever we want without facing responsibility. Nevertheless, it helped me understand what kind of theatre I want to develop and what kind of relationship to the audience I want to create.

Actually, before talking to Young, I didn't really reflect around the role and position of audience in my performances. I tend to conceive my theatre practice as a game of seek and hide, where my shyness pushes me to find alternative ways of being on stage. Therefore, the idea of confronting the audience was not really an option.

This dialogue made me realise how important honesty and vulnerability are in my reflection and that the audience can also play an important role in creating these elements on stage. In fact can we create a vulnerable space if performers and viewers do not dialogue? If the audience is put in the position of a voyeur, can people on stage comfortably share their vulnerable and intimate perspectives? Maybe not. In the next steps on my artistic research I will experiment on creating a non aggressive, but maybe confrontational dialogue with the audience in order for the viewers to feel open and vulnerable, and therefore more connected to what happens on stage.