

Visual artist and choreographer Ibrahim Quraishi gets to grips with Ann Liv Young's AIR project. Featuring edited interviews with four SNDO students responding to their work with the controversial American maker.

# Neutrality is not an option

By Ibrahim Quraishi

Performance artist Ann Liv Young confronts her audiences with shocking onstage imagery, and as her most notorious persona Sherry she subjects them to highly personal interrogation. Prior to the AIR project she appeared as Sherry in Cinderella at Amsterdam's Melkweg. The performance ended when she accidentally cut her labia with a knife and an ambulance had to be called.

For her AIR project she worked with SNDO students to create multiple versions of this character for 37 Sherrys. As the live performance of the piece was drawing to a close, five students took control and redirected its course. This coup d'etat brought the performance to a halt and sparked heated debate.

When it comes to Ann Liv Young's work, it is simply not possible to remain

neutral. She inhabits all the complicated aspects of American reality, whether her work is about sexual intrusion, personal revelations or becoming a judge, jury or arbiter. No subject is taboo. Somehow reminiscent of trash chat-show host Jerry Springer at his most mischievous – to the power of ten – a Sherry show is likely to be an intense, challenging and even enlightening experience.

The iconography of Young's oeuvre is meditated within aspects of the trashy side of American life, and uncanny, poetic moments emerge from the tensions between the artist, the performer and the public. Ann Liv Young does not shy away from controversy and her work has sparked numerous scandals: some are pre-planned, others are spontaneous outcomes brought about by an engaged and overly excited audience; some are a mixture of the two.

Ann Liv simplifies the complicated and complicates the simple within a performative and human context. The news that SNDO director artistic director Gabriel Smeets had invited American enfant terrible Ann Liv Young to be an AIR in 2011 caused a buzz of expectation and excitement in the school. It was a bold decision to have his students, the future generation of makers, work with her. This was to be the first time Young would transmit her creative methodology and the secrets that make her such a formidable New York artist. Together with the students she would not only create a symbolic piece using one of her prime personas, Sherry, but they would also duplicate her 37 times. This adventure was always going to cause controversy and, sure enough, it lived up to the expectations.

To approach the subject of this controversial American maker/performer in

as balanced a way as possible, I carried out informal interviews with four of the SNDO students who had spent more than five intensive weeks working closely with her and have very different perspectives on the experience. The interviewees are all at different stages of their studies: Stephen West (1st year), Marta Ziótek (2nd year), Setareh Fatehi Irani (3rd year) and Florentina Holzinger (4th year, graduating June 2011).

**Stephen West (SW)** I gravitated a lot towards Sherry primarily because of her southern accent. I was raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a very conservative state in America, and I could relate to some of Ann Liv's Sherry characteristics and mannerisms to people I knew growing up. Everything about Sherry's style tickled me from the high-waisted pants and blonde hair, to the long fake nails and 'How are ya'll doin'?' I thought a lot about who this Sherry is and who I am or who am I when I become this character. For me, Sherry is very direct and is not afraid to confront a person and engage him with firm eye contact and personal questions. She's genuinely interested in other people's lives and stories and digging deep into people's values and emotions. I tried to push myself beyond my tendency of only saying safe and polite things.

**Florentina Holzinger (FH)** A proto-Sherry is unpredictable, forthright and revealing. When working with her it's best to take off any masks and meet her bare-skinned right away, to avoid prolonging the procedure. She is very grounded in herself and has nothing to lose and no expectations to fulfill. She is driven by 'the good' and a personal understanding of what is meant to be universal. She assumes that the path to healing might well be a bumpy and painful one, but that travelling along it will ultimately resolve any issue that caused the resistance in the first place.

She looks for resistance, that's how she detects her objects. And resistance is hard to find among 37 students who will be willing to do almost everything to satisfy her conditions. Me personally I took it as an opportunity to look deep inside of myself, for my inner resentments and conflicts that make me usually act a certain way. How do I think I have to approach people, or an audience? What role do I think I have to play and how responsible am I in truth? How do I want to appear as a performer?

**Setareh Fatehi Irani (SFI)** What initially intrigued me most about Ann Liv's performance as Sherry in *Cinderella* was the power dynamic between her and the audience. It was all about how Ann Liv deals with the power structure she creates onstage.

How responsible is she for any actions that ensue from the power dynamic she sets up in these performances? Also, if Ann Liv is using this power structure to teach something to her audience, how sure is she that what she wants to teach them is right? Where does she get this authority from? Is there a place in her work for her ideals to be questioned through an open and intelligent dialogue – as opposed to a one-way conversation that uses the power of the performer to close dialogues with audience members by moving on and taking her microphone elsewhere?

**Marta Ziótek (MZ)** Working with Ann Liv Young made me think about different forms of collectivism. Horizontal collectivism is based on the idea that each individual is equal; vertical collectivism emphasises the fundamental differences between individuals. In the former, people cooperate and share; in the latter people submit to authorities and a specific hierarchy. Individuals in a horizontal collective do not submit themselves for the group – the groups are made up of individuals. Vertical collectivism is based on strict instructions and the integrity of the group. Here, individuals belong to the social, religious and political structures and tend to sacrifice themselves for the group, the masses.

**SFI** Ann Li's performances rely on the fact that she is the only person in the room that has any power, adding 36 people with equal power was clearly incompatible with this scenario.

**SW** There was a lot in the 37 Sherrys process that we all did as a collective group: singing the Kanye West song, marching in a line, the herd of scared Sherrys huddled against the wall. It felt like we were this fabulous little blonde-haired community of Sherrys. There were parts of process – like the standing line holding hands and the marching – where we were told what to do and when and how to do it. But even when I was doing something as a collective with rules or a style that someone else dictated, I felt like I had the choice to engage in that collective experience or not. At these points, passivity could easily lead to being captured by the collective and not having your own opinion or input into what was happening. But being actively engaged in the process creates more dialogue and individual choices.

**FH** There was a general requirement for alertness on the part of the students, and the call for participation was very open. One issue was whether the circumstances were motivating for participation. We didn't learn what tools to use or how to use them. I experienced

it more as growing a thick skin to allow me to handle the situation, to find out where I could contribute for my own sake. I didn't see it as a problem that so many paradoxes occurred between discourses and practical realisation, but everybody had to handle dealing with them on their own and in their own way.

**SFI** Midway through I really began to question my place in this workshop. Although Ann Liv was continually speaking of our freedom as performers, in reality we were becoming more and more limited by the structure she was imposing. As a confident performer and human being, the cognitive dissonance involved in accepting the concepts of our restrictions along with trying to accept Ann Liv's reassurance of our freedoms was quite grating. In fact the concept of this kind of structure has a name. When someone asserts that they have no power over you and you are completely free, but at the same time they are completely controlling your actions, it's called fascism.

**FH** People are very scared to do the wrong thing. To avoid that risk they don't *do*. You need really feng shui circumstances to allow failure to be productive to the process. That panic prevented people acting. The result was passivity and frustration. And then it's not fun to still have to be there playing a tree in a forest. We were clearly put into the position of students who needed the judgement of an authority to be able to define their value.

**SW** I felt that Ann Liv Young was very sensitive in the working process, often checking in with us to see how we were doing and opening up discussions and time for questions. I wish there was more time to work on this project with Ann Liv and go deeper into my role as Sherry.

**MZ** I recognise in Ann Liv Young's working process some of the characteristics of vertical collectivism, especially if we take into account her way of working with a language and representation. In this case, as Judith Butler wrote in *Excitable Speech*: 'Injury caused by language is not the only effect of the word which one is addressed but the way of addressing itself', that interpolates the individual. Personally, I'm interested in a different understanding of collective and collaborative work, in strategies related to Brecht's approach. It's what Deleuze calls 'Dividuality': individuality that is completed by collectivity. It's thinking through doing, a collaborative method of developing the process based on ongoing research, differences and the possibility of extension. By adopting a



37 Sherrys was coordinated by Odin Heyligen, with assistants Annemiek Suijkerbuijk and Floor Cremers. Noha Ramadan assisted Ann Liv Young. Marco Ton and Frans Zwart, both students of Technical Theatre Arts at de Theaterschool, were technicians and SNDO student Simon Tanguy was a stage hand. 37 Sherrys was created at Plantagedok, Amsterdam.

The poster insert is a collage of material sourced from student diaries. It features material by Yui Nakagami, Thibault Maillard, Louis Vanhaverbeke and Clara Burdet.

form of conflict as an articulation of the process, we can simultaneously try to reflect on it.

**SFI** The intended outcome of the workshop was a public performance. The implication was that as performers on stage we would be equal to Ann Liv, with equal abilities and making equal contributions. For me this was a very exciting proposition, one that seemed truly progressive and that removed any hierarchy from the development and performance process. As the workshop progressed our positions in the performance quickly diminished from being equal Sherrys to being lesser Sherrys. We became a supporting cast, asked instead to provide provocative imagery, songs and dances as an army of physical backups for the Sherry that was, it gradually became apparent, to be exclusively Ann Liv Young's character.

**FH** How we take that is of course up to us and people responded as individuals. I had to ask myself the question of how stupid am I to be following, but then again I assigned myself for the experiment and I could have left anytime and I didn't feel an urge to be revolutionary. Take it or leave it, and that's compromises I always make when working for or collaborating with other people. Usually we get encouraged to blow up our individual needs and act upon them, especially in a group.

**SFI** During the final performance some of my fellow cast members and myself decided to use the power invested in us as Sherrys by Ann Liv to alter the outcome of the performance. We decided to work within the boundaries that we had been given, and to use the same mechanisms that Ann Liv/Sherry uses in her shows. As Sherrys we took the microphone from Ann Liv and redirected the course of the show, just as a real Sherry would.

We believed that if Ann Liv was being honest with herself and to us about our value as performers and the nature of her work, we would be able to carry out this 'action' without disturbing the performance. Just like when we had been asked to restrain an audience member in a previous show, we used the same action towards Ann Liv, however unlike the audience member in question, who valiantly allowed the situation to unfold, Ann Liv became quite upset. Were we now with Ann Liv or Sherry on stage? The distinction was in any case often unclear to us, and now more so than ever. Ann Liv became distressed and stormed off stage. We assumed this to be part of the show, so we continued. We had had some brief discussions about our little 'conspiracy' prior to the show that fitted completely within the framework

Ann Liv had created for us. Still assuming Ann Liv was acting at that point, for a fleeting moment we were delighted in the knowledge that we did indeed have the power as performers that she had given us – that we had been part of a free and open collaboration and that Ann Liv had created a truly flexible power structure within which we were working. Just a few minutes later that elation was destroyed. She returned to the stage not as Sherry but as a distressed and tearful Ann Liv, telling the audience that the show was over – when we thought it had just begun!

*Ibrahim Quraishi is a visual artist and choreographer currently working at the SNDO, HAU, the National Museum of Singapore, The Kitchen, Springdance and elsewhere.*

