

Drama Queen

DAVID VELASCO ON ANN LIV YOUNG

IF SHERRY WERE ANY GOOD, she wouldn't have to insult other people. The Kitchen in New York won't present her work again, she guesses, "because I'm nasty to the audience." Sherry sure is nasty. And mercurial, brash, honest, and mean. Her T. J. Maxx business-class drag (blond wig, makeup, pumps, polyester dress) exudes arriviste confidence: "It's amazing / I'm the reason / everybody's fired up this evenin'," Sherry sings crazily, with gusto, atop the Kanye West anthem "Amazing." This isn't appropriation or karaoke; this is competitive Pop. Sherry sings not *with* the original track—played via iTunes from an onstage MacBook—but *over* it. She is so contemptuously over it.

Sherry both is and is not the artist Ann Liv Young. And Young onstage is and is not Young offstage. (Young offstage is a more or less dubious construct, too.) "I'm interested in characters playing other characters," she notes offstage, conjuring a typically guileless, deflective *mise en abyme*. As Sherry, she implicates everyone in her scenes (and she *always* makes a scene): audience, curators, crew, other artists. Memorable,

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traumatic pictures abound. "You're so fucking easy! You bitch! So easy, easy!" shouts Georgia Sagri, another young artist who fell crashing into the critical Sherry trap. The altercation between the two, who shared a bill in February at MoMA PS1 in New York, prompted Klaus Biesenbach, the museum's director, to cut the lights and sound in the middle of Sherry's performance. Briefly, because I don't really want to get into it (Sherry will happily sell you a video for cheap), the ruction transpired in a large gallery on the museum's third floor—the one tiled in Christian Marclay's *2822 Records (PS1)*, 1987–2009. Sherry began by criticizing Sagri's performance, which had immediately preceded

hers, calling it "terrible." Sherry asked the audience what they thought of the work, and then asked Sagri to explain it. "I'm sorry, but we can have this talk, right? Can you tell me? You're the artist!" A brief respite followed in which Sherry did one of her familiar "tidbits" (singing over "Amazing"; peeing in a plastic bin), at which point she was heckled by the performance series cocurator Sarvia Jasso's girlfriend, then by Jasso herself, then by Sagri ("You're shit!"). Sherry, "inspired" by the unruly crowd, stripped off all her clothes and masturbated in front of Sagri while singing to Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas." Sagri put up with it for a moment, then bristled and stalked out of the room. Sherry cheerfully apologized: "Okay, so that wasn't my intention. That was rude of me." Sagri returned and began to scream obscenities before fleeing again. As Sherry put her clothes back on, the power went out. In the ensuing confusion, Sherry tripped, spilled pee on herself, and cut her leg on a piece of broken glass.

"You tried to sabotage my show! Well it ain't possible. It just ain't possible," Sherry yelled, now sans mic. The logic of "Sherry"—and there *is* a logic—could not be more convincingly articulated.

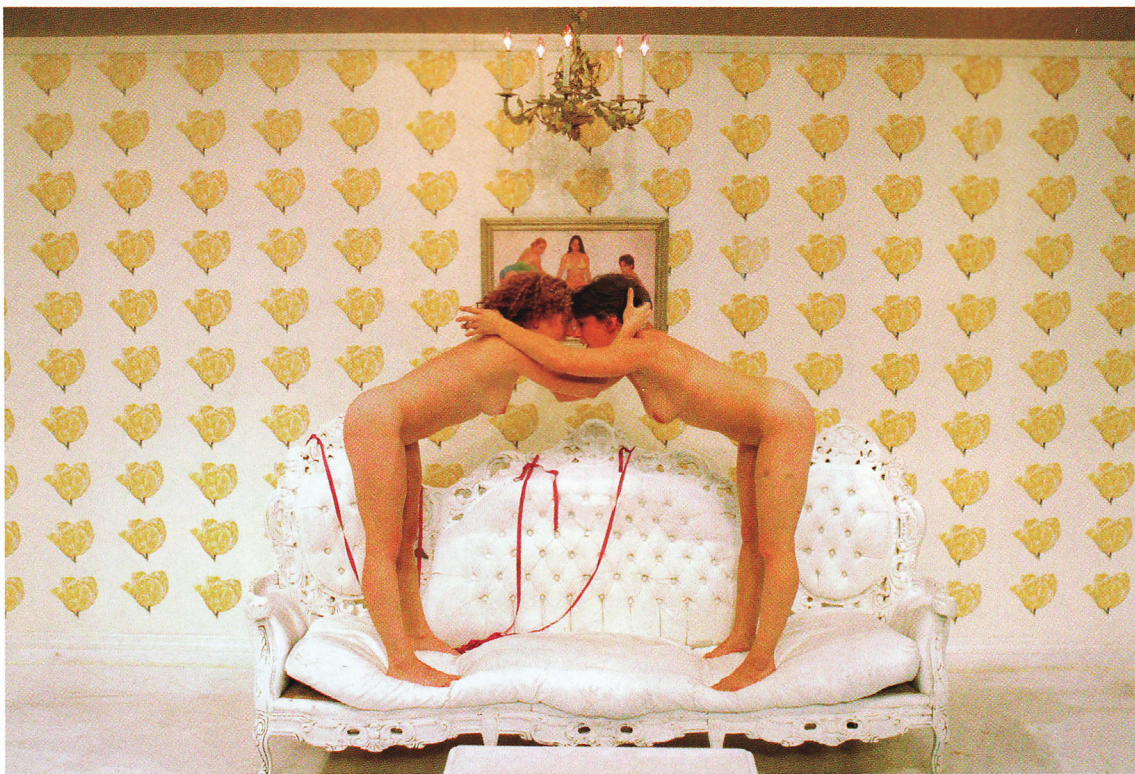
"SHERRY" WAS CONCEIVED during the international tour of Young's dance-theater piece *Snow White*, 2006, a few months before Young gave birth to her daughter, Lovey. Young cites two reasons for the development of her character: "I needed to create a performance model that was economically sustainable, and I wanted something that would always succeed." This is, after all, how she makes a living—through a combination of performance fees and hawking props and



Ann Liv Young, *Sherry*, 2007. Performance view, MoMA PS1, New York, February 27, 2010. Sherry (Ann Liv Young). Photo: Jeremy Fredericksen.

documentation. As opposed to Young, who presents elaborate, rigorously choreographed dance-theater works, Sherry is a polemicist on a budget who gets stuck in *reductio ad absurdum* grooves. In making trouble, Sherry ostensibly gets to *choose* the style of trouble she's in, and an insult from her, in this sense, is simultaneously instigation and investigation, its illocutionary force functioning as a test (as a child tests a parent). All feedback to the Sherry system simply engorges it, makes it louder and stronger.

Within and beyond Sherry, Young does have a bio: She was born and raised in North Carolina, briefly attended the Laban conservatory in London, and then transferred to Hollins University in Virginia, where she studied with the formidable dance educator Donna Faye Burchfield, earning a BFA in dance and textiles in 2003. Two years after graduating, Young premiered her work *Melissa Is a Bitch* at the ImPulsTanz festival in Vienna; evening-length performances at Dance Theater Workshop and the Kitchen in New York soon followed, along with numerous international bookings, unheard of for a choreographer, especially one (still) under thirty. Her forthcoming work, *Cinderella*, will have its US premiere September 3 and 4 at Issue Project Room in New York. Young originally envisioned debuting the piece in the basement of a Jersey City mansion, but exhaustive location scouting proved that Jersey City landlords are highly allergic to direct, intensive action.



Clockwise from top: Ann Liv Young, *Michael*, 2005. Performance view, Dance Theater Workshop, New York, October 19, 2005. Liz Santoro and Renée Archibald. Photo: Julieta Cervantes. Ann Liv Young, *Sherry*, 2007. Performance view, Abrons Arts Center, New York, January 10, 2010. Thomas (Michael A. Guerrero) and Sherry (Ann Liv Young). Photo: Michael Hart. Ann Liv Young, *Snow White*, 2006. Performance view, Théâtre de la Bastille, Paris, November 24, 2006. The Prince (Liz Santoro) and Snow White (Ann Liv Young). Photo: Nicholas Strini.

“GO!” is, appropriately, the command that frequently precedes a vocal or movement phrase in one of Young’s choreographed works. There is an irresolvable tension between her professed interest in contingency and her drive for control, order, and total movement clarity. (Even the *eye blinks* are choreographed, the *New York Times* once noted incredulously.) *Michael*, which never toured after its DTW debut in 2005, is arguably the most tightly scripted of any of Young’s evening-length works. The dance, performed on a fantastically kitschy, shallow set made to resemble a thirty-foot-long trailer, features six female dancers and a single male dancer who famously jerks off and comes on a window during the work’s whip-lash first act. Young does not “perform” in the piece

so much as sit in the audience and dictate the action (“GO!”), intermittently stepping onstage to sing over Eminem’s “Crazy in Love,” put a Band-Aid on a bleeding dancer, or assist in an adagio.

When something goes awry (her mic or monitor is too low, she misses a word, someone slops a move), Young typically breaks the number and begins again. Some of these false starts and interruptions are themselves choreographed or at least anticipated; some are not. Sometimes the people who work with her cannot tell the difference between choreography and contretemps. Thus all failure appears forecasted, accounted for by Young. The effect is the amplification of a certain critical paranoia. Where is the “intention”? Where is it not?

YOUNG IS POP AVEC SADE: Over and over again she evinces a Sadean (not sadistic) *donnée*. Everything must be seen. It is not enough for a woman to be nude: she must do the splits naked (*Melissa Is a Bitch*) and upside down (*Michael*), so that her vulva is presented to the audience. It is not enough for Young to penetrate another dancer with a strap-on dildo onstage (*The Bagwell in Me*, 2008); she must penetrate while being filmed up close with a video camera connected to a live feed that simulcasts the act onto a screen, stage rear. (Then, according to the Sadean math of equivalence, she must be “murdered” by her partner, her dildo sliced in half with a knife.) And it is not enough for this to happen for the live audience: Everything must be taped, edited, and then distributed on Facebook or YouTube or DVD (purchasable after the show or through Young’s website). Thus every performance work is also a video work. Young is doubly explicit: Everything is spoken (and miked), bodies are exhibited, and all action is thereby intensified and amplified. When I later hear a song that Young has previously “covered” in performance, the original sounds puny, tame, lackluster.

GO! Young’s videographer and production assistant is her husband, Michael Guerrero, a soft-spoken man with big, bushy hair and a beard and glasses, who functions as a direct foil/counterpoint to Young’s articulate, spirited, “done-up” personae. (His stage name is Thomas, or simply “T.”) She’ll sometimes ask him questions or yell out a task for him to do, and if he responds he acquiesces quietly. At the end of each of Young’s three nights at the Abrons Arts Center in New York this past January, “Sherry” ritualistically acted out a scenario with “Thomas” in which she managed to play both cruel libertine and despotic woman at the same time.

This tortured hermeneutic extends to the audience as well. “I just want to make sure everyone understands what I’m doing here,” Sherry says to the crowd at Abrons. “This isn’t deep.” When she’s “on” she’s hilarious (some of her clearest antecedents are insult comics such as Don Rickles and Lenny Bruce), but then she’ll turn on the crowd. “You think I’m kidding. I could say the word *the* and you people would all start dying laughing.” The audience suddenly stops laughing, mystified. What do you *want* from us?

GO! It’s Saturday night, and it’s too hot in the bare-bones space of 177 Livingston in Brooklyn, New York. Eighty or so people gather on folding chairs and benches



From top: Ann Liv Young, *Sherry Tries on Cinderella*, 2010. Performance view, 177 Livingston, New York, June 5, 2010. Sherry (Ann Liv Young). Photo: Peter Nowogrodzki. Ann Liv Young, *Cinderella*, 2010. Performance view, Inkonst, Malmö, Sweden, March 25, 2010. *Cinderella* (Ann Liv Young). Photo: Michael A. Guerrero.

around a squat, circular platform. Partially deflated helium balloons drift amid the crowd; U2's "Hold Me, Thrill Me, Kiss Me, Kill Me" plays. Scattered across the makeshift stage are perhaps a dozen kitchen knives, left as they were from the previous night's performance. Sherry enters, bends over her laptop. "Check." U2 fades and is replaced by Lionel Richie's "Stuck on You."

Everyone has come to see Sherry do something. "Expectation will completely destroy you," she says, twenty-five minutes in. "Because God only knows what I'm going to do, number one. And number two, you know, it's not always about exciting the audience.

It's not always about making you all feel like, 'Ah! This is it, this is art—this is the next thing.'" Indeed, Friday's performance had been a case study in delayed climax, a nearly four-hour-long endurance piece in which "nothing" happened—if you could call singing, dancing, rehearsing bits from *Cinderella*, auctioning merchandise, and various pseudo-incendiary interactions with the audience "nothing."

But Saturday is different. Never mind the "shit show"—during which Sherry and other audience members smear fresh fecal matter all over a volunteer in a white T-shirt. The real highlight—captured, like everything, on video—comes at the end, after three hours of alternately exhausting and revelatory give-and-take, when Sherry begins to interrogate a young woman in the front row. How would she respond if the audience were to kill someone onstage? The woman offers, apprehensively, that she would call the police or perhaps fake a phone call. Sherry pushes further.

SHERRY: You think I'm kidding. What if we hung you, right here, in the middle of the circle, with a rope? What if all of us grabbed you, and you couldn't free yourself, you couldn't use your cell phone, you couldn't think for a minute if you should fake a phone call? If we tied you up by your neck. What would you do? All these people in here together.

WOMAN: If you already had me hanging by my neck?
SHERRY: We grabbed you, all of us, and hung you by a noose, and pulled you up to the ceiling . . .

"Hey! Hey!" Sam Frank, a *Triple Canopy* editor (and—full disclosure—*Artforum* copy editor) who booked Young at the space, calls out, off camera. "Stop it, stop it. Stop this."

SHERRY: No. Make me. Make me stop.
FRANK: Because I think you're trying to make us participate somehow.

Everything about the situation is theater. It is unplanned, but not unanticipated. That it is in any way convincing (as reality, not theater) has to do with the fact that Frank has not been scripted but rather has been compelled in the moment (better: inspired) to intervene. As the evening's presenter and an ostensible authority figure in the space, Frank rehearses a position overdetermined by prior Sherry performances, and thus the action consummates rather than interrupts the work (or, to be accurate, the former is the consequence of the latter). Frank becomes, in effect, an accomplice to the performance, engaging with the fiction on its own terms. Young plays along, always staying in character (even if it's a "broken" character).

SHERRY: This is art. This is performance art, have you ever heard of that?

FRANK: Do you believe in performance art?

SHERRY: Of course I do! Why else would I be doing this? You think that I think that I can make all of these people hang her from a rope?

FRANK: No, I don't—

SHERRY: That is it! It's twisted. It's twisted!

If comedy is one lineage for Sherry, the other might be the dialogical. Sherry is, after all, not as mad as she appears; she dramatizes the capriciousness of power, but when confronted with authority, she seizes the occasion to expose its "twisted" logic, making authority reflexive, getting it to turn in on itself. Of course, Frank is aware that the "participation" promised by Sherry is not coercive. (With Young, the audience is always free to leave—this is not Chris Burden or Graciela Carnevale.) The "participation" to which Frank objected—to the extent that his intervention addressed the actual content of the performance, rather than his apperception of his role in its structure—was the burden of proof that Young placed upon the audience; she was testing their agency. It's difficult to say whether Sherry's own "intention" is to make evident this knife-edge between passive and active (all the while hyperbolizing pop-therapy consciousness-raising techniques), but the heuristic impulse, in general, is certain.

SHERRY: Thank you. Point proven. You guys can all go home. Fuck off. Fuck off. And you can keep your fifteen hundred fucking dollars, you asshole.

[Exit.]

[Applause.] □

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