

I, A.M. on being Anja Müller

I⁴ / Concept: Anja Müller / Performers: Aparna Kolar, Chris Leuenberger, Lea Martini and Roger Sala Reyner
Seen: february 3, 2007, Dance Unlimited Amsterdam

I am Anja Müller. I am Anja Müller. I am Anja Müller. I am Anja Müller. It is repeated four times in a row, by different persons. Two men, two women introduce themselves as being Anja Müller. It works both as an affirmative mantra and as *Leitmotiv* for the performance.

Three performers are sitting in a classroom-like setting: some chairs, a chalk-board, a whitescreen and a small trolley with coffee, tea, cookies and snacks. Projected on the screen, we see the fourth person sitting in Müllers 'Berlin' apartment livingroom. He's wearing a blue dress. The others are also wearing clothes that aren't made-to-fit: too wide or too tight. Are they Anja Müller's clothes? Then again, as they all say to be Müller, they are wearing clothes of 'their own'.

Central question in this 'me-search' performance: 'who am I?'. Nothing less. Müller conducts her research in a most playful way. So playful, it can easily be mistaken for naïveté. But despite all humour and wit, Müller embarks on some fundamental philosophical and psychological issues. And aren't these often disguised as naïve questions?

The four Müllers don't question each others claim to be Anja Müller; they just accept it. All four *are* Anja Müller, but not *the* Anja Müller. They all prove to be representing just a sole aspect of the 'Anja Müller-Sein', or the 'being-Anja-Müller-as-a-whole'. Their multiple self is not regarded as a problem like a multiple personality disorder (a theme still popular in melodramas). And unlike most postmodern thinking about identity and the self, that embraces the multiple, Müller continues to search for a unifying One.

Müller uses methods of classic empirical scientific research (close observation, testing, measuring, quantification and comparison of data) to distill some kind of truth about her Self. Controlled by an alarm-clock, each performer is given limited time to share the results with the audience.

"I'm one," the first Müller cries in an almost desperate voice, "not 35 or 10.000!" Looking for a hidden truth in numbers, she subjects her body and mind to counting and measuring. "Nose: one. Ears: two. Mouth: one. Pussy: one. Toes: ten. Number of times I talk to my boyfriend a day: two. Near to death experience: one. Apples a day: two." These numbers are written on the chalk-board, coloured strips measuring the distances between pain points in her body are laid out on the floor in an abstract composition. Despite the seeming clarity and correctness of these data, they fail to reveal the truth about Anja Müller as-a-whole. "These numbers will tell me something, I thought. But they stare back at me and aren't telling anything..."

The second Müller presents a rather ambiguous result. He talks about Müllers characteristic need for intimacy and the difficulties of maintaining a long-distance relationship. But of all, he's the one that is physically absent and only virtually present on stage. In Müllers Berlin apartment, he communicates with us through webcam and microphone-headset, his face projected on screen. This way, he confronts us with the technicality of human communication in the 21st century.

The third Müller is the only one that seems to have made a clear discovery about herself, albeit a very small one. As she means there must be some truth in her unconscious body language, she discovers after close self-observation that Anja Müller manifests herself in the 'Röllchen' (small roll). In a quirky manipulation, the skin of the upper lip, chin or cheek is rolled between her thumb and index finger. But having become conscious of the once unconscious, Müller feels entangled in a vicious spiral of becoming observer and observed, subject and object at the same time. To stop this spiral, she wants to 'release' the Röllchen and share it with the audience. Without much outcome.

In his search for the answer to the question "Who am I?", the last Müller is as unsuccessful as the others. To know more about himself, he did some personality tests: "It was zero, I couldn't find myself. But after a while I realized what was missing was my body."

To find out what is essentially 'Anja Müllerish', he decides to do some comparative research with something so common as a walk as starting point. "Everybody walks, but does everybody have a walk of their own? Is this walk telling something about me? Where is Anja Müller, is it in the landing of the foot, is it in the bending of the knee?" A couple of test-walks are run, but no conclusions are drawn.

Not surprisingly, Müllers pseudo-scientific research to the ultimate Self is doomed to fail from the beginning. Once the Self is recognized as the sum of an endless number of individual aspects, it is impossible to stop looking for next ones. And like atoms, every aspect can be sub-divided in new particles.

Also, the scientific methods she applies are functional only in the context of justification (of theory or facts), not in the context of discovery. Even the scientist needs creativity and imagination to discover something new, before he can check it in a lab situation. As Müller lacks of a theory to unite all atomic or monadic aspects of her Self, she can't prove anything with her tests yet. Her project is like trying to fit together the pieces of a puzzle. But there's an unlimited number of pieces, the pieces don't fit and there's no example of what the definite Anja Müller should look like.

But then again, Müller succeeds in different ways. With her search for the Self, she has taken on a problem which is at the root of difficult philosophical and psychological issues. Before Descartes, the Self was thought to reside in the etherial soul. The materialist philosophers of Enlightenment claimed all mental and emotional experiences to originate in bodily processes. As we understand now, the truth is somewhere in the middle.

Müller doesn't pretend to present us with her definite solution to this complicated issue. But in her search for the Self she does apply her own imagination to bridge the gap between body and spirit. As Müller understands, the body is not only the container of the Self, but our consciousness emanates from a constant and complex interplay between our material body and immaterial thought. In her definition of the characteristics that constitute her Self, Müller quantifies not only the values of the material body stretching in space (length, weight), but also immaterial values as intimacy.

When the fourth Müller comments that he suddenly realized that in his search, the body was missing – a truth so big to a choreographer it must hurt – it can be seen as an ironic comment to the classic technical approach to dance that still has difficulties including mind and soul. Also the remark of the first Müller that the close observation of the Self by means of video-recordings is deadly boring, may be a sneer towards sometimes too auto-focused contemporary performance practice.

Even though no final conclusion is reached after four 'me-searches', the playful and optimistic tone is retained. Coffee and cookies are served to the audience. This is not the end, it's just a break. And as the performance title I^4 can also be read as 1^4 : $1 \times 1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$, it suggests that the performance could easily be multiplied to I^5 , I^9 , I^{14} and so on to I^x . The sum always amounting to I, Anja Müller.

Raymond Frenken
raymond@eenentwintig.org