

This is the book I never read
These are the words I never said
This is the path I'll never tread
These are the dreams I'll dream instead

If Diana Blok had invited me to take part in this project, I would have chosen to be Annie Lennox and speak the lyrics of her eternal ballad *Why*. I just quoted a few lines. She is everything I am not. At her peak, Lennox was simply the best singer and the most beautiful woman in the world. She was powerful and she knew it. All the more touching was her clear vulnerability. In the video for this song, she looks like a young man dressing up in the clothes of an extravagant lady nightclub dancer. And in earlier clips, you might remember, no man has ever looked better in a tuxedo. Annie Lennox knows a thing or two about cross-casting.

And so does Diana Blok. This installation is such a relief. We live in times when many people choose to fortify their identity. Their national or ethnic or gender or political identity. Those in power do it out of lust for more power. Those less privileged do it out of self-defence. But the future can never be fortified. It can only be open and fluid and free to move between all that has become solid.

Diana Blok, a child of many countries, from Uruguay to the Netherlands, has described herself as 'a migrant, a nomad, a pilgrim, a citizen of the state of transition.' In her long career as a photographer, she has always invited others to join her on that journey. In the Gender Monologues that meant: transform yourself into a person you admire of another gender. Diana would then film you, in the delicate manner that has always characterized her work, and place you in the company of others who were brave enough to take this step.

It is not easy. Shifting into someone else's identity doesn't mean shedding your own. You bring what you have into what you have not. James Baldwin wrote: 'History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us.' And the actress Helen Kamperveen understood this deeply when she slipped into the great black American writer's voice and presence.

Ogutu Muraya knew immediately that he would choose Wangarĩ Muta Maathai, the Kenyan environmental political activist and Nobel laureate. From her memoirs he selected a passage about her childhood. But it took him time to be ready. He writes: 'This was a hard role to play, I wrestled with it and myself – and eventually managed to tune out my over-rehearsed masculinity and yielded to my inner femininity. Then something very special happened inside me - the male and the female dissolved into one being.'

Ogutu is a versatile, politically conscious performer and storyteller. He should have been here today. But the Dutch immigration policy is making it hard for him to travel from Kenya to Europe. A man brave enough to cross personal borders is being stopped by institutional borders that reduce him to his national identity.

Thanks to Diana Blok, he can still be here, in a way, on screen. She has brought together people from three continents – and us – allowing us to move, in the most intimate fashion, from identity to identity, from gender to gender, from memoir to dream, from love to rage, from solid to fluid.

Annie Lennox would be proud.

Chris Keulemans

Gender Monologues, Amsterdam premiere
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