



Dariusz Brzostek

**“A lily is a lily,
is a lily, is a lily...?”**

**Voice(es) of the
Body”**



Residency No. 7

BENNY NEMEROFSKY RAMSAY

16 February — 8 March, 2015

POLIN
MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY
OF POLISH JEWS



I

The body feels a desire to talk. To say something (about itself). To make its presence felt, with a gesture, a movement, an utterance. But the voice will not come. It belongs to nobody. It does not listen. It refuses to yield, a servant to no-one. It comes from a foreign land — one that is far away and has no name. It is a stranger in a strange land. In the land of the body, which it keeps visiting and leaving. The body bears features of race, age and sex. Only the voice cannot distinguish between them. It does not want to. It does not have to. It is not obedient; it does not yield, a servant to no-one ...

Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay's pieces invariably revolve around the problems of voice, sex and change — exposing them to endless transformations in the process of artistic sublimation. They create a tension between viewers' expectations and secrets that unfold (timidly and incompletely) within musical performances, sound installations, or video images. Steadily and unobtrusively, they evoke an aura of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) for the audience to be faced with cultural phantasms and their own, derived from those phantasms, ideas of body, sex, voice, manhood and boyhood, of what is natural and what is artificial (i.e. originates in art, imitation, mimicry...). In *The Return* (2010), a very simple — and all the more interesting — sound installation, the viewers find themselves listening to a street megaphone emitting the sound of a siren. It takes a moment before they realize, or as a matter of fact recognize, that the sound coming from the loudspeaker is not mechanical but human — it is the voice of a singing boy, told to imitate the nonhuman sound of a siren. Thus delivered to the listeners, the boy's voice drifts away from its bodily source, turning into an acousmatic tone, haunting the space with a faint echo of apparent presence — of a singer, a body, a person... At the same time, it continues to be the voice of a siren (or maybe Siren) which resounds in space and summons,

beguiles, carrying the listener to a most unordinary land where the natural (the voice of a body) imitates the artificial (the sound of a siren). A similar mystery is found in *The Lovers* (2014), where once again the natural is confronted with the mechanical, as well as boyhood with manhood. Here, recorded bells encounter the singing of boys and men who imitate their sound to mingle and eventually mix with them, and to finally become distant reverberation of the ringing of bells. The composition continues as it flows and develops a form that merges human bodies and mechanical devices into a sound-generating, organic entity, multiplied and carried away by the echo.

- *The Last Song* (2014) provides, on the other hand, an excellent illustration of Freudian “uncanny experience” which occurs “when repressed infantile complexes have been revived by some impression, or when the primitive beliefs we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed”. A singer is struggling with an aria without success — his voice collapses and transfigures into a ludicrous groan but only to be soon reborn as an unexpectedly (and uncannily) resounding voice of a boy coming from the man’s throat, his mouth deformed by surprise, reaching an artistic perfection unattainable to the mature singer. What would be interpreted merely as a symbolic equivalent of terror in psychoanalysis, here becomes ultimate artistic refinement — an “uncannily beautiful” experience or the experience of “uncanny beauty”, brought about by a split in the voice, the fall of an artist, the triumph of a boy over a man, in the very place “where the child ends and the adult does not yet begin, there, from the fourteenth to twenty-fourth year, man is given his time to blossom” — as Witold Gombrowicz noted down in Royaumont years ago...
- The works of Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay discussed above also touch upon, stealthily or casually — as one could put it, a much more complex problem — that of alchemical transformation of “uncanny” (voice, experience) into “beautiful”, or, as Benny told me,

“sublime”. Borrowing terms from two eminent authors of twentieth-century aesthetics — Julia Kristeva, who proposed the concept of abject, and Pierre Schaeffer, who announced the existence of acousmatic sound objects, I hereby take the liberty of introducing the idea of “sound abject” — an unwanted, uncanny corporeal sound (the sound of the body itself), uncontrolled by the self and constituting neither a subject nor an object but a sound phantasm that separates from the body and resounds worryingly. Obviously, these are not only meaningful/less hems or sighs, “sniffing” and embarrassing “rumbling” of the stomach, but also sounds produced by the body which are unexpected here and now: effeminate voices of mature men, a boy’s singing coming from the mouth of a grown-up performer, or a human voice emitted from the guts of a machine. In this respect, Nemerofsky Ramsay’s pieces present a miracle of transformation, achieving sublimation that results in unexpected beauty, even though it originates in a sound abject — an uncanny and unwanted voice.

II

In Ingmar Bergman’s late, or actually last film for the cinema, *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), a mysterious and fascinating figure appears in the climax of the drama. Miraculously rescued from a house of oppression and the power of the cruel bishop, Emilie Ekdahl’s children find themselves in a tenement house full of mysteries; it belongs to Isak Jacoby, a Jewish merchant and a friend of the family, who gives them shelter. Wandering around the empty house at night, Alexander comes across a locked room, in which Isak’s nephew Ismael is kept for his own as well as other people’s safety; the boy may be a madman, or he may be a holy person — foretelling the future and reading people’s minds. This androgynous figure of no definite age talks to Alexander in a female voice (the role is, after all, perfectly performed by Stina Ekbald), announcing terrible events as well as

a prompt and terrible death of the children's strict stepfather. The whole oneiric film sequence (including the conversation and the image of the bishop's death) is utterly uncanny because the "real" nature of Ismael is impossible to be identified — the figure is at once a teenage boy and a woman, a patient friend and an angel of vengeance, a mad solitary figure and an expert on Torah, a human and a creature out of this world (or simply Alexander's childhood fantasy). The troubling duality of this nature is signalled by the female voice coming from a body that is (apparently) neither male nor female but (perhaps) hermaphroditic... or holy.

What was without doubt unholy was the body and life of Zisl, a Jewish boy who wanted to be a girl and became infatuated with another lad. The story of this unholy love is related by the relentless narrator of the countless stories by Isaac Bashevis Singer, while its various folk versions suggest that this unholy life may have ended in a miracle. A miracle, or a transformation. Or, perhaps, a miracle of transformation. Metamorphosis of a body that was human into a flower. Metamorphosis that is such a widespread phenomenon in tradition, culture, mythology. The metamorphosis of Hyacinth. The metamorphosis of Narcissus. The metamorphosis of Zisl... This last metamorphosis is the subject matter of Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay's work *The Muranów Lily*, created especially for the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in 2015. The work focuses on search — for identity (by a Jewish boy raised up in a traditional family), for an artistic form of expression suitable for this story (which Nemerofsky Ramsay finally finds in an indirect approach, oscillating between an audio guide to the exhibition, a radio play and music caught in a net of sound installations) and, finally, of a mysterious image and a hermaphroditic flower — the "Muranów lily" which may (not) exist. In the piece, the folk story where the rabbi and the witch offer exactly the same advice unexpectedly pours into contemporariness, reaching the ears of the visitors through earphones, while

fiction unpredictably ventures into reality, making the listeners look for traces of a presence that originates in the artist's imagination in the space of an actual city. But here also the narration is accompanied by voices — so typical of all Benny's artworks — not only the voices of speakers relating the story of Zisl, but also numerous voices in the background, singers' voices — whispering, humming, quietly whispering. Voices whose apparent chaos eventually transforms into a touching and beautiful composition about the "Muranów lily", a flower lost to the world but recovered in the song.

III

I am going to relate now a different story. A stranger one and, perhaps, an older one. As similar as twins, as two drops of water running down petals of the same flower that may, and why should it not, be a lily... One of the main protagonists in Jan Potocki's famous novel *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* is a "young Israelite woman" called Rebecca — the daughter of a famous cabbalist, the "dreadful Mamun", and the sister of an equally famous researcher of the Sephirot, who raise her up to be the betrothed of "two spirits who preside over the constellation of the Gemini". These ethereal semi-gods beguile the woman, appearing to her only partially in mirror reflections, changing shape and filling her ears with singing voices which are "so perfectly in tune and so harmonious an ensemble that no earthly music could compare with their". What unearthly bodies can produce a voice so harmonious and pleasing? When finally the spirits "presiding over the constellation of the Gemini" decide to reveal their corporeal nature to Rebecca, her eyes are amazed to see this: "I saw two young men who were slightly taller than human beings. Their shoulders were a little broader and were rounded in the way women's shoulder are. Their torso was also feminine in form but they did not have breasts." Where, next to

voices and hermaphroditic boys' bodies, is here the flower of the mystery of sex? It is here as well. In the bunch of wild flowers, given during an act of sensual initiation, secretly watched, to his beloved by a young mulatto, in whom Rebecca recognizes the bodies of the two spirits. The girl who was given them "took bunches of flowers in her hands and pressed them to her breast"...

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Sources

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**The activity “Open Museum — Education in Action” is carried out within the project
“Jewish Cultural Heritage,” component “Faces of Diversity.”**

Supported from the Norway and EEA Grants by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway.



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