

Over the course of a career spanning more than two decades, Montreal-born artist Benny Nemer has been engaging with different aspects of queer identity through an artistic approach that is decidedly tender, open and gentle. His material includes references from pop culture, art history, queer archives, postcards and flowers, while his media have shifted over the years from video to epistolary work, performance, audio guides and, more recently, floral arrangements. In 2021, the artist changed his name from Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay, as a tribute to his grandmother Rosalie. The following interview is the result of an email exchange last summer, while the artist was travelling across Europe and North America.

BENNY

NEMER

TALKS TO KIRIAKOS SPIROU





KIRIAKOS SPIROU: Maybe we can start with a few things about your background, your interests, where you're currently based?

BENNY NEMER: Sometimes I find that what for many people are simple questions are for me the most difficult to answer. My background, for example: I wonder where and when that begins? Recently, I have been feeling that some of my earliest childhood impressions—the hours spent in my grandmother's pottery studio, the sustained presence of classical music in my family home, my first ineffable attraction to flowers—are resurfacing and guiding my current art practice and the way I encounter the world. Not just childhood, but also formative moments from the 1990s, when I came out and started to seek a place for myself in the world, when lexicons of gay activism, pop music, clothing and early sexual experimentation served as signposts towards whatever future I am now living. Something has stirred up the dust of these histories and relationships lately; I find myself navigating a dense mist of images and affects from the past, making it hard to figure out what qualifies as background or foreground.

What I am able to answer with some confidence is that I am based in Paris.

KS: I think what I find so appealing in your early music videos like *I am a boyband* (2002) is how you reuse and reimagine existing material. I'm fascinated by this re-voicing if you like, which, as you said, happened before the time of YouTube and the post-modern maelstrom of recycled cultural fragments we find ourselves in today. In that sense, I feel there's something important in voicing these songs yourself instead of lip-syncing to them. What are your thoughts on this?

BN: I often think of my voice as the site of my first psychic wound. The way I spoke was one of the first signs of gender nonconformity that was problematised and actively ridiculed by people I interacted with. I developed a complex relationship to my voice at an early age: it is where queerness first appeared, long before any clearly defined sexual impulses. Complex because while my spoken voice was full of effeminate affectations that made me a target for homophobia and misogyny, my singing voice was praised as being angelic and refined. I sang in choirs from childhood through to early adulthood, which offered me many opportunities to explore and enjoy vocal production. But in my non-choral life, I made gradual modifications to my speaking voice, trying to masculinise it, to monotonise it. So, the use of my voice as artistic material isn't a random choice, it is very much about confronting and reimaging its potential.

My intellectual concerns were superseded by personal and emotional concerns when creating these early videos and, while I wished to engage critically with popular culture, expressions of masculinity, language and translation, many of my choices were propelled by decidedly personal feelings. It was clear to me that I wished to insert myself—my body, my voice—into the media forms my videos mimicked as a way of responding and contributing to contemporary cultural dialogue. But I also felt strongly that I was using these forms as autobiographical tools. I was especially aware of this when making my 2002 video *Live to Tell*, in which I sing a 16-part choral rendition of a Madonna ballad. I was living through a heartbreak and had just run away from Canada to live in Berlin. One night, I heard this 80s song from my adolescence played at a house party. Listening to the lyrics again as an adult, I found affects from my current situation reflected in uncanny ways, and it became clear that I needed to voice this song myself, to transform it into my own song, to sing the mythopoesis of my life with its words.

KS: Growing up as a very feminine boy myself has taught me all too well the impact my voice had in my social surroundings. I guess this is why I'm so moved by the fact that you choose to sing and narrate in your own work. If I'm not mistaken, you've collaborated with other vocalists as well, like men's choirs, in some of your works. Maybe you have something more to add on this aspect of your work?

BN: My voice still sometimes appears in my current work, especially as a narrator, but it is true that other voices have appeared throughout my sound and video work over the last decade. This initially began because I had ideas for vocal events I was not able to produce myself. I worked with a 12-year-old boy soprano from the Vienna Boys' Choir to reproduce the call of an air raid siren for *The Return* (2010); and with a group of professional tenors, baritones and choirboys to sing like church bells in *The Lovers* (2014). The mature voice of a baritone magically transforms into the fragile voice of a boy soprano midway through singing a Vivaldi aria in *The Last Song* (2015). All these projects were motivated by what might be called "vocal fantasies" that I was unable to sing with my own voice, that required more trained, accomplished voices, or voices with a higher or lower range than my own. But I also began to lose interest in myself as a performer, even if my projects remained quite personal in their motivations. I wanted to produce works that were less directly self-referential; I sought to diversify the vocal signatures of my work and to create kinship bonds with other singers, other voices. I suppose it was the beginning





of a greater change of artistic priorities towards co-authorship and community.

KS: Your mention of narration brings me to your audio guide work, which indeed includes instructions and texts. I would love to know more about how you began working with this medium and how it has evolved as part of your practice.

BN: I had the opportunity to create a narrated piece for the audio guide of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna in 2013. I was doing a residency at the MuseumsQuartier, and became unexpectedly enamoured of a series of 16th-century tapestry cartons on the third floor of the museum: an incredible scene of battle and empire spread across ten giant canvases, each one filled with bodies enacting a thousand gestures of war. The beauty of the male form was emphasised throughout and my homosexual gaze was enchanted by the erotics of much of the imagery. I kept returning to the museum during my sojourn to spend time with the cartons—something I rarely do with a single artwork—and through this sustained, deep spectatorship felt compelled to respond artistically in some way.

Then, at the Félix González-Torres retrospective at the Fondation Beyeler in Basel, I had one of those magical chance encounters that sometimes open themselves up to gay men: a glance, a message, a conversation, a drink, a professional introduction; and an artistic opportunity at the museum emerged. The result is *Mille Regretz* (2013), my first piece for a museum audio guide, in which I narrate a tour of the cartons, posing critical questions about representations of war and colonial power, introducing musical forms as well as a song, drawing the spectator's attention to a detail of a tender moment between two archers, embracing after one has been struck down by an arrow.

Audio guides are at once didactic and intimate; they direct the gaze, the movements of the body, the quality of feelings. They take a secondary, accompanying role to a primary artwork, a kind of companion to spectatorship of something else. I shifted my media art practice towards the exploration of the museum audio guide and created a piece for the POLIN Museum of Jewish Polish History in Warsaw (*The Muranów Lily*, 2015), and a suite of encounters for the audio guide of Thielska Galleriet in Stockholm. With each new project, my questions about the media form proliferated and I eventually undertook a practice-led PhD at the University of Edinburgh, which, among other things, involved a critical re-imagining of the museum audio guide as a unique medium for artistic intervention.

KS: I've always been fascinated by audio guides. It's such an intimate medium because the listener becomes an audience of one in a way. It creates a space for you only. There's also an element of action and participation, in the sense that a guide will instruct the listener to move in certain ways or look at certain things. The experience is completed by the listener's response to what they're listening to. Your audio guide *Trees are Fags* has many of these characteristics.

BN: I think the style I have developed for these works really comes through critical engagement specifically with the unique particularities of the museum audio guide that you mention: an at once didactic and intimate voice addressing a single listener directly in their ear; a script that instructs where the listener is to look, how they move, how they should interpret and process information. While, on one hand, I have used the museum audio guide as a medium through which to emphasise certain affects, relations and critical questions that have always propelled my artistic practice; my sustained investigation of the media form led to a desire to dismantle the hegemonic readings of history and normative modes of spectatorship that museum audio guides usually facilitate. So many of my aesthetic choices are made at the service of these goals: re-imagining the top-down transmission of historical information by inviting listeners to activate their senses, their memories, their past experiences of spectatorship; creating situations in which listeners can make their own choices, thus allowing for individual meaning-making; challenging the subject-object relation of spectator-artwork.

I don't know if you are aware, but the choreographic cues you heard in *Trees Are Fags* are programmed to shuffle, so each listener hears a different sequence of instructions as to how they should move through space. As you know, the piece is meant to be listened to in the presence of trees and invokes the history and affects of gay sex cruising in order to mediate an amorous encounter with a tree. Creating a shuffling, non-definitive way of following an audio guide is one of the ways I seek to destabilise and diversify the authoritative, determining voice of the museum experience. I experimented further with this non-definitive approach to guiding with *I Don't Know Where Paradise Is* (2020), which takes listeners on a tour of the private libraries of a number of elder gay scholars in Montreal, Paris, Amsterdam and London. The piece has 25 chapters, but each time someone listens, they hear only seven, selected randomly, tracing a different path through the archive of objects found in the libraries.

KS: I think this also connects with something you said during your discussion with Renae Shadler in the second episode of her Worlding Podcast: you were talking about the way you extend subjectivity to the object that is being described, how you are trying to destabilise the subject-object relationship that is usually emphasised in a museum. Would you like to share your thoughts on this relationship between the exhibited object and the viewer?

BN: I produced a video in 2010 entitled *The Legacy*, which features a group of my friends cruising Berlin's Grunewald forest, lipsyncing texts on queer spiritual themes to each other. While researching the material for this video, a friend gave me a copy of an amateur audio recording made at the second Radical Faerie Gathering in Colorado in 1980. Harry Hay, one of the founders of the Faeries, is heard speaking about what he calls "subject-subjectivity". His discourse is specifically concerned with the unique role gay men can play in society, positing that our liberated position outside the patriarchal male-female paradigm allows us to break free from subject-object relating. This theory—which I suppose queers ideas that were already in circulation by Martin Buber and phenomenologists—was provocative and revelatory for me, and I quickly adopted it as an ideal to bring to my relations with all things, especially to my artistic practice. Since *The Legacy*, I have actively made work in a diversity of media that attempts to use this queer intersubjectivity aesthetically and methodologically, creating conditions for spectators and listeners to engage in subject-subject relating. These extensions of subjectivity fuel my work with audio guides, but also other aspects of my artistic practice, especially my work with figures from gay history. I have produced a number of works that seek to "touch" queer individuals, practices and ideas across time; to make contact and build transhistorical relationships. This impulse is especially active in my current research into the postcard collection of French author and photographer Hervé Guibert, who died of AIDS in 1991, the year of my coming-out. I have been designing a series of participatory epistolary actions involving my friends that seeks to imagine and recirculate affects from Guibert's life, times and kinship bonds in a way that treats materials from his archive as having agency, as having its own subjectivity. I also do a lot of work with flowers, often concerned with the way flowers are instrumentalised by humans as a kind of relation material, using floral gifts to express feelings or to activate our own sensory pleasures. I am increasingly creating artworks that prioritise the feelings, agency and subjective position of flowers themselves, either through experimental floral arranging or floral gestures involving dancers who tune into and respond to botanical materials.

The Berlin-based choreographer Przemek Kamiński recently commissioned me to create a work for his *Scores for Pleasure* project, for which I produced an audio work entitled *How to Behold a Flower*. The piece leads the listener through a series of actions that seek to facilitate this kind of subject-subject relation with a flower, changing the forms and intentions of the human-flower gaze. Maybe by the time this interview is published, the *Scores for Pleasure* website will have launched. I would love for you to experience it.

KS: I never thought of what a flower might feel or think by itself. Perhaps, on that note, you could tell us more about your relationship with flowers in general and how they have become part of your work in recent years.

BN: Questions about the subjective position of flowers have appeared in a number of works I have produced over the past few years. I have been particularly interested in the roles flowers play as agents of and witnesses to human history, an idea that recurs in a number of narrated audio works, one that is core to the argument made by *Trees Are Fags*. And, as you pointed out, many of my floral works are concerned with gestures of floral gift giving, including floral exchange parties as well as actions in which bouquets or boutonnières are offered to gallery visitors or lecture audiences. These projects engage the ways flowers are instrumentalised by humans as tools of relation and communication, delighting in the emotional and sensorial power of flowers rather than entering into some kind of critique.

But, as time goes by, I find myself engaging with flowers in a more personal way, working with them alone in my studio, composing arrangements and herbaria that I initially did not think of as artworks for public display. These arrangements first emerged while I was writing my PhD dissertation, an activity that required me to render in language every artistic choice I was making, backing everything up with theory. I often needed a break from these academic demands and would leave my writing desk, go to the garden, pick a few flowers or branches or leaves and play with them in the living room. And, while my artistic engagement with flowers continues to deepen, gradually moving from the margins to the very centre of my practice, I remain unable to adequately articulate what it is about relating to flowers that I find so important; so vital and nourishing. I sense it is important to preserve this ineffability, to dwell in a kind of "critical not-knowingness" in relation to flowers, to borrow a phrase from Trinh T. Minh-ha. All I know is that flowers help me to feel, and I sense that my artistic work with flowers helps others to feel, too.