

***A Tin Plate, A Boy***  
*(for Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay)*

“Language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body, stamping it and violently shaping it.” - Monique Wittig, “The Mark of Gender” (1985)

“The exceptional richness of the vocabulary indicating the male homosexual deserves at least to be mentioned: queer, fag, fairy, queen, etc., as if language were exhausting itself trying to define, to name the unnameable.”  
- Guy Hocquenghem, “Homosexual Desire” (1972)

“Could language injure us if we were not, in some sense, linguistic beings, beings who require language in order to be?”  
- Judith Butler, “Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative” (1997)

## **Scene 1.**

### **A tin plate**

We're in a basement.

Black cords are running all over the floor. There's a shelf on the wall and three tables scattered across the room with spray cans and microphones on them.

He's turned away from the audience, crouching over what seems to be a workbench.

He's got long brown hair folded behind his ears and he's wearing a navy blue t-shirt, a white jean jacket, skinny black jeans and sneakers.

The soundscape he creates is eerie. A loop based piece in several layers.

A low grumbling bass sound with frequent metal scrapings on top, occasional flickerings of a synthesizer, bursts of distortion and a high octave oscillator descending and ascending in pitch until it suddenly is being thrown away and redoubled.

At one point you can hear what seems to be the howling of a human voice.

There's a tin plate to the left.

It looks like it's hanging from a mic stand. It's been buckled several times by force and the buckles are concentrated to the centre of the plate.

Later on in the video we see a hammer lying on the floor.

## Scene 2.

### A boy

In Canadian artist Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay's piece "The Return" from 2010 one encounters a boy in the form of a siren and a siren in the form of a boy.

There's a specific kind of gender dissonance, or one might perhaps say, queer noise, at work in this piece: namely the contrast between boyish serenity and the noisiness of a siren.

The very purpose of a siren is to be noticed, to produce a noise that attracts attention, to create sound that cut through the trite soundscape of everyday life.

There are several ways through which an air raid siren attempts to attract attention through noise: through volume, through the range of pitch shifts, through recurrence.

What does the boy-siren warn us about?

The subject position of the "Boy" constitutes a contingent site between subordinate femininity and hegemonic masculinity and is marked by lack (not feminine enough to be regarded as a girl, not masculine enough to be regarded as a man). Yet, as an embodiment of a violent interpellation, a harbinger of gendered violence and as an heir of the Father's name, the "Boy" promises the preservation of a phallogentric future.

A phrase like "...the gendered violence that boys are exposed to..." aims to make visible how there's a specific form of violence aimed at "boys". Yet what this phrase fails to see is how that very phrase, by positing "the Boy" as prediscursively existing, reproduces the very violence it claims to problematize. Not only are "boys" exposed to a specific kind of violence, as boys, but also the very naming of a child *as* a "boy" is part of the very same machinery of that gender specific violence. As feminist and queer theory have shown us calling a child a "boy" is not an objective or neutral description. On the contrary, it is an ideological utterance, a *prescriptive* speech act, that performatively constructs the very subject it claims to describe in a mere objective or neutral way.

It exposes how the human is a linguistic being, how language acts as a form of (gendered) violence and how the "Boy" is a linguistic subject position of vulnerability.

### **Scene 3.**

## **A tin plate, a boy**

So, what does a piece of old tin plate used by american noise artist Nate Young and a choir boy's vocal interpretation of an air-raid siren have in common?

They are both storytellers of harboured violence of masculinity. And they warn us, in two different ways, about the violence they both are materialized effects and bodily manifestations of.

It seems to me, that the "Boy" in Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay's queer noise piece becomes a siren by singing the violence of masculinity. He acts as both receiver and harbourer of the gendered violence acted upon the bodies of children and mirrors it back to where it came from, transforming it into a warning of something's gone awry.

Nate Young, in turn, act as a boy who sublimates this violence by turning it into noise that aims to attract attention, much the same way as the boy-siren does. The local form of peripheral masculinity within the noise scene that Young performs is mirrored, literally etched onto, the tin plate he uses to produce his noise. His tin plate is a testimony of the history of gendered violence and its material effects on bodies conforming (or not conforming) to the norms of cultural intelligibility.

But while the Boy-siren transforms himself into the anvil, Young transforms himself into the hammer.

The siren starts to sing/warn us:

"It's just a tin plate!"

Every blow of the hammer insists:

"No, it's a boy!"