

# Benny Dean Conditions

Rob Kulisek

Variation II

15 November – 20 December 2025

In the prologue to Hermann Hesse's *Demian* (1919), a coming-of-age story of transformation, the protagonist Sinclair warns: "I was one who seeks, and I still am, but I no longer seek in the stars or in books; I'm beginning to hear the teachings of my blood pulsing within me. My story isn't pleasant, it's not sweet and harmonious like the invented stories; it tastes of folly and bewilderment, of madness and dream, like the life of all people who no longer want to lie to themselves." For the young Sinclair, aided by his childhood friend Demian, self-realisation is only achieved by faithfully following the path of destruction, reemerging phoenix-like, but with some scar tissue in lieu of a trophy. Personal daemons potentially quelled, but always still in tow.

As far as intoxicated (de)structurings go, Rob Kulisek's *12 Variations* is a composite half-fictional film portrait bursting with dissolving distinctions. Part classic documentary, part confessional, part nocturnal reverie, all and none of the above, it follows Paul-Alexandre Islas, an artist and burgeoning musician, as his own internal struggles seamlessly merge with the Parisian underworld and bleed into that of classical music and its prodigies. Is madness a prerequisite to becoming a musical virtuoso? Must the demonic energy of the composition also pulse through the artist's veins, in danger of overspilling, for the score to be mastered? Like Icarus, flying too close to perfection can lead to a sudden and painful descent to reality. Like the addict, the pianist dwells in a microcosm that demands commitment, desire, sacrifice. To possess requires opening oneself up to possession.

Call it coincidence, call it fate, Rob once inherited and inhabited Paul-Alexandre's old bedroom. In a certain way then, *12 Variations* could be seen as an enduring testament to the subliminal transmission of a shared energy, flinging itself between destruction and creation, flowing from one artist to the other within the confines of a few square metres somewhere up on the 14th floor of a high-rise in the north of the city. In the film, piano keys are struck repeatedly, chords overlaid, stop and start; they mimic the flow of night to day and day to night as the footage accumulates and as the story unfolds. Cut to flashback. A temporality all of its own. For the philosopher and literary critic Avital Ronell, culture's own addictions must also surely be mapped. "*Discipline and addiction. Practice your scales. Repetitions. Bach on coffee. Berlioz on hallucinogens (but also on coffee and cigars): The Witches' Sabbath, a concoction of Faust and the opium dreams that Berlioz read in De Quincey's Confessions of an English Opium Eater. Mussorgsky's wine, Stravinsky's cigarettes.*" Whether yesterday or today, observing the pain of others almost always comes served with a side dish of *romantisme noir*.

—Anya Harrison

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Video, sound, 6' 42"

**ROB KULISEK** is an artist and photographer based in New York. Capturing the high frequencies of bodies and interferences within group dynamics, his style is profoundly vibrant and contemplative. Whether in the form of exhibitions, collaborative works, experimental magazines, music labels, or installations, he plays with rigid categories to espouse soft, flexible forms. Part of a generation of artists questioning porosities between art photography and fashion photography—and shifting their commercial and aesthetic stakes—his pictures are nurtured by subcultures that emerged mostly in the 90's and the 00's in the indie-fashion photographic field.