ON BOREDOM

Essays in art and writing

Edited by Rye Dag Holmboe & Susan Morris

UCLPRESS

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Martin Creed was awarded the Turner Prize in 2001 for *Work 227: The lights going on and off*, and has become known for hugely varied work which is by turns uncompromising, entertaining, shocking and beautiful.

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Tom McCarthy is a novelist whose work has been translated into more than 20 languages. His first novel, *Remainder*, won the 2008 Believer Book Award and has been adapted for cinema, theatre and radio. His

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Susan Morris is an artist interested in the relation between writing, drawing and photography. Her work explores forms of automatic mark making in various media including chalk on paper, inkjet printing and Jacquard tapestry. Works are often generated from direct recordings of data such as her sleep/wake patterns (using a scientific device called an Actiwatch) or her unconscious bodily movements as recorded in a motion capture studio. She has published writing on her own work and that of others, including the essay 'Drawing in the dark' for *Tate Papers* in 2012. In 2019 she curated *A Day's Work*, a large group show at SKK in Soest, Germany. Her work is in a number of museum and private collections. She is represented by Bartha Contemporary, London.

Michael Newman is Professor of Art Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London. He holds degrees in English literature and art history, and a PhD in philosophy from the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium. He has published numerous essays on modern and contemporary artists, as well as thematic essays on the wound, the horizon, contingency, memory, drawing, nonsense and perversion. His most recent essays are 'Sensation and the measure of timbre: Florian Hecker's *Resynthese* FAVN revisiting Mallarmé's scene' in *Florian Hecker: Halluzination, Perspektive, Synthese* (2019) and 'Decapitations: the portrait, the anti-portrait … and what comes after?' in Kirstie Imber and Fiona Johnstone (eds), *Anti-Portraiture: Challenging the limits of the portrait* (forthcoming). He is the author of *Richard Prince Untitled (couple)* (2006), *Jeff Wall: Works and writings* (2007), *Price, Seth* (2010) and 'Stuart Brisley: performing the political body and eating shit' in *Stuart Brisley* (2015). He is co-editor of *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (1999) and *The State of Art Criticism* (2007). The exhibitions he has curated include works by Tacita Dean at York University, Toronto, and (with Robin Klassnik) *Revolver2* at Matt's Gallery, London. In 2021 Newman's curated exhibition *Figure/s: Drawing after Bellmer* will open at the Drawing Room, London.

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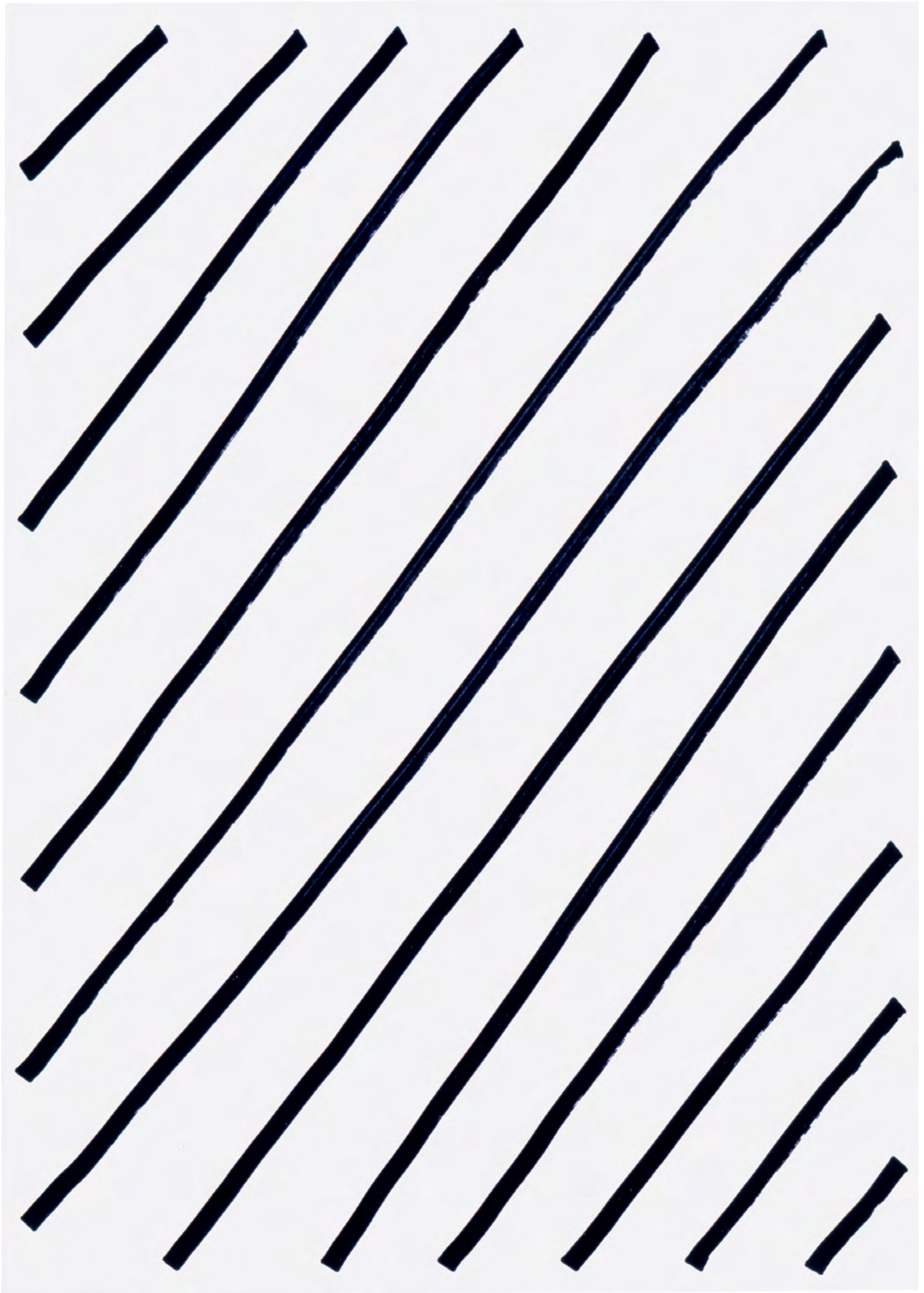

Introduction: on boredom

Rye Dag Holmboe and Susan Morris

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines boredom, tautologically, as 'the state of being bored', and provides us with two synonyms, perhaps by way of compensation: 'tedium' and 'ennui'. The entry states that the first uses of the word 'boredom' in literature are found in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852–3). The aptly named Lady Dedlock suffers from the 'chronic malady of boredom' because she is stuck in a marriage of convenience. Meanwhile, another character called Volumnia is described as someone 'who cannot long continue silent without imminent peril of seizure by the dragon Boredom, [and who] soon indicates the approach of that monster with a series of undisguisable yawns'. Boredom, for the Dickens of *Bleak House* at least, seems to be a female malady, one that is by turn chronic, monstrous and spasmodic, a deadly sickness. Lady Dedlock was 'bored to death', he writes.[1]

That the *OED*'s lexicographers could find no better way of describing boredom than by resorting to tautology shows just how difficult the condition is to define. The word names the experience of a kind of deadlock, one that can be so obdurate and self-referential that the best way of accounting for it may be in its own terms: boredom means being bored. Failing this, one might resort to the use of synonyms – 'tedium', 'ennui', but also 'monotony', 'dullness', 'dreariness', 'weariness', 'inertia', 'apathy' and so on – knowing that none of these words means the same thing. The attempt to define boredom precisely may be a hopeless task. Yet it is at least arguable that this resistance to definition, and indeed this hopelessness, resonate in some ways with the experience of boredom, and so provide a true enough description of it. We are bored when we lose interest. The world then feels unavailable or withdrawn, refuses to mean anything other than itself, and appears to prevent us from relating to it in a creative or meaningful way. Described in this manner, boredom starts to sound like depression, even melancholia, though the condition is probably more mundane than either.

Much has changed since Dickens used the word, and it is often held that boredom, understood as a by-product of industrial capitalism, describes a structure of feeling that characterised Britain and Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, not what is now variously called postmodernity, late capitalism or the contemporary. Flaubert was bored, Emma Bovary was bored, Manet's Olympia was bored, Lady Dedlock was bored, Volumnia was bored, the bourgeoisie was bored, Heidegger, Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer were bored, Nietzsche even thought that, after the seventh day of creation, God was bored, but we today are not bored. We are distracted, unable to maintain our attention for any considerable length of time, and this, it is claimed, prevents us from developing genuine and profound interests and from experiencing life authentically. This attention deficit, itself one of the most prevalent diagnoses in mental health today, especially of children, may also make us vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation. Our perception of the world is so fragmented and overloaded by new technologies that we risk losing our critical faculties altogether, even, according to one critic, our capacity for sleep.[2] Meanwhile, hundreds of books are published each year that show us how to focus our minds, how to respond with greater ease to the proliferation of information in what has been called 'the age of distraction'.[3] The implication is that the 'age of boredom',[4] as Flaubert described it, has now passed. The principal culprits are thought to be the culture industries and, more recently, the internet, together with the digital technologies that allow us to access it. Under such conditions, it would seem that the time needed to be bored is no longer available. We may now even feel nostalgic for those times in our lives when we were bored: in childhood, say, when time seemed to slow down, sometimes painfully so. The danger in this form of retrospection, of course, is that boredom is idealised or romanticised. 'Boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience,' wrote Walter Benjamin. 'A rustling in the leaves drives him away.'[5] Boredom may at times be a dream bird, the ground of creativity, and so quite unlike Dickens's dragon or monster. Yet it should not be forgotten that, if the rustle of leaves distracts us from what may be the deeper and more fundamental experience of boredom, and if distraction, once a remedy or palliative, has since become its own sickness, then boredom nonetheless remains an experience that we spend much of our lives trying to avoid, and for good reason. Being bored is a little like being dead – in a minor key. 'Concert, assembly, opera, theatre, drive, nothing is new to my Lady under the worn-out heavens,'[6] writes Dickens of Lady Dedlock.

On Boredom addresses boredom in its manifold and uncertain reality, and asks what might be at stake in thinking about the affect today. One of the basic questions the writing and art included in this volume pose is whether there is a creative or critical potential to boredom or whether it is in fact as deadening an experience as it is often held to be. 'All boredom is counter revolutionary,'[7] cried the Situationists in the 1960s. Perhaps that is so. But perpetual revolution can itself become boring, permanent change can feel like sameness, and what is striking is how boredom, itself an ordinary, everyday experience, can become the site of some of our most extreme fantasies and projections: of revolution, counter-revolution, sickness, deadness, creativity, dream birds, dragons and monsters. Why might this be so? Is boredom really such a Pandora's box? Or do these fantasies betray just how anxious we are at the possibility of confronting our own boredom, with the risk that we might encounter a meaningless kernel at the very heart of what we call life?

Answers to these questions – and there are of course many others – have come from a range of different perspectives. Material from artists, art historians, philosophers, literary theorists, psychoanalysts, writers and a novelist has been collected together to form a book that responds, both in its content and in its form, to the complexities and texture of the affect called boredom. The hope is that the combination of scholarship and artistic practice, of image and text, is adequate to an experience that is particularly difficult to put into words. The three visual artists whose work is included in the book, Martin Creed, Mathew Hale and Susan Morris, all engage in different ways with forms of attention and inattention. Creed's work examines questions related to seriality, repetition and monotony, and his doodles or scribbles that punctuate this volume are the kind you might make when bored. The addition of repetitive lyrics adds to this effect. Hale's contribution aspires to be a kind of autobiographical artwork, which mimics, parodically, interactive processes between humans and early computers. Meanwhile, Morris's work, which also provides this book with its cover, conjures up a subject, her 'self', caught up in a technological web and subject to clichéd expressions, automatic gestures and repetitive behaviour. The work of each artist makes visible, in a compressed and visual form, some of the book's key concerns, and we regard each contribution as a standalone work in its own right. *On Boredom* also includes an extract from Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island* (2015), a novel that takes boredom as one of its subjects. Among the reasons why U, the novel's protagonist, succumbs to the 'mental disorder' that leads to his manic attempts at composing a

'Great Report' or 'anthropology of the Contemporary', a task replicated in the writing of the novel itself, is to escape from the experience of boredom.[8] The inclusion of this extract allows fiction to enter into productive dialogue with other forms of writing.

The other essays included in *On Boredom* take what may be in some respects a more familiar and academic approach. They address the problem of boredom in philosophy, psychoanalysis, art history and literature. Rye Dag Holmboe takes as his starting point the letters of Gustave Flaubert. His opening essay, 'Where is the rule?', tries to make sense of the plural and unruly nature of boredom as it is expressed in the novelist's correspondence and argues for its survival in different forms of contemporary art. Anouchka Grose asks whether boredom is a precondition of a psychoanalyst's work in the consulting room, the analyst's 'tragedy'; being professional might also mean being boring. Does one have to make oneself affectless and dull in order to open up space for the other person to speak?, she asks. Briony Fer examines visual representations of yawning, noting how photographic reproductions of yawning mouths also open up holes in the pages they are (barely) contained in. Yawns, Fer suggests, often escape representation, but when they are recorded in photographs or other media, they reveal the gaps and metonymic slippages that underlie representation itself.

Margaret Iversen and Josh Cohen both examine boredom as it relates to particular artists: Iversen's essay considers the uses of emptiness and silence in the work of Thomas Demand, in particular his *Dailies*, begun in 2008, a series that deals with the 'ubiquitous, banal, everyday practice of taking photographs with one's smartphone'; Cohen examines Andy Warhol's self-positioning as a permanently bored subject – his 'blank indifference', he suggests, may operate as a form of self-defence. Meanwhile, Susan Morris widens and moves beyond the discussion of her own work in order to consider the relation of boredom to digital technologies, arguing that, while ostensibly opening up ever more channels of communication between people, these technologies actually reduce the encounter with others or indeed with otherness as such. She argues for ways in which artists can create space in the fractures, blanks and discontinuities within a text: in writing's undercurrent, or in what the poet Claudia Rankine terms the 'underneathness' of language, where it is possible, as Rankine suggests, to stage silence.[9] A philosophically grounded exploration of boredom is further developed in Michael Newman's essay, which addresses the time of boredom. Newman considers examples of long-form artworks, such as John Cale's 18-hour performance of Eric Satie's *Vexations* (1893–4)

in 1963 and Andy Warhol's film *Empire* (1964), which deliberately provoke boredom as a way of commenting on, or objecting to, the measurement and commodification of time. Could art have any role in the production of different temporal relations, associated, say, with a wasting of time? And if it is true that today 'distraction covers the entire social and existential field', why, asks Newman, is this not a period of 'great boredom'?

The focus of these essays falls on cultural traditions from Western Europe and North America. The aim was not to produce an exhaustive or comprehensive overview of the subject – a Great Report on boredom, say – but to extend some of the previous research on boredom in interesting and unexpected ways. The essays explore and expand upon a rich vein of European and American writing on the subject, which stands in need of re-evaluation. The focus is in this way restricted but broadened by an innovative and interdisciplinary approach. The reader will also note that psychoanalysis often figures in the pages that follow. This is partly because the writers, artists and academics invited to contribute to the volume share an interest in the discipline and were brought together for that reason. It is also because psychoanalysts have provided us with some of the most insightful and memorable theoretical accounts of boredom: Sándor Ferenczi, Otto Fenichel and, more recently, Adam Phillips, whose striking description of boredom as 'that most absurd and paradoxical wish, the wish for a desire' resonates with much of the material examined in this book, if often only tangentially. In 'On Being Bored' (1994), Phillips describes 'ordinary states of boredom' as being 'both waiting for something and looking for something'. In this sense, he adds, 'boredom is akin to free-floating attention', like that required of the psychoanalyst. He then gives the example of a 'desolate child' for whom 'greed was a form of self-cure for a malign boredom *that continually placed him on the threshold of an emptiness*, a lack, that he couldn't bear; an emptiness in which his own idiosyncratic, unconscious desire lurked'. For Phillips, however, the desire for nothing – the desire that one might have nothing to desire – could also be triggered by another kind of demand. 'It is one of the most oppressive demands of adults that the child should be interested,' he writes.[10] Boredom might then be seen as a form of protest; boredom as a refusal of desire, or as a desire for nothing.

Such, then, are some of the ambivalences and complexities inherent to the experience of boredom. It is hoped that, rather than resolving these problems, the essays in art and writing encountered in *On Boredom* will help to deepen and extend them in creative and productive ways.

A final note. Though this book was edited before the outbreak of Covid-19, we feel that the contributions to this volume find a renewed sense of urgency today. Perhaps at no other time in human history have such great numbers of people been forced to confront their own boredom, living in isolation from each other and needing to find ways of distracting themselves from a condition that can at times be stifling and claustrophobic. Yet these times have also shown, more hopefully, that boredom can be the source of creativity. The book's cover image, by Susan Morris, speaks to this potential. It's a still from a film made over a 24-hour period in May 2020, during what is now referred to as the 'first' lockdown. Initially part of an 'Instagram takeover' commissioned by Kunsthaus Centre d'art Pasquart, Switzerland, the film is made up of 24 one-minute video sequences shot on an iPhone.

Notes

1 Dickens, *Bleak House*, chs 28, 58, 2.
2 See Crary, *24/7*.
3 See, for example, Hassan, *The Age of Distraction*.
4 Flaubert, letter to his mother, 14 November 1850, https://flaubert.univ-rouen.fr/correspondance. Translation by Rye Dag Holmboe.
5 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 81.
6 Dickens, *Bleak House*, ch. 12.
7 Debord, cited in Merrifield, *Metromarxism*, 107.
8 McCarthy, *Satin Island*.
9 Flescher and Caspar, 'Interview with Claudia Rankine'.
10 Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored*, 69.

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1

Where is the rule?

Rye Dag Holmboe

'Isn't "not to be bored" one of the principal goals of life?'[1] This was one of the questions Gustave Flaubert asked himself while travelling around the Orient with Maxime Du Camp between 1848 and 1851. The journey filled the novelist with a degree of anxiety, torn as he was between Orientalist visions of splendour and a fear that reality would be a little more boring than his imaginings – and so much of Flaubert's writing seems to exist within that gap.

His fears appear to have been well founded. After an initial thrill, Flaubert soon slipped into a kind of languid torpor. As Du Camp writes in his memoirs, 'If it had been possible, Flaubert would have travelled on a divan, lying down, without moving, watching the landscapes, the ruins and the cities passing in front of his eyes like the canvas unrolling in a panorama-machine.'[2] Flaubert here comes to resemble a kind of odalisque at the cinema, albeit of a primitive sort, and closer to Manet's Olympia than he is to Ingres's.

Indeed, the banality of the journey seemed to highlight, for Flaubert, something like the loss of the sacred. In one of the most amusing moments in his letters (to my mind his correspondence is often very funny; he's a militant misanthropist), this one addressed to his uncle, Flaubert describes how in Alexandria, a certain Thompson, from Sunderland, had written his name and the name of his hometown in letters three feet tall down the side of Pompeii's column. The words 'Thompson from Sunderland' could be read at such a great distance that it was impossible to see the column without seeing the name Thompson and thinking of Thompson. 'The cretin has incorporated himself into the monument and perpetuates himself with it,' writes Flaubert. 'He has crushed it with the splendour of his letters. All imbeciles are more or less Thompson from Sunderland.'[3]

Ennui – I will keep the French to maintain the distinction for now – has become a byword for the experience of capitalist modernity, a word almost synonymous with the alienation and anomie putatively experienced by the much-derided bourgeoisie. Flaubert himself used, and perhaps coined, the expression 'the age of ennui'[4] to describe the tentacular quality of this affect. Most of his protagonists are, in one way or another, immersed in, or absorbed by, ennui. But in his letters, the meaning of the word ennui, variants of which are used more than 100 times, is both elastic and capacious. Ennui, as he puts it in one letter, knows no measure. It is unruly, '*démésuré*',[5] a great leveller indifferent to its object – to time or to place – so that Flaubert carries it with him everywhere he goes: school, Rouen, Paris, the Nile. Ennui devours everything that it meets, and it is interesting that Flaubert links the experience to orality, which makes sense: we eat when we are bored, we fill a hole, but we can also be eaten up by boredom.

The first time Flaubert used the word ennui was in a letter written to his friend Ernest Chevalier. The letter is dated 26 December 1838, Boxing Day. Flaubert was 17. Chevalier was a schoolfriend of Flaubert's whom the novelist would later deride for getting married and for becoming an archetypal bourgeois. In the 1838 letter, the adolescent Flaubert writes that his heart is inexplicably filled with ennui. Elsewhere he describes Rouen, the city where he lives, as a place drowning in shit where the good citizens 'wank themselves silly on a Sunday from *ennui*'.[6] For Flaubert, it would seem, ennui, leisure and masturbation go hand in hand. The psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi had an expression for this tendency, which, in a paper of the same name published in 1919, he called the 'Sunday neuroses'.[7] Ferenczi argued that the experience of leisure on Sundays could become debilitating, almost intolerable and, with Flaubert's letter in mind, in need of discharge.

In 1839, to the same friend, Flaubert complains how dull the world is and warns Chevalier that he, like everyone else, will only experience ennui during his lifetime, a grave after death and rot for eternity, or what he also describes as '*merde au surplus*',[8] a surplus of shit – Flaubert is also a great writer of scatology. In later letters, he often uses the reflexive verb *s'ennuyer*, to be bored or to bore oneself, which is synonymous for Flaubert with *s'emmerder*, to bore oneself shitless or, more literally, to bore oneself shitful, that is to say, to become constipated by boredom, as well as *s'embêter*, which sits somewhere between boring oneself and annoying oneself, but which also invokes that other word so dear to Flaubert, *bête* or *bêtise*. This term can be translated as 'dumb' or 'stupid', but it is noteworthy that in French it

carries zoological connotations: *bête* also means 'beast'. In this context, it is worth observing that in his letters Flaubert identified with a whole set of animals. The list is remarkably long and includes a camel, a lion, a tiger, a sheep, a monkey, a donkey, a parrot, a dog, a whale, an oyster and, perhaps most famously, a bear, even a stuffed bear, like a specimen from a natural history museum. Hence Julian Barnes's felicitous pun, from his book *Flaubert's Parrot* (1994), 'Flau*bear*', or – less successfully – in French, 'G*ours*stave'.[9] And this experience of animality or bearishness – *ourserie*[10] is Flaubert's term, but it was also used by the Goncourt brothers to describe the experience of the French artist in the nineteenth century more generally – is inextricably tied to the artist's experience of ennui, here tantamount to a kind of hibernation. Yet it is not only the animal world that ennui brings into being, if I can put it that way. Flaubert's letters also link the experience to the vegetal and the fungal. In one letter, he describes himself as a 'mushroom swollen by ennui'.[11] In another, he describes himself as a fossil, as though the experience of ennui was akin to a form of petrifaction, a sinking into what, today, in the age of the so-called Anthropocene, has come to be known as deep time.

Ennui, then, seems to be related to different becomings: becoming animal, becoming plant, becoming mushroom, becoming fossil, becoming *bête*. The caveat is that these becomings are debilitating. Flaubert describes the experience of ennui as tidal, an affect that can swallow him up like the sea, that he can become twisted or caught up in, that can dry out his pipes – a not very subtle metaphor – and that stops him from smoking, that can make him constipated, both anally and creatively. Ennui is also described as a contagious malady, a form of leprosy, a sickness of the nerves, an affect that suffocates, to the extent that in one letter he imagines himself as an Egyptian mummy embalmed by ennui and asks rhetorically whether he had in fact died before he was born. Yet if ennui cannot kill, Flaubert goes on to write, with characteristic irony – he is, after all, still alive, or just about, living but already dead – it can still turn him into a 'thinking phantom' or a 'walking shadow'.[12] Ennui, then, is experienced as a form of mortification. It affects the nervous system. This was made most explicit in a letter written in 1861 in which Flaubert described himself as a bored hysteric. Boredom and hysteria have a particular history. Joseph Breuer, in his study on hysteria, writes that his patient Anna O.'s hysterical symptoms were creative ways of fending off boredom, so that hysteria might be seen as an imaginary solution, experienced in visions or somatic symptoms, to different forms of repression or, in Anna O.'s case, patriarchal oppression.[13] I wonder whether some of the fantasies staged in Flaubert's letters might

be seen in such terms. One critic, Naomi Schor, has argued that Flaubert can be seen as a male lesbian because of his passivity – 'Lesbos is my homeland,' as the novelist once put it – which might also help to make sense of that vision of the novelist as a bored Olympia gazing at the ruins of the past projected onto a rolling panorama-machine.[14] I also suspect that when Roland Barthes described ennui as his version of hysteria, he had Flaubert in mind.[15]

I hope that this does not sound like too much of a catalogue, or like a boring French lesson – though, given one of the works included in the artist Mathew Hale's contribution to this book, *There Was Silence in Heaven the Space of Half an Hour*, perhaps that is in the spirit of things. But it felt important to give a sense of the volatility of ennui. The word is very unstable, like a Pandora's box out of which emerge visions of the subject that are polymorphic and undo distinctions between species, genders, sexualities, the living and the dead, and the animate and the inanimate. A portrait of the artist as a mummified, mushroom-like bear who is also a hysterical male lesbian is a very confused, perhaps queer image, difficult to hold together or to come to terms with. It would be tricky, if not impossible, to extricate a particular facet of ennui and claim that it is representative of Flaubert's prismatic subjectivity, at least as it is expressed in his letters. Perhaps this helps to make sense of his claim in one letter that there is no way to rationalise ennui and no obvious cause for it. In any case, what seems clear is that the term is so over-determined and ambivalent, or just plain weird, that it should be distinguished from the kind of existential angst that the term carries in the Romantic tradition and indeed in philosophy, particularly in Schopenhauer's writings: Flaubert against the philosophers, perhaps.

Of course, all this might seem a far cry from the ordinary, everyday experience of boredom – though it is worth asking what kind of fantasies we are avoiding when we are bored – and ennui in the middle of the nineteenth century was in many ways different from the experience of boredom today. Michael Newman argues in his essay published in the present volume that the 'great boredom' has come to an end and that whatever form of boredom we now experience is in a minor key. But then affects are unruly things, resistant to strict periodisation, anachronistic – ennui, after all, gives Flaubert the impression that he may have died before he was born – and it could be argued that the affect has migrated and survives in certain forms of what we tend to call – for that very reason problematically – contemporary art.

As has been suggested, Flaubert's experience of ennui is related to a very particular form of Orientalism, where symbolic forms are

deconstructed and brought down to earth; Flaubert's vision of the Orient always errs on the side of Thompson, so to speak. His writings about Egypt register the sense that exhausted modes of representation, such as stereotype and cliché, prevent us from knowing the world immediately. The world is not encountered directly but is mediated by images inherited from popular literature, mass culture and religious rhetoric, the already seen and the already heard. That is why Flaubert is often seen to anticipate what is still sometimes referred to as postmodernism. The vision of the writer lying on a divan watching the sacred relics of the past in a kind of dumb torpor – 'the Egyptian temples bore me profoundly',[16] he complains – is closer to Félicité's communion with a stuffed parrot in the novella *A Simple Heart* (1877) than it is to religious experience per se. Félicité is something of a holy fool who in her dying moments misrecognises Loulou, her deceased stuffed parrot, for the Holy Ghost – and remember that Flaubert described himself as a stuffed bear.

In this context, one might also mention the experience of Saint Anthony in *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1874), who is tempted by a parade of grotesques and is attracted not by their spirituality or by the plenitude of their symbolic forms, but by their stupidity. When the *bête* Catoblépas, a black buffalo with the head of a pig that drags on the ground, addresses him, Saint Anthony is bored almost to death: 'Its stupidity fascinates me,' he says, to the extent that he later identifies with the monster and cries out: 'I too am an animal!'[17] Walter Benjamin has suggested that the identifications that take place in the *Temptation* are symptomatic of the empathy with exchange-value typical of capitalist modernity. To make sense of this claim, think of a status symbol, often an artwork, where people worship the price they have paid for a commodity more than its material properties.[18] Yet it is on this same basis that Sven Lütticken has argued that works by contemporary artists such as Damien Hirst are a financial success, ultimate symbols precisely in so far as they reveal themselves to be conventional signs.[19] The point is that demystification does not dislodge the fetish from the commodity because the buyer identifies with the commodity's exchange-value, not its material qualities. This may explain why Hirst can freely say that whether the metal casings in his works enclose an animal or not is immaterial. He has also described himself as 'a cunt who sells shit to fools'.[20] Like the Flaubertian symbol, Hirst's works are stereotypical and neo-archaic, both new and already old, and are thus a source of perpetual ennui. In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx wrote of boredom as 'the mystical feeling which drives the philosopher from abstract thinking to intuition … the longing for content'.[21] This sense of

longing may also make sense of the pathos of the Flaubertian symbol, of which Hirst's work is a later, and arguably more boring, iteration.

So where is the rule? This was the question asked on numerous occasions by Bouvard and Pécuchet, the eponymous protagonists of Flaubert's novel, which, one letter tells us, might have borne the subtitle *On the lack of method in the sciences*.[22] The book is about two mad Parisian bachelors who discover that they are both copy clerks and become friends. They share a distaste for urban life and for their work. When Bouvard inherits a small fortune, the two buy a farm where they retire and begin an encyclopedic quest for knowledge. They try chemistry, physiology, anatomy, geology, archaeology. On a visit to the natural history museum, the stuffed quadrupeds fill them with amazement, the butterflies with delight, the fossils make them dream, the conchological specimens bore them – and yes, you really could be at a Hirst exhibition – but in the end, all the reader is presented with is the repetition of clichés. Flaubert's writing, his absolute way of seeing things, is indifferent to its object, to what Leo Bersani has described, in his essay 'Flaubert's encyclopedism', as 'the superficial differences of content'.[23] 'What happens to horticulture or jam-making', writes the critic, 'is identical to what happens to theological doctrine and natural history.'[24] Cumulative descriptions exhaust the protagonists, the subject matter and the reader, whose capacity for metabolising information is broken down, leading to the experience of boredom. If the *Temptation* ends with Saint Anthony's climax, *Bouvard and Pécuchet* ends with a parody of the very possibility of climax. But it would not be adequate to say that Bouvard and Pécuchet's quest is motivated by failure. Their liveliness and restlessness, their craving for sensations and mental activity, are motivated and driven by an anxiety not to be bored. This for Flaubert is the ultimate goal of life, and theirs is a boredom closer to how we might mean it today, in the age of the internet and mass distraction.

When the two protagonists finally realise that their quest for total knowledge is bound to fail, they return to their roles as copyists, and, had the novel been finished, they would have gone on to compose a Dictionary of Received Ideas. In raising the craft of the copyist to the same level as that of the artist, their quest reminded me of figures such as Herman Melville's Bartleby the scrivener, but also of conceptual art: Sol LeWitt, to be sure, but also a work by John Baldessari, which he made in 1971 and called *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art*[25] (Fig. 1.1).

I want to end with this work, if only to raise a question.

For Baldessari, the point of the work was to challenge 'received wisdom, what you would get in school. And so a lot of my work was about

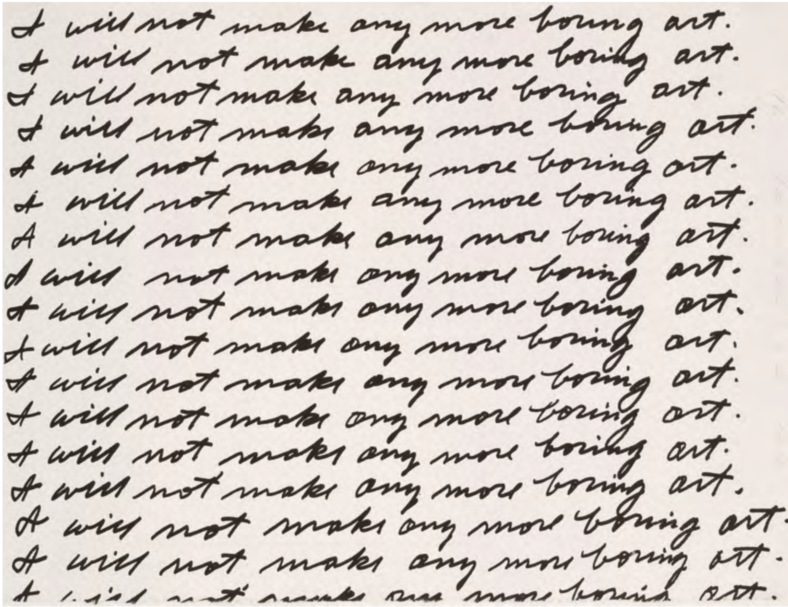

Figure 1.1 John Baldessari, *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art*, 1971. New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Lithograph, composition: 56.8 × 75.1 cm; sheet: 57 × 76.4 cm. © 2020. Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence.

questioning this received wisdom.'[26] Unable to travel to the exhibition in 1971 to which he had been invited for lack of funds, he sent instead a set of instructions:

> I have no idea what your gallery looks like of course, and I know that you do not have much money for shows so that conditions my ideas of course … I've got a punishment piece. It will require a surrogate or surrogates since I cannot be there to … impose punishment. But that's ok, since the theory is that punishment should be instructive for others. And there is a precedent for it, Christ being punished for our sins, and many others. So some student scapegoats are necessary. If you can't induce anybody to be sacrificial and take my sins upon their shoulders, then use whatever funds there are, fifty dollars, to pay someone as a mercenary.
>
> The piece is this, from floor to ceiling should be written by one or more people, one sentence under another, the following statement: I will not make any more boring art.[27]

I think this statement suggests a connection between boredom and ennui, which may be related to a kind of sadomasochistic structure.

What the terms share may have something to do with the repressed violence of their etymologies. Ennui is derived from the Latin *in odio*, to be in hate, while boredom is derived from the German *bohren*, to bore or to drill. The *Oxford English Dictionary* declares that its likeliest connection is to 'making a hole' by persistent pushing or drilling.

Notes

1 Letter from Gustave Flaubert to François Parain, Rhodes, 6 October 1850. All quotations from Flaubert's letters cite this website unless stated otherwise: https://flaubert.univ-rouen.fr/correspondance/. Translations my own.
2 Du Camp, cited in Speake (ed.), *Literature of Travel and Exploration*, 439.
3 Letter from Flaubert to François Parain, Rhodes, 6 October 1850.
4 Letter from Flaubert to Caroline Flaubert, Cairo, 5 January 1850.
5 Letter from Flaubert to Louise Colet, Rouen, 21 January 1847.
6 Letter from Flaubert to Ernest Chevalier, Rouen, 14 November 1840.
7 See Ferenczi, *Further Contributions to the Theory and Technique*, 92–101.
8 Letter from Flaubert to Ernest Chevalier, Rouen, 24 February 1839.
9 Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*, 50.
10 Letter from Flaubert to Maurice Schlésinger, Croisset, 24 November 1853.
11 Flaubert, cited in Sartre, *L'idiot de la famille*, 226.
12 Letter from Flaubert to Louis de Cormenin, Rouen, 7 June 1844.
13 See Freud and Breuer, *Studies in Hysteria*, 25–50.
14 Schor, 'Male lesbianism'.
15 Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, n.p.
16 Flaubert cited in Paramore, *Reading the Sphinx*, 131.
17 Flaubert, *La Tentation de saint Antoine* [*The Temptation of Saint Anthony*].
18 Benjamin, 'Exchange with Adorno', 111.
19 Lütticken, 'Attending to abstract things'.
20 Hirst, 'Why cunts sell shit to fools'.
21 Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts.*
22 Letter from Flaubert to Madame Roger des Genettes, 24 January 1880.
23 Bersani, 'Flaubert's encyclopedism', 144. My reading of Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet* is greatly indebted to Bersani's brilliant essay.
24 Bersani, 'Flaubert's encyclopedism', 142.
25 For a discussion of copying as uncreative writing see Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*, 12.
26 Baldessari cited on MoMA website, https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/john-baldessari-i-will-not-make-any-more-boring-art-1971.
27 Baldessari cited on Khan Academy website, https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-1010/conceptual-and-performance-art/conceptual-performance/a/john-baldessari-i-will-not-make-any-more-boring-art.

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2

Prayer and other lyrics

Martin Creed

PRAYER

I WISH I DIDN'T KNOW THINGS
I WISH I DIDN'T KNOW THINGS
I WISH I DIDN'T KNOW THINGS
I WISH I DIDN'T KNOW THINGS
IT DOES MY HEAD IN
IT DOES MY HEAD IN
I DON'T WANT TO KNOW
I DON'T WANT TO KNOW
EVERYTHING IS MOVING
EVERYTHING IS MOVING
EVERYTHING IS MOVING
EVERYTHING IS MOVING
EVERYTHING
YEAH EVERYTHING
YEAH EVERYTHING
YEAH EVERYTHING
AND THIS IS NO EXCEPTION
THIS IS NO EXCEPTION
THIS IS NO EXCEPTION
THIS IS NO EXCEPTION
AND NEITHER IS THIS
AND NEITHER IS THIS
AND NEITHER IS THIS
AND NEITHER IS THIS
AND NEITHER IS THIS
AND NEITHER IS THIS
AND NEITHER IS THIS
AND NEITHER IS THIS
AND SO ARE WE
AND SO ARE WE
AND SO ARE WE
AND SO ARE WE

WHAT THE FUCK AM I DOING?

WHAT?
WHAT?
WHAT?
WHAT?
WHAT?
WHAT?
WHAT THE?
WHAT THE?
WHAT THE?
WHAT THE FUCK?
WHAT THE FUCK?
WHAT THE FUCK AM I ?
WHAT THE FUCK AM I?
WHAT THE FUCK AM I SEEING?
WHAT THE FUCK AM I HEARING?
WHAT THE FUCK AM I SMELLING?
WHAT THE FUCK AM I SAYING?
WHAT THE FUCK AM I DOING?
WHAT THE FUCK AM I DOING?
WHAT THE FUCK AM I DOING?
I CAN'T BELIEVE MY EYES
WHAT THE FUCK AM I DOING?
I CAN'T BELIEVE MY EARS
WHAT THE FUCK AM I DOING?
I CAN'T BELIEVE MY NOSE
WHAT THE FUCK AM I DOING?
I CAN'T BELIEVE MY MOUTH
I CAN'T BELIEVE
I CAN'T BELIEVE
I CAN'T
I CAN'T
I CAN'T
I CAN'T
I
I
I
I
I
I
I
I

WHAT THE FUCK AM I DOING?
WHAT THE FUCK AM I DOING?
WHAT THE FUCK AM I DOING?
WHAT THE FUCK AM I DOING?
WHAT THE FUCK AM I THINKING?
WHAT THE FUCK AM I THINKING?
I CAN’T BELIEVE MY HEAD
I CAN’T BELIEVE MY HEAD
WHAT THE FUCK AM I FEELING?
WHAT THE FUCK AM I FEELING?
I CAN’T BELIEVE MY HEART
I CAN’T BELIEVE MY HEART
WHERE THE FUCK AM I GOING?
WHERE THE FUCK AM I GOING?
I CAN’T BELIEVE MY FEET
I CAN’T BELIEVE MY FEET
WHAT THE FUCK AM I DOING?
WHAT THE FUCK AM I DOING?
WHAT THE FUCK AM I D-D-D-D-D-D-D-D-DOING?
WHERE THE FUCK AM I G-G-G-G-G-G-G-G-GOING?
WHAT THE FUCK AM I TH-TH-TH-TH-TH-TH-TH-TH-THINKING
AND WHAT THE FUCK AM I F-F-F-F-F-F-F-F-FEELING? WHAT?
WHAT?
WHAT?
WHAT?
WHAT?
WHAT?
WHAT THE
WHAT THE
WHAT THE
WHAT THE FUCK?
WHAT THE FUCK?
WHAT THE FUCK AM I?
WHAT THE FUCK AM I?
FUCK AM I DO-
ING ?

BORDER CONTROL

IT'S A BORDER CONTROL
IT'S A BORDER CONTROL
IT'S A BORDER CONTROL
IT'S A BORDER CONTROL
IT'S A BORDER CON
IT'S A BORDER CON
IT'S A BORDER CON
IT'S A BORDER
IT'S A BORDER
IT'S A BORE
IT'S A BORE
IT'S A BORE
IT'S A BORE
IT'S A BORE
IT'S A BORE
IT'S A BORE
IT'S A BORE

MIND TRAP

I GOT MYSELF INTO A MIND TRAP
AND NOW I'M LOOKING FOR A MIND TRAP MAP
I CAN'T GET OUT OF THIS MIND CRAP
I'M LOOKING FOR A MIND CRAP GAP
LEFT AND RIGHT AND UP
DOWN AND ROUND AND BACK
THROUGH AND ACROSS AND ALONG
BIT BY BIT BY BIT
I GOT MYSELF INTO A MIND TRAP
AND NOW I'M LOOKING FOR A MIND TRAP MAP
I CAN'T GET OUT OF THIS MIND CRAP
I'M LOOKING FOR A MIND CRAP GAP

IT'S YOU

WHATEVER YOU FEEL
WHATEVER YOU WANT
WHATEVER YOU DO
WHATEVER YOU DON'T
WHATEVER YOU THINK
WHENEVER YOU SINK
WHEREVER YOU STAND
WHEREVER'S YOUR LAND
IT'S YOU AT THE FRONT
AND IT'S YOU AT THE BACK
IT'S YOU, IT'S YOU, IT'S YOU

WHATEVER YOU FIND
WHATEVER YOU MIND
WHATEVER YOU TOUCH
WHATEVER'S TOO MUCH
IT'S YOU ON THE TOP
AND IT'S YOU UNDERNEATH
IT'S YOU IN THE MIDDLE
AND IT'S YOU ON THE SIDE
IT'S YOU, IT'S YOU, IT'S YOU
IT'S YOU THROUGH AND THROUGH

PASS THEM ON

IF YOU'RE FEELING BAD
AND YOUR THOUGHTS ARE SAD
PASS THEM ON TO SOMEONE ELSE
PASS THEM ON
PASS THEM ON
PASS THEM ON
PASS THEM
PASS THEM ON
PASS YOUR BAD FEELINGS ON
PASS THEM
PASS THEM ON
PASS THEM ON
PASS THEM ON
PASS THEM
PASS THEM ON
PASS THEM ON
PASS THEM ON
TO SOMEONE ELSE LIKE A FRIEND OR A RELATIVE
LIKE A FRIEND OR A RELATIVE
LIKE A FRIEND

PRINCESS TAXI GIRL

SHE'S A FRIEND
SHE'S A GIRL
SHE'S A WOMAN
SHE'S A BRIDE
BUT
SHE'S NOT A WALKER
SHE'S NOT A WALKER
SHE'S NOT A WALKER
SHE'S NOT A WALKER
SHE'S A PRINCESS
AND SHE'S A TAXI GIRL
AND I DON'T MIND
PRINCESS TAXI GIRL
I DON'T MIND
PRINCESS TAXI GIRL
I DON'T MIND IF I DO
SHE'S DIPLOMATIC
SHE'S ENIGMATIC
SHE'S NOT DRAMATIC
SHE'S TELEPATHIC
SHE'S NOT A STALKER
AND SHE'S NOT A TALKER
AND SHE'S DEFINITELY NOT A WALKER
SHE'S A GIRL
SHE'S A WOMAN
SHE'S A PRINCESS
SHE'S A BRIDE
SHE'S A PARTY GIRL
AND SHE'S A TAXI GIRL
PRINCESS TAXI GIRL
I DON'T MIND
PRINCESS TAXI GIRL
I DON'T MIND IF I DO
PRINCESS TAXI GIRL
I DON'T MIND IF I DO
MIND

(YOU PUT YOUR) HAND IN MY HAND

YOU PUT YOUR HAND
IN MY HAND
IN YOUR HAND
IN MY HAND
IN YOUR HAND
IN MY HAND
IN YOUR HAND
YOU PUT MY HEAD IN THE CLOUDS
YOU PUT THE CLOUDS IN MY HEAD
YOU PUT THOUGHTS IN MY HEAD
YOU PUT MY HEAD IN THE CLOUDS OF THE THOUGHTS
IN YOUR HEAD IN MY MIND
WITH THE THOUGHTS IN MY HEAD
YOU PUT YOUR HAND
IN MY HAND
IN YOUR HAND
IN MY HAND
IN YOUR HAND
IN MY HAND
IN YOUR HAND
YOU PUT YOUR FOOT IN MY MOUTH
YOU PUT YOUR TONGUE IN MY MOUTH
YOU PUT MY FEET ON THE GROUND
YOU TAKE THE RUG FROM MY FEET
YOU PUT YOUR HAIR ON MY FACE
YOU PUT MY HAIR OUT OF PLACE
I PUT MY LIFE IN YOUR HANDS
YOU PUT YOUR HAND
IN MY HAND
IN YOUR HAND
IN MY HAND
IN YOUR HAND
IN MY HAND
IN YOUR HAND

3
Twenty years of boredom

Susan Morris

In 1997, at the time of making my computer-based work *TEXT*, I became interested in the way that then-new digital technology enabled you to take sequences of still or moving images, or audio recordings, and play them in a random order. Thus, in their ever-changing relation to one another, the components of any piece could build their own narratives, automatically, almost as if they were writing themselves. *TEXT* consists of a collection of quotations, bibliographies, indexes, contents pages and references on the subject of boredom, organised as a series of self-contained animations that run up the screen like end credits in cinema or TV – except that parts of the transcribed written material are sometimes cropped or out of frame. Adding the random function ensures that what is being communicated by the work remains unfixed: the piece loops endlessly, but the separate components of the whole never play in the same order.

The viewer is confronted with a strange kind of writing, a text in fragments. Impossible to grasp as a whole, the material is nevertheless not unreadable – some of it is even quite funny. This is especially the case with anything addressing the problem of boredom within the psychoanalytic setting, with *The Bored and Boring Patient* listed amongst the string of book titles and, from a book extract, a perplexed analysand recounting how he regularly watches his analyst fall asleep.[1] Other animations contain fragments of songs where, for example, a lover laments the 'long, lonely time' of waiting, which viewers also get to experience as they are forced to spend the time it takes to read the lyrics slowly scrolling up the screen.

Time goes by so slowly
And time can do so much
Are you still mine?[2]

Much of the material focuses on boredom in relation to the subjective encounter with technology. The Russian writer Maxim Gorky's review in 1896 of an early film by August and Louis Lumière is one such instance: in the silence, faced with the strange black-and-white scenes unreeling before him, Gorky feels himself confronted by a world whose 'vividness and vitality have been drained away'. This is not reality, he declares, 'but its shadow'.

> *… before you a life is*
> *surging, a life*
> *deprived of words*
> *and shorn of the*
> *living spectrum of*
> *colours – the grey,*
> *the soundless,*
> *the bleak*
> *and dismal life …*[3]

In its emphasis on the 'monotonous grey' that covers everything, Gorky's description evokes a world as if covered in ash; a dead world, devoid of meaning. But what did the film remove from the scene, if not the viewer himself? To be bored by something – a film, a book or, perhaps worst of all, a lecture – is to be confronted by a scene wherein it is clear that there is *nothing here for me*. When someone or something is boring you, it's as if you don't exist; exposed to a kind of 'meaning vacuum', you are rendered lifeless, snuffed out, like the canary at the bottom of the cage.[4] Seán Desmond Healy, in *Boredom, Self, and Culture* (1984), from which I also extracted quotations for *TEXT*, characterises boredom as 'the loss of a sense of personal meaning, whether in relation to a particular experience or encounter, or to an entire life situation. This loss might be occasioned by the withdrawal or absence of the meaningful, or by the imposition of the unmeaningful' (as was the case for Gorky, perhaps). Sometimes the cause can be easily identified – it is this or that which is boring you. Often, however, the reason for a 'chronic and painful' boredom cannot be pinned down, and this realisation leads Healy to suggest that boredom takes two forms: there is a trivial, everyday kind of boredom, and a 'hyperboredom' that is 'inexplicable, persisting', akin to depression, and directly related to the '*collapse* of meaning'.[5]

The psychotherapist James E. Lantz suggests that boredom erupts 'whenever a subject has been unable to identify, find [or] recognise'

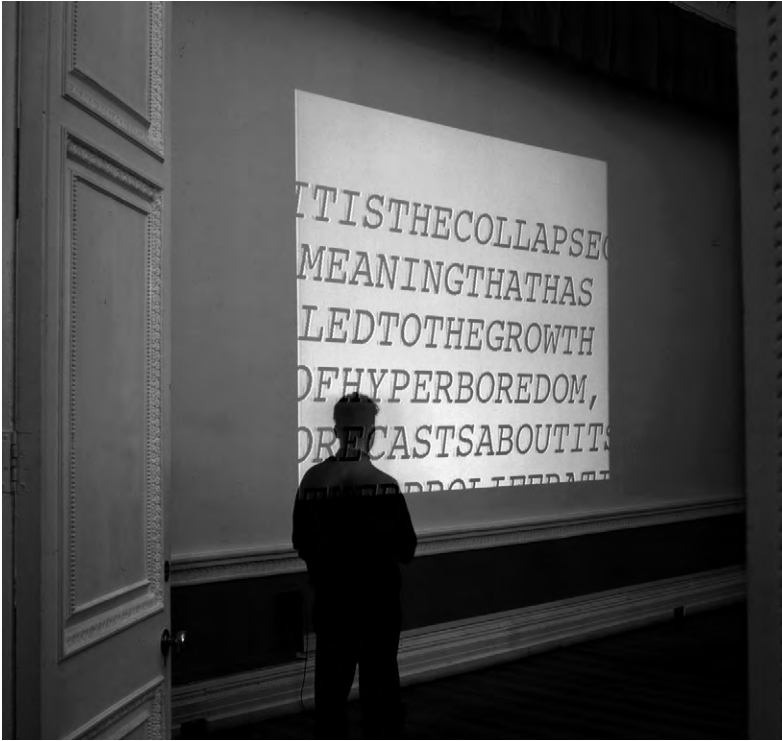

Figure 3.1 *TEXT*, 1997. Randomly ordered series of digital animations, dimensions variable. Installation shot taken at ICA, London, during the launch of the CD *On Boredom* published by Cambridge Darkroom Gallery, December 1997. Courtesy the artist.

meaning; when the subject is confronted with an emptiness both absurd and nauseating.[6] Yet many writers have commented on the usefulness of boredom. For Walter Benjamin, famously, boredom was necessary to the creative work of *making* meaning, spun by the listener out of the multiple interpretations of a storyteller's tale.[7] Benjamin might in fact have described himself as following 'an ethos of boredom', taking care to deliberately summon it up in order to begin his writing.[8] Benjamin's boredom is neither trivial nor everyday – it is the 'dream' space through which the subject experiences and has deep connection with the world. Hyperboredom seems, in contrast, to shut the world out. In his review of Healy's book, the historian Eugen Weber summarises it thus: 'It is not we, hyperboreans, who are inadequate; it is the world around, the culture we live in.'[9] And yet 'hyperboreans' suffer, by internalising the lack of meaning. The *nothing here for me* is reflected back onto the subject: there is nothing here *in* me.

Might these different types of boredom each be linked to a different relation to time? In Benjamin’s argument, the art of storytelling, which demands boredom’s ‘mental relaxation’, is distinguished from ‘a new form of communication’: information. Supplied primarily by newspapers – reproduced by the printing press – information is ‘shot through with explanation’. It replaces the tradition of the story, yet it has no lasting relevance; information simply evaporates when it is no longer new. Because it is resistant to interpretation, information also short-circuits or shuts down meaning. ‘A story is different,’ in Benjamin’s estimation. ‘It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time’, *over* time. Information is always local, immediate. Storytelling combines the yarns of the traveller with those of the artisan who stays at home; both leave an imprint on the tale. Untouched by an encounter with otherness, information is supplied to a reader who believes, as Hippolyte de Villemessant, the founder of *Le Figaro*, once stated, that ‘an attic fire in the Latin Quarter is more important than a revolution in Madrid’.[10]

Digital technology allowed me, in making *TEXT*, to experiment with narrative form against a background of ideas about storytelling aimed at disrupting closed systems of information. Artists might copy, sample or quote information out of a desire to create space that more

Figure 3.2 *TEXT*, 1997. Randomly ordered series of digital animations, dimensions variable. Installation shot taken at Five Years Gallery during the exhibition *What Is a Photograph?*, 3 July–9 August 1998. Courtesy the artist.

accurately reflects the aberrant temporalities of human experience – shot through with fantasy. A great influence on many artists of my generation, for instance, was the film *La Jetée* (1962) by Chris Marker. Marker's film remains radical not only because it consists almost entirely of stills, but also for the questions it poses concerning subjective time. As the artist and writer Victor Burgin argues, different registers of time run through the film concurrently. Firstly, and perhaps more obviously, there is 'the time of the living organism, the irreversible time of the entropic body'.[11] Kept by our biological clocks, this is the time of lifespans. In Marker's film, evidence of this kind of time appears in the traces of graffiti that the characters in the story often come across when they meet.[12] These handwritten marks – fragments of writing and drawing scrawled across walls and buildings – resonate with notations recorded in a diary, where the passing of chronological time is marked by the human individual who ages along with it. Embedded in this register of time, however, there is another, of a different tempo: the time of the human subject. This 'constructs itself' around the couple in the film, Burgin suggests, and is the time 'of *durée* … an indeterminate period of lived existence that may expand or contract according to the attention that is brought to it'.[13] This is subjective time, time that runs its own way and that operates, frequently, in memory and dreaming.

La Jetée, as the opening sequence of the film informs us, is 'a story of a man marked by an image from childhood' – an image that belongs to the register of subjective time. The (nameless) man travels backwards in

Figure 3.3 Still from *La Jetée*, 1962, dir. Chris Marker.

chronological time to meet with a woman (also nameless), whose image is fixed so firmly in his mind. The strangeness of this film is that it ends where it begins; or it doesn't end, because although the reel runs for about 26 minutes, the film is looped *internally.* A boy will see himself die as an adult, and the adult will realise this at the moment of his death, but will also acknowledge that *he is there still* – alive – as a child in the same place. The two separate biological times coincide, in the time of the desiring subject.

Can subjective time be thought of in relation to psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott's concept of the transitional object? A 1953 article by Winnicott on the child's first 'not-me' possession notes the use of transitional phenomena – such as toys, a blanket or even a special repertoire of songs – through which the infant develops a relation to external reality. Given that reality often contains things that are absent, 'thinking, or fantasying', as Winnicott suggests, 'gets linked up' with these objects.[14] Yet there are also certain times, such as the time between sleep and awakening, or in daydreaming, when fantasy mingles with external reality. This time is anticipatory; it is a time of potential reunion. Initiated when the separation from the desired other first occurs, transitional time transforms the separation into a potential reunion. But if nobody comes, or if, upon returning, anticipation is repeatedly frustrated, then transitional time is transformed into what the psychoanalyst André Green describes as *le temps mort* – 'dead time' – the chronic equivalent of empty space. As Burgin writes: 'In normal everyday experience this is the time of boredom, the waiting from which one expects nothing.'[15]

Transitional time is anticipatory. Endless waiting is dead time (boredom). In each kind of time, the thing upon which the subject waits is crucially bound up with his or her identity, but while transitional time looks to the future, endless waiting, as a kind of dead end, can curdle into severe depression. Here the subject 'suffers a total inhibition of action and disinvestment from the world', as if the world, or they themselves, were dead.[16] Strangely, as Green explains, the subject experiences this as if they are at the mercy of a force other than themselves: 'It is not me who is going away; I am not wanted here. I/they are expelling me.'[17] This description resonates with Sigmund Freud's observation that in melancholia, with which hyperboredom may be compared, the ego appears to align itself with the lost object, the object that will never return. 'In this way an object-loss [is] transformed into an ego-loss.'[18] Freud characterises the existential state of melancholia as a kind of annihilation or death of the self – or a death *wish,* 'the overcoming of the

instinct which compels every living thing to cling to life'.[19] Here the cry of every spurned lover, 'You're dead to me!', is thrown back upon the self: 'I am dead to me.'

For anyone who has had writer's block, this feeling is familiar. How might one induce the kind of boredom that is conducive to making work? How might one avoid falling into that which baffles or suffocates thinking, that deadens the space of dreaming and strands us in a dead end where nothing comes? An answer might be suggested in Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée* (1950), where the link between boredom and endless waiting is also explored. A princess, who represents Orpheus's death, sacrifices herself to make the poet immortal. But she desires one last embrace, so she has to wait for him to come back to her in the underworld, and is tortured by the time it takes him to reach her. *Now I understand what it is to wait!* she cries. Is this what, for humans, is boredom?

For the first time I almost know what time is
On earth, waiting must be terrible
Do you get bored?[20]

Cocteau's *Orphée*, as a modern-day retelling of the Greek myth, is set in Paris and saturated with residual trauma of the Second World War, when members of the French Resistance, anticipating the return of freedom,

Figure 3.4 Still from *Orphée*, 1950, dir. Jean Cocteau. English subtitled version released in 2018, BFI, London.

awaited communication from the Allies. The strange spoken messages in the film that Orpheus receives through his car radio reconstruct, or mimic, such kinds of coded signals. Orpheus, suffering from writer's block and therefore desperate for inspiration (he has been waiting, despondently, for the return of his muse), interprets them as poetry. He writes them down. What does he recognise in these incomprehensible fragments? Why do they claim the status of poetry for him?

Interestingly, a debate about what constitutes writing occurs during the film's interrogation scene. The judges cannot decide if Orpheus is a 'writer' at all, or they argue as to whether he is a writer or a poet. Orpheus suggests that writer and poet are almost the same thing. There is no *almost* here, snaps the interrogator, and *What do you mean by poet?* 'Écrire sans être écrivain', Orpheus replies – *to write without writing*.[21] A poet doesn't engage with writing, though he writes. Writing that isn't (consciously) written – what is this? For the poet, the 'text' has to come from elsewhere, the radio receiver perhaps. Poetry, at least for Orpheus, has affinities with automatic writing – it emerges from a dream state. The interrogation panel, flummoxed by Orpheus's replies, gives up on the question, but it lingers on in the film; the struggle to write, and to write *poetry*, is perhaps the film's central theme. This is because in this post-war Paris version of the Orpheus myth, poetry equals death – or immortality. Perhaps they are one and the same. Poetry as 'not writing', or as writing that is not writing; that is the *end* of writing:

Figure 3.5 *TEXT*, 1997. Randomly ordered series of digital animations, dimensions variable. Installation shot taken at Five Years Gallery during the exhibition *What Is a Photograph?*, 3 July–9 August 1998. Courtesy the artist.

this signals the beginning of something else, something that breaks with the traumatised past. Here 'information' is repurposed and remade as a poetry equivalent to the shattered fragments of day-to-day life among the ruins. Language regains meaning, but only once it is coded, broken down, presented in pieces.

Gorky's reaction to the Lumière film chimes with Roland Barthes's observation that through photography the dead 'return'.[22] But they return, are made present, through other means too. Beginning around the end of the nineteenth century, modern industrial technologies of transport, production and communication, through which things could become doubled or set adrift, seemed to bring the dead closer. Voices could be severed from their speakers, for example; objects and machinery could move by themselves. During the First World War, this feeling intensified as people started seeing longed-for loved ones in the street, even though they knew they were dead – 'just catching a glimpse of someone on a bus or through a shop window, thinking it's their husband or their brother or their son'.[23] Suddenly the glass in the buildings or on vehicles would double as a sensitive plate or recording instrument with the face of the absent loved one projected across the street, like a cinematic fragment; like a photograph. The city therefore itself becomes a medium, housing the dead, with the literature that reflects it classified, perhaps, as the work of mourning. The dead can be made present in the fractures, blanks and discontinuities within a text – in writing's undercurrent, or in what the poet Claudia Rankine terms the 'underneath-ness' of language, where it is possible, she suggests, to stage 'silence'.[24]

When we see our beloved 'everywhere', we are waiting to be with them again. So it is for the man in *La Jetée*, who sees the image of the person with whom he wishes to be reunited. So it is for all of us who wait for the ones we love. As the narrator of André Breton's *Nadja* (1928) asks at the very beginning of the book, 'Who am I [if not] whom I "haunt"[?]' This idea, he continues, 'makes me, still alive, play a ghostly part'.[25] Breton's novel, the story of a doomed love affair, is constructed, like a collage, from fragments of real (or more often missed) encounters, the majority of which take place in the street or in bars and cafes. It's a text that didn't have a planned outcome, but that wrote itself as it moved along a route dictated by desire, accumulating material lifted directly from the exterior world. The camera has always done this – absorbed the world, unmediated, into itself – and since the invention of photography, literature has frequently tried to adopt the camera's point of view.[26]

Indeed, as new technologies continue to give rise to different literary forms, contemporary storytelling reflects our encounters with the internet. Now content is gleaned from websites and social media, with the narrative arc (or more often, the anti-narrative outcome) directed by reactions to and between sources. Conducted in a dreamlike state, the route taken as a user travels through, or 'surfs', the rhizomatic space of the web is intuitive, spontaneous, anticipatory, with the resulting 'text' structured in ways that replicate this journey.

Such is the argument put forward by the poet and critic Kenneth Goldsmith in his book *Wasting Time on the Internet* (2016). Goldsmith suggests that Breton's strategy of using inquisitive, open-ended 'wandering' to construct a narrative is analogous to the experience of the contemporary internet user, whom Goldsmith proposes as the twenty-first-century equivalent to the *flâneur*. Absorbed by and into the environment, people surfing the web drift – just as the Situationists, with their strategy of *dérive*, once gave themselves up 'to the tugs and flows of the urban street, letting the crowds take them where they will'.[27] In this space where contemporary forms of writing and art-making are emerging, Goldsmith argues, we might think of 'our web sojourns as epic tales effortlessly and unconsciously written, etched into our browser

Figure 3.6 Anonymous Situationist slogan, 1968.

histories as a sort of new memoir'.[28] Goldsmith refers to early precedents including Samuel Pepys's diary and James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* – built up out of the 'accumulation of bits and pieces of the quotidian ephemera: letters, observations, patches of dialogue, and descriptions of daily life' – in order to compare them to online blogs.[29] Interestingly, to advertise his course at the University of Pennsylvania (after which his book is titled), Goldsmith chose a Situationist slogan that marked the walls of Paris during the May 1968 protests: 'live without dead time'.

If you are able to travel unobserved along ungoverned routes, you remain open to the chance encounter, to otherness. But it's no good if these journeys take you nowhere; if you only end up back where you started; if you don't get started at all. Recent changes in the internet in fact threaten to kill off the digital *dériviste.* In 2009, for example, Google started using a new algorithm for its search engine with the aim of providing a 'personalised search for everyone'.[30] As author and activist Eli Pariser explains in *The Filter Bubble* (2011), Google tracks 'signals' obtained from individual users in order to present them with customised pages corresponding to who they are assumed to be, and what kind of things they like. Thus the world that forms before your eyes is simply a reflection of your own past forays into the web; new routes are closed down or non-existent. In an uncanny echo of newspaperman Villemessant's comment cited above, Pariser's book opens with a quotation from Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's co-founder: 'A squirrel dying in front of your house may be more relevant to your interests right now than people dying in Africa.'[31] States Pariser: 'Now you get the result that Google's algorithm suggests is best for you in particular – and someone else may see something entirely different.'[32]

'The user', in other words, 'is the content'.[33] In this surely regressive situation there are no 'not-me' phenomena, no longed-for other. There is only the mirror image of yourself as a narcissistic, closed circuit that has little contact with difference, with anything that falls outside of what has already been 'liked'. For film-maker Adam Curtis, the version of cyberspace that is currently evolving is very much like the one imagined in William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* (1984), where 'behind the superficial freedoms of the web' are a few giant corporations with opaque systems that control and limit what we see and shape what we think, what we buy, how we vote.[34]

While the full impact of this technology as an 'influencing machine' is not yet understood, there is nothing new about the malleability of the

subject.[35] Advertisements and public relations companies have always exploited the subject's tendency towards projection into a future where a new and better self awaits. This idea – that there is another 'you' somewhere else – is rehearsed in the anticipatory time of daydreaming. Under these conditions, *where* the authentic self is actually located shifts to the question of *when*, thus reiterating the ideas outlined above about subjectivity's peculiar relation to time. Outside of any fixed time and place: subjectivity is *anachronic*. I like the definition of this word as a description of the chronologically 'misplaced'.[36] Subjective time is disordered; it disregards chronological time. Gazing at a photograph – perhaps one in an advert – you experience, as Barthes suggested, a peculiar conjunction of tenses (dizzying, impossible) all operating 'under the instance of "reality"' – a reality that nevertheless is out of time, above or beyond time; or where time, on a loop, eternally recurs.[37]

According to a graph supplied by the *Collins English Dictionary*, use of the word *anachronic* might seem to have risen during the period of the two world wars – precisely when the dead began to appear in such numbers among the living, within an environment formed by technology's proliferation of discontinuity and otherness.[38] The shadow or blur in early photography, the echo on the telephone line, the uncanny self-sufficiency of automated systems of production and transportation: these things that are in excess of technology's primary operation expose us to something outside of ourselves. Overall, however, and alongside further technological mutations, *anachronic* appears to have actually declined in usage, as if the ever-increasing industrialisation, mechanisation and quantification of labour and life coincide with – or indeed produce – the urge to categorise, classify and fix everything within an allocated time slot. Things are discouraged from drifting out of place. In this scenario, ever more 'subject to administrative norms', as Benjamin observed, 'people must learn to wait'.[39]

Has digital technology increased this waiting time? Analogue technology, including the machinery of industrial production, brings into everyday experience the encounter with the dead. There is something about celluloid footage of a train, for example – or even about the train itself – that haunts the subject. The effect of digital technology (and its algorithms) is to turn this dead thing back upon ourselves. The anticipatory time of fantasy and daydreaming slips into endless waiting. Into this space of dead time no one comes. The object dies. This is the time of hyperboredom, the encounter with the dead, when that dead thing is yourself.[40]

Benjamin wrote his essay 'The storyteller' in 1936, but he had started working on a very different kind of writing much earlier. *The Arcades Project* – unfinished at his death – presents scraps of information in such a way that they replicate the open-ended fabric of storytelling. Described as a way of 'writing about a civilization using its rubbish as materials', the book also introduces something of the *flâneur*'s approach to reading, intricately linked with boredom.[41] Consisting of multiple entries on various themes – like a collection of index cards gathered in researching a particular topic that never coalesces into a whole – the book might be started at any point, for its thesis is constantly regenerating itself. Benjamin's overall 'topic' is, in fact, the Parisian shopping precincts, or arcades, that brought together (as the text does) apparently incompatible objects and ideas all under the same roof. 'Existence in these spaces flows like the events in dreams. Flânerie is the rhythmics of this slumber.'[42] Indeed, while there remains some debate about his intended final outcome, there is no doubt that Benjamin was experimenting with form, juxtaposing seemingly unrelated textual fragments to create a disunited whole: 'This work has to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks. Its theory is intimately related to that of montage.'[43]

The Arcades Project opens itself up to multiple interpretations and so presents an interesting model for representing a scattered, chronologically disordered subject position. Almost contemporaneous with it, but less well known, was a project initiated by Maxim Gorky some 50 years after his encounter with the Lumière film. Aimed at capturing a snapshot of the world by condensing samples of it taken from a single day, *Den' mira* (*A Day of the World*) compiles, in book form, news reports including photographs and cartoons from around the globe on 27 September 1935.[44] When the project was reperformed in 1960 for publication as *A Day of the World: The events of Tuesday, September 27, 1960*, one contributor, the East German writer Christa Wolf, somehow found herself unable to stop; she went on to make annual notations of her everyday life on or around every 27 September until her death in 2011.[45]

Contemporary writers and artists seem increasingly drawn to practices that are either diaristic or that utilise found material as a method of producing work discontinuous in style but externally structured (often, for example, by the clock or calendar) – think of Claudia Rankine's recent poems from the *American Lyric* series, Kenneth Goldsmith's books *Day* (2003) and *Capital* (2015; directly modelled on Benjamin's *Arcades*

Project) and Uwe Johnson's *Anniversaries: From a Year in the Life of Gesine Cresspahl* (1970–83; translated from the German – four volumes – into English in 2018).[46] Collaged and fragmentary, with content frequently extracted from the exterior world, this writing may come out of a desire to record and fix time, but to do so through the collecting together of ephemera – material often cast aside or thrown away. Encyclopedic in scale, while simultaneously undermining the encyclopedia's quest for accuracy, these kinds of texts present an alternative to the deadening meaninglessness of endlessly recycled newsfeeds and status updates – which they nevertheless often incorporate.[47]

My recent large-scale work *de Umbris Idæarum* (*on the Shadow Cast by our Thoughts*) takes the form of a diary. It is like Johnson's *Anniversaries* because it records an entire year – 2011 – but it is not a work of fiction. A mixture of writing, such as my own 'personal' observations alongside text extracted from books, newspapers, transcriptions of radio shows and conversations overheard on the bus, with photographs and other scanned paraphernalia, the work was built using the software application Evernote, into which I could save information at any point in the day using a Wifi-enabled device (typically

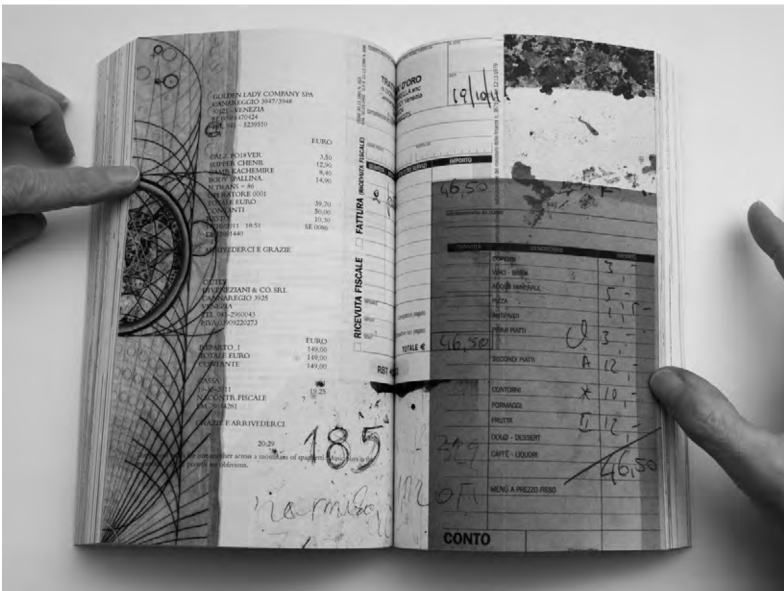

Figure 3.7 Images from *de Umbris Idæarum* (*on the Shadow Cast by our Thoughts*), 12 softback books, each 21.5 × 13 cm, with shelf. Printed paper and wood, 25 × 95 cm, 2019. Courtesy the artist and Bartha Contemporary.

my own phone, iPad or laptop). Gathered over time, like Breton's *Nadja*, the diary presents a chronological flow of 'updates' in a seemingly endless narrative that continually returns to the present – for instance, entries repeatedly start with the statement 'I am awake' (usually in the morning, though not always). I am also often waiting (at bus stops, or for friends to arrive) or apologising for keeping my friends waiting (when, racing against time, I'm running late).

The collected material is organised as a series of 12 books, one per month, with each book's interior spreads structured by the timing of individual diary entries – a column of numbers that run down the centre of the pages, parallel to the book's spine. Time counts down over the course of the year, with what is randomly ordered being the self, the many variable, anachronic instances of me. My moods, like the weather, are both changing and recurring. The people around me – friends, colleagues, family members as well as strangers – exhibit the same yet unpredictable behaviours – who *they* are is as impossible to pin down as I am. Assertions and decisions are undone as quickly as they are made; like any diarist, I am unreliable, inconsistent.[48] During the recording process I became interested in publicly displayed messages on walls and noticeboards, such as graffiti or posters for lost pets or items for

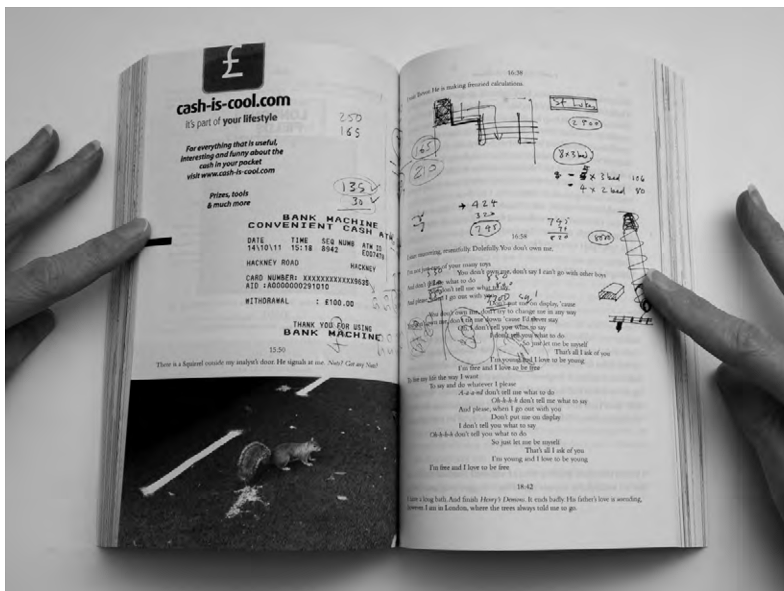

Figure 3.8 Images from *de Umbris Idæarum* (*on the Shadow Cast by our Thoughts*), 12 softback books, each 21.5 × 13 cm, with shelf. Printed paper and wood, 25 × 95 cm, 2019. Courtesy the artist and Bartha Contemporary.

sale, and there are many photographs of these kinds of things reproduced in the diary – evidence of the time of the living organism, which operates alongside subjective time.

There is in fact a third kind of timekeeping recorded in the diary – that of the wildlife in my immediate environment, seemingly synchronised to something other than subjective or chronological time. Observations are made of the coming and going of city birds, the activities of local foxes, as well as of changes to trees and flowers and even the impact of the seasons on the food I eat. Detailed in the receipts from restaurants and cafes, supermarkets and corner shops, are names of the individuals I was 'served by', seasonal special offers, advertising slogans and company logos. Finally there are the many songs, often on repeat, that come into my head either randomly or triggered by the external world. I am myself like a radio, a receiver, a transmitter; and the randomly collected ephemera has evolved into something affiliated with the dream space of *TEXT*, from back in 1997.

The overall effect is to show the subject of the diary as fluid, cloud-like, unresolved and migratory, constantly rewriting itself in relation to – or against – chronological time. The 'text' of the diary – littered as it is

Figure 3.9 Images from *de Umbris Idæarum* (*on the Shadow Cast by our Thoughts*), 12 softback books, each 21.5 × 13 cm, with shelf. Printed paper and wood, 25 × 95 cm, 2019.
Courtesy the artist and Bartha Contemporary.

with receipts, flyers, news articles, etc. – is marked by dates of issue and time-stamped proofs of purchase. In contrast to this time 'of the body', my self drifts, rewriting itself in each new entry. In this way the diary attempts to stage the unconscious, that is, the self as *other*. Mirroring the day's events as well as the culture I am embedded in, 'I' become scattered across clock time, adopting different subject positions *in* time.

André Green describes the activity of the average neurotic as working 'against the ineluctable march of time [where] something is repeated, without the subject knowing it, or in spite of himself, which is fundamentally resistant to any possibility of being transcended'. Often the elements in the subject's discourse 'that are indispensable for its intelligibility are lacking'.[49] Writing – what it can contain as well as what it leaves out, what is inadmissible to it – is still very much at the centre of my work. I regard the diary as a kind of 'involuntary' novel, but I'm also interested in the way that writing can incorporate blanks, or *yawning* gaps. This may stage a new form of automaticity, where the montage of texts and images, rather than evidencing traces of an automatic gesture, is the *engine* of it. By this I mean that the collected citations, quotations, reports and so forth, alongside my own (possibly boring) personal musings, generate something that operates like unconscious thought. What is made present may be excluded from the actual contents, may in fact only make itself felt (as ghostly presence, or as absence-as-presence) through lapses and silences in the assembled materials. Thus the diary is an attempt 'to write without writing'; to draw out the singular, evasive and discontinuous, the temporally aberrant nature of subjectivity. This is to move beyond the nullifying effects of much current technology – governed by algorithms – and towards a future as yet unwritten.

Note: The context for this piece is the symposium '20 Years of Boredom', hosted by the Department of History of Art at UCL in 2017, where I gave a short paper on which the above essay is based. Twenty years earlier, I had curated an exhibition on CD, *On Boredom*, which brought together a group of artists who had started working with newly accessible desktop computers and image-manipulation software, including early versions of Photoshop and Premier, and with the worldwide web, which had first made its appearance in 1994.[50] Often frustrated by the limits of the processing power, we were nevertheless optimistic about the creative potential of these 'new tools'. The CD, with a fold-out publication including essays by David Bate and Andrew Brown, was launched at the ICA, London, in December 1997, and published by Cambridge Darkroom Gallery.

My thanks to the then-director, Ronnie Simpson, for enthusiastically embracing boredom all those years ago. This essay is also indebted to Victor Burgin's brilliant essay 'Marker marked', which brings together so elegantly the themes of biological time, subjective time and André Green's 'dead time'.

Notes

1 Stern (ed.), *Psychotherapy and the Bored Patient*, 31.
2 Stern (ed.), *Psychotherapy and the Bored Patient*, 129. The song is 'Unchained Melody' (1955), lyrics by Hy Zaret.
3 Gorky cited in Leyda, *Kino*, 407–9. Gorky writes of 'grey rays of the sun across the grey sky, grey eyes in grey faces and [that] the leaves of the trees are ashen grey'.
4 Lantz, 'The bored client', 111.
5 Healy, *Boredom, Self, and Culture*, 10 and 99. Emphasis mine.
6 Lantz, 'The bored client', 111.
7 Benjamin, 'The storyteller', in *Illuminations*, 91.
8 Sturgeon, 'The storyteller by Walter Benjamin: review'.
9 Weber, review of Healy, *Boredom, Self, and Culture*.
10 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 88–91.
11 Burgin, *The Camera*, 146.
12 They encounter it again – this record making/evidencing of time passing – when they come across the giant sequoia tree trunk.
13 Burgin, *The Camera*, 146.
14 Winnicott, 'Transitional objects and transitional phenomena'.
15 Burgin, *The Camera*, 149.
16 Burgin, *The Camera*, 149.
17 Green, *Diachrony in Psychoanalysis*, 120.
18 Freud, *On Metapsychology*, 258.
19 Freud, *On Metapsychology*, 254.
20 These translations are lightly paraphrased from the English subtitles in the version of *Orphée* released in 2018 and distributed by the British Film Institute (BFI), London.
21 A literal translation would be 'To write without being a writer.' Subtitles in the version released by the BFI in 2008 have the phrase as 'One who writes, without being a writer,' while the 2018 BFI version has: 'No writer, yet he writes.'
22 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 9. Barthes writes of 'that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph'.
23 In research conducted for his 2016 public art project *We're Here because We're Here*, British artist Jeremy Deller came across many such recorded accounts. For the comment about 'seeing a glimpse of someone', see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXnr3w74TJs.
24 See Flescher and Caspar, 'Interview with Claudia Rankine'. Rankine has spoken of 'the potential openness of the page', which she uses 'to suggest silence, for example'.
25 Breton, *Nadja*, 11. The 'proverb' Breton refers to in this opening statement is 'Dis-moi qui tu hantes et je te dirai qui tu es' ('Tell me who you haunt and I'll tell you who you are').
26 See Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences*; Banfield, 'L'imparfait de l'objectif'. Drawing on Banfield, I discuss this idea at length in 'On the blank', especially pp. 27, 55.
27 Goldsmith, *Wasting Time on the Internet*, 56.
28 Goldsmith, *Wasting Time on the Internet*, 24. In an interview with Claudia Rankine, Kayo Chingonyi suggests that Rankine's recent prose poems similarly reflect the way our lives are mediated through many different spheres and media: 'Instagram and Tumblr poets are now part of popular culture, and the boundaries that divide poetry from other creative modes are being called into question.'
29 Goldsmith, *Wasting Time on the Internet*, 79.
30 Quoted in Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*, 1.

31 Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*, 1.
32 Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*, 2.
33 Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*, 47.
34 See *Hypernormalisation*, dir. Adam Curtis (2016). https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p04b183c.
35 See also Tillmans, *What is Different?*
36 https://www.thefreedictionary.com/anachronous.
37 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 97.
38 https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/anachronic.
39 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 119.
40 André Green thinks of this 'disappointed expectation' as a kind of 'negative trauma … The hallucinatory wish-fulfilment has had no effect: nothing comes. Beyond a certain time, the possibilities of postponing the hoped-for-satisfaction are exceeded. The object dies.' Green, *Diachrony in Psychoanalysis*, 120.
41 Coetzee, 'The marvels of Walter Benjamin'.
42 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 881.
43 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 458.
44 Gorky recruited the journalist Mikhail Koltsov as editor and the resulting book was published in 1937, a year after Gorky's death. See Bird, 'Revolutionary synchrony'.
45 Published in English as Wolf, *One Day a Year, 1960–2000* and *One Day a Year, 2001–2011*.
46 See Sehgal, 'A masterpiece that requires your full attention'.
47 The diary, for example, could be considered as 'a new mode of writing for a new mode of living'. See Levensen, 'Stephen's diary', 185.
48 Because 'I was someone else then'. See Levensen, 'Stephen's diary', 191.
49 Green, *Diachrony in Psychoanalysis*, 115–17.
50 Invented by Tim Berners-Lee in 1989, the internet didn't become widely accessible until 1994. In 1997, a few months before we published *On Boredom*, Larry Page and Sergey Brin registered the domain name for Google.

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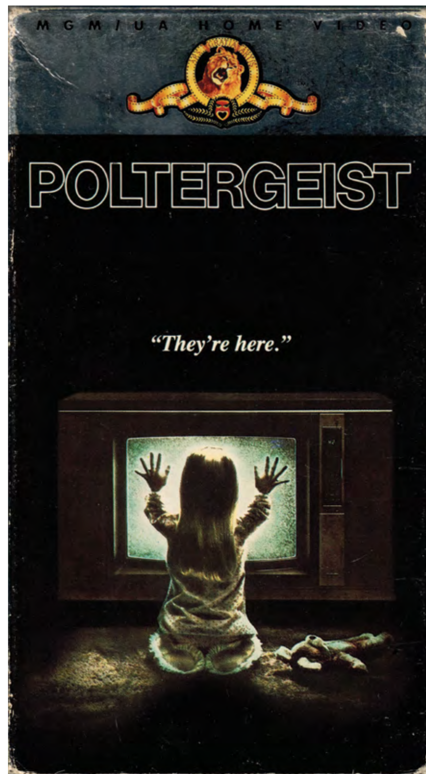
4

There was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour

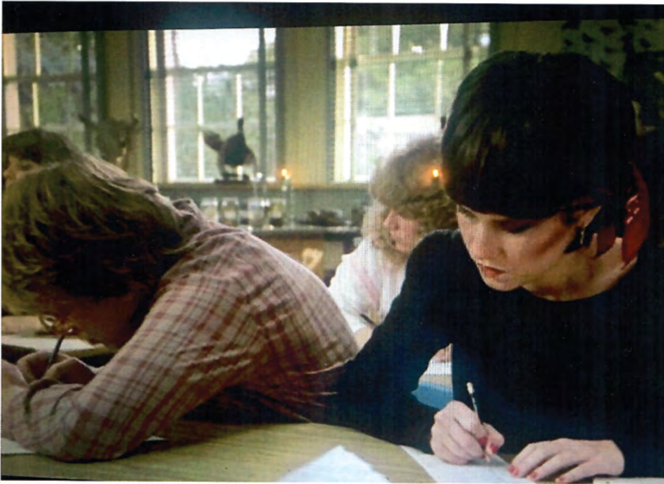
Mathew Hale

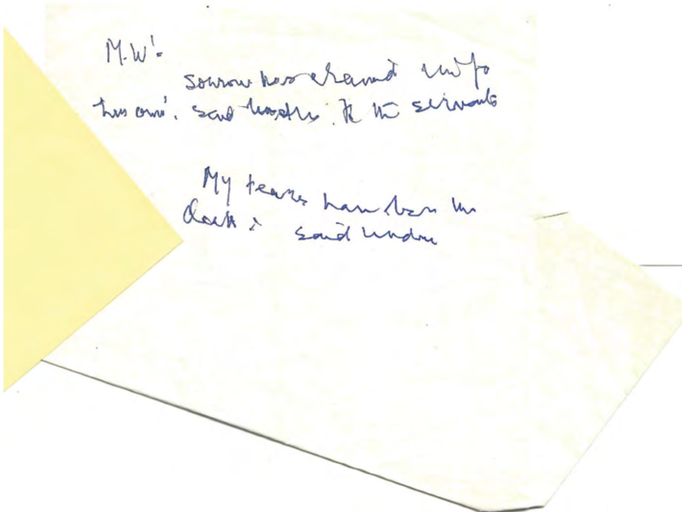


I just love this image on the cover of my old *Poltergeist* video. Coming from outside my project it confirmed the 'magical' aspects of human/computer interaction, and the physical skin of the virtual, back in slow, glass, computer-1997.

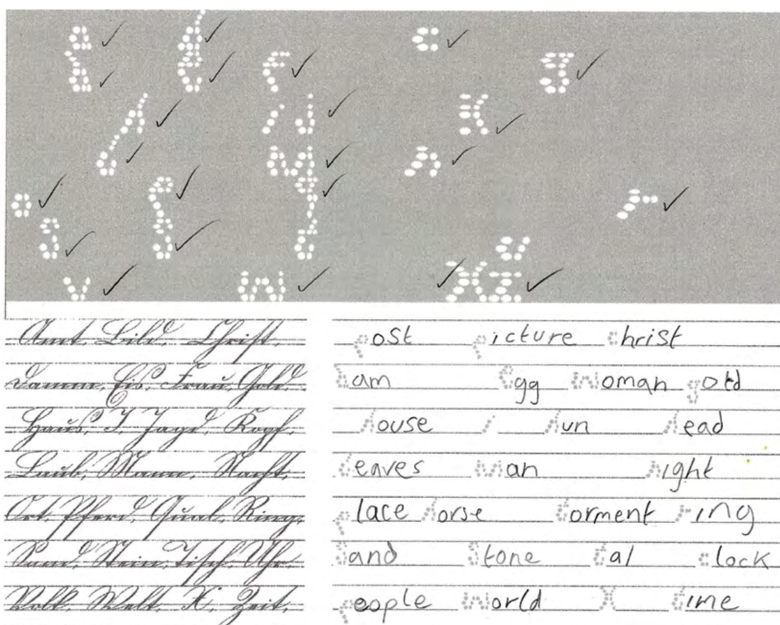
There Was Silence in Heaven About the Space of Half an Hour instructs the participant to print out a form and then press it against the screen of their computer monitor, facing towards the screen, and hold it there for five seconds. Here is a photo of me doing that in 1997. The warmth coming off the cathode ray tube and its curving surface are memorable.

The computer begins 'translating' the German words. Each letter is written on screen by a modular font, designed by me, which mimics handwritten script, allowing each letter to appear gradually, as it does when handwritten. Adults who have transcribed these 25 translated words often find that their handwriting has become a 'childish' version of itself.

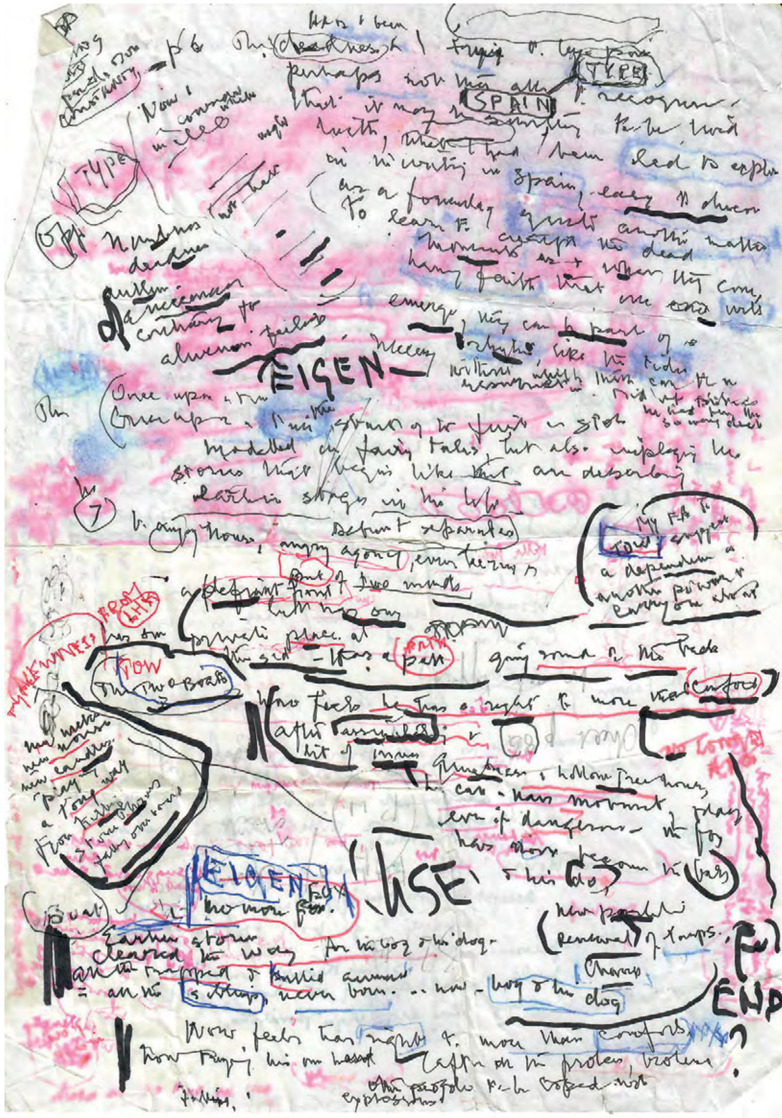




Transcribing is a very dull activity. At the time I made the piece I was also working as a typist for psychoanalyst Marion Milner. This was usually not dull at all, quite the opposite, but it could be. Marion was in her nineties and her script was hard to decipher. Much of my time was spent walking to and fro between the room where I typed and Marion's work room, reading back the text I had typed to check it was as she had intended.



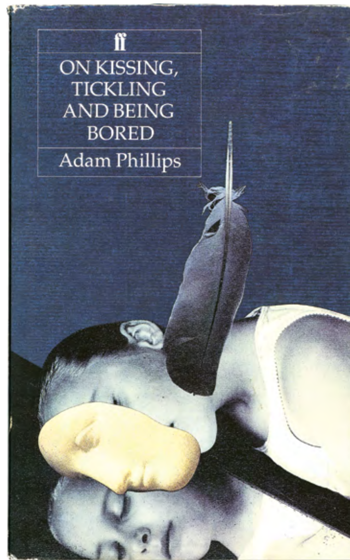
Here is an example of a form completed by someone who performed the process demanded by *There Was Silence in Heaven About the Space of Half an Hour*. You can see how their writing has become childish because each word appears letter by letter, one at a time. The 25 example words, translated, are extraordinarily suggestive, and put me in mind of the Apocalypse – and Dalí/Buñuel. Here they are: Post, Picture, Christ, Dam, Egg, Woman, Gold, House, Hunt, Head, Leaves, Man, Night, Place, Horse, Torment, Ring, Sand, Stone, Table, Clock, People, World, Time, Everything.



Sometimes Marion’s manuscript pages got truly baroque as she worked over them during the week between my visits. She continued writing in bed at night. The book which resulted, *Bothered by Alligators*, was her last creative project, and was published in 2012. She was born in 1900.

Here is a copy of Milner's *The Suppressed Madness of Sane Men*, exactly as she last left it. I photographed her house before her possessions were moved, the day after her death. Part of the reason that I did was to help keep track of the different parts of her unfinished manuscript. Mainly I did it because her life and house were so rich when they were suddenly gone, and her work and friendship felt so significant to me. There is another slide I took showing *On Not Being Able to Paint* lying in a shaft of sunlight.

On Not Being Able to Paint is a book whose entire subject might be said to be the process by which one ceases to be a little bored by what one makes. The process by which one passes through aspiring to copy and match received models of painting, in Milner's case, and then begin to be driven by desire and its mysterious imperatives, many of them unconscious.



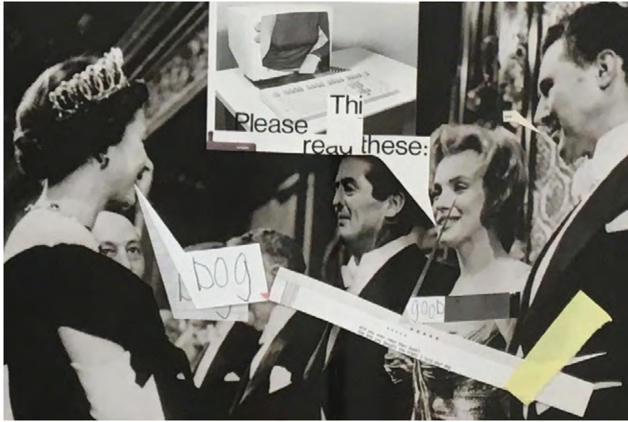
A few years before her death Marion had seen my new hardback copy of *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored* by Adam Phillips, in my shoulder bag. She immediately asked if she could borrow it. I said yes, because she knew the writer and I recognised that she should read it immediately. She told me she thought it was very good. I used to look for it vaguely over the next couple of years until one day I suddenly spotted it at the bottom of a pile. I took it to her saying I had found it and had she finished with it? She returned it to me and when I left her house I got on the tube to go directly to see my psychotherapist, Nina Farhi, who had been recommended to me by Marion. I was immediately absorbed in reading the book which was extra fascinating because Marion had made a lot of notes in the margins.

Suddenly I realised that I had arrived at Golders Green and, rushing out of the carriage before the doors closed, I left the book behind me. I was devastated. I had only just got it back and in an improved form too, embellished with Marion's marginalia. When I got to my session I was disproportionately upset and as I told Nina what had happened, lying on my back, I made a slip of the tongue, giving the title as *On Kissing, Tickling, and Not Being Bored*. 'Did you hear what you just said?', she asked.

I had moved the 'Not' from the title of my favorite book of Marion's, *On Not Being Able to Paint*, and transferred it to Adam Phillips's volume of essays. Losing the book had been worth it, perhaps. I was left with not being bored and being able to paint.

Since before I knew her personally, but after having read *On Not Being Able to Paint* at art school, I have made 'free drawings', as advocated and practised by Marion Milner. The term refers to a process: beginning a drawing without knowing what it will be and allowing it to elaborate itself. This is a drawing that I made in the same year that I left the book on the train. It also perhaps has to do with *There Was Silence in Heaven About the Space of Half an Hour*, also made in 1997. There is a kind of sadistic enjoyment to the task of writing and maybe being punished for writing badly. Handwriting always remains the product of schooling. That echo never entirely fades. I can feel the sexuality coming through it. That is a good sign for me when I'm inside the process of drawing. What does it mean to bring adults to write in a childish hand?

I came across this unusual image of a naked boy holding his 'mother's' breasts from behind her. It immediately reminded me of the sensation of pressing the form against the old computer screen.



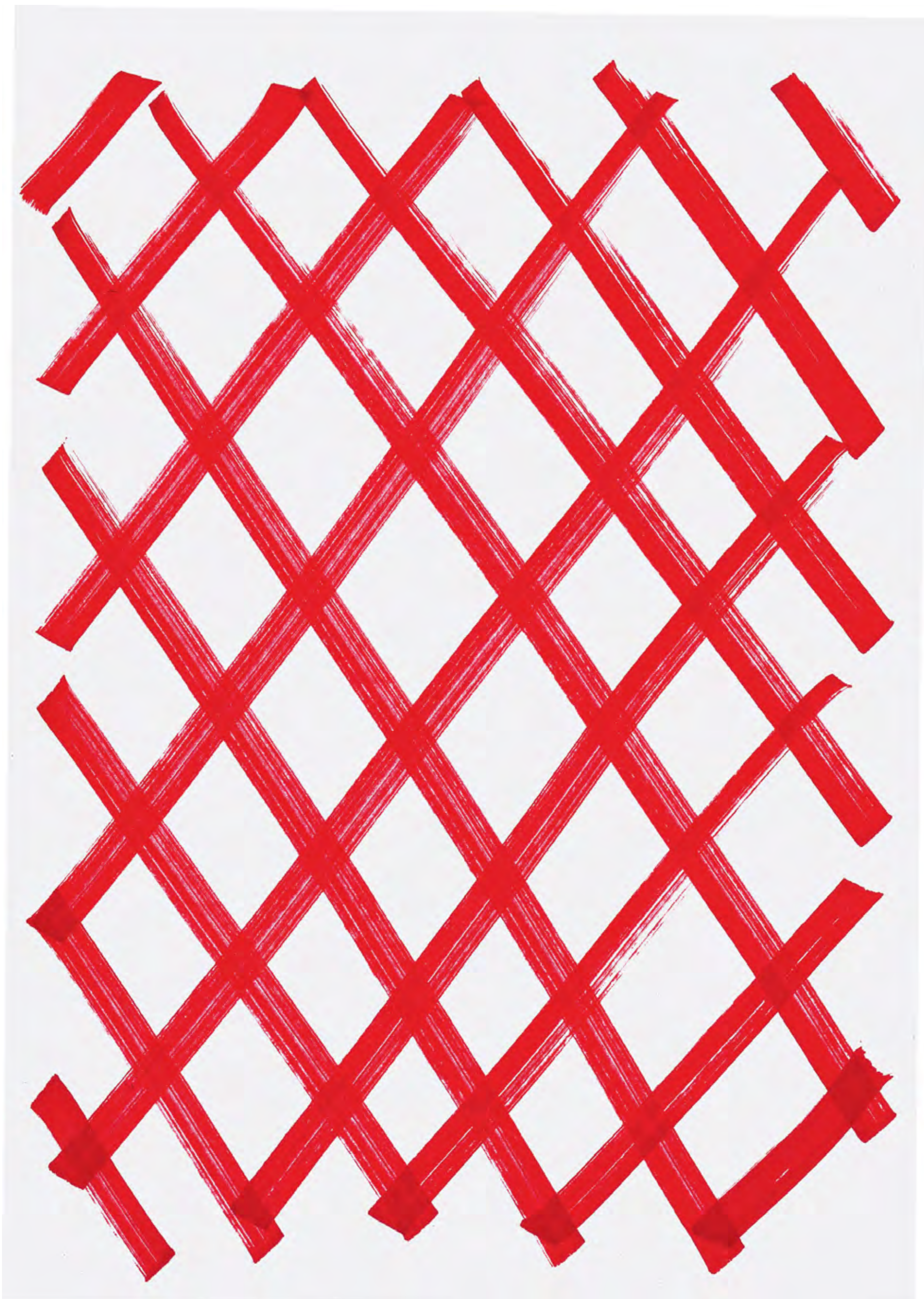
Last year I exhibited a collage I had made of a phantasy interaction between Marilyn Monroe and Queen Elizabeth II. Here we see a detail. The queen asks for help with reading and Marilyn coaches her – via the metaphor of her chest on a computer screen. ‘Please read thi/ese,’ it says.

… Which allows us to loop back around to the cover image of *Poltergeist*.

I guess, like *On Not Being Able to Paint*, this pathway, above, describes a process of becoming no longer bored by one’s work. That did happen to me, especially so in the years after I mistakenly enunciated the words, ‘On Kissing, Tickling, and Not Being Bored’.

(The End)

Work No. 422, 2005, © Martin Creed. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2020.
Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.



5

Extract from *Satin Island* (2015)

Tom McCarthy

On buffering

7.3 The meeting with the Minister took place. It's odd to spend time in the company of somebody with power – I mean real, executive power: to hang out with a powerful person. You would imagine they exude this power at every turn, with each one of their gestures; that their very bodies sweat the stuff, wafting its odour at you through expensive clothes. But in fact, the thing most noticeable about this Minister was her lack of powerful aura. She seemed very normal. She wasn't physically striking in any way: neither particularly tall nor particularly short; neither fat nor thin; neither attractive nor ugly. Her accent bore no traces of excessive privilege, nor of its masking. She must have been about my age, early forties. She was wearing sober, business-like clothes, with the exception of her shoes, which had small faux-fur tiger-skin stripes on them. We were sitting around a table: Peyman, Tapio, myself, this Minister and two of her staff. The way we were positioned allowed me to see these shoes, and what she was doing with them. As first one, then another person presented, responded, queried, clarified, proposed, counter-proposed and so forth, she rubbed one of her feet against the other, so that her right shoe's toe, its outer edge, moved up and down against the side-arch of its neighbour. She performed this activity non-stop throughout the meeting, even when she herself was talking. I thought at first that she was scratching herself, that she had a bite or irritation on her left foot that was itching. Twenty or so minutes into the meeting, though, I had to abandon this hypothesis: while even low-level scratching has a kind of franticness about it, an angry, stop-start rhythm, her movement was so regular and methodical that it seemed almost automatic. With each upwards motion of the toe against the arch, the

tiger-skin, its fur, would be drawn upwards, ruffled until its hairs all separated, each one bristling to attention; with each downward or return stroke these hairs would all lie back flat again, losing their individuality amidst the smooth, sleek flow of feline stripes.

7.4 After the best part of an hour, I realised what this Minister was up to: she was attempting, with her right foot, to undo her left shoe's buckle (which, unusually, fastened on the inward- rather than the outward-facing side). This, I realised as I watched her, was a quite ambitious undertaking. Buckles are finicky; once you remove hands from the equation, mastery of them becomes well-nigh impossible. Yet this is what her right foot, with a persistence and determination that I found increasingly admirable, was trying to do. The buckle had some give in it; the strap had been made pliant by (I presumed) repeated previous attempts to carry out this operation. At the same time, the strap still possessed enough stiffness to ensure that a push applied to its free end caused a whole stretch to be forced up towards – and ultimately through – the metal frame, rather than just crumpling. This didn't, as I mentioned, happen all at once: it took an hour of tiny upward nudges, and of tiny corresponding downward smoothings of the shoe's surrounding surface, for the strap to travel all the way up through the frame's lower side; then, continuing its upward movement even though there was no further *up* for it to go, it snaked back over on itself in such a way that *up* turned into *down* with no perceptible change of direction – and, in performing this manoeuvre, cleared the central bar with all the grace of a pole-vaulter, the prong falling away beneath its belly as it did so. Free of all encumbrances, the strap then slipped with rapid ease through the frame's upper side; and *presto!* the operation was completed.

7.5 As if this weren't impressive enough, the Minister then proceeded, using the outside edge of her right shoe's toe once more, to re-do the sequence in reverse. It took the best part of another hour; but she managed it as well. As soon as she'd returned the buckle to its starting position, its original state, she called the meeting to a close. I found the whole experience of observing this small episode, this drama that (due to the shape of the table, its supporting legs, the layout of our chairs and similar factors) I alone could see, deeply satisfying. How do you think it went? Peyman asked me after we had left. Oh, I answered: excellently.

7.6 Back in the office, as our work on the Koob-Sassen Project kicked in and the general traffic levels edged up, we started experiencing problems

with our bandwidth. There was too much information, I guess, shuttling through the servers, down the cables, through the air. My computer, like those of all my colleagues, was afflicted by frequent bouts of buffering. I'd hear Daniel swearing in the next room – *Fucking buffering!* – and others shouting the same thing upstairs, their voices funnelled to me by the ventilation system. The buffering didn't bother me, though; I'd spend long stretches staring at the little spinning circle on my screen, losing myself in it. Behind it, I pictured hordes of bits and bytes and megabytes, all beavering away to get the requisite data to me; behind them, I pictured a giant *uber*-server, housed somewhere in Finland or Nevada or Uzbekistan: stacks of memory banks, satellite dishes sprouting all around them, pumping out information non-stop, more of it than any single person would need in their lifetime, pumping it all my way in an endless, unconditional and grace-conferring act of generosity. *Datum est:* it is given. It was this gift, I told myself, this bottomless and inexhaustible torrent of giving, that made the circle spin: the data itself, its pure, unfiltered content as it rushed into my system, which, in turn, whirred into streamlined action as it started to reorganise it into legible form. The thought was almost sublimely reassuring.

7.7 But on this thought's outer reaches lay a much less reassuring counter-thought: what if it were just a circle, spinning on my screen, and nothing else? What if the supply chain, its great bounty, had dried up, or been cut off, or never been connected in the first place? Each time that I allowed this possibility to take hold of my mind, the sense of bliss gave over to a kind of dread. If it was a video file that I was trying to watch, then at the bottom of the screen there'd be that line, that bar that slowly fills itself in twice: once in bold red and, at the same time, running ahead of that, in fainter grey; the fainter section, of course, has to remain in advance of the bold section, and of the cursor showing which part of the video you're actually watching at a given moment; if the cursor and red section catch up, then buffering sets in again. Staring at this bar, losing myself in it just as with the circle, I was granted a small revelation: it dawned on me that what I was *actually* watching was nothing less than the skeleton, laid bare, of time or memory itself. Not our computers' time and memory, but our own. This was its structure. We require experience to stay ahead, if only by a nose, of our *consciousness* of experience – if for no other reason than that the latter needs to make sense of the former, to (as Peyman would say) narrate it both to others and ourselves, and, for this purpose, has to be fed with a constant, unsorted supply of fresh sensations and events. But when the narrating cursor catches right up

with the rendering one, when occurrences and situations don't replenish themselves quickly enough for the awareness they sustain, when, no matter how fast they regenerate, they're instantly devoured by a mouth too voracious to let anything gather or accrue unconsumed before it, then we find ourselves jammed, stuck in limbo: we can enjoy *neither* experience nor consciousness of it. Everything becomes buffering, and buffering becomes everything. The revelation pleased me. I decided I would start a dossier on buffering.

6

Creative boredom and Thomas Demand

Margaret Iversen

It is well known that Walter Benjamin distinguished between two kinds of experience for which he used the German words *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, which can be respectively translated as genuine, long or authentic experience and isolated or immediate experience. He associated these different kinds of experience with the shift from pre-modern to modern industrial conditions of life and labour. It is less well known that Benjamin also conceived of two kinds of boredom, between which he didn't clearly distinguish and for which he only had the one German word, *Langeweile*, literally, long while or long time. Each type of boredom has its corresponding form of experience, but only pre-modern boredom is conducive to the formation of genuine experience. Benjamin's account of the atrophy of genuine experience and memory, owing to modern industrial and urban conditions, has been revived in the current context of debates concerning the effects of information and communication technologies. Contemporary artists, including Thomas Demand, have addressed this crisis with work aimed at encouraging something equivalent to the boredom associated with experiential receptivity described by Benjamin in 'The storyteller'. Demand's series of photographs based on iPhone snaps, the *Dailies*, requires a particular approach that takes into account the artist's description of them as 'haiku moments'.[1] Roland Barthes's reflections on the haiku, which anticipate his account of photography in *Camera Lucida*, help to draw out this suggestion.

The two boredoms

Benjamin's notion of pre-modern boredom, which he elaborates in 'The storyteller" (1936) and elsewhere, is bound up with the rhythms of pre-industrial forms of labour, such as weaving and spinning.[2] These activities encourage a relaxed, receptive, self-forgetful, almost absent state of mind. It is in this dreamlike atmosphere that storytelling thrives. Storytelling is fundamentally about assimilating, sharing and transmitting experience. Experience in the deepest sense, *Erfahrung*, depends upon these processes which enable the retention of new experiences, the assimilation of them to past ones, and the formation of personal or collective narratives. Stories help to weave together a largely unconscious repository of shared understanding. This is partly because the story remains open, ambiguous and enigmatic. As Benjamin put it, the story is free from explanation and, consequently, 'it preserves and concentrates its energy and is capable of releasing it after a long time'. But the conditions that induce boredom and foster storytelling no longer exist. As Benjamin put it, 'boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience'. This dream bird's 'nesting places – the activities that are intimately associated with boredom – are already extinct in the cities and are declining in the country as well'. When we lack the open-ended time of boredom, 'the gift of listening is lost and the community of listeners disappears'.[3]

In his helpful essay 'The atrophy of experience: Walter Benjamin and boredom', Carlo Salzani argues that the conditions that caused the atrophy of experience and destroyed 'boredom as mental relaxation … at the same time also produced a new form of boredom'.[4] The second type of boredom, which we mainly encounter in Benjamin's essays on Baudelaire, is a kind of enervated restlessness caused by the constant stimulation and shocks of modern life and labour. Baudelaire's 'spleen', which he called 'a soul-deadening spiritual condition', is related to this boredom.[5] In one of his poems, he figured this mood of depression as a city plunged in fog which, Benjamin noted, is 'the preferred canvas for embroideries of boredom'.[6] To characterise the psychological impact of industrial technologies and urban existence, Benjamin relied on Freud's 'Beyond the pleasure principle' (1920). He summarised Freud's thesis as follows: 'The greater the shock factor in particular impressions, the more vigilant consciousness has to be in screening stimuli; the more effectively it does so, the less these impressions enter long experience (*Erfahrung*) and the more they correspond to the concept of isolated experience

(*Erlebnis*).'[7] Freud thought that shocks are parried or cushioned by a part of the brain that has become hard or inorganic and so resistant to the effects of stimulus. Following Baudelaire, Benjamin compared the function of this defensive, vigilant consciousness to a fencer parrying blows. The mental shocks caused by jostling in city crowds, repetitive factory labour, clock time and the blitz of media info-imagery eventually leave one incapable of properly assimilating new impressions. This breaks up one's sense of time into a series of discrete events and leads to the characteristic boredom of modernity. The account of modern boredom outlined by Benjamin was also influenced by Georg Simmel, who argued in 'The metropolis and mental life' (1903) that modern city-dwellers develop a blasé attitude in response to the levelling effect of money, which 'hollows out the core of things'. For Simmel, 'the essence of the blasé attitude is an indifference toward the distinction between things'. Things 'appear to the blasé person in a homogeneous, flat and grey colour with no one of them worthy of being preferred over another'.[8] For Benjamin, the modern city-dweller's dual defence of hyper-alertness and unresponsiveness prevent just the sort of relaxed, semi-unconscious, self-forgetful receptivity associated with pre-modern boredom. As a result, their experience is shallow and disconnected.

Thomas Demand

For Benjamin, the loss of a receptive state of boredom and the consequent atrophy of genuine experience are closely associated with a crisis of memory; what is merely lived through leaves no trace. In 'On some motifs in Baudelaire' (1939), he observed that technologies such as photography, which make it easy to retain and retrieve an event, have a deleterious effect on our capacity for long experience and substantive memory. Since our prosthetic devices remember for us, our power of remembrance is weakened. In addition, the instantaneous snapping of the modern camera shutter gives 'the moment a posthumous shock', insulating it from lived experience.[9] There is a certain irony, then, in Thomas Demand's use of photography as the medium for work aimed at countering the deepening contemporary crisis of experience and memory. He is well aware of the tension: in a conversation with the novelist Daniel Kehlmann, he linked his fears of an impending crisis of memory to digital technologies. In the age of Facebook, he noted, the distinction one formerly drew between collective and personal memory

is collapsing. In theory, one could publicly document and post one's entire life online. One could construct 'a lifelong photo album in the Cloud'. He continues:

> But that also means you are storing your own deepest memories offsite. These days this most private aspect of human life is being commercialized … We know we've got all these photos readily accessible, so we forget them. And what happens in the long term with the human mind if it now structures knowledge according to how it can be accessed and retrieved? After all, you for one, are still more interested in the contents of Proust's work than in knowing where the book is on the shelf.[10]

In his response, Kehlmann proposes an analogy between the current situation of knowledge and the use of satellite navigation. Satnav allows you to find your way around a city without knowing its geography. So also in the case of knowledge: you can find information so effortlessly that 'very quickly you lose any deeper understanding of connections and contexts'.[11]

Yet concern over a crisis of memory long predates digitalisation. It is surely no accident that, in precisely this context, Demand mentions Proust, a novelist deeply concerned with the problem of memory. In 'The image of Proust' (1929), Benjamin argued that Proust's notion of involuntary memory more closely resembles forgetting, for it is in dreams and idle thoughts that we weave meaningful patterns with the disparate threads that constitute experience. These largely unconscious memories are only retrievable accidentally. Conversely, the information about the past retrieved by voluntary memory 'retains no trace of that past'.[12] The sort of memory that relies on deliberate recall is hollow, simulacral or, as Samuel Beckett remarked in his book on Proust, 'it presents the past in monochrome'.[13] Benjamin suggested that '*A la recherche du temps perdu* may be regarded as an attempt to produce experience … in a synthetic way under today's social conditions.'[14] But the conditions required for what might be called creative boredom no longer exist and cannot be resurrected. In these circumstances, we must ask: is it possible to create, in the midst of our distracted state of boredom, the conditions conducive to genuine, long experience? Can the technical, mediatic image be made memorable? These are the questions addressed by Demand's unusual photographic practice of photographing full-size paper and cardboard models of scenarios often based on media images.

In a conversation with the theorist, film-maker and storyteller Alexander Kluge, Demand acknowledged our condition of near-total immersion in the mediatic: 'I gain a large part of my experience exclusively through this media-based narrative on the world and not, as one would have done one or two generations ago on "primary experience".'[15] Or, again: 'I'm at the end of an entire chain of worlds of images that present themselves to me. All experience, all I essentially am, is largely the upshot of things passed on to me.'[16] In the same conversation, Demand revealed that many of the images he uses have a particular personal charge. *Room* (1994), for example, shows a destroyed office which, we learn, is based on a photograph documenting the aftermath of the unsuccessful attempt on Hitler's life by Wehrmacht officers in 1944. The photograph hung in Demand's school room. For those who grew up in post-war Germany, this scene has more than merely historical interest: Demand says that it 'had been seared in my mind'.[17] These words recall Benjamin's comment in the 'Little history of photography' (1931) about early photography being marked by 'the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject'.[18] The implication seems to be that, for Demand, certain trauma-laden media images have the power to puncture the psyche's protective shield and so form the basis of memorable, long experience. Benjamin suggested that this is what Baudelaire accomplished with his poetry: he exposed himself to the shocks of modern life, but to this immediate experience (*Erlebnis*) he 'has given the weight of long experience (*Erfahrung*)'.[19] An example of this effect, cited by Benjamin, is Baudelaire's poem 'A une passante' ('To a passer-by'). Jostled in a city street, the narrator passes a tall veiled woman in deep mourning who is borne along and swept away by the crowd. It is a case of love at last sight – a sudden and fleeting encounter. The image is striking, isolated, but for the narrator-poet and reader alike, unforgettable.[20]

Demand aims to transform our exposure to mass media imagery into something like authentic experience, retroactively; he is an artist as storyteller for modern times. If, for Benjamin, the storyteller always impresses something personal on otherwise remote events, then, for Demand, this bears on his use of personally affecting source imagery: 'Things must be slowed down,' he says, 'and for me that involves making something with my hands.'[21] In this respect, he is comparable to the storyteller as craftsman whose task it is to 'fashion the raw material of experience'.[22] As raw material, Demand often chooses 'blurred' mass media images of events that form part of our personal biographies, but which also circulate in the public sphere. By laboriously constructing a

model and photographing it with a large-format, analogue film camera, he detaches these images from mass media information and makes them enigmatic, prolonging our attention. This is comparable to what the storyteller does. In a story, things are reported with accuracy, but as Benjamin notes, 'the psychological connections among the events are not forced on the reader'. The story is bare; it 'has a chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis'.[23] In other words, Demand's photographs of models of mass media imagery acquire an internal opacity that encourages a receptive, unconscious reverie analogous to pre-modern boredom.

The *Dailies*

As we have seen, Demand appropriates hyper-mediated but personally affecting photographic images and transforms them into objects of long experience. In an interview, he made this clear, noting that his art involved 'pulling true facts into fiction'.[24] This account relates well to Demand's *Histories*, but is it equally appropriate in the case of the series he initiated in 2008 called the *Dailies*? This series engages with the ubiquitous, banal, everyday practice of taking photographs with one's smartphone. The device makes possible the habit of snapping, sharing and saving fairly inconsequential images which then serve as a little archive of personal memories. The activity typifies the distracted state of boredom – a state, as Jonathan Crary put it, of 'constantly engaged, interfacing, interacting, communicating, responding or processing within some telematic milieu'.[25] Yet in an interview, Demand remarked that the *Dailies* 'are like these little haiku moments: you see something that has a very mundane and trivial beauty, and then you walk on'.[26] Haiku moments may be mundane, but they nonetheless have the capacity to puncture the general 'telematic milieu'. For this series, Demand selects images from his own ephemeral iPhone snaps, makes life-size paper and card models of them, photographs the models using his large-format Sinar camera, and then has prints made using the dye transfer technique. This printing technique is very complex, time-consuming and nearly obsolete, but capable of producing extraordinarily rich and subtle colours.[27] The *Dailies* are rectangular in format, in both portrait and landscape orientations, and of variable dimensions, amounting to an area under one square metre. In other words, given the current context, they are quite modest in size, as are the things photographed. Also, unlike Demand's large-scale *Histories*, which are laminated behind plexiglass

and unframed, the *Dailies* are framed and glazed. It is as though, after a period working within the contemporary equivalent of the genre of history painting, Demand turned his attention to the more intimate, 'low' genre of still life. Like the *Histories*, the *Dailies* respond to the atrophy of experience, but they do so in a different way.

In his article, 'Dailiness according to Demand', Hal Foster picks up on the artist's suggestive reference to the haiku moment and poses the pertinent question, 'can everyday things still prompt epiphanic insights in an administered world?'[28] Can a photograph pierce the muffled anxiety and restless boredom of contemporary life? I would like to pursue these questions further with the help of Roland Barthes's fascinating discussion of the haiku in his late seminars published posthumously as *The Preparation of the Novel* (2003). *Preparation* contains a section devoted to the boredom and crippling lethargy suffered by many writers. Yet Barthes also declared that 'art is indeed this power that relieves boredom: it cuts off (short circuits) boredom'.[29]

The haiku is a traditional Japanese poetic form that consists of three lines, each with a prescribed number of syllables, 5–7–5. Barthes remarks that a haiku is best appreciated seen on the printed page as 'a little block of writing, like an ideogrammatical square'. The haiku's appeal to vision is owing not just to the arrangement of the printed words, but also to the white spaces created by them, which impart an 'aerated' lightness. Barthes also discusses the form's popular appeal. In Japan, haiku induce in readers the desire to write their own; it is a popular pastime.[30] The brevity, small format, popular appeal and lack of any strict division between author and reader all suggest the plausibility of the analogy with smartphone photography, but the analogy, as we shall see, goes deeper.

The *Dailies* resist the dominant trend in art photography for large, theatrically staged and/or digitally manipulated work. Faced with this dominance, many artists are exploring the possibilities of an altogether different ideal of photography. Moyra Davey, for example, writing in 2008 (the year of the first *Dailies*), forcefully stated her objection: 'The problem, to state it baldly, is one of stilt coupled with bloat. Absent from these oversized tableaux is the inherently surrealist, contingent, "found" quality of the vernacular photograph.' She concludes that what is missing in contemporary art photography is accident.[31] She is not alone in this surmise. In fact, even Andreas Gursky, a master of the digitally manipulated 'oversized tableau', has recently been experimenting with taking source photos from moving cars and high-speed trains, in order to produce accidental effects, unexpected distortions and loss of focus.

Similarly, Demand's interest in phone photography can be seen in the context of a certain dissatisfaction with the immaculate, totally controlled and imposing nature of contemporary photography. Michael Fried famously argued that this kind of photography, including Demand's, demonstrates its thoroughgoing authorial intentionality and so its realisation of photography's ambition to be a fine art, like painting.[32] Yet while Demand's model-building, lighting and photography are undertaken in studio conditions, the images themselves, based on appropriated media sources, often epitomise the accident – either historical catastrophe or natural disaster. Consider, for instance, the ironically titled *Control Room* (2011), showing the aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear disaster.[33] The *Dailies* represent another kind of accident – the contingency that marks everyday life.

The situation of contemporary photographic art bears comparison with the literary scene to which Barthes was responding in his appeal to the haiku. In his seminars of 1979–80, he set out his aim of writing a novel that would be fragmentary, intimate, domestic.[34] He had been musing on this project for some time: for instance, in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975), he wrote under the heading 'Projected Books': '*Incidents* (mini-texts, one-liners, haiku, notations, puns, everything that falls, like a leaf), etc.'[35] He elaborated this idea in an essay on the writer Pierre Loti: 'The incident – already much weaker than the accident (but perhaps more disturbing) – is simply what falls gently, like a leaf, on life's carpet; it is that faint, fugitive crease given to the fabric of days; it is what can be just barely noted: a kind of notation degree zero.'[36] Foster points out that the root of both accident and incident is *cadere*, to fall, and that 'gravity is foregrounded' in many of the *Dailies*, which 'pressures the intentionality that otherwise suffuses the work'. He relates this to the aleatory strategies of the historical avant-garde, such as Jean Arp's *Squares Arranged According to the Laws of Chance* (1917).[37] While the *Dailies* do make compositional allusions to the early avant-garde, they actually have more in common with Barthes's conception of things that fall on life's carpet. The marked point of view, often from above, is intended to make them look like records of a momentary glance.

In one of the seminars in *The Preparation of the Novel*, 'Daily practice of notation', Barthes discusses his habit of carrying around a notebook in order to jot down incidents that attract his attention; he hoped that these brief notes, prose haiku, would form the basis of a new kind of novel. Particularly relevant in this context is his observation that the haiku verges on the banal, while at the same time giving subtlety and nuance to the everyday. The task of poetry, epitomised by haiku, is to rescue a sense

of nuance in a culture bent on standardisation. As Antoine Compagnon put it, for Barthes, 'the haiku emblematizes, individuates, nuances the world, instead of abstracting and conceptualizing it'.[38] Further, according to Barthes, haiku touches on a 'language void' in the subject – a void, not owing to despair, but rather to jubilation, to the sense that life is worth living. It is the loss of language that comes when one is 'alive to the world'. It 'retains a trace, a scent of this resistance to meaning'. It is a scrap, a sliver of vision – absolutely contingent, subtle, painful, real. It evokes 'what, in a unique instant, once *befell* the subject: a voice, a sound (contingency defines the perishable, the mortal)'.[39] Haiku is an activity of writing between life and death. It sparks the *satori*, or mental jolt, that Barthes would later associate with the photographic 'punctum'. Like photography, its impression of presence is in the past, and so edged with absence. Barthes also notes that neither medium says 'I', although both imply a subject who has noted the scene – and thought it worth noting.

The *Dailies* suggest that even the mundane, daily practice of smartphone photography is capable of a haiku-like vividness. The difficult task Demand set himself was to show the mundaneness and the vividness at once. Some of the *Dailies* emphasise the mundane side of the haiku. This is especially true of the images apparently chosen to relate to the site of their first exhibition. The photographs were displayed in an unusual building, designed for the Commercial Travellers' Association in Sydney, whose hotel bedrooms are arranged, like flower petals, around a central core. *Daily #10* (2008), which shows a footstool with a bold flower pattern, alludes to this arrangement. Other photographs evoke the legendary boredom and alienation of the travelling salesman: these include the corner of an anonymous bathroom, a 'do not disturb' sign hanging from a door knob, and 'artfully' arranged processed cheese slices with tongs. Other images have the essential haiku-like quality of being both recognisable and surprising, which is also the classic definition of wit. *Daily #15* (2011), for instance, shows a chain link fence into which someone (or a couple) has wedged two empty paper coffee cups, one nestling inside the other. *Daily #14* (2011) visually thematises the haiku's characteristic resistance to meaning; it shows foliage seen obscurely through a window of frosted glass, rendered, I suppose, with tracing paper. Particularly haiku-like is *Daily #20* (2012), probably because it is one of the few images that indicate a time of day, morning, and a trace of the previous night's activity – a plastic glass of half-finished beer on a sloping window ledge. The more one studies the image, the more its complexity grows. Light, shade and reflections play on the various (paper) surfaces; the beer acts as an impromptu spirit level;

the window mirrors the glass, tilting the beer in the opposite direction. (But how does one make a paper model of a reflected glass? With another paper glass?)

Although it is not a *Daily*, the most haiku-like work by Demand is, for me, *Rain* (2008), the animated film loop of rain drops bouncing off a shiny ground accompanied by the lovely rushing sound of a downpour. Barthes cites what could have been its source-haiku:

> No sound
> Other than the summer rain
> In the evening
> (Issa)

Barthes might have been thinking of this haiku, or one like it, when he observed that 'Haiku frequently bring short filmed sequences to mind.'[40] The film is actually a stop-motion animation: amazingly, the raindrops are formed of candy wrappers and the soundtrack is of eggs frying in a pan.[41] Relevant in this context is Benjamin's observation that one of the symptoms of modern urban existence is 'the diminishing magical power of rain'.[42] Although *Rain* is the very height of artifice, it nonetheless restores a moment of wonder to what has become the utterly dreary natural phenomenon of a rainy day. To reply to Foster's question, then, everyday things can still prompt epiphanic insights in an administered world.

The Preparation of the Novel makes it clear that Barthes's conception of photography, as expounded in *Camera Lucida*, is closely connected to his appreciation of the haiku. A whole seminar is devoted to the haiku's similarity to photography. 'By entering one art though another', he came to realise that they share a 'that-has been-temporality', that is, a certificate or impression of past presence. Barthes also points to the key importance of the two arts' lack of generality: if a haiku mentions rain, 'we perceive *the particular mode of being* of *that rain*'. The particularity of the haiku might seem to be in tension with Demand's model-making process. Yet Barthes also points to the major difference between photography and the art of haiku: a photograph is *bound to say everything*; it produces an excess of meaning. Haiku, on the other hand, are more 'abstract'.[43] Demand's model-making means that his images lack photography's 'inevitable details'; they have the bare, compact quality of a haiku.

In a sensitive reading of Benjamin's 'The storyteller', Peter Brooks glosses what it might mean to transform information into a memorable story. Interestingly, he stresses what is left out:

> What may need to be scrutinized in narrative is less its 'message', less its ostensible affirmations, and much more its interstices, its gaps, its moments of passage, the moment when something falls silent to indicate a transference, the moment when one begins to hear other possible voices in response.[44]

This insight bears on Demand's unusual process which, we can now see, is not just a matter of demonstrating the constructedness of photographic meaning or the 'sheer authorial intention' of photographic art. Rather, it is a way of creating blanks, interstices, gaps, silences that resist meaning and so of producing creative boredom and genuine experience in a synthetic way under today's social conditions.

Notes

1 Demand and Millard, 'Same author, different form'.
2 Benjamin, 'The storyteller', in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 143–66.
3 Benjamin, 'The storyteller', 148–9.
4 Salzani, 'The atrophy of experience', 131. See also Moran, 'Benjamin and boredom'. For an excellent overview of Benjamin's account of the waning of experience and its relation to the notion of aura, see Costello, 'Aura, face, photography'.
5 Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, 351.
6 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 356.
7 Benjamin, 'On some motifs in Baudelaire', in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 319.
8 Simmel, 'The metropolis and mental life', in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, 329–30.
9 Benjamin, 'On some motifs in Baudelaire', in *Selected Writings*, 337.
10 Demand, 'Model making', 77.
11 Demand, 'Model making', 80.
12 Benjamin, 'On the image of Proust', in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 238.
13 Beckett, *Proust*, 19.
14 Benjamin, 'On some motifs in Baudelaire', 315.
15 'A conversation between Alexander Kluge and Thomas Demand', in Colomina et al., *Thomas Demand*, 90.
16 'A conversation between Alexander Kluge and Thomas Demand', 68.
17 'A conversation between Alexander Kluge and Thomas Demand', 60, 71.
18 Benjamin, 'Little history of photography', in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 510. Demand's use of that term 'seared' is an oblique reference to Benjamin's essay, where the image in early photography is described as 'seared' into the plate. This in turn is a reference to the effect of traumatic events that impress themselves on the psyche.
19 Benjamin, 'On some motifs in Baudelaire', 343.
20 Benjamin, 'On some motifs in Baudelaire', 323–4. Baudelaire, 'To a passerby', in *The Flowers of Evil*.
21 'A conversation between Alexander Kluge and Thomas Demand', 85.
22 Benjamin, 'The storyteller', 162.
23 Benjamin, 'The storyteller', 148, 149.
24 Demand, 'Interview with Doug Aitkin'.
25 Crary, *24/7*, 15.
26 Demand and Millard, 'Same author, different form'.
27 In the introduction to the catalogue of the original exhibition of the series, Demand wrote movingly of 'the perfect mastery' and expertise of the few remaining people with the skills and materials required to print using the dye-transfer technique. See Demand et al., *The Dailies*, n.p.

28 Foster, ‘Dailiness according to Demand’.
29 Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 272. The sessions on the haiku ran from 6 January to 10 March 1979. *Camera Lucida* was written between April and June 1979. For an overview of Barthes’s reflections on boredom, see Badmington, *The Afterlives of Roland Barthes*, 83–108.
30 Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 26, 27, 35.
31 Davey, *Long Life Cool White*, 84, 81.
32 Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 261–76.
33 I discuss the *Histories* at greater length in Iversen, *Photography, Trace, and Trauma*, 100–9.
34 Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 22.
35 Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, 150.
36 Barthes, ‘Pierre Loti’, in *New Critical Essays*, 108. See Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, 175–211.
37 Foster, ‘Dailiness According to Demand’, 104–5.
38 Compagnon, ‘Roland Barthes’s novel’, 31.
39 Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 47, 50, 52.
40 Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, 58.
41 This information was confirmed by Demand’s gallery, Sprüth Magers, London.
42 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 102.
43 Barthes, *Preparation for the Novel*, 72, 73.
44 Brooks, *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*, 86.

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7 Professionally boring: the psychoanalyst's tragedy

Anouchka Grose

There are a number of generic responses when you say you're a psychoanalyst. One is to back away from you very fast; another is to tell you everything. Then again, it's common to say something along the lines of: 'That must be so interesting!' Or what probably amounts to much the same thing: 'Oh my God, that must be so boring. How on earth do you stand it?' Not only do you have to sit around all day listening to people ramble on about their first world problems, but you have to do it all with a measured, professional demeanour while wearing drab clothes. According to a certain set of (Anglo-Saxon) standards, a psychoanalyst is meant to be almost theatrically boring. They are supposed to have given up all their symptomatic weirdnesses; to have transcended the internal volatility that makes human beings fascinating.

Quite often, the people who come to see you also worry that they might be boring you, and money often gets brought in as the solution to the problem; as long as you pay your analyst you can bore them as fiercely as you like. Occasionally you get someone who's perhaps more worried than most; someone for whom 'boringness' is a key presenting symptom. I once worked with a woman who feared being dull. She felt she couldn't keep people around – they'd fade away from her as if there was nothing in her that could hold them. The factual details of her life were odd and interesting, but in a kind of low-key way. If you met her at a party and made small talk you'd be quite likely to stumble across these few slightly unusual details. Still, she desperately didn't want people to latch onto them, as it would feel too exposing. For her, there was so much pain attached to these biographical facts that it would be unbearable to talk about them with a stranger in a social setting. But to a

friendly, well-meaning stranger they might appear innocuous enough to ask further questions about. (Without giving too much away, it was something along the lines of her father having a slightly unusual job.) So she didn't let people know any of the 'interesting' things about her, but was then upset at how lonely she was, and how difficult it seemed to make and keep friends. In short, she was a perfect, neurotic impossibility machine. In the end it wasn't clear whether she feared being boring or interesting, but both were bad. The first left you isolated, and the second invaded – a seemingly insoluble topological problem.

This seems to be something quite different from the traditional 'bore' who leaves no space in his discourse for the other: somebody who talks *at* people rather than conversing *with* them. In analysis people often worry about being mistaken for one of these types and are keen to point out that they would never be so rude as to talk about themselves at such great length in any other situation.

It seems that some psychoanalysts themselves also bring a special array of concerns to this question of boring or interesting. On the side of their analysands, it's easy – all people are interesting, and if they seem boring then that's interesting in itself. How and why are they bringing this boringness about? What's the unconscious purpose of it? But, at least in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, the boringness or interestingness of the *analyst* is a subject that can sometimes become a little fraught. In her book *Jacques Lacan and Co.*, Elizabeth Roudinesco presents the psychoanalytic world of the 1960s as a culture of charismatic narcissists on the Lacanian side, versus castrated artisans on the International Psychoanalytical Association side. From a certain perspective it can seem that in order to be a 'proper', 'legitimate' psychoanalyst you have to be a bit boring.

It's always funny to see how small theoretical differences between the various analytic orientations play out in clinical practice. One of the thornier questions is the handling of the transference. In the French psychoanalytic tradition you have the idea of a transference to knowledge, as in knowledge of the unconscious, and definitely not great learnedness. As Lacan said in his twenty-second seminar, psychoanalysis can make you less ignorant, but it can't stop you being a pillock. In the course of your analysis you set to work to find out what your analyst appears to you to know about your unconscious. You want to know as much about it as they do. So your transference is to what they appear to you to know, and not so much to *them*. But in the Anglo-Saxon tradition there's more of an idea of a transference to the person of the analyst, coupled with the idea that transference interpretations

will form a very important part of the work. The analyst will consistently name the affects associated with the transference: 'You think I'm angry with you. You're sad because there's a break coming. You're trying to frustrate me by being late.' (Apologies for the caricature but, going by the evidence, it's not *that* much of a caricature.) In order to stay relatively 'clean' in this mess of difficult feelings the analyst has to be careful about how they appear to their patient. They have to be – or certainly to seem to be – well analysed themselves, otherwise they'd surely be equally responsible for all the dreadful feelings flying around. And that brings out another huge set of theoretical differences. What does it mean to be 'well analysed'? What are the aims of psychoanalysis? Are you supposed to be able to control your drives better? To have a healthy, flexible ego? To be realistic about the kinds of satisfactions you can expect from life? Or to have seen beyond all your ideals and identifications (in which case 'looking like a psychoanalyst' would be the proof that you hadn't quite got there yet)?

How to Survive as a Psychotherapist (1993) is the name of a widely read book by Nina Coltart, a British independent psychoanalyst and one-time vice president of the British Psychoanalytical Society (i.e. a premier league castrated artisan). As the title suggests, the book deals with the daily 'realities' of working as a psychoanalyst. It attempts to take the word 'survival' seriously, focusing on the idea that psychoanalysis or psychotherapy is a very challenging form of work for reasons that are ludicrously varied. Your survival as an analyst might depend on things as disparate as your capacity to bear the suicide of one of your analysands, your ability to be equally frank about sex and money, and your aptitude for sitting in the same chair for eight to ten hours a day and not saying much. In this context, Coltart also singles out your ability to dress appropriately for the job; failure to do so will apparently cause your patients no end of embarrassment and will no doubt therefore have an impact on your survival in the field. For Coltart, 'appropriately' equals 'conservatively', which again brings out the question of what a psychoanalyst *is*. Are they supposed to function as a model of perfect psychic equanimity and social normalcy, or can they be something more like a refreshingly *abnormal* co-conversationalist? And what impact might these basic suppositions have on the way they dress?

The book came out in 1993, the year before Coltart retired, and there is a small section in it about choosing the right chair. 'I cannot emphasize enough how essential a good chair is,' she writes,[1] which could seem banal, until you hear (not in the book, but perhaps in one of her obituaries) that she retired due to severe back pain caused by sitting

still for too long, combined with heavy smoking; one of her vertebrae collapsed. In 1997, at the age of 70, she underwent voluntary euthanasia after the painkillers she was taking gave her a perforated stomach ulcer. So when she says, 'Get a good chair,' one can assume it really comes from the heart. (It's a great shame she missed out on the famous Herman Miller 'Aeron' chair – designed in 1994 – beloved by bankers who take coke and do 24-hour shifts, and widely available second-hand on eBay since the financial crash in 2008.)

Coltart describes the work of being a therapist as 'eccentrically low-key', which some might say is a euphemism for 'boring'.[2] More than once she mentions Wilfred Bion's rather Zen idea of approaching sessions 'without memory or desire', and she herself was a Buddhist who saw great parallels between psychoanalysis and Buddhism. Both practices, according to certain traditions, aim to tame excitement or agitation in order to reduce suffering. Apparently she meditated daily, which perhaps goes to show how far her passion for sitting still and shutting up went. You could almost call it an unhealthy obsession. Only a weekend job in Trafalgar Square, moonlighting as a 'living sculpture', would be needed to complete the picture of ossification.

What are you supposed to do with your body when you're apparently just sitting there, listening and thinking, giving yourself over to an account of the thoughts and drives of someone else? Are you equally full of impulses and desires yourself, in which case how can you do your job well? Wouldn't you die of boredom, or explode with frustration – or even just make loads of unconscious slips? Or do you have to be somehow drained of all excitement, in which case, equally, how can you hope to understand what your analysands are on about? (Or, perhaps more sinisterly, are you the first type, disguised as the second? Do you fear the intrusions of your drives and so present an uncanny mask of false serenity? This is basically the state of all comedy therapists, from *Frazier* to Tina Fey's character in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, as well as more frightening shrinks such as Hannibal Lecter.)

In Coltart's book, alongside chapters about assessment and the differences between psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, there is a chapter called 'Apparent trivia' that deals with all sorts of stuff that psychoanalysts are supposedly reluctant to speak about because it seems too stupid. While most of the other chapters deal with 'ideas' – such as how to cope with paradoxes, or negative transferences – the trivia chapter has a heavy focus on materiality, of the consulting room and also of the body. Apparently it's highly unlikely that your training will have flagged this stuff up for you. In fact, your training may even

have led you to believe that psychoanalysis is all to do with the psyche and therefore happens in some kind of bodiless space, or at least a space where bodies are held in suspension temporarily so as to make way for purity of thought. The funny thing is that Coltart's book is going to tell you it's not like that so you can pre-empt things in order to make them appear more like that again. So you must have a watertight dustbin to catch the occasional vomit, in order that your consulting room remain odourless and unsullied for the next session. The walls of your room should be white, and any artworks (particularly facing the couch) should be as unevocative and austere as possible. There do need to be artworks, however, as bare walls look unhomely.

Still, there's one element of the 'apparent trivia' that does tend to be a frequent topic for discussion, at least according to Coltart, and that is the psychoanalyst's clothing. The appearance and meaning of our clothes is an especially pressing matter because we live in even closer contact with them than all the other things in our personal space. Therefore, if you get them 'wrong' it's quite literally 'on you'. The main thing about clothes, as with everything else in the psychoanalyst's physical space, is that they should be thought about, chosen well and then forgotten. In order for this to happen, the clothes supposedly need to be both comfortable and conservative. Coltart says, rather ominously, 'A therapist who is obviously self-conscious, in either an anxious or a narcissistic way, about her clothes, would be quite off-putting to a patient, who might not feel able to broach the subject for a long time.'[3]

You can maybe see that there's a lot packed into that statement. For a start there's the fact that it's gendered, unlike almost every other such statement in the book (which is otherwise full of 'one', 'he/she' and 'I'). There's also the idea that psychoanalysis necessarily involves thorough and explicit exploration of the transference (inside which you must sustain a position of faultless opacity). What if your patient didn't like your clothes? OMG, how would they deal with that? And what if it was *your fault* that they didn't like the way you dressed because you had picked the 'wrong' clothes? How would they gradually pluck up the nerve to tell you about your very visible clinical mistake? And that's presuming they kept coming long enough to get round to it. Of course they would immediately be able to see that you aren't very well analysed if something of your own desires or phantasies has crept into your wardrobe. In other words, the chapter is a masterclass in how to appear boring.

It's easy to laugh at the programmatic nature of it all – the robot therapist idea – but of course it can be very anxiety provoking when something too un-boring, or revealing, slips into the work from the

analyst's side. I recently had a strange experience of it that really shook me up. A man came for an initial session with the idea that he'd like to start an analysis. He was a very intelligent person, clearly capable of self-questioning, so it seemed that it would be possible to get to work. He also worked in the same field as my partner, which can sometimes feel a bit uncomfortable; are you going to run into each other outside the consulting room? Does he know people we know?

The man left, and immediately afterwards I saw that my daughter's boyfriend had let the dog out during his session, and that he had deposited a kind of joke shop-style turd right in the middle of the doorway, which this person must have had to step over on his way out. I felt immediately implicated by this terrible object – it was like the worst wardrobe malfunction; like something of *mine* had slipped out. I felt like I had to do or say something about it, but what? And also how? And when? It certainly didn't seem like an appropriate subject for an email. What would you put as a heading? There was nothing to be said that wasn't all about me, my shame, my embarrassment, my 'badly analysed' relation to the anal object. So I vowed to say nothing and waited for the next session. If there was anything useful to be said it would have to come from him.

The man arrived a few days later and spoke a great deal about all sorts of things, but definitely not about the turd in the hall. There was no sign whatsoever that he had even seen it. After talking for quite some time he mentioned dreams, saying he never remembered them. I pushed a little and he said he could remember a tiny fragment of one from the night before. He'd dreamt he saw his old doctor coming towards him in the street and was embarrassed because it was a doctor who maybe knew a bit too much about him. His actual words were something like, 'My old doctor appeared unexpectedly in my field of vision. He was kind of a grumpy old man.' He wondered whether to acknowledge this doctor or just to look away. As the doctor drew nearer the man became more and more anxious, but the doctor suddenly looked straight at him and gave him a smile and a wink. The man felt incredibly relieved – this potentially awkward encounter suddenly seemed friendly and funny.

So it appears to be an extremely elegant bit of dream work. The man sees an unexpected thing in his field of vision. And this 'thing' seems somehow to interpellate him, or to know too much about him. He didn't explicitly make the link with the unspeakable hallway object, and I chose not to make it for him, as it was only his second session and it might have been somewhat pushy. So we ended the session there and will have to wait to see how 'the thing' will come back. But for now perhaps it can

show that weird shit can come out in analysis, not only on the side of the analysand, and it needn't be a complete disaster. And it would be boring, not to mention futile, to try to pretend otherwise.

Notes

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1 Coltart, *How to Survive*, 28.
2 Coltart, *How to Survive*, 25.
3 Coltart, *How to Survive*, 30.

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8
Warhol's indifference

Josh Cohen

Among Andy Warhol's most disturbing images is one we'll never see. In 1949 the fledgling commercial artist, newly arrived in Manhattan, painted a series of large canvases that were later lost or destroyed. One, based on a harrowing photograph known as *Bloody Saturday*, originally published in *Life* magazine, showed a lone baby sitting among the ashen wreckage of Shanghai's South Station during the Japanese bombing campaign of 1937.

Figure 8.1 H.S. 'Newsreel' Wong, *Bloody Saturday*, 1937. Photograph, original dimensions unknown.

The baby is propped upright at the edge of the platform, his skin blackened, clothing shredded, mouth fixed in a cry of despair as he stares into the ruined vista ahead. According to Warhol's biographer Victor Bockris, 'the painting was horrific yet surprisingly decorative', executed in what would come to be his trademark 'blotted-line technique and pastel colours'.[1]

The painting foreshadows the celebrated *Death and Disaster* series (1962–4), but with a striking difference: where in the later images of electric chairs and road accidents, human beings are either ominously absent or grainy corpses indifferently merged into the mechanical wreckage, the Shanghai baby brings us into the traumatic presence of raw and incomprehensible pain.

A young man I treated in analysis over many years had come to London fleeing a childhood marked by the unbound cruelty of a civil war. One day he arrived having had a potentially fatal cycling accident the previous afternoon. He was shaken less by the speeding white van that muscled him off his bike than by the succession of cars that drove past him as he lay on the pavement. 'I felt like a screaming, naked baby in the middle of the road,' he told me. Consigned without choice or consent to total dependence on the care or neglect, love or hate of adults, we are born, to use Freud's term, into a condition of helplessness.

Perhaps, Bockris hints, Warhol disowned the painting once it revealed itself to him as an unwitting self-portrait, an exposure of the darkest and most vulnerable corner of his own self. His commercial work at the time mined post-war consumer culture's deep seam of sentimentality, conjuring an idyll of lush pastel flowers, cherubs and butterflies, an enchanted inner childhood. Perhaps the Shanghai baby, rendered in those 'surprisingly decorative' colours, was the cherub's unconscious obverse, an unacknowledged black trauma haunting the idealised, pastel surface.

Coloured by illness and grief, Warhol's childhood afforded him little relief or distance from the terrors of infantile helplessness. At the age of two, he suffered ocular swelling, treated by his mother with boric acid baths; at four, curvature of an arm bone he'd broken without realising it; at six, scarlet fever; and at eight (the most notorious of these biennial afflictions), recurrent bouts of chorea, or St Vitus's dance. Chorea is a disorder of the central nervous system that causes its sufferer to lose control of his limbs, which periodically flail in an unpredictable frenzy. The sensation of dispossession would stoke the child's fear that he was going mad. Andy's shaking fits led to the malign attention of bullies, leaving him in terror of going to school, confused by

basic tasks of coordination and provoked all too quickly to tears. His childhood had become a story of the traumatic breaching of his bodily and emotional borders.

Prescribed a month's bed rest and constant care, Andy was moved by his mother, Julia, into the dining room adjoining the kitchen, enabling her to attend him round the clock and perhaps beginning the fraught relationship that saw her live with him (though kept increasingly out of sight) through the various homes of his adult life. In bed, the convalescing patient enjoyed a limitless supply of paper dolls, comic books and magazines procured by his mother, from which he cut the elements of the collages he'd then assemble. Describing the scene in his *Philosophy*, Warhol evokes – knowingly? – the ambience of a factory in miniature: 'I would spend all my summer listening to the radio and lying in bed with my Charlie McCarthy doll and my un-cut-out paper dolls all over the spread and under the pillow.'[2] The convalescent bed shared an essential paradox with Warhol's later Factory, the legendary studio space in which his manic production mingled with sexual, narcotic and emotional excess and where too the radio would be kept on through the working day: both the child's bed and the adult Factory were places of compulsive productivity and of inertial retreat, of perpetual motion and its cancellation.

Figure 8.2 Andy Warhol, *Electric Chair 74*, 1971. Screenprint in colours, no. 215 from an edition of 250, Zurich, Bruno Bischofberger. Christie's Images © 2020 London/Scala, Florence.

Cut out from newspapers, the serial images of electric chairs, car crashes, suicides and race riots in Warhol's *Death and Disaster* series have a disinterested quality, as if taken by an anonymous camera. Saturating them in industrial yellow, green, red and orange, Warhol submerged the traumatic images in a wash of indifference.

These paintings have always aroused in me a queasy shame, as though catching me in the posture of the gawking rubbernecker. When you drive past the scene of a motorway accident, the speed of the cars ahead, and then of your own car, dips to a catatonic slow motion. For those few seconds, the concertinaed fenders, shattered glass, even the blood trails, are drained of human significance, as your eye becomes a coldly mechanical recording instrument. I experience the same split in perception before the *Death and Disaster* paintings. The car crash scene is both an eruption of violence, destruction and pain, and an indifferent arrangement of interchangeable objects. I feel at once inhuman and all too human, too far away from and too close to the surfeit of horror.

Warhol's 'hardcore detachment from anything concerning [death]'[3] doesn't preclude compulsive fascination with it. In the grip of hypochondriac anxieties, imagining his skin and internal organs under permanent siege, the critic Brian Dillon suggests, he took refuge in the fantasy of a neutral body, in which all agitation was cancelled out: 'Fearing illness and medicine in equal measure, he imagined that physical well-being consisted in remaining inviolate from both and thought that a healthy body was a body that was unified, self-same, wholly itself and itself alone.'[4]

Isn't it this fantasy of equilibrium that colours the screaming Shanghai baby in dreamy pastels, and that coats the later scenes in shades of commercial affirmation? The vacant electric chair signifies both the violent shock it will administer and the permanent silence of death that will follow. The artificial colour washes out these twin terrors of excess and nullity. While commentators have ascribed political meaning to the series, during a radio conversation with Claes Oldenburg and Roy Lichtenstein Warhol insisted they were 'an expression of indifference'.[5]

The flattening function of colour gives a more sinister inflection to the whimsicality of Warhol's comments on painting, more than a decade later, in his book *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*: 'You see, I think every painting should be the same size and the same color so they're all interchangeable and nobody thinks they have a better painting or a worse painting.'[6] Put differently, the ideal of painting would be to nullify both its own content and the viewer's response – saying nothing,

Figure 8.3 Andy Warhol, *5 Deaths*, 1963. Silkscreen ink and acrylic on canvas, 111.8 × 83.8 cm. Christie's Images © 2020 London/Scala, Florence.

soliciting nothing, a moment of pure non-communication between artist and audience.

Neutrality, indifference, emptiness – these were Warhol's resources in the struggle against the onrush of disturbances to his internal balance. He sought, in both life and work, a state of serene pastel stillness, only to find it menaced on one side by the threat of pain and shock, on the other by the void of silence and death. His erotic life oscillated between long periods of asexual detachment and abrupt bursts of passionate, often hopeless desire, just as his successive relationships with his Factory 'superstars' repeated a trajectory of adhesive mutual entanglement ending in cold indifference and rejection.

Warhol evidently found intolerable the double bind of love – the promise of gratification, the risk of indifference; hence his compulsive oscillation between renouncing erotic desire and giving himself up to it. The cultivated emptiness of his persona, among his greatest creations, was a solution to this bind. Visiting Hollywood in 1963, he dreamed (as he writes in *POPism*, his memoir of the 1960s) of his life assuming Hollywood's unalloyed vacancy: 'Vacant, vacuous Hollywood was all I wanted to mold my life into. Plastic. White-on-white.'[7]

To attain a white-on-white life is to permanently neutralise the agitations of feeling, to cleanse the face of life of the colours that distinguish it. According to Warhol's friend and biographer David Bourdon, his favourite film of 1964 was *The Creation of the Humanoids*,

in which a post-apocalyptic labour shortage is resolved by the invention of humanoid robots. The film's 'happy ending' 'comes when the heroine and the hero discover themselves to be machines'.[8] The disappearance of the human into the machine was the happy ending Warhol sought for himself. Numbness and indifference, the end of desire, were increasingly Warhol's primary creative resources.

Warhol's persona was an attempt to realise 'the desire for non-desire' as his very essence. Indifference insinuated itself into his gaze, his voice, his comportment: into the texture of his everyday being. Paradoxically, his persona also fed off the creative, emotional, narcotic and sexual excesses flaring around him. A community of artists, drag queens, hangers-on and superstars inhabited the Factory during the 1960s and a febrile cauldron of loves, hatreds, rivalries and yearnings bubbled perpetually around the impassive humanoid at its centre.

Is it irony or destiny that a body obsessively imagined by its bearer as a site of danger and vulnerability should end up being shot by a stalker, whose intent above all was to attack the victim's bodily and psychic boundaries? The bullets Valerie Solanas fired into Warhol's chest on 3 June 1968 would destroy his last vestige of trust – in other human beings and in the integrity of his own body, which could now be restored only precariously and with the aid of an external device. 'Profoundly disembodied already,' remarks Warhol's biographer Wayne Koestenbaum, 'he became, after the assassination attempt, more radically severed from his body, now a canvas of wounds and scars – the apparatus of his torn and flayed flesh held in place, for the rest of his life, by tightly bound abdominal belts, corsets that Brigid Berlin dyed for him in optimistic pastels, like the colours of his silkscreens.'[9]

Being shot confirmed for the author of the *Philosophy* that all experience, even and especially at its most traumatic edge, is essentially 'television': 'you don't feel anything'.[10] It is the same philosophy that imagines an aesthetic utopia in which all paintings are the same size and colour, that enjoins us to play all relationships 'on one level' of genial indifference: 'very light, cool, off-hand, very American'.[11] In a Warholian utopia, the excitations and agitations of desire, pain, frustration and even pleasure would be cancelled out in the name of nirvanic bliss.

The increasingly obsessive cultivation during the early Factory years of his trademark flat, affectless mode of speech and movement was the manifest expression of this inertial ideal. But here a striking paradox comes into view: Warhol's investment of his whole self in doing,

feeling and being nothing was also an expression of his prodigious productivity.

The chapter on 'Work' in the *Philosophy* turns on the erosion of any distinction between work and life: 'just being alive is so much work at something you don't always want to do. Being born is like being kidnapped. And then sold into slavery. People are working every minute. The machinery is always going. Even when you sleep.'[12] We are ransomed to work for as long as we're alive, slave labourers on a zero-hours contract, subject to the flows, sometimes even, sometimes violently unstable, of energetic input and output circulating through us. The machinery is always going.

Perhaps, then, Andy got to the Factory early and worked so unrelentingly because even if he were to stop doing and making, he would still be stuck with the work of simply being. And so his work and life were dedicated to the strange ideal of lifelessness. 'The negative message that emerged from the Warhol Factory was really a memento mori,' remarked the critic Calvin Tomkins.[13] In his films the camera whirrs away, keeping a vigilant eye on its objects for hours on end in the service of attaining a state of absolute stillness and silence.

In July 1963, during the *Death and Disaster* period, Warhol bought the Bolex 8 mm camera and made his first film, proposing to his lover John Giorno that he make him a movie star by filming him sleeping. *Sleep* is a five-hour film which shows the naked, sleeping Giorno, the camera lingering hypnotically on smaller and larger fragments of his body from different angles and perspectives: head, torso, buttocks, the full body seen from the foot of the bed or sideways or above. It is very difficult, as Koestenbaum suggests, to watch *Sleep* without thinking of the corpse of Andrej Warhola from which Andy had taken flight 21 years previously. 'At last,' he writes, 'Andy performs his filial vigil; *Sleep* is a wake.'[14] The motionless paternal body the young Andy couldn't bring himself to look at was transmogrified into the lover's body he couldn't take his eyes off.

Staring at a sleeper is minimally yet decisively different from staring at a corpse. Motionless for long stretches, withdrawn into itself, the sleeping body is absent from the world, divested of the interests and desires of waking life. The evocation of death at certain points is irresistible; filmed on his back from the foot of the bed, Giorno's head and torso assume a leaden immobility that recalls an open coffin, or Frankenstein's monster awaiting his fatal animation. But of course Giorno isn't dead. His face twitches, he turns on his side, his trunk hosts the rise and fall of his breath. He evokes deathliness only because we're

seeing him in the most elemental state of life, bordering both the final and irreversible stillness to which we all succumb and the anticipation of his imminent awakening into life and desire.

Warhol's camera eye in *Sleep* is very far away from the anonymous gaze of the *Death and Disaster* series or the stony neutrality of the stationary camera placed years later in front of the Empire State Building. The camera switches angles, zooms in and out, taking up an intrusively curious relation to its oblivious object. There are interminable shots that home in on Giorno's body to the point where it becomes inhuman, an abstract composition of texture and shadow. But when the camera pulls back to reveal the curved line stretching across the base of the screen as the crack of his sculpted buttocks, the apparent formal objectivity of the previous shot takes on the creepiness of the stalker's obsession.

Sleep ties erotic desire, like aesthetic creativity, to the sleepy state in which we're suspended between life and non-life. 'Spying on motionlessness', comments Koestenbaum, 'is a rather specialized erotic discipline.'[15] Warhol works through the night, sacrificing his own sleep to capture his lover's. All his labour and creativity are invested in the state of total disinvestment. In contrast to his predecessors in the surrealist movement, it is sleep rather than dreams that interests him – not the working part of the nocturnal psyche ('Dreams', writes Freud, 'only show us the dreamer in so far as he is *not* sleeping'[16]), but its non-working, inertial counterpart. His abundant reserves of creative and sexual energy are all put in the service of sleep and its various cognate states in waking life: apathy, emptiness, indifference.

Notes

1 Bockris, *Life and Death*, 88.
2 Warhol, *Philosophy*, 21.
3 Bockris, *Life and Death*, 46.
4 Dillon, *Tormented Hope*, 265.
5 Bockris, *Life and Death*, 170.
6 Warhol, *Philosophy*, 149.
7 Warhol with Hackett, *POPism*, 51–2.
8 Bockris, *Life and Death*, 217.
9 Koestenbaum, *Andy Warhol*, 47–8.
10 Warhol, *Philosophy*, 91.
11 Warhol, *Philosophy*, 111.
12 Warhol, *Philosophy*, 96.
13 Cited in Bockris, *Life and Death*, 264.
14 Koestenbaum, *Andy Warhol*, 30.
15 Koestenbaum, *Andy Warhol*, 30.
16 Sigmund Freud, 'A metapsychological supplement', 223.

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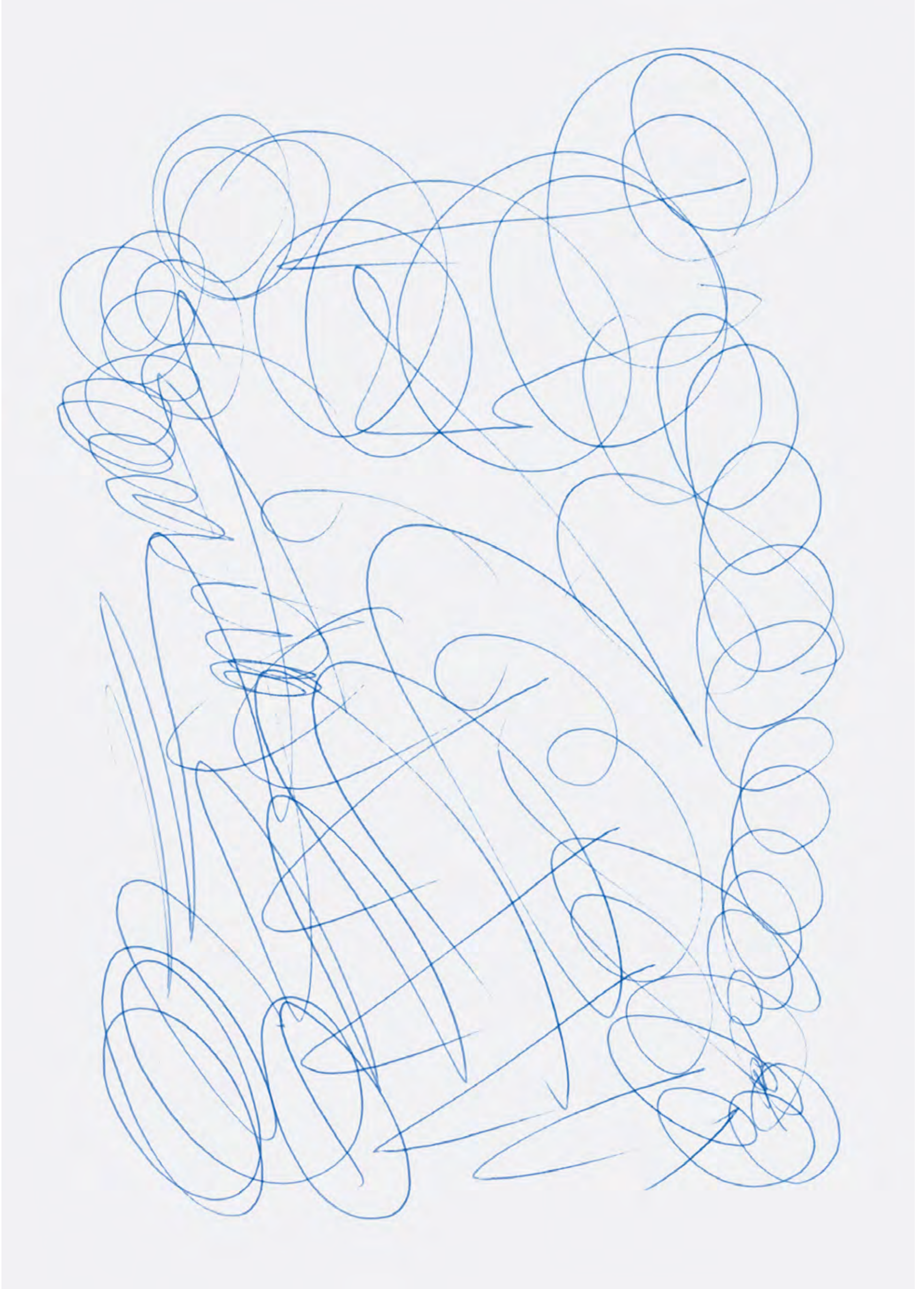


9

Yawns of boredom

Briony Fer

> It was bigger than everything
> Bigger than its own bigness
> Vasko Popa, 'Yawn of yawns'[1]

A yawn is one of a multitude of small gestures that tend to escape visual representation, or at least lurk only in its shadows. Pictures of yawns are scarce because like throat clearing or hiccupping or sighing they are insignificant and so actively get in the way of expression – they are the useless bits of us that have to be edited out in order for representation to be meaningful to us. If, as I am, you happen to be drawn to the bits that generally slip through the net of attention, then the visual phenomenon of yawning becomes worth thinking about. I'm talking, of course, as if I know what yawning is, which is not to say that I know what it means. It appears that the question of why we yawn is still one of science's great mysteries, which would seem to confirm the general lack of interest in it. The most recent theory – and in actual fact one of the most ancient – is that rather than being a sign of sleepiness yawning allows us to take in more oxygen in order to wake us up.

As involuntary bodily actions yawns are a natural reflex yet they are laden with social meaning and mired in tiny rituals. They are most often taken to show – or betray – boredom or tiredness. Obviously we can try to control our fits of yawning, more or less successfully; and we can do what we are taught to do: cover our mouth with our hand. And yet they momentarily overwhelm us beyond our control – involuntary spasms manifested in varying degrees of contortion to the muscles of the face, pulled tight yet almost recklessly free. Yawns can be subtle, tortuously stifled like Emma Bovary's where 'every smile concealed a

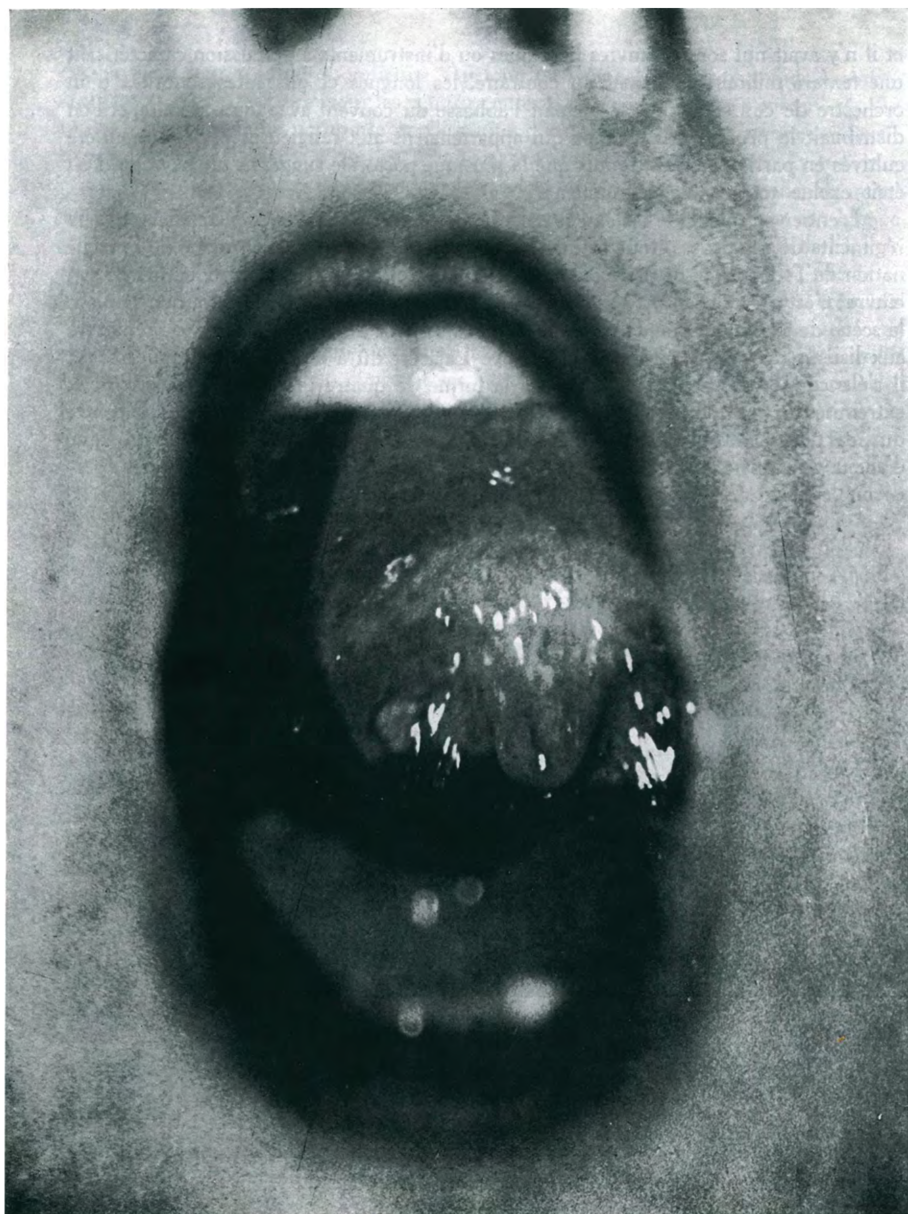
yawn of boredom' ('chaque sourire cachait un baillement d'ennui'[2]), or exaggerated, in a grimace: mouth gaping, arms stretching, back arching. Or they can start as one and end as the other. They can be single or serial, all but silent or alarmingly loud, on the verge of a howl.

The most striking image of a woman yawning is the series of photographs taken by Albert Londe, the head medical photographer of the St Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris in about 1890 (Fig. 9.1). He worked closely with the psychiatrist Jean-Martin Charcot documenting both male and female hysterics. The unidentified woman patient, according to Charcot, was 29 years old and was suffering from 'bâillements hystériques', paroxysms of yawning that occurred about 8 times a minute or 480 times an hour. She was observed during the session of 23 October 1888, and Londe's photographs were published alongside numerous others in the magisterial *Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtrière* (1890).[3] You have to rotate the volume to see the three stages in sequence running across the page: the chin first protruding as the mouth begins to open, widening as the jaw drops lower, then finally a gaping hole stretched to its limits. In the vast taxonomy set out in the *Nouvelle Iconographie*, hysterical yawning is only one set of symptoms to be documented by Londe, alongside others such as a male subject laughing.

The taxonomic drive aims to keep the categories separate; in an image world, on the other hand, those categories may be more or less indistinguishable. The incremental building and release of tension in the yawn could also be a cry of despair, or nudged a little perhaps, even an eruption of incipient laughter. The facial spasms involved in yawning, screaming and laughing – in representation at least – are almost self-mimicking. The fact that yawning is known to be contagious (though nobody has established why) exacerbates this mimetic aspect as a compulsive form of serial repetition – a serial attitude that is of course laid out in the three photographs of 'bâillements hystériques'.

The metonymic slippages involved can be readily seen in the photograph J.A. Boiffard took to accompany Bataille's entry on 'La Bouche' in his *Critical Dictionary* in the dissident surrealist magazine *Documents* (1930). Now the caption is taken from Bataille: 'terror and awful suffering turn the mouth into the organ of tearing screams' ('la terreur et la souffrance atroce font de la bouche l'organe des cris dechirantes').[4] The blurred image of the gaping mouth fills the frame to reveal the droplets of spittle on the tongue – a scattering of luminous points that seem to settle on the surface of the photograph. It's as if the hysterical yawn of Londe has mutated into a spasm of terror, as if the one

Figure 9.1 *Baillements hystériques*, plate XVIII. Three photos in a series showing a hysterical woman yawning. Photograph *c.* 1890, by Albert Londe. Wellcome Collection. Attribution 4.0. International (CC BY 4.0).



... la terreur et la souffrance atroce font de la bouche l'organe des cris déchirants (p. 299). — Photo J. A. Boiffard.

Figure 9.2 J.A. Boiffard, *La Bouche*, accompanying Georges Bataille's article in his *Critical Dictionary*, from *Documents* 2.5 (1930), p. 298.

were the flipside of the other. Neither is passive but instead aggressive: as Bataille makes clear, 'the mouth is the beginning of the animal part and what is most frightening for other animals' ('la bouche est le commencement, ou si l'on veut, la proue des animaux').[5] And the most animal-ish part of us.

Leafing through *Documents*, the gaping hole that is Boiffard's photograph becomes a template for all the many masks and faces that proliferate through its pages in articles on 'Têtes et crânes' and 'Masques-Janus du Cross-River (Cameroun)'.[6] It is filled with faces and masks of faces in various states and stages of extreme distortion. The very last issue had an article on Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, the eighteenth-century sculptor and friend of Franz Anton Mesmer who made numerous bronze portrait busts as part of an inventory of contorted facial expressions and grimaces, including crying and yawning.[7] In this company, Picasso's famous series of paintings of Olga seems more ambiguous – especially the almost cartoonishly graphic profile of a wide-open mouth caught between despair and chronic boredom.[8] There is no denying the libidinal projection onto the body of the female hysteric that underpins *Documents*' anatomy of the modern, and yet one also feels the radical counter-force of what second-wave feminist theorists such as Jacqueline Rose termed 'hysterical protest'.[9]

As the original prototype, the image of the human face provides a schema that is endlessly malleable and capable of expressing the full range of human emotion. The repetition of the gaping mouth shows both the very conventional nature of this model of expression and its ambiguities. The metonymic slippages are, as we have seen, dramatised through the serial nature of photography but they are by no means confined to it. Another register where the malleability of a graphic line amply demonstrates this kind of polymorphism is surely in cartoon animation. As Sergei Eisenstein observed in his commentary on Disney, animation is all about what he called the 'protoplasmic' – the stretching and morphing of one thing into another that the animated line demonstrates so vividly. The language of mutating cellular processes might also be useful in describing the way the line worked in Picasso's portraits of 1930 (Eisenstein would refer to Picasso's 'plasmatic reminiscences'[10]) or for that matter the Russian film-maker's own prolific drawings. Like Picasso, Eisenstein favoured the closed contour, all the better to curve back and forth in and out in a continuous and unbroken movement. He traced this back to the first doodles of the child, drawing circles in the shape of a 'primal ellipse' that could then potentially transform into any number of other possible figures.

Technically, the protoplasmic effects of animation were achieved through extremely intricate and laborious methods, with each sequence of movement broken down into numerous individual drawings. Even the simple opening and closing of the mouth is a complex series of graphic operations. The yawning hippo in Disney's *Fantasia* (1940) is an example of the extreme 'protoplasmic' stretching out of a closed contour in a way that 'plasmatises' the whole screen. In this instance – and many others like it – the languorous yawn is a comically expansive and somewhat paradoxical trope commenting on the process of animation itself – that is, the very process of coming into being or enlivening of form. In a not wholly dissimilar way, Eisenstein's dissonant montage in the famous scene of the sculptural monument coming to life in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) involved rapidly intercutting the sleeping and roaring lions with the exploding buildings, making the sculptures themselves appear to awake in alarm.

The fact that yawning is a behaviour shared by humans and animals becomes more rather than less significant in the context of all this fluidity between species. Yes, it cast the female hysteric as a wild animal and, as such, as an object to be contained and controlled by the psychiatric regime that was St Salpêtrière. The same reflex action is to be found in non-humans. Albert Renger-Patzsch's photograph taken of a baboon at Dresden Zoo in 1927 is part of a series that all focus on the face of the animal, in dignified repose and then yawning so extravagantly that the mouth stretches out of all proportion to the frame. Teeth and tongue frame the gaping hole at the centre of the image – as if this organ is the body's aperture, a yawning chasm that mimics not only its animal subject but also the open shutter of the camera lens, just as in Londe's photographs, where the paroxysm of the mouth had acted out the reflex action of the camera. The repetition of the shutter corresponds to the body's most revealing and disconcerting gape – not the eyes, now, but the yawn.

The phrase 'yawns of boredom' comes from a novel by the nineteenth-century Brazilian writer Machado de Assis that has been published in English as *Epitaph of a Small Winner*. It brings me to my final point. An avid reader of Flaubert, Machado de Assis wrote the novel as a fictitious memoir from beyond the grave. His narrator, then, is already dead, recounting his life, but at the same time interjecting his commentary upon what it is to write it. In one of his many short chapters, he digresses in this way, showing himself to be as much in thrall to the wild ways of Tristram Shandy as to the ennui of Emma Bovary. The bored narrator interrupts his own narrative with a chapter titled

Figure 9.3 Three people sitting yawning around a table. Etching. Wellcome Collection. Attribution 4.0. International (CC BY 4.0).

'Parenthesis', listing a series of maxims or epigraphs for the reader to ponder (such as 'We kill time; time buries us').[11] Machado de Assis had begun his career as a typesetter and never lost his love of dashes, asterisks and the blanks on the page – so each maxim appears as a little stab at wisdom or a little spasm. And as an observer of his own life, the parenthetical 'digression' becomes a way both to distract the reader from its dull proceedings and to focus attention instead on the job of writing about it – like Laurence Sterne in *Tristram Shandy*, Machado makes us feel as if the book is still in the process of being written as we are reading it. This adds a temporal aspect to yawns of boredom – to the business of stretching out and contracting of a narrative.

Yawning may be contagious, but arguably in visual representation it offers us not an allegory of empathy but rather – in its place – a series of gaping holes. When a yawn comes from the eternal background of insignificant actions to the foreground of an image – as it occasionally does – then we see, as we gawp at its gaping, something fundamental about the image as an exaggerated, distorted version of itself.

Notes

1 Popa, 'Yawn of yawns', in *Complete Poems*, 71.
2 Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, 400.

3 See also de la Tourette et al., 'Contribution à l'étude des bâillements hystériques'.
4 'La Bouche', in *Documents* 5 (1930), reprinted in Hollier (ed.), *Documents*, vol. 2, 299.
5 'La Bouche', in *Documents* 5 (1930), reprinted in Hollier (ed.), *Documents*, vol. 2, 299.
6 'Masques-Janus du Cross-River (Cameroun)' by Dr Eckart von Sydow in *Documents* 6 (1930), 321–8; and 'Têtes et crânes' by Dr Ralph von Koenigswald in *Documents* 6 (1930), 353.
7 See the article by Jean Bourdeillette, *Documents* 8 (1930), which contains the following images: *L'Homme pleurant*, *Le Souci profondément caché* and *L'Homme très vieux*, all from the Belvedere, Vienna. Messerscchmidt's *Man Yawning* of *c.* 1770 (Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest) is not shown, but is discussed in the excellent recent study by Guédron, *L'Art de la Grimace*.
8 Reproduced in the special issue devoted to Picasso, *Documents* 3 (1930).
9 See Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*.
10 Eisenstein, *Eisenstein on Disney*, 12.
11 Machado de Assis, *Epitaph of a Small Winner*, 207.

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10

The long and the short of it: boredom after the end of the great boredom

Michael Newman

One of the first long-form works to deliberately evoke the experience of boredom, Erik Satie's *Vexations*, composed around 1893–4, was presented 70 years later in the episode of the US broadcaster CBS television's *I've Got a Secret* of 16 September 1963.[1] The beauty of this conjunction is that the game show is a good example of precisely the kind of distraction that in general the long-form work deliberately provoking boredom is trying to resist. The episode also brings together perhaps the earliest such work from the 1890s with a period, the 1960s, that marks a peak in the exploration of the temporality of boredom by artists, musicians and film-makers. This particular performance of *Vexations*, in which John Cale was one of the team of pianists and where Karl Schenzer was the only member of the audience to sit through it to the end, was organised by John Cage and is supposed to be the first time *Vexations* was played in its entirety. Members of the audience did indeed clock in and clock out, receiving a refund of a nickel for each 20 minutes attended. This draws attention to factory conditions of labour and the economising of time that the excess involved in the extremely long performance – the sheer waste of time – is supposed to militate against. On the top of the manuscript of Satie's *Vexations* are written words that might be considered instructions: 'To play this motif 840 times in a row, it will be well to prepare in advance, and in the greatest silence, by serious immobility.'[2]

A year after Cage organised the performance of *Vexations*, which in the end lasted over 18 hours, Andy Warhol showed his film *Empire* (1964), a film of the Empire State Building shot from a static

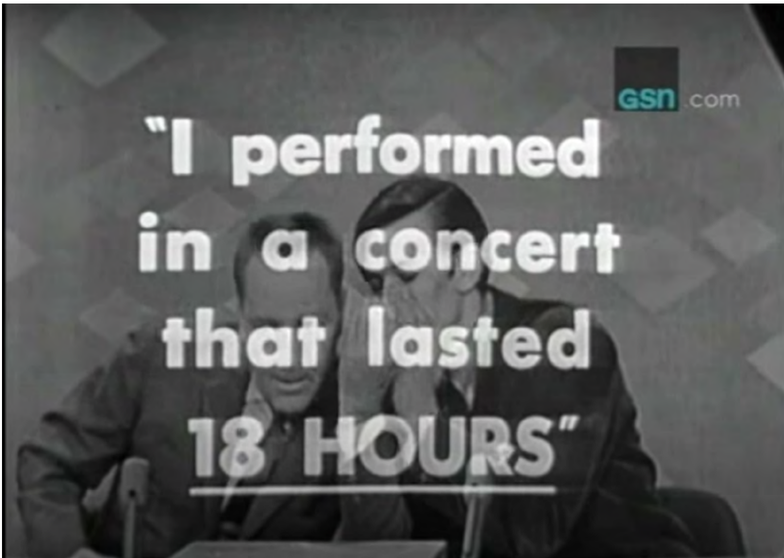

Figure 10.1 *I've Got a Secret*, featuring John Cale, 16 September 1963. Screenshot captured at 0:40. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mqO-xsRyTM.

Figure 10.2 *I've Got a Secret*, featuring Karl Schenzer, 16 September 1963. Screenshot captured at 0:54. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mqO-xsRyTM.

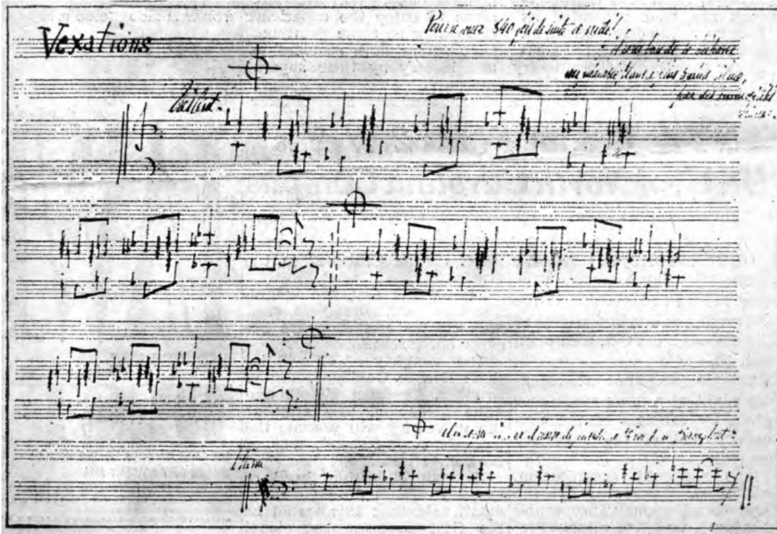

Figure 10.3 Score of *Vexations*, Eric Satie.

camera and played at a slowed-down rate of 16 frames per second, lasting for eight hours and five minutes.[3] My hypothesis is that in the twenty-first century great boredom is a thing of the past, as great art was a thing of the past to Hegel in the nineteenth century.[4]

However, a difference in the relation to history of 'great art' and boredom is that boredom has an oblique relation to the dialectic. The whole point of boredom is that it cannot be integrated into a spiral of negation and production. Nonetheless it also occupies, parasites even, the Hegelian dialectic in that the 'absolute knowing' in which the *Phenomenology of Spirit* culminates would after all be a rather boring state to occupy.[5] The *Bildungsroman* of *Geist*,[6] with its actually quite surprising twists and turns (despite the fact that it has always already happened), culminates in a boring plateau or a plateau of boredom, as boring as heaven would be if there were such a place. The 'end of history' would needless to say be boring, but boredom is not the end of history. In Hegelian terms this is the moment at the end when the dialectic is no longer productive, no longer needs to be productive. If we knew what we desire to know we would be bored, clearly. As the writer knows, the problem is not to attain a state of knowledge but to try to restore your ignorance in order to have a motive to keep going.

So, if boredom is both inside and outside the dialectic, which boredom is it exactly that is a thing of the past? For, no doubt, there is more than one kind of boredom.

Arguably, the period of great boredom runs from the 1890s to the 1970s. Peaks would be the 1890s, the 1920s to 1930s, and the 1960s. All seem to coincide with mediatised jumps in the amount of distraction: newspapers and fashion in the 1890s, radio and cinema in the 1920s and 1930s, and TV and advertising in the 1960s. The paradox is that we are faced in the third decade of the twenty-first century with a mega-jump in the amount of distraction brought on by the confluence of the internet, smartphones and social media, but virtually no recourse to long-form 'boring' works of art, theatre, cinema or music. Why is *this* not a period of 'great boredom'? Is it because distraction covers the entire social and existential field? Could we say that once distraction is totalised, boredom is entirely forgotten[7] – that if these have been '20 years of boredom', as per the title of the conference on which this book is based (quoting Leonard Cohen)[8] it is not 20 years of *being* bored, but rather 20 years of the *forgetting* of boredom? By this I mean that distraction is no longer counterposed with boredom. We are no longer even aware that distraction is an escape from some kind of fundamental confrontation. Distraction rules by completely concealing boredom. It is no coincidence that distraction is now a fundamental way of conducting politics: it becomes a way of concealing the 'political', rendering us oblivious to it.[9] Pessimistically, we could say 'that's it', that's the short of it. Or else we could go a bit mystical and say that 'where the danger lies, there lies the saving power'.[10] Will there be a flip out of boredom into another kind of relation with time and with the world? Could art, after all, have any role in this? How might art preserve itself from being absorbed into the culture of distraction?[11] Or could the turn happen through art being totally absorbed into distraction?

The point is, of course, that boredom, if it has any radical sense at all, must involve an outside, a non-relation that is not just an absence of relation. Just as the idea that 'great art is a thing of the past' was turned to their advantage by the thinkers who broke with Hegel – that art could stand for that which falls away from the dialectic, that which remains unassimilable, and so on, at least if thought about in 'anti-aesthetic' terms – so might be the case with boredom. But at the same time, that boredom today might be 'a thing of the past' raises the question of the *loss* of the outside in the context of the economisation of everything and the totalisation of distraction.

The word for 'boredom' in German is *Langeweile*, which is a compound of the words for 'long' and 'while', the latter related etymologically to 'rest' or 'pause'.[12] Heidegger, in his lectures on boredom of 1929–30, makes much of this stretching of time. We could contrast this

with the shortening or acceleration of time today. Heidegger adduces three forms of boredom: being bored of (doing) something – the example he gives is waiting for a train; being bored alongside something, for example at a social event, where we don't even know we are bored until afterwards, when we realise we have been wasting our time; and the state in which everything is boring. Heidegger's claim is ontological because it concerns the being of beings as a whole: boredom gives access to the ontological difference between being and beings, by rendering all beings as nothing, as withdrawn from possibility. To attribute boredom to boring things, or to consider it an inner psychological trait of the subject, is for Heidegger to avoid the fundamental relation of *Dasein* to the world and to beings as a whole, which profound boredom discloses.[13] Unlike the more dramatic 'being towards death' of Heidegger's earlier *Being and Time*, boredom thus serves as a mediation between inauthenticity and authenticity, as a means to transit from one to the other, but with the implication, which is perhaps foreign to Heidegger's intention, that the authentic and the inauthentic can never be definitively separated, and that authenticity might become boring. In effect, Heidegger is making a distinction between 'little' ordinary boredoms and a 'great' boredom that involves the ontological disclosure of the burden or task of *Dasein*. As he leaves the discussion of boredom, he suggests that the 'problematic of metaphysics' may not 'for the whole of world history' be 'developed on the basis of the temporality of *Dasein*', and that there might be 'a different kind of necessary grounding for metaphysics'.[14] On the one hand, he is implying the necessity to understand the *Stimmungen*, the attunements, including boredom, which is a fundamental one, a *Grundstimmung* in relation to a history of being as a history of the forgetting of the ontological difference of beings and being, just as the 'great' boredom is suppressed by the little boredoms and their distractions. But on the other hand Heidegger also makes the ominous demand, as if to answer to what being fully open to the 'great' boredom requires of his audience in the lecture hall, that 'We must first call for someone capable of instilling terror into our *Dasein* again.'[15] Three years later, shortly after he had been elected Rector of the University of Freiburg, Heidegger joined the Nazi Party. Today, of course, fascism as an escape from white male boredom, now mediated through internet memes and streams, is once again a live topic.

What then is the relation, where boredom is concerned, between ontology and history? Why does boredom, as an ontological *Stimmung* or attunement, emerge under particular historical conditions? How is *Langeweile* related to the acceleration of time in modernity? What exactly

is forgotten or suppressed in and by that acceleration? In order to approach these questions, I now turn to the relation between boredom and technology.

I wonder whether one could say that the 'great' boredom is an analogue affect – that it has a relation to the record of time conceived as a continuum that is inscribed. Boredom would thus be a relation to time as continuum – it just goes on and on – combined with the withdrawal of investment in, or engagement with, objects and projects. Boredom, then, is non-relation with relation conceived in terms of continuity. Nonetheless, this kind of boredom is finite. The long work of art may therefore be an analogue phenomenon, because there has to be a limit for it to be perceived as long. This could be the material limit of the vehicle, such as the physical celluloid, or the scroll. Or the limit of exhaustion of the human body. We could contrast this with a digital video recording simply allowed to run on endlessly, as might be the case, for example, with surveillance videos. In that case the video is neither long nor short, since it has no determinate length. There would be no possibility to see it through to the end, however bored one might be. The works of art of the 'great boredom' offered the opportunity to undergo something difficult, and there would come a point when they would have been 'lived through'. The paradox was to offer the audience an achievement that was one of passivity. This would reveal something about an essential passivity, perhaps even a 'passivity more passive than the passivity of activity', as the philosopher Levinas put it.[16] This passivity would not be a defective form of activity, with the latter given priority. It would have implications for the relation to oneself, to the world and to the other. Is it not this passivity that is occluded in the transition from the 'great boredom' to totalised distraction?

An example might be Christian Marclay's *The Clock* (2010). It is 24 hours long, and at one level functions literally as a clock. As with the relation of Jasper Johns's *Flag* (1954–5) to an American flag, which poses the question of whether it is a painting of a flag or a flag, *The Clock* is both a film of clocks and a clock. The time shown on the clocks in the sequences from films is coordinated with the time at which these are shown in the screening of *The Clock*. Despite its duration, *The Clock* is not a work of the 'great boredom', but rather discloses the temporality of distraction. This may have to do with the short segments, each arousing a kind of narrative spasm which only leads into the next, so that each segment of time gets nowhere, and the next begins again *in medias res*. In structuralist terms, the paradigmatic substitutions are determined but limited by the size of the archive and the syntax is paratactic, one

Figure 10.4 Douglas Gordon, *24 Hour Psycho*, 1993. Screenshot captured at 21:27.

moment beside the other. The attempt on the part of the viewer to create a sequence is endlessly frustrated. In a sense this is pure distraction, but at the same time repeating the frustration from which distraction is meant to distract. We could contrast this with Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), which we might see rather as a late work of the 'great boredom', remediating film through video to bring together two modes of the 1950s to 1960s, the psychological horror thriller and long-duration art. It does seem to press against the limits of endurance in a way made possible by contemporary technological changes.[17]

I have suggested that boredom, in its withdrawal of attachment or cathexis, is potentially a mode of access to the non-relational. Hence its role in the production of the new. Where the technologies of boredom are concerned, a question might arise as to what the non-relational is, or whether the non-relational is even possible with respect to the digital, given that the digital is all-encompassing, or omni-relational. Would digital non-relationality simply be a 'sleep mode'? The digital enables the seeping of distraction into every aspect of life. It contributes to the collapse of the distinctions of inner/outer and private/public. On public transport people are absorbed into the private worlds of their smartphones, which connect them to everything everywhere – or seem to. In the current media ecology, we risk losing all the spaces in which boredom might be experienced. The artist's studio was such a space that was culturally privileged and mythologised.

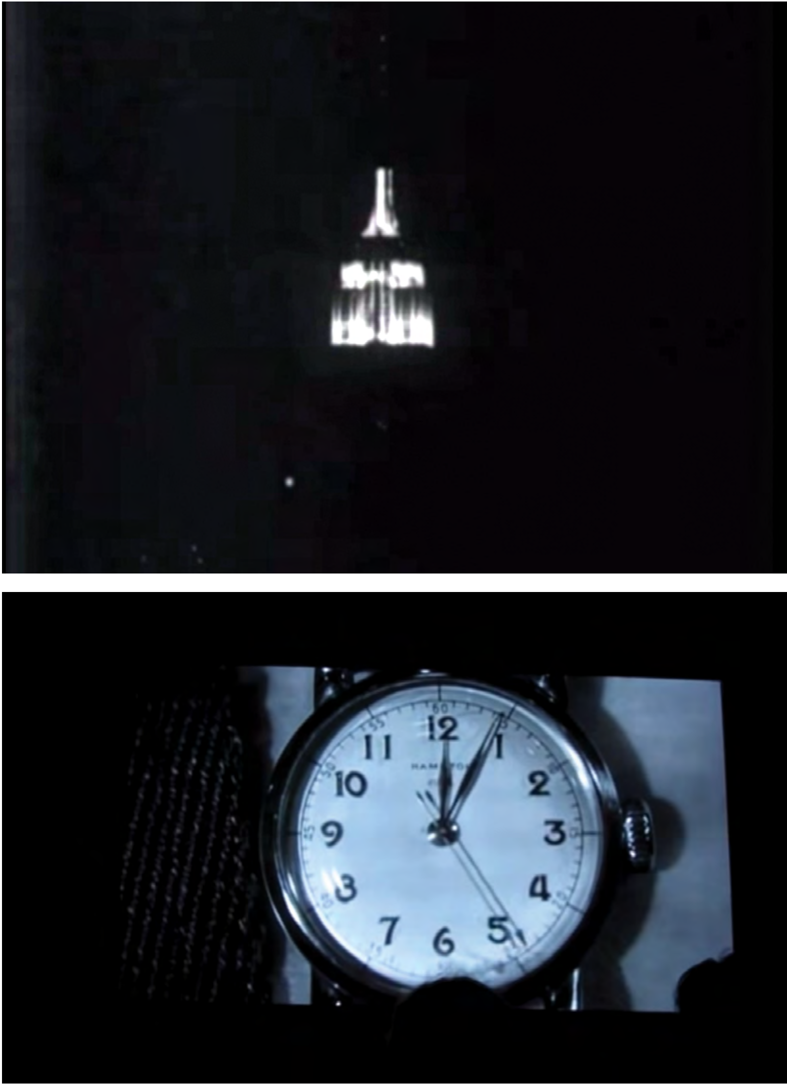

Figure 10.5 Warhol's *Empire* and Marclay's *Clock*. Screenshot captured at 13:46.

Early on in Alberto Moravia's novel *Boredom* (1960) there is a scene in which the protagonist, who is an artist, destroys the painting in his studio by cutting it into pieces. He later asserts the blank canvas as his work.[18] Boredom becomes, as Adam Phillips puts it, 'the moment in which nothing is inviting'.[19] In the novel, the artist's dissatisfaction, the failure of his desire, is connected to his cold mother or rather with a

non-coincidence of mutual expectations. Christopher Bollas, cited by Phillips, suggests that boredom is waiting for transformation, linked to the mother experienced not as an object but as a process of transformation, leading in adult life to the object being 'sought for its function as signifier of the process of the transformation of being'.[20] Moravia's novel also implicitly raises the question of the gendering of boredom and its relation to sexual obsession, and indeed harassment, as an act pursued, not out of desire, but rather out of the reaction to the failure of desire and the substitution of power.

In Moravia's novel, the studio is one of the sites – perhaps the most important – where boredom is played out. So far, we have at least three modalities of boredom: the boredom that is the topic of psychoanalysis; the boredom that is a factor of the shocks and distractions of modernity; and the boredom where withdrawal is connected to potential. The artist's studio may function as something of an intersection of the three.

If the studio is a privileged site for a necessary boredom, a place where potential is gathered, what then of so-called 'post-studio' practice? I think we can locate an ambivalence, perhaps a contradiction, here. On the one hand, post-studio art can be seen as a resistance to the fetishisation of both the object and the artist as isolated genius, and an attempt to give art a socio-political role; on the other hand, of course, it is confluent with the post-object experience economy of platform capitalism, and therefore on the side of the totalisation of distraction, even if the 'distraction' in this case might be a worthwhile political project.[21] In post-studio practice, art becomes a 'project' instead of an object.[22] It could be that the very structure of the 'project' is as much a part of the problem as a critical response to it, in so far as it implies both an orientation to the future made possible by a relation to finitude and death that enables the grasping of possibilities,[23] and a temporal continuum where the future is supposed to be under the control of the present.

While art has become an important part of the distraction economy – biennales, blockbuster shows, publicity, lifestyle and so on – art is also offered as the escape from, or even cure for, our malaise. In the 'critical' period of boredom, in the 1920s and 1930s, that malaise would have derived from a combination of acceleration in technological and economic urban life with the sense of the eternal recurrence of the new in fashion and commodities. Everything rapidly changes but social relations remain the same, with inequality increasing as it does today. Boredom would have been a defence against this acceleration, and perhaps a way of accessing another temporality. Up to the 1960s,

art and the studio provided the locus for resistance, or escape, depending on how you look at it; perhaps even the promise of a transfigured relation to being. But somehow the art of the 'great boredom' seems to have disappeared.

Can we envisage a return of the 'great boredom', or are we involved in a new kind of relation? If a new kind of relation, then the non-relation that was once experienced as boredom will necessarily be different. Perhaps, if still to be found, it will no longer be experienced *as* boredom, but rather as some other affect. What may have changed is not the boredom as such, but the relation to it: to be more specific, the relation with non-relation, with both its possibility, and what it gives on to.

The necessity of wasting time has not changed. Indeed, it is even more urgent because of the total colonisation of time. Pretty much all our time has been rendered productive, although mostly not for us. This has been achieved through the monetisation of attention, made possible by the digital and the internet, social media and the development of smartphones, which lure attention during down moments, the times when in the past we might have been bored. Apparently, at one point, Candy Crush largely replaced the reading of novels on public transport.[24] Now, no doubt, some other game transports commuters elsewhere. This 'wasted time' has been rendered productive for the global corporate economy, so we have to look somewhere else to find a waste that cannot be economised, if such a thing is even possible, according to the paradox of the potlatch identified by Bataille, that of turning waste itself into an acquisition.[25]

It is here that we might turn to the relation between boredom and bliss posited by Roland Barthes. We see this when, in the middle of an interminable meeting during the notorious trip to China by French intellectuals that led to the Maoist turn of the Parisian left, he is attracted by tea leaves unfolding in a cup.[26] This is not a great boredom, but a mundane boredom, and the bliss, which he describes as an excess of the signifier, is a small bliss, and not a great fusion: a tiny moment of ecstatic waste in the midst of an instrumentalised administered world.

The non-relation of boredom is a kind of out-of-work-ness, a *désoeuvrement*.[27] This might be understood as a withdrawal (as in, say, Herman Melville's story 'Bartleby the Scrivener' [1853], with the scrivener's 'I would prefer not to' being neither negation nor affirmation but neutral), or even as something affirmative. For Barthes this is in a small way; for Georges Bataille it is in an ecstatic sense. We need to understand this *ecstasis* not as leisure – the time to recuperate in order to

work better – but rather as outside of the work–leisure duality (which is also where we might want to situate boredom).[28]

Waste in Bataille's sense is potlatch and expenditure without return.[29] We tend to think of the period in which this thought was articulated in terms of things. But the relationship to time was already there through money. And the idea of a wasted time, time as a kind of waste or wasteland, is obviously in Samuel Beckett, in the idea of waiting, repetition or tedium.[30] This wasteland seems to have been entirely gentrified today, converted into value. Wasting time has been made productive, just, as I said, not for us. More and more of the day has become wasted time where our attention is harvested. It is another form of expropriation. The problem we face is how to claim back our wasted time without instrumentalising it, without turning it into labour. A task for education, perhaps, not providing 'job skills' and preparing for lucrative employment but teaching the art of wasting time.

The advent of the modern 'great boredom' is marked in the arts by a distinction between two different kinds of long form, and of the temporalities implied by them. Around the time of Satie's *Vexations*, the poet Stéphane Mallarmé was developing his ideas for the epochal book performance *Le Livre*, based on obsessive calculations and measurement, and both could be seen as a response to – indeed critique of – Wagnerism, manifested in excessively long operas and the mythic opera cycle *The Ring*. Note that already in Satie the 'ring' is replaced by what is in effect a 'loop': the long-form narrative work with its tendency towards ecstatic fusion is replaced by repetition, bourgeois religiosity with almost factory-style labour. One way of seeing the repetition of the short piece of music is as its looping, except that it does have an end after 840 repetitions, number being as much of an interest to Satie as it was to Mallarmé, and the actual performance of the whole thing introduces differences and contingencies into the repetitions.

What is the difference between the *Langeweile* and the loop that becomes possible with audiotape and film, and is carried over into a repeat function in contemporary art?[31] Perhaps we could say that the *Langeweile* is an outside of the time of action, whereas the loop is a trap.[32] We are trapped in the exact repetition of what we have seen and heard. However, while the loop of a temporal work of art remains the same, the visitor to the gallery does not: each repetition will be experienced differently, given its temporal non-identity in perception – the same happening, being perceived, at a different time. And of course we can always leave. So the alternatives set up by the loop are trap and expulsion. But the relation between them is not the same as that of boredom and

distraction: we are neither expelled into, or out from, the *Langeweile*. This poses the question of whether it is still possible to retrieve the *Langeweile*, the 'long of it': and the short of it is I'm not sure that it is.

We should now go on to consider why the 'great boredom' might be at an end. As is the case with art after great art in Hegel, that does not mean that there is boredom no longer. Quite possibly there is more boredom than ever before. But the character of the mood has changed, along with its technological conditions. Boredom is a historical mood, perhaps *the* mood of modernity. For Heidegger, as Miguel de Beistegui suggests, the thinking of boredom, as distinct from the 'universal' human finitude of being towards death, is a way of thinking the relation to time as epochal – that is historical – and as collective.[33] These 'epochs' were those in which being is forgotten in distinctive ways, and each ever more forgetful: as idea; as God; as the subject; in total oblivion in the epoch of the *Gestell* (usually translated as 'enframing', perhaps rather 'set-up') of technology. Whereas Heidegger thinks of modernity in ontological terms, such that boredom as a distinctively modern mood in its radical form involves a non-relation to being, as a moment in the 'history of being', Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin think of the modernity of boredom in terms of society, economy and media. The continuity lies in the relation of all these things to temporalisation. A question we need to pose is whether the transition from the 'great' boredom to what we could call 'minor' boredoms is related to a transformation in temporalisation, connected with new technologies, affecting the extent to which the substance of life may be mediated, rendered abstract and subject to the extraction of surplus value.

Boredom is 'the blasé attitude' according to Georg Simmel in 'The metropolis and mental life' (1903). It results from a combination of 'the intensification of nervous stimulation'[34] in the city with the money economy, which reduces all quality and individuality to quantity so that 'the meaning and differing values of things, and thereby the things themselves, are experienced as insubstantial. They appear to the blasé person in an evenly flat and gray tone; no one object deserves preference over any other. This mood is the faithful subjective reflection of the completely internalized money economy.'[35] Thus, boredom is a response to the combination of the abstraction brought about by money as the universal medium with the acceleration of urban life under capitalism. For Siegfried Kracauer, boredom is the refusal of and even resistance to distractions such as advertising, a guarantee that one is present and still in control of one's existence: 'Eventually one becomes content to do nothing more than be with oneself, without knowing what one actually should be doing.'[36]

Boredom is a mood or *Stimmung* in relation to what is present being either empty or withheld. This raises the question of whether it is directed towards something other than the present. Since boredom has to do with the suspension or withholding of possibilities, it involves an orientation towards the future, even if in the negative sense. This is announced by Benjamin in his notes on boredom made in 1928–9, the same period as Heidegger's lecture course, when he writes, 'Waiting is, in a sense, the lined interior of boredom. (Hebel: boredom waits for death).'[37] Waiting implies futurity. Boredom thus involves a non-relation to the present in the name of a future that remains undetermined. This is articulated in terms of both historicist time and eternal recurrence. Historicist time is a 'progressive' continuum where the future is essentially the same as the present even if it looks different, and exactly the same is true of the past. Both are in this sense continuous with the present. Eternal recurrence, Benjamin's reinterpretation of Nietzsche's *amor fati* via the *Eternity of the Stars* of the insurrectionist Louis Auguste Blanqui, figures the way in which the new 'returns' as the ever-same, and therefore blocks the possibility of the revolutionary new as event. Being bored would therefore be a refusal to be absorbed by the recurrent new, for the sake of that which is awaited on the basis of interruption rather than the continuum of historicism. Boredom is in this respect a 'great boredom' because it is tied to – is the very mood of – the standpoint of redemption. Boredom is 'the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience', writes Benjamin, and, he adds, 'A rustling in the leaves drives him away.'[38]

Benjamin and Heidegger's accounts of boredom share a totalising operation, and it is arguably this that characterises the 'great' boredom. This is evident in the contrast of boredom and discontent. Discontent is discontent with something, whereas boredom involves a withdrawal from or of everything. Boredom is therefore opposed to any partial amelioration. The only way of transforming everything would be a transfigured relation to time as such, whether this is the time of being for Heidegger, or messianic redemption for Benjamin. Such is the project of the 'great' boredom. It is also the project of Capital: to turn *all* lived time into abstract labour. We would have to say, therefore, that a minor boredom could be taken as a refusal of a major boredom, maybe a being bored with the 'great' boredom, not only in the failure of redemption, but also in discerning that the redemptive expectation in the boredom of waiting may itself be part of the problem.

The boredom of the 1960s is not yet at this point. We could see it rather as the attempt to sustain the idea that the rejection of the

redemptive boredom might take the form of another 'great' boredom. We may find this in the conjunction, which is also a non-meeting, of John Cage and Andy Warhol. If boredom has to do with the withdrawal of possibilities whereby things come to appear empty or distracting, there is a reorientation in the 1960s of what those possibilities could be directed towards, a turn from action to consumption. This cuts across differences in the respective attitudes and approaches to art of Cage and Warhol. With Warhol, the relation of boredom to consumption is obvious: to do the same thing every day is to consume the same thing, including the same food. Warhol famously replied when asked why he started painting the Campbell's soup cans: 'Because I used to drink it. I used to have the same lunch every day, for twenty years, I guess, the same thing over and over again.'[39] Along with the abstraction produced by repetition goes affectlessness, or the reassuring feeling of being affectless: 'the more you look at the same exact thing, the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel'.[40] For Cage, by contrast, the implicit posture of the consumer would figure as the reception or openness to the audible in *4′ 33″*, or being subjected to chance. The supposed conjunction of the two was that first performance of the greatest of boring works, Satie's *Vexations*, the one organised in New York at the Pocket Theatre in 1963 by John Cage with which we began. The claim has been made that Warhol attended the performance, a claim that was the basis of an event at Tate Modern on 27 May 2007, in which Satie's *Vexations* was played live to accompany a screening of Warhol's film *Sleep*, made in the same year as the Satie performance.[41] The film of Warhol's lover John Giorno sleeping, shot in 16 mm, lasts 321 minutes.

What does this conjunction of Cage, Warhol and Satie mean for the relation between temporality and abstraction that is a condition for boredom? It is Warhol who provides the clue: between 1962 and 1984 he produced works in the Factory, as his successive studios are named, works that have to do with the registration of existing images, and with forms of advertising and consumption and films that tend to be single-shot and/or long-duration. This is the historical moment of the acceleration of consumption becoming itself a form of production. If the condition for this is the abstraction of consumption – it doesn't matter what is being consumed, what matters are the profits and the social relations that determine where they go – consumption becomes simultaneously interesting and boring, which is perfectly encapsulated in Warhol's pose. Consumption becomes interesting because it becomes conceptual, a universal term subsuming sensuous experiences, but the very condition that allows it to become conceptual, its abstraction as a

result of its being subsumed under the medium of exchange, also renders it boring, since the particular qualities of the sensuous experiences are replaced with symbolic ones (the current expansion of this process takes place through social media such as Instagram, where the signs of consumers' experiences are consumed). Thus a shift in the mode of boringness coincides with the emergence of what has been called 'semiocapitalism'.[42]

A change in the nature of boredom involves an alteration in the relation between the abstraction of time and the withdrawal of possibilities. The abstraction of labour in the factory left possibilities open outside and in the time after work. This surely is why one of the first documentary films, *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1895), directed by Louis Lumière, is so affecting. The abstraction of labour has been understood as a totalisation through a form required by capitalism. So long as the matter or substance of life, or at least aspects of it, remain un-totalised, not abstracted for the extraction of value, boredom can lead somewhere that is not boring. Of course, it could be argued that neither *Vexations* nor *Sleep* is really boring, but rather that the repetitions and exclusion of any narrative focus attention on changes and differences. Brandon Joseph suggests that while for Warhol repetition means doing the same thing every day, for Cage it has to do with variety.[43] In other words, there is a way out within the experience of boredom itself.

By 1968 boredom was a talking point. The Fluxus artist Dick Higgins wrote in an article published in the *Something Else Newsletter* that 'Boredom was, until recently, one of the qualities an artist tried most to avoid. Yet today it appears that artists are deliberately trying to make their work boring.'[44] He suggests that 'in the context of work which attempts to involve the spectator, boredom often serves a useful function: as an opposite to excitement and as a means of bringing emphasis to what it interrupts, causing us to view both elements freshly'.[45] The successful, repetitive, long-form work of art depended on boredom not in the end being boring. The 'great' boredom combines totalisation with the expectation of an exit or total transformation, and the intimation of this within the experience of the work itself. The notion of boredom also suggests something shared, whether broadly in society, or by a select group. However, as art, its social character becomes channelled into aesthetic self-transformation. This is not necessarily a bad thing, since boredom is not the most promising motivation for a demand for social change.

The 'minor' boredoms that follow the 1960s take two forms: on the one hand a financialised boredom, and on the other a revival of *acedia*.

It is the book in which *acedia* is a central motif that shows us the connection between the two. Before his suicide in 2008, David Foster Wallace organised the typescripts and associated computer files for the novel he was working on, *The Pale King*, so that they would be found. The novel revolves around the changes to the US tax code in the 1980s, under the presidency of Ronald Reagan, and the formation of a tax examiner in the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) who worked during the time of those changes. The new tax code involves the shift from the idea of tax work as a civic duty for the benefit of society to the subordination of the IRS to corporate profitability. This is the bedrock of the seismic turn from the aftermath of the New Deal to the emergence of neoliberalism.

Boredom is both described and thematised in the novel, and arguably is also fundamental to its structure and the implied reader. The formation of the protagonist takes place during the 1970s, the last period of the 'great boredom'. Implied is a critique of the idea of the great boredom from a later perspective, combining the viewpoints of the protagonist in the 1980s and the author in the first decade of the twenty-first century. That critique involves making a distinction between 'aesthetic' boredom (already identified and criticised in the nineteenth century by Søren Kierkegaard),[46] and the boredom of certain kinds of necessary work. If boredom for Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin is a mood that takes on a particular character in modernity, it tends specifically to be a response to the life of the metropolis, and therefore already to imply a distinction between metropolitan boredom (as a defensive reaction to over-stimulation) and provincial boredom (of Madame Bovary for example – therefore also a question of gender). In Wallace, provincial boredom has become that of the suburbs, and he introduces a further distinction between that boredom and a boredom that is unavoidable and indeed necessary as a civic virtue. It is the value accorded to the latter type of boredom that is threatened by neoliberal capitalism from the 1980s.

According to the first distinction Wallace is making, aesthetic boredom has become the boredom of kids from the Midwestern suburbs, who are of college age. The privilege here is being supported by parents (of the New Deal generation), who have to do boring jobs to provide that support. This suburban kids' boredom becomes the Warhol version of aesthetic boredom. The bored college kid, after his father's traumatic death in an accident, goes into a boring job of his own, with the IRS. This boring job becomes located on an inflection point of social values. So repetitive boring labour, which is negatively coded, here becomes

positively coded. In a way the structure is both similar to and different from Heidegger's opposition of profound boredom and its evasion by little boredoms, or Benjamin's of waiting and distraction. On one level the IRS job is stupid and repetitive, but on another it has a crucial social value. Indeed, it is at this level of detail that history is really made, beneath the distracting political spectacle. What is needed to discern it is a practice of boredom in order to achieve attention.[47] There is a connection here with the very origin of boredom in the *acedia* of the Church Fathers,[48] which is suggested in the conversion narrative of the protagonist of *The Pale King* when he accidentally sits in on a university accountancy class given by a substitute tutor who happens to be a Jesuit.

In the course of the novel, attention-in-boredom is needed to perform as an IRS examiner, but also to discern what is happening, to perform a critical reading of the tax code itself and of the changes that it is undergoing. This provides an analogy for the reading of the very long novel with its own boring passages dealing with the minutiae of working for the IRS. It is no longer a matter of heroically undergoing an immensely long, repetitive, boring artwork (witness Karl Schenzer as the heroic audience member at *Vexations*), or passing through boredom to live in the affirmative differentiations of the moment, both of which uncover some fundamental relation to time and human possibility, but rather of paying attention through boredom in order to grasp why things are the way they are, and indeed in order to act in the public sphere, which is not so much a matter of time as such, but rather of history. It is perhaps through a necessary minor boredom that a relation between time and history is reinstated, like the role *acedia* plays in the Christian redemptive story, but in a new way and in a lower key.

> The underlying bureaucratic key is the ability to deal with boredom. To function effectively in an environment that precludes everything vital and human. To breathe, so to speak, without air … It is the key to modern life. If you are immune to boredom, there is literally nothing you cannot accomplish.[49]

It is indeed this 'minor' boredom that is presented as 'heroic' by the Jesuit substitute tutor, in a way that is satirised by the author to imply that it is anything but:

> He said, 'To retain care and scrupulosity about each detail from within the teeming wormball of data and rule and exception and contingency which constitutes real-world accounting – this is

> heroism. To attend fully to the interests of the client and to balance those interests against the high ethical standards of FASB and extant law – yea, to serve those who care not for service but only for results – this is heroism. This may be the first time you've heard the truth put plainly, starkly. Effacement. Sacrifice. Service. To give oneself to the care of others' money – this is effacement, perdurance, sacrifice, honor, doughtiness, valor. Hear this or not, as you will. Learn it now, or later – the world has time. Routine, repetition, tedium, monotony, ephemeracy, inconsequence, abstraction, disorder, boredom, angst, ennui – these are the true hero's enemies, and make no mistake, they are fearsome indeed. For they are real.[50]

The relation to history is a matter of reading, with the implication that we will never be able to understand history without being able to continue to read through boredom.[51] This implies a critique of the historical genres of the novel and film that would seek to avoid boring the reader or viewer. The implication of *The Pale King* is that the examination of tax returns provides the model for the reading of the book itself, and since the book deals through its minutiae with a turning point in history, for the reading of history itself.

Wallace is attempting to fuse the 'minor' boredom from the 1980s with the 'great' boredom of the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, while at the same time drawing attention to the distinction:

> Pay close attention to the most tedious thing you can find (tax returns, televised golf), and, in waves, a boredom like you've never known will wash over you and just about kill you. Ride these out, and it's like stepping from black and white into colour. Like water after days in the desert. Constant bliss in every atom.[52]

The boredom that comes with the monotonous attention to tedious detail, necessary for civil society, for an understanding of history and for close reading, is combined with a Christian tradition from the desert fathers to Kierkegaard, of thinking of boredom as a path to salvation. In a monologue by a ghost – referring to the 'noonday demon' seen by a devout 'wiggler' (a trade term for a tax examiner) – we find the following reference to *acedia*: 'No word for the Latin acedia made so much of by monks under Benedict. For the Greek ακηδία. Also the hermits of third-century Egypt, the so-called *daemon meridianus*, when their prayers were stultified by pointlessness and tedium and a longing for a violent death.'[53] Perhaps in this respect *The Pale King* is the last statement and

exemplar in its own longueurs of the 'great boredom' while at the same time seeking to encompass the 'minor' boredoms that anticipate its undoing. However, it is also clear that boredom is a form of resistance to depression, or an attempt to turn depression into resistance as a relation to possibilities denied or withheld.[54]

In the twenty-first century, the conditions for boredom have changed once again. The possibilities for a virtuous, civic boredom posited by Wallace in *The Pale King* have been reduced by algorithms based on machine learning. The targeting of information and communications, and the demand for instant response, have reduced the toleration for the stretched-out time of boredom. Media have at once produced and exploited shortened attention spans. Of course this has produced reactions, such as the movement of 'slow radio' and 'slow television', but these are marginal, and do not touch the profound changes that media have produced in the experience of temporality. It is no coincidence that the new phase of the suppression of boredom, which is approaching totality through the multiplication and penetration to every level of life by distraction, goes together with the attempt to financialise all forms of attention. This tendency has reached its apogee during the years following David Foster Wallace's death. The problem remains what it already was in the first decades of the twentieth century, the relation of boredom to distraction, the attracting away of attention, while the new situation is the corporate colonisation of attention at every level.

With the emergence of 'semiocapitalism' during the 1980s in what has become the 'global North' we see a shift from a 'Fordist' boredom, linked to repetitive and tedious labour and statist and corporate bureaucracy, to a new kind of all-pervasive boredom involving a general exhaustion and emptying out of significance.[55] Punk boredom acts as a hinge between the two: on the one hand a continuation of working-class male boredom celebrated with an energy that is associated with the idea that there is a sphere of freedom outside that of work; on the other hand, a devaluation of all values and refusal to see the point in anything. The phase after this is described by Mark Fisher as 'anhedonic boredom' and he gives the example of Kurt Cobain and Nirvana: 'In his dreadful lassitude and objectless rage, Cobain seemed to give wearied voice to the despondency of the generation that had come after history, whose every move was anticipated, tracked, bought and sold before it had even happened.'[56]

If boredom is still a matter of time, as it is in the classic accounts, and also concerns a relation to abstraction,[57] then we would expect this

new condition of boredom to involve changes in the relation between temporality and abstraction. When it is possible to maintain the distinction between the abstraction of time and the labour process and non-abstract aspects of life (friendship, love, self-realisation), boredom has a telos and an end. The expansion of abstraction and commodification into leisure and home life began to happen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, picked up after the depression in the 1930s and accelerated during the post-war period, increasingly from the 1960s with the development of the advertising industry which – from at least the 1890s – lay behind this penetration of capital into consumption and the colonisation of private life. Distraction offers itself as the solution to boredom, inevitably becoming boring itself. This is the logic behind Benjamin's critique of fashion according to the eternal return. The cycle of distraction and boredom preempts the redemptive dimension of waiting of the 'great' boredom. Minor boredom takes over where 'great' boredom might lead. The condition for this is that life 'beyond' boredom becomes itself subject to abstraction.

Roberto Finelli explains this extension of abstraction in terms of the distinction in Marx between formal and real subsumption. The totalisation of capital has to arise not from particular contents but from a determination of its form, since the addition of particulars could continue indefinitely without resulting in a totality.[58] Formal determination concerns the penetration of the social relations of production into the labour process when an existing labour process is taken over by capital. With real subsumption capital penetrates the whole process of production such that living labour counts only as a supply of working time.[59] Abstract labour arises when different performances with their sensuous particularities all count as 'universal' labour. The abstracting involves the emptying out of different labours with their particular character for an interchangeable labour-in-general. An additional factor is the expansion of what counts as labour: as the nature of work changes, cognitive labour comes under the relations of production; and as media technologies are transformed, affective and intimate life itself becomes labour. In the course of this, writes Finelli, abstraction

> invades the concrete, filling it according to the exigencies of its expansive-reproductive logic. At the same time, however, it leaves it a semblance, an exterior surface of concreteness … It posits the abstract and the concrete in connection not through contradiction but through abstraction – emptying-out … I believe that postmodern

> society should be interpreted, not as rupture and discontinuity, but, rather, as the deepening and the more complete realisation of modern society. It is completed by means of the extension and the unfolding on the part of the subject constituted by impersonal and abstract wealth into all of the collective and private environments of life: a colonisation which is dissimulated and negated through an hysterical over-determination of the surface.[60]

This occurs in cognitive and affective capitalism,

> in which, given that it is essentially information which is worked on, the active and creative participation of subjectivity is valorised and emphasised to the maximum, with all of the individuality of its psychic resources; while the elaboration of information refers in reality to the function of choosing between alternatives already preconstituted and predetermined, obeying programmes and work plans already conceived and signified by others, and placed in that great artificial brain external to our mind that is the informational machine. Expressed in other terms, this is the way real abstraction presents itself, as mental labour that is merely discursive-calculative and devoid of intentionality or personal appropriation, appearing as dissimulated in its superficial appearance, turned upside down into its opposite of creative and personalised labour.[61]

When the work/personal life distinction is collapsed, assisted by smartphones, email and so on, and the dimension of love and relationships becomes labour, 'The sphere of consumption, of that zone which once was still defined as private, thus experiences ever more the decline of feeling, of taste, of sensual emotion, giving way to boredom, to insignificance and quantitative indifference.'[62] Under such circumstances, can boredom still be a form of refusal or withdrawal? Or a way of waiting to find desire, as the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips puts it?[63] What happens when desiring itself becomes a form of abstract labour? And what kind of temporality would make this possible?

The relation to the future presupposed in the classic accounts of boredom has undergone a change as a result of the mediations made possible by new technologies. Twenty-first-century media have affected the temporality of sensibility in a 'feed-forward mechanism', so that behaviour no longer becomes a question of intentionality or perception.[64] In the example of the bored adolescent girls addressed by YouTube discussed by Tina Kendall, the solution to the problem of boredom is

pre-programmed even prior to the awareness of it.[65] This is the condition for the financialisation of boredom typically addressed to adolescent girls through YouTube videos that purport to provide solutions. The technical condition for the transformation of temporality that facilitates this is that of the computation-based media which have made surveillance capitalism possible. Hansen argues that the micro-temporalities of computation applied to tracking and sensing contribute to a general sensibility that works below the level of perception as a condition for consciousness and predetermining its intentionality. What the 'feed-forward' creates is a continuum effect whereby the future is predicted and therefore within an order of probability pre-empted from a present in a way that is imperceptible to consciousness but available as probabilistically processed data which can be used to inform or to advertise towards future outcomes. It is not only that the possibilities are controlled for actualisation in certain directions, for example the financialised solutions to feeling bored, but that the future is to be constituted solely in the modality of possibility. This is the determination of futurity which enables its real subsumption – its abstraction and financialisation in advance as labour for capital – to be always already anticipated.

A new temporal dimension is added to the continuing saturation of boredom.[66] Instead of a temporality of slowness and distention – *Langeweile* – as a withdrawal from the speed of modern time (as in Kracauer, Simmel, Benjamin and Heidegger), boredom becomes itself incorporated into sensibility subject to the micro-temporalities of computation. While Fordist boredom was something to be endured and could be relieved in social life outside the factory, there is no outside according to the topology of semio- and surveillance-capitalist boredom. If 'profound boredom' had to do with a withdrawal to potential, the aim of semio- and surveillance capitalism is to make sure all potential is reduced to possibilities that can be financialised, and therefore are abstracted and rendered interchangeable by means of big data and machine learning.

In such a situation, passing through boredom doesn't lead anywhere else. In effect, boredom ceases to become a way of holding off depression, and becomes indistinguishable from it. The end is not transfiguration or redemption but exhaustion and collapse. That is one reason why we can no longer talk of a 'great' boredom. But that does not mean that boredom may not be directed at abstraction as such and its data-sanctioned possibilities, seemingly unlimited but beneath their apparent differences all the same, as in Benjamin's version of the eternal return of the new. Perhaps to consider this a 'great' boredom would

be an evasion or a nostalgia, as if in such circumstances some kind of transfiguration could still be possible. Such an aspiration would be irresponsible given the injustices and ecological threats that exist today. In retrospect, it is possible to see the 'great boredom' as the last avatar of the sublime, but in the modality that Sianne Ngai calls 'stuplimity', where 'the initial experience of being aesthetically overwhelmed involves not terror or pain (eventually superseded by tranquility), but *something much closer to an ordinary fatigue* – and one that cannot be neutralized, like the sublime's terror, by a competing affect'.[67] If for Edmund Burke the aim of the sublime was to shake the subject up through a combination of pleasure and pain, or for Immanuel Kant to overwhelm the imagination for the sake of the transcendence of reason, boredom is more like a dulling, clogging inertia or the tedium of one thing after another.[68] The failure is not so much a failure of the imagination to totalise as a diminishing of the energy to enumerate. While eschewing transcendence, the 'great boredom' served as a last hope that the experience of art can change us, if only through exhaustion. In the materialist comedy of its repetitions and falls, Ngai's 'stuplimity' may provide what, quoting Gertrude Stein, she calls 'a little resistance'.[69] Even that expectation directed towards boredom now seems vain. Mark Fisher writes that:

> It is certainly true that one could feel almost nostalgic for Boredom 1.0. The dreary void of Sundays, the night hours after television stopped broadcasting, even the endless dragging minutes waiting in queues or for public transport: for anyone who has a smartphone, this empty time has now been effectively eliminated. In the intensive, 24/7 environment of capitalist cyberspace, the brain is no longer allowed any time to idle; instead, it is inundated with a seamless flow of low-level stimulus.[70]

The process of formal abstraction and real subsumption is continuous from the nineteenth-century factory system, but undergoes a series of ever more rapid quantum leaps with semiocapitalism in the 1980s and 1990s, cognitive capitalism arising from the 1990s to the early 2000s, and surveillance capitalism from 2008, aiming to transform all of life to a source of surplus value.[71] The increasing breadth and depth of abstraction lead from sign production and exchange to post-Fordist forms of work leading to precarity and the gig economy, and to the subsumption as labour of sociality, love and what would previously have been private life through forms of tracking via search, social media and sensing devices.

These technologies produce data that is aggregated and subject to machine-learning algorithms, and they generate value through the application of a probability calculation to possibilities whereby the subject's behaviour, including consumer choices, may be predicted. This enforces the idea of a person as a bundle of possibilities which may, given the appropriate data and analytical tools, be subject to calculation and prediction. The extension of the category of possibility as that which is predictable is therefore a condition for abstraction in the economic sense. The possibilities may even be considered to be infinite, as in the ideology that 'you can be anything you want to be'. The category of possibility as it is used in this way needs to be distinguished from that of potentiality, a condition of being which, according to Giorgio Agamben's reading of Aristotle and application of this to sovereignty, must involve the potentiality not to be, in other words contingency.[72] There is no necessity, even to a degree, that a potential should be or occur, hence it is in principle not calculable. What if that which is boring results precisely from the reduction of potentiality to possibility? Boredom would then be the attempt to withdraw or regress from the possible in order to restore potentiality, through the potentiality not-to. If the distinction of potential from possibility is that potential always involves contingency, that is the potential to just as well not be, does the end of the 'great boredom' also mark the closure of the 'profound' boredom that is distinguished by a withdrawal to the potential not-to? Is it possible that after the end of the 'great boredom', this relation to contingency might rather come to inhabit the 'minor' boredoms? Perhaps a 'profound' boredom can after all only be a 'minor' boredom, since it must also involve a non-relation with what makes it 'profound', that is, the relation to potential not-to, given that a simple relation would turn the very withdrawal in potential into a possibility that may be cashed out.

There is a danger, however, if potential is set in opposition to possibility, which is that the implied reserve becomes a matter of 'clean hands', of a potentiality that remains 'pure' and 'full' only by being insulated from actualisation. The possibilities are infinite only so long as they are withheld in potential which, as potential not-to, remains immeasurable, that is, prior to and beyond any calculus of probabilities. Thus the status of boredom oscillates between withdrawal into potential and hesitation before possibilities that will become determinate by being actualised. Chance is held up as a way of maintaining contingency in actualisation, as an alternative solution to the loss of potential in the predictability of possibilities.[73] Boredom, as withdrawal from decision since all the possibilities are indifferent, is the obverse of undecidability.

Nineteenth-century ennui, associated with the dandy, involved an intense desire for sensations combined with a state of indifference marked by superiority over all the possibilities, none of which can be sufficiently beautiful or transformative.[74] The hyper-discrimination between sensations of the bored aesthete is both a reflex against the subsumption of experience under abstraction, and a defence against being overwhelmed. What is desired, sensation, becomes a threat to the integrity and distance of the transcendental subject of perception and judgement. Boredom as a defence against the overwhelming could also, of course, be understood in terms of social relations.

If there is to be actual change, a limited possibility will have to be chosen and realised, including a possibility that may seem to be blocked and therefore 'impossible'.[75] In a fragment of Benjamin's *Arcades Project* we read that 'Boredom is a warm gray fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and colorful of silks. In this fabric we wrap ourselves when we dream. But the sleeper looks bored and gray within his sheath.'[76] The potential that seems to inhere in the lining becomes boredom in actuality, and conversely the experience of boredom speaks

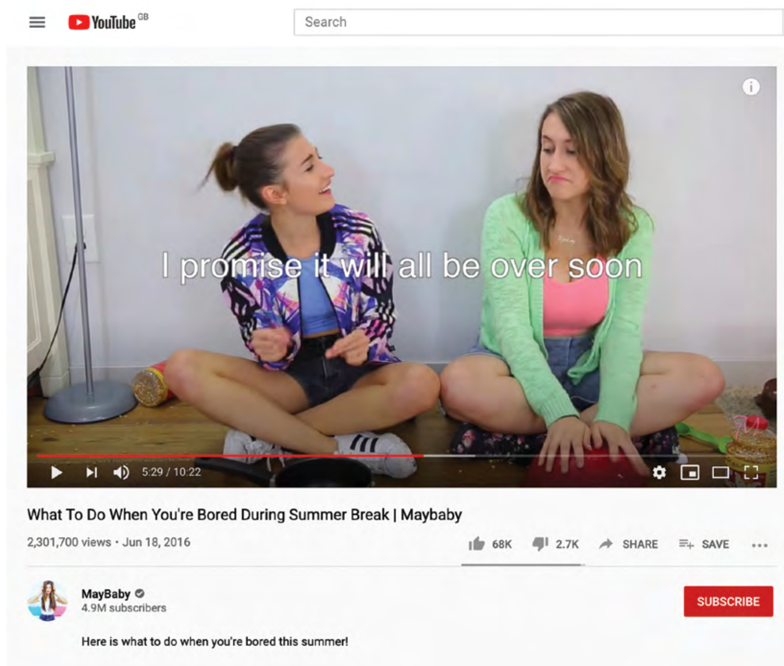

Figure 10.6 Maybaby, *What to Do when You're Bored during Summer Break*. Screenshot captured at 05:26. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHt-jEZfVX8.

of the lining in potentiality. But for change to occur, this potentiality would need to be limited to become a possibility, in which case the colourful silk would revert to prosaic grey, which is precisely the necessary condition of boring service of which David Foster Wallace writes in *The Pale King*. However, the process of the abstraction of experience as it is turned into data for the possibility of its appropriation as surplus value and corporate profit becomes a pre-empting of the conversion of potential – the lustrous lining of boredom – into the counter-possibility of a transformation that would interrupt this machine. We appear to be in a moment when the abstract (as formal relations of capitalist value extraction) has been allowed, as Finelli puts it, 'to invade the concrete'[77] with the result that everything becomes simultaneously attention-grabbing and boring, not in the 'great' sense of a duration endured for some kind of illumination, but with an endless, indefinite, low-level hum. Boredom, which could once have been a form of resistance, is returned into the cycle of repetition. As in all exploitation, what is appropriated, in the end, is time. However, the limits to and disastrous consequences of this expansion of the abstraction of labour and expropriation of experience are becoming increasingly clear. As the boredom of precarious labour that leads nowhere becomes more pervasive, boredom as an aesthetic stance comes to seem self-indulgent. What is in question is not stretching my time, but freeing the time of others, and that there be time at all.

Coda

If boredom is an affect that is epochal and in that respect an 'attunement', it will have been transformed under the impact of a genuine event. The Covid-19 pandemic, affecting all of mankind, is clearly such an event. To date boredom has been understood in psychological, existential and historical terms which are all human-centred. However, the pandemic both connects and displaces the human with respect to micro and macro temporalities, from the cellular and viral to the climatic and the anthropocene. What place can boredom have at these scales?

The long stretches of lockdown have created new occasions for boredom, and also made explicit that the different kinds of boredom reflect social inequality, as they have done in the past, when the ennui of the monied is not the same as boredom with repetitive work. Generative boredom, if such can still occur, is the privilege of those who have the time and space for it.

By forcing people into isolation, or into tight 'bubbles', the circumstances of the pandemic bring to the fore that boredom, unlike for example shame, is not a social affect. What is shared, rather, is what alleviates it: banter, humour, gossip and storytelling. This alleviation is not the same as distraction because it has to do with the connection with others. If the 'great boredom' was supposed to be an orientation towards everything in the mode of negation or withdrawal, including from distraction, then the pandemic, socially divisive as it may be, changes both the relation to the whole and the experience of isolation.

Boredom has always involved a problem with desire and the future. Today it encounters the way surveillance capitalism monetises anticipated behaviours and decisions, thereby pre-empting potentiality, including that held in reserve in supposed boredom. If, under the pandemic, languor, sadness or the daily struggle alternate with sheer panic, what then? Would boredom finally be revealed as the hither side of a different kind of connectedness?

Notes

1 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mqO-xsRyTM.

2 'Pour se jouer 840 fois de suite ce motif, il sera bon de se préparer au préalable, et dans le plus grand silence, par des immobilités sérieuses' (quoted at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vexations). See also Potter, *Erik Satie*, 139–44. Potter describes *Vexations* as a 'a deformed chorale, a broken-down hymn tune' (141) and she goes on to discuss the effect of stasis and the use of extreme repetition by Satie to empty expressive content.

3 The work is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. See their notes at https://www.moma.org/collection/works/303039#:~:text=Empire%20is%20an%20epic%20black,Life%20Building%20in%20midtown%20Manhattan.

4 'Art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past [*ein Vergangenes*]. Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our ideas instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place.' Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 11. The lectures were delivered by Hegel in Heidelberg and Berlin between 1818 and 1829.

5 'Absolute Knowing' is the final stage in the journey of *Geist* or 'Spirit' in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. 'The goal, Absolute Knowing, or Spirit that knows itself as Spirit, has for its path the recollection of the Spirits as they are in themselves and as they accomplish the organization of their realm.' Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 493.

6 'Well, the *Phenomenology* may be viewed, then, as the biography of world-spirit ….' Royce, *Lectures on Modern Idealism*, 150.

7 See Heidegger, 'The question concerning technology', in *Basic Writings*, 311–41. 'The essential unfolding of technology threatens revealing, threatens it with the possibility that all revealing will be consumed in ordering and that everything will present itself only in the unconcealment of standing-reserve. Human activity can never directly counter this danger' (339).

8 From 'First We Take Manhattan' on the album *I'm Your Man* (1988): 'They sentenced me to 20 years of boredom / For tryin' to change the system from within.' The conference at which the first part of this essay was originally delivered was '20 Years of Boredom', 16 December 2017, Institute of Advanced Studies, UCL.

9 For a prescient study of the use of distraction in politics, see Jamieson, *Dirty Politics*. For a genealogy of distraction, see North, *The Problem of Distraction*. On the digitisation of distraction see Pettman, *Infinite Distraction*.

10 Heidegger, 'The question concerning technology', 340, quoting from Friedrich Hölderlin's poem 'Patmos' (1802).
11 Given the pressures of funding combined with the justification through exhibition attendance numbers in public institutions.
12 *Die Langeweile*, which translates as 'boredom', is a compound of *lange* and *Weile*, 'long while', related to *weilen*, 'to stay', and *verweilen*, 'to tarry' or 'to linger': see Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 78. Karl Schenzer certainly tarried in the performance of *Vexations*.
13 Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 164–7.
14 Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 171.
15 Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 172. For an excellent discussion of these matters, see de Beistegui, *Thinking with Heidegger*, 61–80.
16 For this formulation, see Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 50, 74, 153.
17 See Hatton, 'Looping the loop'; Mulvey, *Death 24 × a Second*, 8, 101.
18 Moravia, *Boredom*.
19 Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored*, 80.
20 Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored*, 77.
21 See Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*.
22 For the shift from studio to project-based approaches to art production, see Lauwaert, 'Changing artist's practices'.
23 See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 184–88, 304–11.
24 See Day, 'Candy Crush Saga'.
25 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1, 25–6 and 72–7.
26 Barthes, *Travels in China*, 27. See Badmington, 'Bored with Barthes', 317: 'Tea breaks up the boredom, offers an alternative to ennui, by offering something "indirect" in the midst of the doxa, which is both direct and correct (in that it repeatedly confirms its own authorised account of life under Mao).'
27 For a discussion of *désoeuvrement* in Blanchot and others, see Iyer, 'The workless community'.
28 See Bataille, 'Letter to X', on 'unemployed negativity'.
29 See Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1, 27–77.
30 See the discussion of Beckett, together with Gertrude Stein and Kenneth Goldsmith, in the chapter on 'stuplimity' in Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 248–97.
31 See Hatton, 'Looping the loop'.
32 Susan Morris spoke, in the conference on which this book is based, of the loop as 'time on hold'.
33 de Beistegui, *Thinking with Heidegger*, 77.
34 Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 410.
35 Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 411.
36 Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, 304.
37 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 118, quoting Hebel, *Werke*, 393.
38 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 149.
39 Quoted in Swenson, 'What is pop art?', 26. For Warhol and boredom, see Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom*, 100–6; also Josh Cohen's essay in this volume.
40 Andy Warhol quoted in Joseph, 'The play of repetition', 32.
41 Joseph, 'The play of repetition', claims that Warhol did attend the performance of *Vexations* organised by Cage, and that this affected the structure of repetition of *Sleep*. Comenas, 'Notes on John Cage', argues convincingly that Warhol is very unlikely to have attended the performance. However, he knew about it, and probably thought that he should have been there, so whether he actually attended or not does not affect Joseph's argument for a relation between *Vexations* and *Sleep*.
42 For semiocapitalism, see Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*; Berardi, 'Cognitarian subjectivation'; and Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody*.
43 Joseph, 'The play of repetition', 38–41, has a detailed discussion of Cage's disagreement with La Monte Young about repetition and boredom.
44 Higgins, 'Boredom and danger', 1.
45 Higgins, 'Boredom and danger', 2. Marcel Duchamp associated the artistic production of boredom with Happenings: 'Happenings have introduced into art an element no one had put there: boredom. To do a thing in order to bore people is something I never imagined! And that's too bad, because it's a beautiful idea.' Cited in Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, 99.

46 For boredom in Kierkegaard, see McDonald, 'Kierkegaard's demonic boredom'.
47 Wallace, *The Pale King*, 177: 'I know that I wouldn't understand this prior to entering the Service and seeing the bearing of some of the older examiners who spend all day for years at a desk or Tingle table, leaning forward to examine tax returns, primarily to identify those that should be audited. In other words, it's the posture of someone whose daily work means sitting very still at a desk and working on something in a concentrated way for years on end.'
48 See Clare, 'The politics of boredom'.
49 Wallace, *The Pale King*, 440.
50 Wallace, *The Pale King*, 233.
51 The distinction between the aesthetic and the ethical, and the focus on authorship and reading, of course suggests that the closest preceding account of boredom to Wallace's is that of Kierkegaard.
52 Wallace, *The Pale King*, 548.
53 Wallace, *The Pale King*, 385. The novel is discussed in relation to *acedia* in Clare, 'The politics of boredom', and in Michael, 'Pale king or noonday demon?'.
54 For depression and *The Pale King* see Cohen, *Not Working* (a book in which Cohen advocates for the benefits of idleness), 194–217.
55 See Crary, *24/7*.
56 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 9; see also Fisher's discussion of boredom in *K-Punk*, 57–61 and 549–50, where he argues that the boredom of Fordist factory labour is associated by neoliberals with the 'tedium' of social democracy and stability, to be replaced by the anxiety correlating with precariousness, an anxiety that should be politicised rather than medicalised.
57 See Osborne, 'The dreambird of experience'.
58 Finelli, 'Abstraction versus contradiction', 63.
59 Finelli, 'Abstraction versus contradiction', 64. Arguably both are present in all stages of capitalism, but that does not mean that they are not present in different relations and ratios.
60 Finelli, 'Abstraction versus contradiction', 66.
61 Finelli, 'Abstraction versus contradiction', 67.
62 Finelli, 'Abstraction versus contradiction', 68.
63 Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored*, 72.
64 Hansen, *Feed-Forward*, 34–81.
65 Kendall, '#boredwithmeg'.
66 Gardiner, 'The multitude strikes back?'. This kind of boredom is anticipated in the boredom of saturation described in Klapp, *Overload and Boredom*.
67 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 270.
68 Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 30–6; Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 134.
69 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 294.
70 Fisher, *K-Punk*, 549–50.
71 Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 93–6.
72 For potential, see Agamben, *Potentialities*, 177–84, and on the relation of potential to boredom, Agamben, *The Open*, 63–70.
73 This would enable us to understand better the transition from nineteenth-century ennui, for example in Baudelaire, via the indecision to cast the dice in Mallarmé's *Igitur*, which references *Hamlet*, to the casting of 'A throw of the dice will never abolish chance', which expresses the desire to maintain potential despite the actualisation of the possibility in the number produced by the thrown dice. For a discussion of this see Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren*.
74 The supreme exemplification of this would be Huysmans, *Against Nature.*
75 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 17: 'Emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a "natural order", must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable.'
76 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 105.
77 Finelli, 'Abstraction versus contradiction', 66.

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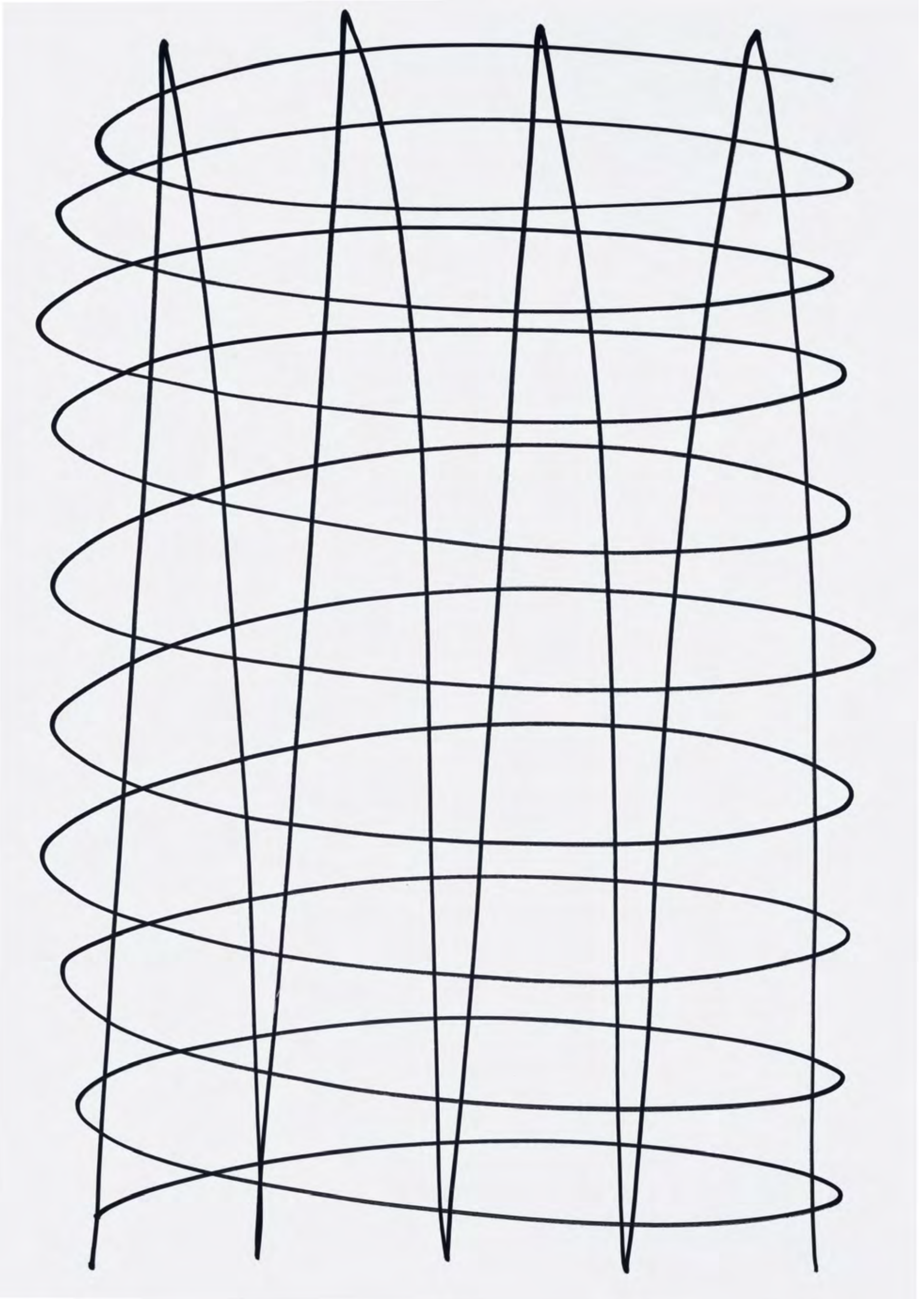

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What do we mean when we say that we are bored? Or when we find a subject boring? Contributors to *On Boredom: Essays in art and writing*, which include artists, art historians, psychoanalysts and a novelist, examine boredom in its manifold and uncertain reality. Each part of the book takes up a crucial moment in the history of boredom and presents it in a new light, taking the reader from the trials of the consulting room to the experience of hysteria in the nineteenth century. The book pays particular attention to boredom's relationship with the sudden and rapid advances in technology that have occurred in recent decades, specifically technologies of communication, surveillance and automation.

On Boredom is idiosyncratic for its combination of image and text, and the artworks included in its pages – by Mathew Hale, Martin Creed and Susan Morris – help turn this volume into a material expression of boredom itself. With other contributions from Josh Cohen, Briony Fer, Anouchka Grose, Rye Dag Holmboe, Margaret Iversen, Tom McCarthy and Michael Newman, the book will appeal to readers in the fields of art history, literature, cultural studies and visual culture, from undergraduate students to professional artists working in new media.

Rye Dag Holmboe is currently Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at UEA, where his research examines the relationship between creative process and psychoanalysis. Holmboe has published books on contemporary artists as well as articles on art, literature and theory.

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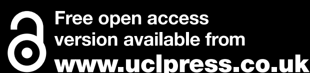

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