

Introduction

This is a collection of artworks and essays that either dwell in the territory of boredom or attempt to comment upon it. Pleasure is not excluded from this exhibition, nor is there within the works a sense only of exhaustion or depletion – terms or states perhaps normally associated with boredom. What is contemplated here is a space that absorbs, to varying degrees; the sensual, the (over)decorative, and aspects of the melancholic. It has qualities about its form that imitate (consciously or not) the actions performed within the hold of a compulsive obsessive disorder.

David Bate links boredom with the baroque which, in its contemporary form, has all the elements of clutter which is 'not merely ornamental, but a constitutive component of ... a world represented in signs without guaranteed meaning'. This is a world within which the 'anxiety of cosmic space is obsessively covered over and simultaneously revealed', in an activity not unlike that of the fetishist, who uses an object which by its presence speaks of (a denial of) absence, and which is usually made out of materials that embody sensuality or luxuriousness.

Working to produce an intensely beautiful and meditative work Mariele

There was silence in heaven when the space of half an hour, words are slowly written out on the computer, using a specially developed alphabet of circles and ellipses. You will be asked to wait at the computer as successive letters emerge, and copy down the word-result on the form that is provided.

Jeremy Akerman's work; *Road: (I was thinking about a time once)* is a three minute non-interactive film, with sound, consisting of a sequence of stills. The images appear to trigger a narrative, dwelling on memory and loss, which is 'spoken' by the computer voice 'Kathy'; thus perhaps distancing us from the experience of any real emotion.

There is an association in road movies, and in even travel itself, with the desire to drop out, to move away. In *Tunnel*, Anna Mossman presents a piece of film which silently loops so that, time and time again, we see the same vehicles pass through an underpass. No significance is attached to the place, and nothing particular happens. We are exposed to the experience of boredom and frustration with the time it takes to do this thing, and desire to move on and be somewhere else. However, the experience of watching the same footage repeatedly starts to load the scene with a latency and beauty so that every moment or any moment is held on to as that which is lost, but that which also may have had meaning – outside of the bind within which we are trapped.

Alan Ball and Edward Dorrian work with loops of (found) video footage. In contrast to all the other work, however, both these pieces are interactive. Interactivity offers the viewer the possibility of a limited variation within the scene, transforming him or her into participant. Vision; issues around being seen or seeing, is integral to these works.

Dorrian's work, *hPrick*, uses footage from a soft porn video obtained from his local newsagent. The work, which can be manipulated, acts also as a lure, wrapping the viewer in idle fascination. We observe a woman switch from a person who speaks to camera, to an object of the detached gaze as she somewhat awkwardly slips into the appropriate poses, coaxed by two cameramen. By our reaction (clicking with the mouse on whichever part of the image we chose) we become complicit in encouraging this transformation, roped in by the demands of the job to be done.

In *Recidivist* Ball reworks footage from television news, which demonstrates how an electronic tagging device can be fitted round the ankle of a person. As viewer or participant you are able to replay the moment of fastening or unfastening this device. Ball uses a quote from Michel Foucault in Discipline and Punish, to accompany this work; 'he who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power ... he becomes the principle of his own subjection ... the external power may throw off it's physical weight.'

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ALAN BALL

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WITH TEXTS BY

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BOREDOM AND BAROQUE SPACE DAVID BATE

André Bazin argues in 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image' that 'In achieving the aims of baroque art, photography has freed the plastic arts from their obsession with likeness...'. Photography and the cinema, he says, have satisfied our 'appetite for illusion'. The invention of myriad computer imagery shows this to be otherwise. The appetite for illusion shows no bounds, just as the psychoanalytic proposition of Jacques Lacan the 'metonymy of desire' reminds us that desire itself is an endless process. In this context, new computer based practices of representation are, without knowing it, precipitating a mutation in representational space. There is an uncanny 'return of the repressed' which moves us out of twentieth

century photographic realism. A Baroque trend of spatial illusions, theatrical imagination and intense feelings, where an image is a representation of the thing it represents through a relation of meaning, a kind of 'psychological realism' rather than through a mere mimetic likeness or literal resemblance.

The attitude of Baroque art, according to Erwin Panofsky, can be defined as 'based on an objective conflict between antagonistic forces, which, however, merge into a subjective feeling of freedom and even pleasure...'. The paradigmatic example of this for Panofsky is a sculpture, the *Ecstasy of St. Theresa* (1644-47) by Bernini. This famous altar piece in Rome dedicated to saint Theresa depicts the moment in her story when an angel of the Lord has pierced her heart with a golden flaming arrow. She is shown swooning, filled with pain and erotic ecstasy. Her facial expression is intended to express this emotional

intensity, while streams of light in the form of golden rays suggest the movement of her rising to heaven. The drapes around her body also suggest movement with their crisp dishevelled and whirling forms. Intended to be seen from a single point of view as in the modern photographic image, the three dimensional statue combines picture, relief and plastic grouping. Thus for Panofsky 'Baroque art came to abolish the borderline between the "three arts," and even art and nature, and also brought forth the modern landscape in the full sense of the word, meaning a visualization of unlimited space captured in, and represented by, a section of it, so that human figures became debased to a mere "staffage" and finally could be dispensed with altogether.'

For Michel Foucault 'the Baroque' period is: 'the privileged age of *trompe-l'oeil* painting, of the cosmic illusion, of the play that duplicates itself by representing

another play, of the *quid pro quo*, of dreams and visions; it is the age of the deceiving senses' Celestial frescos, anamorphic distortions, the illusion of doors, windows and other images where they do not exist, all move the spatial representation of the world away from one of resemblance. For Foucault, this is the 'essential rupture of knowledge in the Western world, what has become important is no longer resemblances but identities and differences'. If somewhere like Versailles is 'baroque', it is its grand plan, its 'grotesque', 'excessive ornamentation', the 'decorative' components that spiral off into an infinity of minute differences. The vases in the garden: each one the same identity (as vase) yet different in decoration. Decoration is not extra or unnecessary in the baroque, but constitutive of differing identities, of an infinite difference. Where representation had been based in resemblance and similitude in the sixteenth century,

the seventeenth century world was represented in signs without guaranteed meaning. While comparison and similitude had revealed the ordering of the world, baroque rhetoric made representation (of the world) a question of analysis. The logic of likeness, resemblance, the 'chimera of similitude' was represented as such. It is no coincidence that the Baroque was also the age of allegory where a sign is always already a collection of other signs. Laid bare, the illusion of space where there is none, (i.e. the *trompe-l'oeil*), may be read allegorically as a critique of the structure of social space and social relations within them. Whether viewed as ugly or beautiful, the common sense of baroque as 'excessive decoration', of an exaggerated, unnecessary artfulness, only shows our distance from an understanding of the Baroque rhetoric of visual splendour. Pleasure is the measure of intelligence and boredom is the signified of a lack of

eloquence. A common-sense view of baroque is associated with decadence and a grotesque, as things that grew out of an 'ennui', the result of a boredom with the existing spatial and representational conventions. In courtly life of the period where speech was the equivalent of thinking, a bored response signified a refusal or rejection of the speaker's thought. A boring speech was one composed of boring thoughts, or rather, for the listener no libidinal investment or stimulus in the speakers words. 'Plato is boring because he is not eloquent.'

The term Baroque initially begins as an insult, to as a term of abuse and derision to describe – criticise – the bold, 'over-ornate' style. The use of the word boredom similarly describes a negative state, of being bored by something. But boredom is a question of what one does with space. In the nothing to do, or 'nothing to see', it is not that there is nothing to see, rather that

the subject cannot see it. Vision is colonized, inhibited, by boredom. The bored person is the one for whom seeing is blasé, the sense of sight, supposedly, as it is commonly said, is 'dulled through over-stimulation'.⁷ As Otto Fenichel argues, what such situations really describe is the damming up of a libido. Repressed, the libidinal energy turns around on the subject and disperses through it as a kind of paralysis of any aim (or rather that boredom is now the manifestation of that aim). This boredom is like anxiety, it similarly petrifies the subject into non-action. Boredom and anxiety are defences against libidinal excitement. This can be seen as the 'passive' type of boredom. The 'active' type of boredom is exemplified in the idea of the 'Sunday neurotic': the person who cannot abide the idea of vacation, they are bored by them. When there is no duty to fulfil, the libidinal energy comes rushing out, only to be inhibited and dammed up as 'I'm bored'. At work

such a person strives to disperse their desire for intense excitement in the demands of work duties. Once these duties are removed, the anxiety of how to disperse the libidinal energy emerges again in boredom. The activity of work thus offers an escape from the pain of boredom.

The sort of 'clutter' associated with Baroque architecture, sculpture, painting and rhetoric is not merely ornamental, but a constitutive component of the style. If this style is 'irritating' to someone it is because it invokes anxiety and boredom. There is too much 'emotion' in it, too many signifying components, it is 'over-stated'. Baroque work itself seems to characterize the active aim of boredom. The 'eclectic' sticking together of 'disconnected styles', the ceilings filled with an imaginary space, the portraits that are crowded allegorical personifications, everything is doubly filled with meanings and details. It is as though the whole age of Baroque recognised the

illusion of the Renaissance representational space. Perspective, where a horizon is the vanishing-point of the lines that meet in the infinite distance, hides the anxiety that there is nothing beyond the perspectival horizon. The anxiety of cosmic space is 'filled in' in Renaissance representation by the horizons of Quattrocento perspective. Revealed in the Baroque as a chimera, this perspectival logic is obsessively covered over and simultaneously revealed at the same time. The anxiety of the nothing beyond is actually represented, embodied in the signifying forms of the Baroque. This is the symptom of the Baroque age.

The painting by Velasquez of the maids of honour called *Las Meninas* (1656) holds for Michel Foucault the representation of Classical representation, and the definition of the space it opens up to us."⁸ Much earlier Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533) had combined two points of view, literally

'perspectives', (one anamorphic) into the same picture plane, simultaneously revealing the supplement of mercantile capitalism and the accumulation of worldly goods: death. The spatial 'distortion' of the anamorphic skull or flying pancake (I am reminded, distractedly, of Lacan's 'hommette' joke) as it appears from the 'normal' point of view interferes, cuts across, the normal perspectival logic of the picture. It is such 'distortions' that the computer enables to be produced fairly simply, such that these images become absorbed into the dominant signifying practices of our visual culture as 'normal'. We are again in a period of chimerical representation, of eclectic styles, an obsessive covering over of the holes in existence, which both reveals them and denies them. As Baroque art 'upped the stakes' in the demand for the ever new with a spiral of invention – new combinations of contradictions – so its use of the devices and ornaments

inevitably multiplied. On the one hand Baroque invention appears as a kind of 'Sunday neurosis', the crowding of signifiers, a constant work of signification, to avoid the anxiety and boredom of 'nothing to see'. On the other hand these eclectic signifiers fill a space which offers no comfort for the subject of a passive boredom. A bored subject is one who craves stimulation. But boredom is not a property of the object, it is a problem of the subject. Thus, whatever the signifier, the signified is always 'boring'. Stimulation is repressed, such that it manifests as a bored response, a constant deferral of dealing with the passing of time. With the speed of new technologies, the distance between things is collapsed, simultaneously different spaces are collapsed into the same time.

Today's culture of the 'visual', based in a logic of the photographic image, is potentially thrown into a baroque 'deception' when the indexical-iconic field of resemblance

is constantly disturbed by the new capacities for illusion. If the computer is giving a twist to the uncertainty of the historical kaleidoscope of representation, we may find ourselves in the space of a baroque dream, which bores those who cannot face the present, let alone the future.

⁷ André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', reprinted in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. A. Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island, 1980), p.240 ⁸ Erwin Panofsky, 'What is Baroque?', *Three Essays on Style*, MIT, 1997 p.38 ¹ Ibid., p. 45 & p.51 ² Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, London: Tavistock, 1985 ³ Ibid., p. 51 ⁴ See Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *The Eloquence of Colour*, University of California Press, 1993, p.29 ⁵ Otto Fenichel, *The Collected Papers of Otto Fenichel*, Vol.I, eds. H. Fenichel & D. Rapaport, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), p.302 ⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, (London: Tavistock, 1985) p.16 |

WRITING ON BOREDOM ANDREW BENJAMIN

There is a difficulty in writing on boredom. The topic does not elude consideration. Rather boredom brings with it two specific problems. The first problem concerns the simultaneous need for a phenomenology insofar as boredom involves the experiencing subject, while at the same time it necessitates having to work with the limits of that phenomenology as there will always be the question – and thus the questioned possibility – of the generalisation of boredom such that boredom may come to describe the age within which subjects live. In the first instance boredom is linked merely to the subject, while in the second it would describe the subject's condition. This condition would need to be thought in terms of the historical nature of subjectivity. However, that generalisation would necessitate a philosophical justification that was not available

phenomenologically. It is in this sense that boredom demands a phenomenology while at the same time it charts the limits of such an approach.

The second problem that arises in taking up the topic of boredom concerns the particular logic within which any investigation of boredom is already articulated. What marks this logic out is the centrality of a form of passivity that escapes the hold of the opposition active/passive. It is a passivity that occurs because of the specific impossibility of objectifying boredom. In this sketch of some of the themes at work in such an investigation reference will be made to both these problem areas.

To contemplate boredom, to investigate it and thus to allow it to emerge either as an object of study or the site of simple reflection, are moves that will already have overcome the determining effect of boredom by refusing it any form of immediate presence. Boredom works within the conditioning and determining modes of subjectivity; i.e. the modes of being of subjectivity. It will be in this sense that it is

correct to write that the subject *is* bored. What this means is that subject is in its *being* bored. Consequently, opening up boredom, opening whatever it is that boredom inevitably brings with it as its own self-definition, must take place prior to this transformation: a transformation that occurs in the movement of boredom from the place of the subject to its having become an object for a subject. Once this move occurs – the move resulting in the objectivisation of boredom – then boredom can no longer play a role in either determining actions or be implicated in the form such actions will take.

This transformation has a precise location. It occurs in the movement from the subject who is bored to the recognition by that subject of being – perhaps only of having been – positioned by the hold of boredom. Once boredom no longer has the subject in its hold, and thus with boredom having become an object for that subject, boredom no longer inhabits and determines modes of subjectivity. In fact the contrary will be the case. The move from subject to object means that the

subject will have become interested in the determining effects of boredom where the latter is understood as the site of analysis rather than a lived experience. The result of this is that any real analysis of boredom must concern itself with the moments prior to what could be described as the becoming object of boredom. (Any philosophical analysis of boredom will already be concerned with its presence as an object. However, rather than account for its objectivity there can always be the attempt to take up boredom as a mode of subjectivity. It would be at this precise point that both the necessity and the limits of a phenomenology emerge.) What will need to be investigated is the object of boredom; not boredom as object but the object proper to boredom itself. With what – what object – is the subject bored? Even in asking this question it is essential to move slowly since it may turn out to be the case that the language of subject and object proves to be no longer straightforwardly appropriate for an sustained examination of boredom; i.e. any analysis of boredom prior to

the transformation already noted.

Perhaps, the opening move here will be the recognition that boredom works beyond the hold of a predictable conception of causality; i.e. a conception of causality in which individual or singular occurrences are all interconnected within a determined causal link. While a particular state of boredom may be attributed a cause, the identification of that cause neither explains the boredom nor does it allow for its resolution. Particularly, therefore, is defined beyond the hold of an explanatory series of interconnections. It is in the terms set by the impossible possibility of causality that a similarity emerges between boredom and restlessness.

To be restless is to be in a state of agitation that cannot be objectified. Allowing restlessness to become an object is already to have shaken free from its determinations. It would be as though one were at ease with restlessness. This is, of course, an impossible state of affairs. It would deny the insistent determining hold that restlessness has. Before pursuing the implications of

the connection between boredom and restlessness it is essential to identify the logic they both seem to announce.

The logic involves the need to maintain a specific conception of passivity. To be bored demands the effective presence of that particular conception of passivity that will resist attempts to displace or overcome boredom either by analysis or a change in attitude. The passivity in question touches on activity insofar as boredom maintains itself. And yet, it is not actively maintained. Once again to allow it to be maintained would be to objectify boredom and thus preclude its hold on the subject. Equally, there cannot be complete passivity for in such cases boredom would have become a simple loss of self-consciousness or self-awareness. Phenomenologically, what is central to boredom, and thus what would in this instance define boredom, is the lived awareness of the state of being bored. It would be a performative contradiction to admit the state both of being bored but also of being unaware that one was bored. There is an insistent element within

boredom which resists the hold of either complete activity or complete passivity. Boredom, in order that it remain what it is, demands another formulation.

There will be an obvious parallel with restlessness at this precise point. Again, it would be contradictory to affirm an unacknowledged restlessness. It is rather that to be restless, involves a state of agitation that maintains itself but not through an act of will. Willed restlessness is a simple oxymoron. Boredom and restlessness resist the operation of the will. Neither state can be willed into presence. None the less, neither works to exclude the operation of the will since the will may operate in conjunction with either state.

The question that arises here concerns what the acknowledgement of either restlessness or boredom involves. If it can be accepted that both are already acknowledged then the nature of that recognition needs to be taken up. Simply, the questions that have to be asked are: What is it to be bored? What is it to be restless? The key to these questions concerns

the complex presence of passivity. Passivity opens up recognition. Being bored becomes the absorption of the subject into that state. And yet the absorption is not absolute. The subject identifies with this set up. It is the non-absolutisation that is fundamental here. If there were a closure then boredom would be linked to the state of being unaware; itself another form of closure. Complete passivity would have led to the gradual identification of subject and mood. Subject and an internalised object would have meshed enjoining a stupor. Awakening from such a state would demand a shock sufficiently severe that it could also have given rise to forgetting or a regression back to the initial setting. In either case what would have emerged would have been the impossibility of allowing boredom to be present as a determining state – the subject is in its being bored – but one which incorporated an opening not precluding actions.

Being bored therefore demands a passivity that allows for a type of opening. The opening in question is the site of recognition: the locus in

which the subject identifies itself as bored. And yet in that act of identification the subject holds itself apart from complete identification. Boredom is always more. In the 'more' the question of the object returns. What is the object of boredom? Answering this question will need to begin with the recognition that the object while present has to be defined in terms of a type of negation. That the presence of an identifiable and thus straightforwardly nameable object is an impossibility becomes that which defines the object of boredom. The elusive nature of the reason for boredom therefore becomes integral to any understanding of boredom's object. Boredom will open up beyond itself only to close in on itself. At-hand and yet ungraspable, boredom touches the very preconditions that would allow a search to be undertaken. Boredom and research touch, though only in the end to separate.

They touch because the opening that works within each of them allows for a fleeting connection. They separate because boredom can go no

further than the opening itself. Boredom becomes the site in which the subject becomes mired in the opening between the at-hand and the ungraspable. Boredom becomes therefore the continual repetition of working within that set up. Activity is the repeating. Passivity is boredom's endurance. Boredom cannot have an end because it is already located in a structure of repetition. The conception of repetition with which it works is determined by an unspecified conception of Sameness. It is the Always the Same which continues to predominate. Its repetition is ensured because of the effective presence of the ungraspable. It is, however, a conception of repetition understood as mere continuity. Even diversity within continuity would not shake the possibility of boredom's reiteration. Once diversity is ruled by continuity then the conditions for boredom endure. Indeed, it is precisely this consequence of the relationship between diversity and continuity that both defines novelty and accounts for why it is that novelty will never be

free from its capacity to bore.

A phenomenology of boredom will always have to be concerned with having to account for the movement between the at-hand and the ungraspable where that movement is determined by a repetition of the Same. The limits of any phenomenology do not concern the difficulty of taking up a subject's mood. Rather, the limit emerges because of the intrusion into that setting of that which is always greater than a state of affairs limited by subjectivity. In this instance, that which would break the limits given by subjectivity is effective presence of the repetition of the Same. Any analysis of this structure has to begin to confront the relationship between the reiteration of Sameness and the nature of modernity. Pursuing the limit of phenomenology means working with the recognition that the interruption of boredom will always involve more than allowing the subject another mood. Interruption has to be thought as the larger possibility given by modernity due to the complex set up in which modernity is given. The attempt to

efface the founding dislocation marking the advent of modernity means that the move to efface it is also integral to the work of modernity. Effacing will take place in the name of the Same; it will become the work marked as the repetition of the Same. To this extent modernity engenders the preconditions for boredom. Co-present with this set up, are the means by which boredom's presence can be interrupted. Interruption's possibility is held in place due to the retained presence of modernity's founding dislocation.

Boredom allows for an analysis that holds the subject in play – a holding allowing for a phenomenology – while recognising that fundamental to the preconditions for the subject to be placed within the structure of boredom is the work of the present. What this means is that opening the subject will have always been to have opened the present.