



## or either silver lining

20 June - July 07 2012

tcbartinc.

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### Ronnie van Hout

*Brief Return*, 2003

15:18 min, colour, sound, DVD

Courtesy the artist, Kaliman Rawlins, Melbourne & Daren Knight Gallery, Sydney.

### Andrew Liversidge

*NEW ECONOMY (if I had a dollar for every time I picked up a dollar I'd have a dollar and I'd throw it down again)*, 2011

48 min, colour, sound, DVD

*BUSTER (red yellow blue)*, 2010

2 min, colour, sound, DVD

Courtesy the artist & The Commercial, Sydney

### Greatest Hits (Gavin Bell, Simon McGlenn, Jarrah de Kuijer)

*Bored Room*, 2010

5:37 min, flatscreen television, mini DV transferred to DVD

Courtesy the artists

**DAMP** (Rob Creedon, Meg Hale, Ry Haskings, Deb Kunda, James Lynch, Natalie Thomas, Lisa Radford)

*Untitled (Throw)*, 2008

6:16 min, colour, sound, DVD

Courtesy the artists

### Acknowledgements:

Lisa Radford would like to thank the following people for their assistance in getting the show up and running: Simon Zoria, Henry Jock Walker, Rosemary Forde, Francis Parker, Ronnie van Hout, DAMP, James Lynch, Greatest Hits (Simon McGlenn, Gavin Bell, Jarrah de Kuijer), Andrew Liversidge, Helen Hughes, the TCB artinc committee, Justin Clemens, VCA Margaret Lawrence Gallery and Monash University Museum of Art.

### Special Screening:

**Bruce Nauman**

*Bouncing Two Balls Between the Floor and Ceiling with Changing Rhythms*, 1967-68

10 min, b&w, sound, 16 mm film on video

Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

## On Boredom

Justin Clemens

It has been suggested to me that any kind of talk on boredom should itself be boring, and thereby exemplify what it's talking about. After all, when I've finished, you'll be triply grateful: 1) simple relief — thank god it's over! 2) you'll have learned a valuable lesson — just because something's free doesn't mean it's any good; 3) you'll realise how exciting it's actually been — if only retrospectively.

I originally penned this document for a festival session itself entitled "From Tripping to Transcendence: How do we get our kicks?" and noted that the fear of boredom seems to be what makes such a quest for kicks necessary, possible, and/or desirable. After all, if you're living for excitement, you need a certain kind of contrast to set it off. Moreover, as a psychoanalyst might note, excitement and happiness are often a sign of impending and horrific disaster; rather than genuine values in themselves. King Oedipus is of course the exemplary instance of such a disaster: happily married, beautiful children, well-respected king of a peaceful state... at which point, he realises he's killed his father, married his mother, his sons are his brothers and his daughters are his sisters, and that the state's going to be destroyed by the inadvertent consequences of his actions. Next thing you know, he's a self-blinded penniless outcast stumbling about the landscape of ancient Greece as an object-lesson to us all. Indeed "getting your kicks" for psychoanalysis smacks of death, the mortificatory binding of fantasy-images to fundamental drives. Boredom, on the contrary, grants a detachment that makes possible the only genuine psychoanalytic utopia, "ordinary unhappiness" — and makes clear that boredom is most definitely a force for life, rather than death.

It's also clear that boredom is more complex in its range and qualities than is often supposed — and we need connoisseurs of boredom way more than we need connoisseurs of fine wines. For there are so many kinds of boredom: endless blahblahblah, intense periods, spasmodic inexplicable boredom, irritated or irritable boredom, lassitude, enervation, frustration and despair... And there are many causes of boredom — the object or situation being actively not interesting in itself, or the object having once been of interest but exhausted through endless repetition, or the object being too quiet for you to sense anything of interest about it, or possibly things might be boring because they're *too* loud and colourful, *too* different. But this is the point: boredom is a question of a subject, not objects. Moreover, it's clear that boredom is itself integrally caught up in a net of affects, the neighbour of resentment, on the one side, and anxiety, on the other. My time is being wasted by this person crapping on and on about nothing and holding me up and stealing my precious time and enjoyment from me, as there are so many better things I could be doing.

But this might also bring up the sense that it was your own life choices that brought you here — you having somehow, somewhere, sometime made a decision to pursue a form of life that's consigned you to this situation. Perhaps I decided to be a lawyer, which means that I now have to sit here in endless meetings with endless customers with the endless repetition and the endless administrative crap... Still, you're being paid well for that kind of gig. Boredom would thus be a sacrifice that excess makes to necessity. In boredom, you're being spoon-fed the void of yourself in the guise of an external imposition. I don't want to be doing this — but in order to be me I can't be elsewhere.

This paradox immediately brings us to something that's at the heart of boredom — the strange relations between engagement and detachment, activity and passivity, being and time, and between feeling, understanding, and memory. The bond that boredom makes apparent between feeling, understanding and memory is possibly the condition of most experience, but only really evident or accessible in moments of boredom, "moment," of course, only being a metaphor when bored — since boredom precisely deranges the sense of time as something that passes in moments. Boredom, as everyone knows, stretches time. "I felt that it would never end," "it went on and on," being among the most common responses to being bored... Boredom poses the question of "why even bother?" that is, a question of existence, and it does this without the giddy blackmail exerted by the violence of terror or anxiety or enjoyment. Indeed, boredom makes it possible to deal with the possibility of "the nothingness of human affairs" without prejudice.

That boredom is one of the universal possibilities and problems of being human is shown by the various clichés and recurrent ways of characterising people and situations: "Not only is he dull, but he is a cause of dullness in others"; "Only boring people are bored"; "I'm chairman of the bored," and so on and on. Indeed, boredom and its avatars have been a staple of mystical and philosophical traditions for thousands of years. Whether or not you agree with their doctrines or presuppositions, it's still noteworthy that it's so often boredom that is held to direct the mastery of proportion, limit, and life.

The ancient sects of Epicureans and Stoics, for instance, dealt in their different ways with the problem of sensation. Both implicitly rely on a fundamental distinction between passive boredom (subjected to the vicissitudes of existence) and active boredom (the achieved mastery of circumstances, detachment). In the latter case, *ataraxia* — radical indifference to what happens to you — is an instance of true freedom. Rather than being caught up in all the delusory impulses of sensation, desires and drives that are beyond your control, you have worked on yourself to produce the only genuine attitude that should accompany the freedom possible in this world: detachment from the passions. Passive boredom must be turned into active

indifference. But this goal introduces a problem: what are the technologies that enable the production of such a state? This technological question — how should I work on myself, what do I have to do to achieve this state of being that's precisely a detachment from being? — returns again and again in the literature, along with the question: is boredom something that can be mastered by a technology? This technology may include internalised routines of meditations, it may be buying a new video-game — either way, the problem of boredom proves itself central to subjective self-fashioning. I

In his third Critique, significantly *The Critique of Judgment*, in which the question of art is central, Immanuel Kant speaks of the sublimity of *apatheia*. For Kant, apathy, like enthusiasm, is paradoxically linked to joy, a joy that bears no affective resemblance to the empirical sensations that most often go under this name. Apathy, for Kant, functions in some way as the other of feeling; and, as such, the apathete is not pathologically motivated. But this freedom from pathological motivations — i.e., an animal subjection to the passions — is absolutely crucial in Kant's philosophy. For it places you in a position of involved disinterestedness — which is clearly a genuine aesthetic feeling, according to Kant's famous definition of "interest without interest." And, into the bargain, this para-experience has links to ethics as well. Kant thus re-articulates, in an entirely different register, the Stoic and Epicurean conviction that boredom and ethics are very closely allied. But we should also underline the fact that Kant does this by reconsidering the forces of boredom as an integrally aesthetic experience.

He is followed in this by many of the greatest philosophers of modernity. For Søren Kierkegaard, boredom is directly and clearly linked to the demonic, that is, to self-estrangement & solitude — "inwardness with a jammed lock" (*The Concept of Anxiety*). As Pat Bigelow comments in *Kierkegaard and the Problem of Writing*: "there is in boredom... a silence sufficiently dense to stifle any and all babbling on about being... Nothing disappears; all is abandoned. Nothing is ownness; all is estranged, all is estrangement; and above all, all is self-estrangement. As self-estrangement the being collapses in itself, from an infinitely discrete implosion." If you excuse the ponderous philosophical syntax and vocabulary, you'll immediately recognise the affirmation of the powers of boredom as essential to yourself. You, yes you, are essentially boringness and boredom!

For Sigmund Freud, boredom can be seen as a defence against traumatic psychic incursions (emblematically, the garden-variety middle-class judgement about porn movies, "I don't find it exciting, it's just boring," as if admitting to being made sexually excited by things designed to make human beings sexually excited was somehow *déclassé*, and as if the admission of boredom somehow designated a moral superiority insofar as you've clearly sacrificed any feeling from the head down). Indeed, this anecdote can show how the expression or profession of boredom often

serves as a *de facto* theological category — closer to God than excitement, closer to labour than to idleness. The alleged experience of boredom is clearly a political question. But also an ontological one.

As Martin Heidegger writes in "What is Metaphysics?":

Even and precisely when we are not actually busy with things or ourselves, this "as a whole" overcomes us — for example in genuine boredom. Boredom is still distant when it is only this book or that play, that business or this idleness, that drags on. It irrupts when "one is bored." Profound boredom, drifting here and there in the abysses of our existence like a muffling fog, removes all things and human beings and oneself along with them into a remarkable indifference. This boredom reveals beings as a whole... Such being attuned, in which we "are" one way or another and which determines us through and through, lets us find ourselves among beings as a whole. The founding mode of attunement not only reveals beings as a whole in various ways, but this revealing — far from being merely incidental — is also the basic occurrence of our *Da-sein*. What we call a "feeling" is neither a transitory epiphenomenon of our thinking and willing behavior nor merely a present condition we have to put up with somehow or other.

For Heidegger, then, boredom linked to preliminary detachment from the world of objects and redirection of apprehension towards being as a whole (but not as fundamental as anxiety).

Despite this long history of attention to boredom, I'd also say that certain historical periods, such as our own, are more caught up with the problems posed by boredom than others. As Dom Pettman puts it in his book *After the Orgy: Towards a Politics of Exhaustion*, "Fatigue... like boredom, is one of the fundamental notions in response to modernity." (Not coincidentally, Pettman's first published text was written for teenagers, and called *Boredom Busters* — so something's evidently happened between then and now. Indeed, boredom, *ennui*, can have a horribly corrosive effect, as the difference between Pettman's two titles shows. On the one hand, a lot's obviously happened in the interim; on the other hand, there's also obviously a particular trait holding his life together: the quest for excitement or, more precisely, the drive not-to-be-bored. But such a drive is evidently also doomed to failure, for the usual reasons — to the point where it's possible that boredom is his one true desire.) Please, give me boredom or give me death! In fact, this disjunction "boredom or death!" is possibly the democratic demand *par excellence*...

In fact, I believe that there's way more boredom about these days than there was before the industrial revolution. Indeed, it's worth pointing out that boredom and the orgi-

astic participant-spectacles of the contemporary Empire of Telecommunications aren't simply opposed, a fact evident at the heart of the great historical event that marks the transition to modernity: the French Revolution. Richard Sennett notes that:

At the height of the French Revolution, the most radical newspaper in Paris declared that there could be no real revolution if people did not feel it in their bodies...Yet when the French Revolution sought to bring the body to life on the streets of Paris, something quite unexpected happened. Often the crowds of citizens became apathetic. In part, the spectacles of violence numbed their senses; in part the revolutionary spaces created in the city often failed to arouse people (*Flesh and Stone*).

In her study of modern nationalisms, Leah Greenfield makes the startling observation that "the great Revolution which abolished the nobility was the work of the nobility nevertheless, and that the aristocracy, not the bourgeoisie that remained bourgeoisie, was the truly revolutionary class....The French Revolution...was, therefore, a child of the aristocratic reaction" (*Nationalism*). The rich have always expressed boredom, for boredom is a luxurious emotion, an emotion about luxury, about having too much to dispose of, about having too much to be able to enjoy. Boredom is the affect accompanying the self-critique of power; it is a paradoxical goad to an action that forever threatens to fall back into the abyss of the indifferent.

And it's no accident that aristocratic *ennui* and enervation move to the centre of European culture thereafter. In addition to the sequence of modern philosophers I've quoted, it would have been just as easy to show how important a role boredom serves in art and literature. From Charles Baudelaire to Walter Benjamin, J.-K. Huysmans to Hughes, the radical characters of modernity are those peculiar aesthetes whose default mode is apathy and whose futile quest is to be endlessly entertained. As Lord Henry Wotton remarks to Dorian Gray in Oscar Wilde's great book, "The only horrible thing in the world is *ennui*, Dorian. That is the one sin for which there is no forgiveness." And then they discuss the painter of the portrait, Basil Hallward, the man whom Dorian has murdered: "Basil was very popular, and always wore a Waterbury watch. Why should he have been murdered? He was not clever enough to have enemies. Of course he had a wonderful genius for painting. But a man can paint like Velasquez and yet be as dull as possible. Basil was really rather dull. He only interested me once...." Expressions of boredom are the bread-and-butter of the most refined aesthetes, the greatest snob tastes requiring a sensitivity to boredom that transcends the powers of lesser men (and, presumably, women).

It's something like this way of thinking that returns boredom to a sacrificial economy. I mean this absolutely literally. If sacrifice is held to have disappeared from the modern

world — after all goats and virgins are no longer used to serve a public function — the very waste made possible by luxury is now experienced not as blood but in the form of boredom. As Jacques Derrida notes in *The Gift of Death*: "There is an affinity, or at least a synchrony, between a culture of boredom and an orgiastic one." And, as Jeff Nuttall notes of the routines of 1960s counter-culture in his well-known study *Bomb Culture*, "Boredom was a mode" (*Bomb Culture*). The aforementioned Pettman also remarked to me the strangeness of the old Australian government health advertising whose notorious tag was "Life: Be in It" — which presumes that Australians so apathetic that they even need an advertising campaign for life.... The fact that so much shit has to go into convincing soft comfortable first-world liberal capitalists to do anything whatsoever is an index of just how bored so many people must be.

In this sense, "radical boredom" is the democratic experience and value *par excellence*, the aristocracy of the mass. Everyone, of course, laments this deleterious state of affairs, the apathy and indifference that seems to overwhelm even the most important and pressing issues of the day. But boredom goes hand in hand with a consumer culture in which the population's day-to-day needs of food, clothing, and shelter are basically assured — and in which you must follow your desires, as long as those desires aren't too deeply held or too protractedly pursued. Boredom is the unconditional demand for something new; a demand for freedom, for something beyond what already exists. The limit affect of boredom is therefore one of the residues in our contemporary situation of the demands of the modernist avant-garde.

*This essay was first presented as a lecture in 2001 as part of a series of presentations 'From Tripping to Transcendence: How do we get our kicks?' the Melbourne International Festival of the Arts at Storey Hall, RMIT, Melbourne..*

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I See J-F. Lyotard, *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1988): "I must confess that in the distant past I spent a few years studying several doctrines that support the notion of indifference: the Epicurean *ataraxia*, the Stoic *apatheia*, the extreme Stoic *adiaphora*, the Zen not-thinking, the Taoist nothingness...indifference is nothing other than the groundlessness of Being which constantly exerts a fascinating threat over thinking and writing," p. 9. And: "No indifference is possible or, better yet, indifference as such is a mode of answering the appeal [of the law]," p. 12.