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Listening to Nothing in Particular:

Boredom and Contemporary Experimental Music

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Abstract
"Listening to Nothing in Particular" examines contemporary boredom through the lens of recent experimental composition. While boredom is typically treated in the arts as a conceit of transcendence or radical indifference, this essay argues that the mood in contemporary post-Cagean compositional practices articulate a much more ambivalent feeling of being unjustified, a feeling whose low-level intensity is largely indistinguishable from the spins and stalls of everyday life. Drawing on Sianne Ngai's notion of the "stuplime," a stilted and undecidable response to expressions of an infinitely iterated finitude, and evoking alternative ways of suffering the passion of waiting, "Listening to Nothing in Particular" focuses the scattered rays of boredom on a conflict between contemporary culture's shrunken curiosity and its imperatives for constant individual self-invention.

> It turns out that bliss—a second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious—lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom. Pay close attention to the most tedious thing you can find . . . 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 color. Like water after days in the desert. Constant bliss in every atom.
>
> David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King*

I heard a string quartet a while ago by Los Angeles composer Art Jarvinen titled *100 cadences with four melodies, a chorale, and coda ("with bells on!")*. As the title suggests, the piece keeps ending, over and over again, each time promising to conclude a musical adventure that never was. Over forty-eight minutes, the consecution of endings, punctuated by solos and glimmering silences, draw out an irritatingly radiant array of mock-perorations. And I am always more or less aware of this: More aware when the sheer materiality of these several endings intrudes upon my sense of contemplation, and less aware when, like Swann listening to Vinteuil's sonata, I am taken away by time passed. I am alternately *with* the music, my attention buoyed by a procession of simulated extinctions and untimely non-events, and *beside* the music, dreaming counterfactuals, shifting backward, forward, side to side in fantasies of otherwise. Buoyed in the messy imminence of a perpetual conclusion, my attention floats on nothing in particular, nothing but a series of loose intensities that are now and again interesting, or boring, or both.

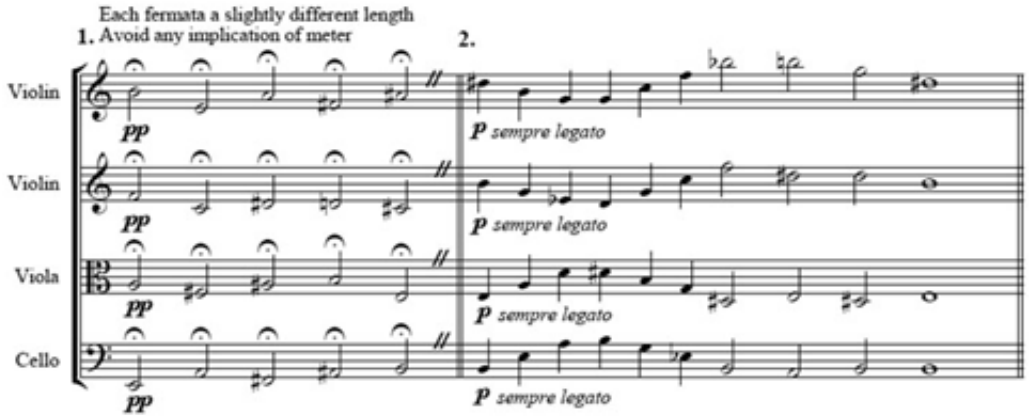

Fig. 1. Opening bars of *100 Cadences*. Click for PDF format.

Audio 1. *100 Cadences* bars 1-12. Click to hear audio.

Listening to Jarvinen's piece, I hear David Foster Wallace's summons: Ride out the waves of boredom, Wallace insists, and "it's like stepping from black and white into color." Maybe once upon a time, when there was a patience to let the swells and breaks slowly teach us to ride its current, one could learn to surf the waves of boredom. But being bored is not the ride it once was. Through the second half of the twentieth century, boredom bored so many holes in the body of every genre, every medium, every performance, and every criticism, that it bled its promise of bliss into ever-narrower furrows of distraction. The problem with boredom now is that the rituals of bloodletting that go by the name "boring art" are largely indistinguishable from the practices of everyday life such that our interests have, in a sense, hemorrhaged. Bored to death, post-industrial culture is dying by a thousand little interests. Boredom no longer compresses into a tight bundle of bliss; now it just splays out —the pullulating temper of postmodernity's bad or "sensuous infinity."[1]

While characterizing the nihilism some associate with the postmodern, this sensuous infinity (a concept I borrow from Hegel who used it to describe a situation of perpetual alternation between the determination of x and not-x) more accurately captures the affective scope of what it's like to endure the pressure of finding oneself a finite subject addressed by seemingly infinite demands. Boredom in this sense is a coping mechanism that cradles us from the madness of the infinite, but, insofar as there is no end to being bored, its cradle reduplicates the summons of infinity. Boredom's sprawl is therefore the propagation of an ambivalent event that shelters the subject from the loss of its practicable horizon with a homeless mood.

It is this ambivalence that I consider in the pages that follow in order to update the capacity, or incapacity, as it were, of boredom (in music) to articulate the feeling of being a

subject in contemporary culture. While experimental composition is the primary aesthetic practice that I use to explore this concern, I deploy it more as a lens by which to focus the scattered rays of monotony on a wider set of logics that can be found in numerous other aspects of contemporary culture.[2] I suggest that composers, specifically those informed by a post-Cagean sensibility regarding the way boredom's intensity modulates itself over time, and who are writing long, quiet, repetitive, and slow moving music intended to be experienced without (external) interruption, express a sense of boredom characterizing a more general feeling of being unjustified. This feeling is engine to a neoliberal injunction demanding constant self-invention. In other words, the transcendental satisfaction promised by a work such as Charlemagne Palestine's *Strumming Music* (1974), a fulfillment that discriminates aesthetic boredom from mundane *ennui* and *spleen*, is no longer operative. There is no water in the desert, but only a parallel series of fatigue and regeneration that split infinity in two: "I can't go on, I'll go on."

On Being Bored

Traditionally, boredom is understood in relation to a lack of meaning. But I propose instead to describe it as a lessening of one's capacity to affect and be affected—a diminishing of our potential engagement with the world. If we follow Brian Massumi in thinking of affect as the intensive measure of what "escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is" (35), then boredom is rightly a *dis*-affection, for it reveals a certain corporeal engulfment that, by virtue of its strange underlying tension, borders on the neighborhood of pain. Too much body and not enough imagination becomes an affliction.[3] This is perhaps why our culture has developed so many ways to live beyond its fleshy limits —to reduce the burden of embodiment and relieve the labor of existence. I'm not, however, s peaking only about the virtual realm of cyberspace, but about everything that capitalizes on the terror of our finitude: Television, film, and the Internet relieve us (to a certain degree) of our fleshy burden, but so do art galleries and concert halls, where bodies are incarcerated and the senses mortified in order to dispose our being *not* towards nothing or death, as Heidegger would have it, but towards anything *but* nothing. But boredom is not "nothing." It is something in the way that a hole is something, and as such, it fulfills its etymological destiny: it "bores a hole" in us.

The twentieth century, of course, has seen and heard a vast number of artworks that use forms of slowness, tedium, and repetition as aesthetic strategies to explore the strangely multivalent effects of aesthetic distortion, but because the contemporary expression of these forms occurs in a cultural space that has become self-evidently untotalizable, there is much less concern today with boredom's being interesting. Composer John Cage's oft repeated saying that if you attend long enough to what is boring you will find that what is boring is not boring after all, summarizes the latter sentiment, and suggests that within the spins and stalls of boredom is an occulted interest that promises a sublimation of Hegelian

proportions. However, neither the stakes nor the forms of attention that would bring boredom to such awareness are the same now as they were in the 1960s. After so many artworks like Satie's *Vexations* (1893), Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* (1925), Andy Warhol's *Sleep* (1963) and *Empire* (1964), and more recently, Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) and Kenneth Goldsmith's *Day* (2003), it's hard to imagine that the desert of boredom holds any more water. But the redoubling of tedium in contemporary art and music might suggest something other than a redundancy. In contemporary Western culture, which is arguably characterized by excessive expressions of irony and multiple layers of meta-referential discourse, the mood takes on a different life, a life that in fact resembles a kind of death, a stillborn death.

The Aesthetics of Boredom and the Art of Waiting

Go back to David Foster Wallace's thoughts on boredom. Though crushing, he imagines that boredom can be a nostrum to what he perceives as America's addiction to entertainment. Wallace, who hanged himself in the fall of 2008, was working on a novel about boredom titled *The Pale King*. In this work, his stated aim was to interrogate the merits and powers of concentration and mindfulness. But, from the portions of the work that have already been published, it's clear that Wallace wanted to catechize the full breadth of a malaise whose emotional burn feeds quietly off the ever-expanding patina of diversion. For Wallace, media culture disables an individual's ability to decide *how* and *what* he or she pays attention to. While we can imagine for a moment that one could actually pay attention to nothing, the saturation of media makes it impossible. An individual's ability to slow the dizzying flows of media imagery and "find himself" in the fog of boredom would thus seem to occasion something other than mindfulness and something more like what psychoanalyst Adam Phillips suggests is a confrontation with "the poverty of our curiosity" (75).

In a selection from his posthumous novel, *The Pale King*, Wallace fictionalizes the tactics available to US Internal Revenue Service agents to combat the threat to curiosity that the job of processing tax returns cultivates:

> Lane Dean, Jr., with his green rubber pinkie finger, sat at his Tingle table in his Chalk's row in the Rotes Group's wiggle room and did two more returns, then another one, then flexed his buttocks and held to a count of ten and imagined a warm pretty beach with mellow surf, as instructed in orientation the previous month. Then he did two more returns, checked the clock real quick, then two more, then bore down and did three in a row, then flexed and visualized and bore way down and did four without looking up once, except to put the completed files and memos in the two Out trays side by side up in the top tier of trays, where the cart boys could get them when they came by.
>
> (376)

Though Wallace never concludes his diagnosis of the pale king, I wouldn't claim that being bored is an antidote to either entertainment or information overload, for the effects of

boredom are much too diffuse and uneven to counteract the disturbingly focused and systematic distractions and amusements that contemporary culture contrives to keep the loose threads of desire in tow. That is to say, while boredom may be ubiquitous, its effects are local and unpredictable. As such, I would suggest that the boredom Wallace was after is a tactical one, a downtime in the sense of "*la perruque*," which Michel de Certeau conceptualizes as a kind of subterfuge whereby one poaches time for other ends that are "free, creative, and precisely not directed toward[s] profit" (24). The difficulty, however, in seeing boredom in this way is that the time it takes is structured by no apparent "ends," creative or otherwise.

This guerrilla or banditry boredom is carried out in the work of Brooklyn-based composer Devin Maxwell. In his piece *PH4* (2004), for bass clarinet, contrabass, and marimba, the listener is made simply to wait, not *for* something but *to* something. Over 13'41" is unfolded a series of slow permutations on what Maxwell calls a "crippled gesture," in this case expressed as two short notes and one long tone distributed among the three instruments (with an occasional tremolo for variety). This crippling is used, as Maxwell says, to "build momentum which can or cannot lead to something interesting" (2009). Reminiscent of Morton Feldman's early work, but also of the British composer John White's "machine music" pieces of the 1970s, *PH4* develops a form of waiting from within its refrain that shifts attention to the event of the moment's happening, taking time away from the *meaning* of our expectations and giving it to the *feeling*, the intensity, of anticipation. In *PH4* the listener is made to wait and to listen out for waiting, not for what follows waiting but for the event that (much like dying) is both something we do and something that happens to us. The listener is encouraged to witness *PH4*'s event not as an occasion *of* attention but as an occasion *for* attention, where waiting is what happens while it happens.

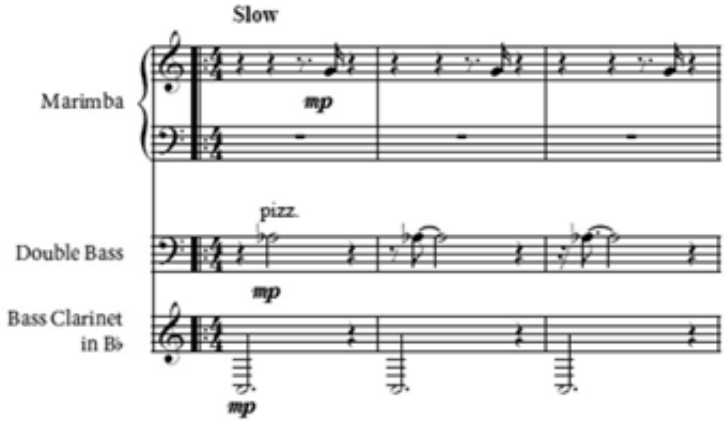

Fig. 2. Opening bars of *PH4*. Click for PDF format.

Audio 2. Excerpt from *PH4*. Click to hear audio.

Summoning de Certeau again, we can understand the waiting encouraged by *PH4*'s evocation of a musicological downtime as a "'remainder' constituted by the part of human experience [in this case, being bored] that has not been tamed and symbolized in language" (61). Though we can speak of "waiting" in the infinitive, gerund form, it's known best as a specific expression of "waiting for" something—waiting *for* the subway to arrive...*for* the movie to begin...*for* a song to end. But in terms of de Certeau's analysis of everyday practices, waiting falls into a species of *lived* art or tactical know-how that is "composed of multiple but untamed operativities" (65), which is to say that waiting is a non-discursive art of organizing human experience without a *proper* time or place outside of its own occurrence. Waiting can happen anywhere, anywhen. How one waits is mandated by circumstances, but the capacity to wait is independent of any variation it may take. As such, "to wait" characterizes a bizarre in-activity that "operates outside of the enlightened discourse which it lacks" (66). What makes the waiting strange in *PH4* is that it brings out its infinitive quality in a similar way that we might say Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* (1938) brings out the "essence" of mourning, or Sergio Ortega's *¡El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido!* (The People United Will Never Be Defeated!) captures the spirit of a mobilized working class. Boredom in *PH4* brings something of the extra-discursive operativity of waiting—let's call it the *art of waiting*—to attention. Or, to put this into another perspective, recall Wallace's IRS agent, who, confined to his "Tingle Table," enacts a virtuosic display of the art of waiting:

> Then he looked up, despite all best prior intentions. In four minutes, it would be another hour; a half hour after that was the ten-minute break. Lane Dean imagined himself running around on the break, waving his arms and shouting gibberish and holding ten cigarettes at once in his mouth, like a panpipe... Coffee wasn't allowed because of spills on the files, but on the break he'd have a big cup of coffee in each hand while he pictured himself running around the outside grounds, shouting. He knew what he'd really do on the break was sit facing the wall clock in the lounge and, despite prayers and effort, count the seconds tick off until he had to come back and do this again... He thought of a circus strongman tearing a phone book; he was bald and had a handlebar mustache and wore a stripy all-body swimsuit like people wore in the distant past. Lane Dean summoned all his will and bore down and did three returns in a row, and began imagining different high places to jump off of.
>
> (63-64)

It's in the last line of this passage that we see how boredom introduces the inarticulate yet highly effective "know-how" or capacity of waiting into the *logos* and "productivist ideal" of the tax return (de Certeau 67). And from this example we can extrapolate that boredom is expressing the sense of waiting *apart* from its varying occasions.

While the boredom of this IRS rote examiner brings to suicidal attention the range of his vocational and existential deprivation, we might suggest that the aesthetically conjured boredom of *PH4* exercises the capacity to imagine at all by making us wait, "return[ing] us to the scene of inquiry" where the individual comes to experience the conditions for "what makes desir e possible" (Phillips 75, 74). The expression of boredom in works like *PH4* specifies the *protocols of desire*. Waiting to find new desires, to find ways of becoming what one hasn't already become, describes an art of becoming-otherwise, becoming wise to the ubiquity of unimagined possibilities. As such, "the paradox of waiting that goes on in boredom is that the individual does not know what he was waiting for until he finds it, and that often he does not know that he is waiting" (Phillips 77). It is this paradox of waiting for nothing—the uneventful event of waiting—that characterizes the contemporary sense of boredom. If, as we've heard so many times, the world is already coded by multiple layers of simulation, including the repertory of our desires and responses, then to be bored is not to wait for *some-thing* (we already have those "things") but to wait for *no-thing*. And to wait for no-thing is to risk waiting for nothing, a risk that is itself charged with an ambivalent mixture of wonder and contempt, fixation and flight.

Perhaps it's the intensity of waiting for nothing that Cage wants us to experience when he says, "If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all" (93). Cage implies that boredom's "hedonic tone," the positive or negative feeling of waiting internal to a state, must be practiced, rehearsed, and therefore "perfected."[4]

Lane Dean's effort to imagine himself elsewhere than the returns office is an exercise that resists the practice of waiting by refusing him permission to adopt the refrains of boredom that lie within his constrained and routinized existence. However, to the extent that boredom can at all be taken as a kind of Spinozan wonder, a wonder that stalls in the face of an inassociable novelty, again and again it offers the opportunity to practice the art of waiting but does so only under the condition that one waits for the novelty of a "nothing" that must be brought to attention and allowed to flourish in *in*attention. What, for example, is Cage's *4'33"* but a model of attention, refined under the sign of concert culture, that performs a sacrament whereby the object(ive) of attention is inattention? Though it's traditionally construed in terms that suggest some kind of aesthetic "pay-off" (*Mehrwert*), the contemporary expression of boredom in *4'33*" offers no such thing but instead encourages the listener to practice a type of waiting that relies on the failed promise of its so-called "musical" form so that in this failure the listener might experiment with his/her appetites in the presence of no-thing and, as Phillips suggests, "by doing so commit himself, or rather, entrust himself, to the inevitable elusiveness of that object" (78).

So, is this really the virtue that Wallace wants to put us in mind of, a concentration on "the principally open field of endless heterogeneity and multiplicity" (Blom 64) imagined by Cage

as interestingly boring? Having ultimately chosen oblivion, I'm inclined to think that this is not exactly what Wallace was after. Judging by the way Wallace often represented his fragmented thinking through a sophisticated use of footnotes and, later, a deft handling of stream-of-thought prose, he was likely advancing an immanent form of concentration and mindfulness rather than the kind that adorns itself in the esoteric trappings of perennial wisdom-cum-aesthetic insight. Like the patient variations of *PH4*, which conjure an implacable scene of waiting (for nothing) that strands us in the desert of wall-to-wall delay, Wallace leads us to speculate that it is more productive to imagine contemporary aesthetic tedium as a means of *coping* with the felt sense of senselessness that inheres in contemporary culture's poverty of curiosity.

Like it or not, there is literally *nothing* to wait for because everything is already at hand. The proliferation of boredom shows us to be a culture in waiting, a culture more attuned to the singular and pure time of its own happening—its event-hood—than to the mixed and impure time of an immediacy mediated by a deferred desire. However, without recourse to overarching narrative complexes that supplement the singularity of waiting, one can only deal with the dumb insistence of an event that attunes us to its virtual infinity. The question then is not whether *PH4*'s musicalized boredom allows the listener's "feelings to develop in the absence of an object" (78), but rather, how does being bored these days take the time of its happening, its waiting, as something it does and undergoes? In short, it can't take it. It is a deponent force, which is to say that boredom is active in form but passive in meaning. The boredom of waiting does not describe but instead *witnesses* its happening. It, and those who wait, become, in Lyotard's lovely words, "good intensity-conducting bodies" (262), bodies whose alternating expression of wonder and fatigue are testament to the radical ambi-valence of events.

A Less Promising Boredom

The kind of emotional or affective illegibility that typifies the experience of the aesthetically induced boredom I've been outlining is consistent with the reports by its champions, who tend to depict a committed engagement with mood as expressing a concealed virtue. While boredom's relationship with art has a rich history extending back at least to Baudelaire, the history that I'm really dealing with here is that of the increasing appearance of boredom in art from the 1950s onward. Cage's *4'33*" is paradigmatic of a certain unacknowledged articulation of boredom (as are Robert Rauschenberg's 1951 *White Paintings* from which Cage supposedly drew insight), but looking a little afterwards we see more explicit and unequivocal expressions of boredom in Warhol's *Sleep* (1963) and *Empire* (1964) and in the procedural poetry of Jackson Mac Low,[5] and in Dick Higgins's 1968 essay "Boredom and Danger," in which he considers post-war art's increasing interest in boredom. In this work, Higgins draws a line backwards from Fluxus's mid-century experiments to Erik Satie's turn-of-the-century iconoclasm, suggesting that the latter's outlandish use of repetition in pieces

like *Vexations* (1893) and *Vieux sequins et vielles cuirasses* (1913) reflects a modern concern and response to actually having to live with the possibility of an endless future promised by the multiplying wonders of technological innovation and scientific knowledge. Recounting his own experience of *Vexations*, Higgins writes that, after the initial offense wears off, one has "a very strange, euphoric acceptance" and eventually gains insight into the "dialectic [relationship] between boredom and intensity" (21, 22). From this, Higgins concludes that the fascination with boredom in art lies in the way it functions as "an opposite to excitement and as a means of bringing emphasis to what it interrupts". As such, boredom, for Higgins, dialectically affirms the intensities that frame its occasion, making it "a station on the way to other experiences" (22).

But after nearly fifty years of sincere, ironic, and iconoclastic elaborations of aesthetic boredom, this has the ring of a cliché. Furthermore, calling it a station obscures an ambiguity that is expressed in boredom's way of being both a property of the objective world ("*That* song is boring") and a subjective state ("*I'm* bored"). That is, qualifying boredom as a dialectical passage between intensities obscures the mood's stranger way of being both objective and subjective, dull and interesting—ambivalent. However, as I suggested in the last section, boredom is less dialectically operative and more tactically effective. There is no time of waiting for *an* event, there is only a syncopated time of waiting *as* event. And furthermore, as I argue in the next section, the event of waiting has been absorbed by another paradigm that allies the premise of boredom's potential to be interesting with an individual's capacity and responsibility to realize his or her "self." My point then is that aesthetic boredom no longer has the same dialectical leverage it did for Higgins et al. Whereas the outlandish repetition of *Vexations* once invoked boredom as a negative "structural factor" (Higgins 22), the contemporary simulation of its refrain, one that can be automated and, more importantly, one that can be ignored, evokes a response that is less certain, less transcendent, and more perplexed. In short, boredom is less promising these days.

But if boredom has less to offer, if its disaffection fails to bore into blissful indifference, what's the point of art's being boring anymore? For contemporary-art historian Christine Ross, boredom is one of the conditions that convey what she identifies as a "depressive" paradigm in recent art practices. In *The Aesthetics of Disengagement* (2006), Ross argues that recent art works stage symptoms of depression such as slow time, perceptual insufficiency, and the dementalization of subjectivity to show how art, while filching from science's varied portrayals of depression, works to challenge and alter these as it generates its own expressions of the condition. Ross suggests that these renderings of depressive symptoms are productive insofar as they map their own *affective* sense of the disorder, particularly by showing a *concern* for the depressed subject in a way that is exempted from clinical definitions of the illness. Challenging and enriching the classification of depression as a form of insufficiency, art, says Ross, addresses depressed subjectivity at the level of

sensory appreciation (*aesthesis*), which expands the sense of insufficiency as primarily a cognitive or hermeneutic deficiency to include somatic and affective failures, failures that are no less expressive in their representation of depressed subjectivity than impaired thinking is.

Ross details a number of ways in which contemporary artists deal with the symptoms of depression. In a series of video works by Ugo Rondinone, featuring clowns engulfed by a torpor of unknown origin, Ross sees the "withering of melancholia" in art as it has become subsumed by a contemporary depressive paradigm. However, in Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) and Rosemarie Trockel's *Sleeping Pill* (1999), two video pieces that depict an illegible form of (slow) motion, she sees how slow time in art suggests the way depression interrupts the hermeneutic impulse of perception and revalorizes the domain of sensory appreciation. Here Ross construes the staging of depressed behavior in these and other cases to show that they are "not the symptoms of a disease but 'normal' configurations of contemporary subjectivity" (61). And insofar as boredom's disaffection signals a diminishment in one's capacity to do something, it too articulates the feeling of insufficiency that dominates the subject of "a society founded on individualistic independence and self-realization," a subject whose "self is always on the threshold of being inadequately itself" (160).

In this view, boredom no longer forms a dialectical relationship with intensity that Higgins took its contrast with excitement to mean. Where boredom once served "as a means of bringing emphasis to what it interrupts" (Higgins 22), it now functions in this "culture of individualized independence," where individuals have the "right" (or the duty) to choose their own identity and interests, as a symptom reflecting the individual's failure "to the meet the neo -liberal demand for speed, flexibility, responsibility, motivation, communication, and initiative" (Ross 92, 178). Drawing on Alain Ehrenberg's study of depression (2010), Ross argues that since the 1970s, Western culture has experienced a "decline of norms of socialization based on discipline, obedience, and prohibition and the concomitant rise of norms of independence based on generalized individual initiative...and pluralism of values" (91-92). Depression might be seen then as the psychic fallout of postmodernity's discursive execution of ideological and normative prescriptions whose celebration of difference, while directing "the individual to be the sole agent of his or her subjectivity," establishes at the same time the perpetual risk of "failure to perform the self" (92). As such, I suggest that Ross's reading of depression as symptomatic of neoliberal ideals and its expanded field of potential failure shows how depression has taken over where boredom left off: modernity's trope of anomic distress has been replaced with postmodernity's "pathology of insufficiency" (178). Boredom, I contend, appears now as a failure for the (neoliberal) individual to secure a sufficient self, a view that contrasts markedly with the Cagean directive of "losing one's self" in the dissolution of the life-art divide. Failure here is a potential gained while depression is a state earned by the injunction "to be oneself," an optimal functioning self in

a world that expects and prohibits nothing but that you demonstrate your right, and/or your (in)capacity, to create/perform your "self."

The curious thing about this paradigm is that failure comes to serve a major role in the expression of contemporary subjectivity. To the extent that the contemporary self must continually perform and reiterate its independence (ironically, on already coded models of performance), its failure to obtain the perfection of the idealized performances of this independence along the lines of adaptability, ingenuity, or initiative figures the contemporary subject as what Ross calls a "coping machine." Borrowing the term from cognitive-science studies of depression, Ross cites artist Vanessa Beecroft's performance installations as exemplifying the dynamics of coping that express the failed self. Crudely put, Beecroft's works can be seen to stage a confrontation with the impossibilities of performing feminine ideals. Typically comprising a group of female models chosen for their svelte appearance and homogeneous features, features that can be easily appropriated to common clichés of femininity, Beecroft instructs these meagerly clad (or unclad) women, always in high-heeled shoes, to stand motionless or pose indifferently before an audience for a duration of two to four hours. Ross reads the flagging resolve and subsequent alterations that appear in the performers' attempts to fulfill this performance as behavioral actions, but actions that fail, actions that are "not merely failures but mostly modes of coping with failure" (76). Ross contends that in failing to perform the feminine ideal that is aesthetically framed and exaggerated by the array of uniformly anonymous performers, a coping machine's exhibition of "[d]epressive affects become[s] a strategy by which one shapes one's individuality" (83). Beecroft's exemplary machines affirm , then, a mode of contemporary subjectivity whose "self" is differentiated and expressed not by mastery or affirmation of a prefigured quantity of, in this case, "femininity," but rather by its manner of coping, by the way it expresses an array of depressive affects that make the depressed/bored individual his/her own (positively flawed) subject.

Ross's take on the way depression articulates a mode of subjectivity along the lines of failure or, in her words, insufficiency is instructive and helps to show how the "metaphysical ambiguity" at play in the discourse of boredom is being reworked in contemporary culture.[6] We can see this attitude of neoliberal self-responsibility reflected in the way composers who work with various forms of tedium insist that their music isn't boring—or at least that it doesn't set out to bore. Take this statement from Canadian composer John Abram, whose 68-minute composition *Vinyl Mine* (1996) catalogues the sound of a single pass from the play-off groove of each album comprising the (then) whole of his record collection:

> It's a pet peeve of mine that people say "It's boring," when they really ought to say "I am bored by this." I really believe that anything at all can be engaging and fascinating if you examine it the right way, or for long enough. The viewer's inability or unwillingness to engage with the work is not the work's problem, nor its maker's.

Or consider this, from American composer G. Douglas Barrett, who says of his piece *Three Voices* (a work I consider below):

> As square and strict as this score is, there is always something unexpected which arises in performance—in this case having to do with the sheer concentration and endurance needed to repeat an action 169 times in strict coordination with two other performers.

Both composers give boredom no purchase on their work, either displacing it onto the listener or treating it as a surface effect of the piece's formal monotony that will (eventually) become marginalized by the appearance of the unexpected—provided one is capable of perceiving it in this way. These comments, obviously taking for granted a Cagean faith in boredom's promise, inadvertently evoke the contemporary sensibility of insufficiency that requires the listener to be the agent of his/her own interests. Here again is Adam Phillips's idea that boredom returns the individual to the scene of inquiry, only this time with the belief that one must "initiate one's own identity [desires] instead of being disciplined to do so" (Ross 92).

Yet as insightful as Ross's intervention into the construction of depressed subjectivity is, it overlooks that fact that the viewer is somehow expected to understand the hidden operativity of slowness, monotony, fatigue, without actually having to experience the lived reality of these corporeal states. Of course it's possible, to an extent, to understand depression without having suffered it; however, insofar as Ross contends that many of the works she discusses aim to revalue "the sensory and affective dimensions of aesthetics" (152), it bears noting that almost no one watches the entirety of Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*, or stands for the duration of the performance with Beecroft's models. As such, the audience inevitably misses something of the somatic and intensive dimension of failure that is being staged by these works. In this respect, we can see how musical enactments of boredom actually *make* the time and space for the kind of sensory regeneration that is only symbolized by the sluggardly pace of these optically-based works. That is, the forms of embodiment that are only ever *portrayed* by Rondinone's and Gordon's work, and which are supposed to "create the beholder as depressed," are actually made effective by the concert and listening rituals of music that conjure a phantasmatic space-time which allows and indeed requires one to endure the intensities of insufficiency that take time to play out.[7] Music's "concerted" expressions of boredom make the experience of suffering what Sianne Ngai terms the "ugly feelings" defining contemporary subjectivity an effectively affective part of its aesthetic expression *and* reception.

Uglier Feelings of the Stuplime

How aesthetic expressions of boredom have affected us differently over time outlines something of the history of modernity's preoccupation with "ugly feelings." Along with envy, paranoia, and irritation, Ngai identifies a feeling of modernity that characterizes the kind of

"syncretism of excitation and enervation" generated by encounters with mind-bendingly vast and excessively dull art (280). Addressing and unpacking the under-theorized ambi-valence of aestheticized tedium, Ngai draws attention to the way it resembles the sublime insofar as a listener's "faculties become strained to their limits in their effort to comprehend the work as a whole," but differs from the sublime in that "the revelation of this failure is conspicuously less dramatic" (270). Naming this feeling "stuplimity," Ngai argues that works like Beckett's *Stirrings Still* (1988) and Kenneth Goldsmith's *American Trilogy* (2005-08)[8] (or even abstract systems like the one representing "justice" to K. in Kafka's *The Trial*) do not induce a properly (Kantian) sublime experience. While the vastness of the sublime that threatens to crush the finite individual "ultimately refer[s] the self back to its capacity for reason" and its ability to "transcend the deficiencies of its own imagination" (266), the excessive "agglutination"[9] of banalities that comprise *Stirrings Still* and *American Trilogy* keep us mired in our insufficiency and in touch with the sensuous infinity intimated by these works.[10]

The difference between the sublime and stuplime can be clarified and the latter's affect examined by looking at a work like *Piano Installation with Derangements* (2003) by Canadian composer Chedomir Barone. There is nothing intimidating or overwhelming about its material in the sense suggested by the sublime. Essentially, it is a deliberately obtuse presentation of 750 coupled derangements of a C major scale that when performed (as it was in 2005 by the composer who spent three hours slowly [ca. 52bpm] and quietly playing each paired derangement while depressing the *sostenuto* pedal throughout and treating each quarter rest as an unmeasured fermata) invokes the vertigo of the sublime *without* eliciting the (Kantian) promise of reason that will rescue the affected mind from the failing of its imagination.[11]

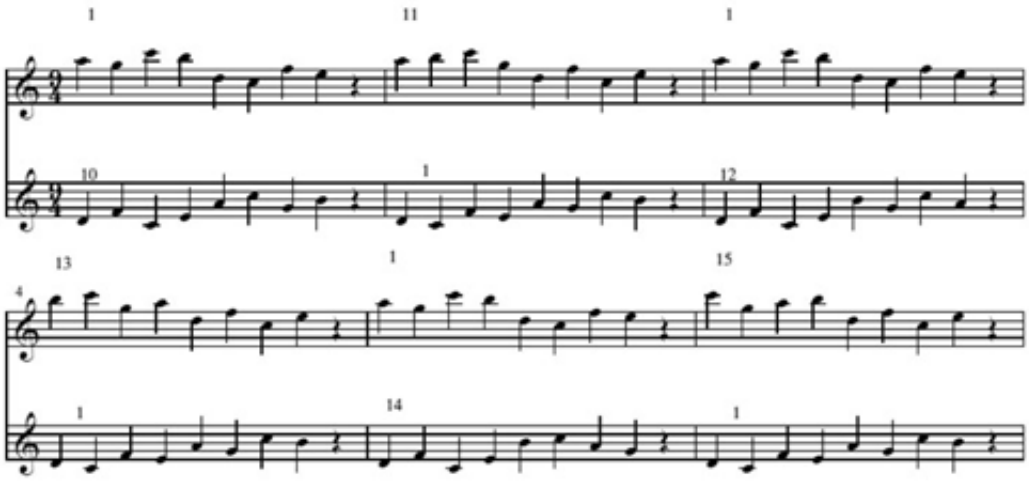

Fig. 3. Opening bars of *Piano Installation with Derangements*. Click for PDF format.

Audio 3. Excerpt from *Piano Installation with Derangements*. Click to hear audio.

Staged as an "installation" so that listeners ("non-performers," in Barone's words) might come and go as they wish, the piece, says Barone, is actually intended for the performer, whose encounter with boredom, because he or she "*must* pay attention or the piece collapses," does not have the luxury of being carried away from its monotony. As in Beecroft's models, the performer must attempt to accomplish an ideal, which in this case is described by a slow, quiet, and steady sounding of seriated C Major derangements. But of course, the performance is festooned with "errors" and slips, and these expressive failures are what usually pass as justification for the work's boredom. However, the discourse of musical experimentalism that converts these "failures" into aesthetic successes—a discourse premised on the idea that "An error is simply a failure to adjust immediately from a preconception to an actuality" (John Cage qtd. in Nyman 62)—has the effect of obscuring the affective conditions that engendered their expression. Here's how Barone describes his experience of performing *Piano Installations*:

> I was perhaps a little over half way through the piece when I had a series of revelations. First, I realized that I was no longer consciously controlling my hands, or even reading the music. It seemed at the time that I was only looking at the pages, and my hands were somehow working by their own accord. Next, it occurred to me that I didn't even know "how" to play the piano. (I started to feel the sort of giggly panic at this point that you get when you've taken magic mushrooms and are strolling about town trying not to look/act high). Finally, I realized that nothing much made sense. I was smacking some wooden box with my hands for reasons unknown, and somehow sounds were happening as a result of my actions. Everything—the music, the piano, the concert, the people sitting there—seemed utterly foreign and utterly ludicrous.
>
> (2009)

Note, Barone never says that the monotonous refrains of the piece transported him to some transcendent plateau or endowed his sense of self with some agreeable estimation of itself. The expressions of sublime transduction are clearly absent from his description. Instead, Barone recounts a senseless mixing of bodies and fugitive intensities whose familiar semantic crust and affective attachments have corroded—not exploded—under the slow decay of his capacity to sustain a focused attention. Throughout this performance, Barone is neither elated nor self-secure. He simply finds himself enduring a slow burn that alternately sears and numbs attention as his body encounters the sensuous infinity of the finite's iterability.

Although Barone is relating a performer's experience of the work, its presentation as "music" (despite its title and the invitation to exit) solicits a kind of attention that condemns

one to suffer the duration (*durée*) of the performance and so to cope with a "series of fatigues or minor exhaustions, rather than a single, major blow to the imagination" (Ngai 272). The halting awe of the stuplime, which more accurately describes an experience of Barone's work, expresses a paradox in a way that both recalls and challenges Cage's immersive ideal. It does this insofar as the concerted stuplime articulates the Cagean conceit that displaces intentionality onto the listener who is at the same time created as, in Ross's terms, an insufficient subject. That is, the musicalized stuplime solicits a subject who is expected to be responsible for witnessing his/her incapacity to adequately attend to nothing in particular. The ambivalence infusing this paradox, which in the 1960s was managed and qualified discursively by appealing to the rhetoric of Zen and other traditions of *coincidentia oppositorum*, is in this case expressed in the affective terms of "coping" and "striving," terms that embody a contemporary "form of living related to a loss of self but inextricably tied to the development of the self" (Ross 68). Thus, whereas Kenneth Goldsmith's work *Fidget* (2000), which is nothing/everything but a transcription of his bodily movements over a single day, simply *represents* the array of corporeal techniques that he suffered over twenty-four hours, the audience captured by the musical address of Barone's much more modest three-hour performance is given its own occasion to yawn, to loll, to ache, and so to shape the individuality of its members through their alternately flagging/rebounding capacity to cope with the stuplimity of its derangements.

What differentiates the boredom of this situation from its Romantic expression is the articulation of a neoliberal and cognitivist model of subjectivity in which individuality is constituted, expressed, and strangely empowered by the transitive banalities, rogue affects, and uneven fatigues that assail him/her/it. In other words, whereas Romantic boredom promised an ecstatic, eventual, and indubitable (if inexpressible) self-presence, contemporary boredom makes no such promise, leaving one, for better or worse, to carve a selfhood out of an apparently uniform tedium by showing how one is *uniquely* affected by the pressures of contemporary culture's norms of independence. In the context of an experimental music culture that has made it compulsory to flaunt an iconoclasm and an ostensibly catholic taste, this pressure is felt and manifested in the imperative to meet the strikingly neoliberal policy of required creativity, of the constant need to display not a mastery, for that is impossible, but a capacity to creatively *cope* with the uncertain, the unforeseen, and the ultimately "unknown unknowns" of life. Thus, the extent to which the stuplime expresses a contemporary *ambivalence* to aestheticized boredom, one that contrasts with the rhetorically attractive refrains of its Romantic escapes, can be seen by the way it addresses a subject who is persuaded that it is both a right *and* a chore to wait for one's own interests.

The ambivalence of stuplimity plays out a little differently in the work of American composer G. Douglas Barrett. Barrett's interdisciplinary practice traverses the conventions of traditional composition and visual art and skews Barone's affectedly doltish

(over)abundance of minor variations by its conceptually mannered conceit of simulation, or what Barrett calls "transcription." Transcription for Barrett turns less on the order of the real and the hyperreal than it does on the way of making expressive the distortions, the insufficiencies, and the overlooked in what Barrett says are "processes that have to do with documenting, replicating, recording and repeating" (*Artist Statement*). These processes, of course, nevertheless participate in the general economy of simulation, for each instance is a type of image that cannot help but articulate the logic of models and copies that both generate and undermine the notion of the real or original.[12] Barrett's practice of transcription, however, can be distinguished from the contemporary history of simulation by virtue of the way his work *emphasizes* rather than dissimulates the disfiguring properties intrinsic to its processes. Like the act of translation, transcription for Barrett entails a certain amount of interpretive activity that does not so much introduce as *express* the difference that occasions two or more instances of a thing-event. In other words, Barrett's transcriptions witness and delineate in musical terms the virtual multiplicity or multivalence of an event as it is figured in different mediums: audio recording, notated score, and live performance (and this discursive medium in which you're encountering it now). What makes Barrett's transcriptions and their exquisite tedium elicit a stuplime ambivalence has, however, less to do with the familiar dimensions of repetition and extendedness than it does with the way they treat every source as an insufficiently expressed event. Take for example his work *Derivation XI, or*,

> *{Derivation(Derivation[Derivation{Derivation(Derivation[Derivation{Backyard [Music] - Vol. 4 (or Derivation IV.)} (or Derivation VI.)] (or Derivation VII.)) (or Derivation VIII.)} (or Derivation X.)] (or Derivation XI.)) (or Derivation XII.)}(or Derivation XI.) for string quartet* (2009)

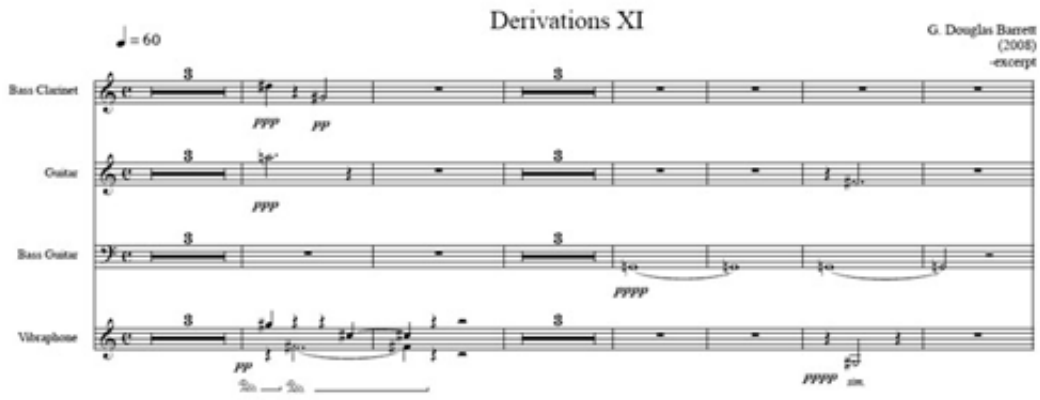

Fig. 4. Opening bars of *Derivation XI*. Click for PDF format.
© G. Douglas Barrett.

Audio 4. Excerpt from *Derivation XI*. Click to hear audio.
© G. Douglas Barrett.

The originary event for this "piece," or more accurately, the series of derivations executed by Barrett since 2006, is a recording of a performance of his piece *Backyard [Music]* (2006), which is itself the transcription of a recording made of the ambient sounds of a Hollywood street corner. *Derivation XI* can be thought of as the eighth generation of *Backyard [Music]*—as the collective expression of the recording, transcription, and performance—or, if you want to discriminate a performance from a recording and from a transcription, then *Derivation XI* will be the twenty-second iteration of *Backyard [Music]*. In Barrett's terms:

> Derivation XI. is a transcription of a recording of a performance of a transcription of a performance of a transcription of a recording of a performance of a transcription of a recording of a performance of a transcription of a recording of a performance of a transcription of a recording of a performance of a transcription of a recording of a transcription of a recording (of a performance).

What each subsequent iteration (recording, transcription, performance) of this process implies is that the previous iteration is, in a sense, in-attentive to something that can only be attended to in the following iteration, paradoxically showing that the finitude of each event is composed of an excess that escapes its specificity. Brian Massumi describes the ingressive potential that informs each instance of a thing or event as the "autonomy of affect," a potential that gives things their sense of "life." "Actually existing, structured things," he writes, "live in and through that which escapes them" (35). This "escape" is what Barrett transcribes and reiterates, each time expressing again the same potential difference or, as Massumi says, "a fade out to infinity" (35). The ambivalence of the tedium crafted by Barrett derives from the kind of charged uncertainty that gives life its feeling, its sense of open-endedness, which reminds us of what Cage averred as a heterogeneous field of multiplicity. However, because Barrett's transcriptions still participate in a logic of simulation, a logic that dislodges all signs from their relation to a "real" referent and that, argues Baudrillard, is the dominant economy of our age, they also remind us that there is no outside or founding model, no tradition or central edict that shows us how or who to be—except for the model of individual independence, a model joyfully embodied in the 1960s and '70s, but tediously, and often insufficiently, performed by today's bored subject.

While the seriality of *Derivations* takes on the impressive but ultimately impossible task of actualizing the totality of its difference, Barrett's piece *Three Voices* (2008) composes another series of simulations through the description of "every possible ordering of entrances and cut-offs of sounds or actions for three performers" (Barrett 2009). From left to right, three lines, three performers, each playing a single tone, sound, or action corresponding to the 169 graphic portrayals of relative beginnings and endings, Barrett composes an exhaustive picture of a particular form of time, of time written sideways. An hour-long performance from 2008 features two violins and flute articulating the diversity of entrances and cut-offs through a series of soft iterations of the sonority: Eb4, D5, Db6.

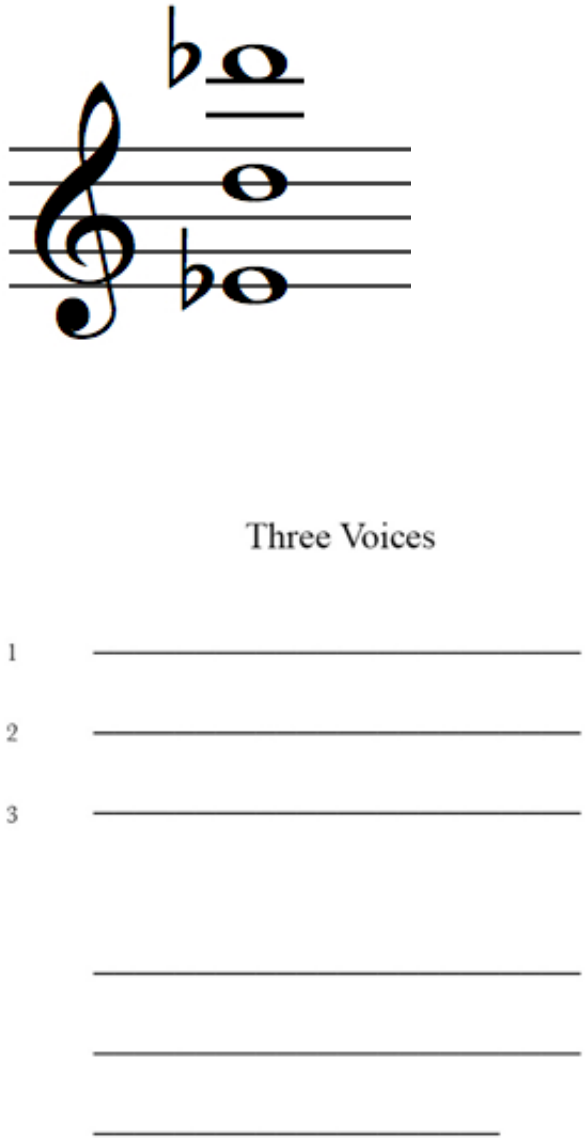

Fig. 5. Opening of *Three Voices*. Click for PDF format.

Audio 5. Excerpt from *Three Voices*. Click to hear audio.

On one level, *Three Voices* resembles the fetishization of presence associated with the compositions of Morton Feldman. Like Feldman's works, which elaborate a succession of varied instrumental events, Barrett's piece stages a uniform flow of variations of the same event. However, to the extent that it aims to elaborate a kind of action, *Three Voices* is more

usefully compared to Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family's Progress* in the way that it attempts to exhaust the telling of its "kind," its "list[ing] of every ordering of starts and stops of three elements" (Barrett).[13] Like Stein's psychedelic taxonomization of "kinds" of Americans, *Three Voices* enacts a totalizing project that engenders a stuplime encounter with the singular "kind" of beginnings and endings. The labor involved in this sort of "inventory art," from writing, to performing, to listening to it, summons affects that force the subject back upon itself, not in a recuperative gesture of the sublime that Kant sees as reason's triumph over the imagination's insufficiency, but in the sense that the imagination is made to continually reflect upon its paucity and in a way that forces the listener to take responsibility for developing new ways and manners of listening.

Certainly one can imagine slips in intonation or uneven bowing and breathing as moments of "excitement" in the unfolding of *Three Voices.* But Ngai's description of *The Making of Americans* as a "labor of enumeration, differentiating, describing, dividing, sorting" tells us that this making involves very little excitement but instead "generally takes place as a painstakingly slow, tiring, seemingly endless 'puzzling' over differences and resemblances" (292). The instruction that *Three Voices* be played "*soft, concentrated, for its own sake*" indicates a making of kinds of beginnings and endings that are neither euphoric nor ironic, but *unjustified multiples of kinds* (of beginnings and endings) whose repetitions "elevate and absurdify" (Ngai 280) their way of being an assembly of singular kinds whose strangeness breaks upon the familiar of their kinds. Works such as these extract an affective response that is decidedly un-sublime. Both Barrett's and Barone's neo-Dada interrogations of the shockingly obtuse drift perilously close to the un-musical refrains of the everyday by unintentionally choreographing the contingencies and inexactitudes that inhere in and inform any programme of embodied actions. While lacking the intensive magnitude of the sublime, like the buzz of everyday life both *Three Voices* and *Piano Installation with Derangements* are rich with hiccups that, because of their aesthetic making, lie on just this side of being boring.

Post...Death...

Obviously, boredom today is not wholly distinct from the boredom of the 60s and '70s; the formal and conceptual similarities, as well as the discursive figures that are used by artists to describe and justify the boring things that they do, are more than apparent. What is not so evident is the way in which the paradoxical "shock" of boredom now functions as a currency in what theorist Paul Mann calls the "white economy of discourse." In his 1991 book, *Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*, Mann argues that the devices of avant-garde or "oppositional" art, of which boredom is just one device along with "shock," "juxtaposition," "collage," and, most importantly for Mann, "critique," are forms of currency in an economy that trades on expressions of conformity/resistance. The avant-garde doesn't occupy the latter term of this binary so much as its expressions mark the differential drift by which this

pair is made sayable in a system of exchange. In essence, Mann is suggesting that the avant-garde's perpetual effort to differ makes it a discursive agent insofar as its expressions of difference generate discourse. And as discourse is the scene of recuperation, the assimilation of difference to the same white economy of exchange, the avant-garde is less a site of resistance and more "a system for instrumentalizing contradiction" (Mann 46). This insight into the avant-garde's complicity with a bourgeois culture of exchange is supposed to be the death of the avant-garde; however, as Mann notes in pointing to the proliferation of "obituaries"—like his book and even this essay--the avant-garde's death makes it not less productive, but in many ways more productive: "The death of the avant-garde is the n-state of the recuperation of its critical potential by a narrative of failure" (xi). Here, Mann is saying that the avant-garde's critical posture is itself a commodity that can be used for purposes of exchange. While artworks continue to be made and sold, their real value lies in being placeholders or ingredients for the essays, books, dissertations, conferences, and symposia that are like grimoires and séances for reanimating the dead. Within a discursive economy, every critical study of an avant-garde's death is a type of necromancy. From this perspective, the current interest in aesthetic boredom would seem to lie not in how it affects someone, but in how a work's senseless drifts and empty feints persuade someone to talk or write about it. The catch here of course, one whose dialectical gesture is tautologically poised to collapse in an ever tightening spiral of immanence, is that art which is merely an interesting thing to write about—to discourse on—*is* boring, and being boring is merely interesting to write about. The bind for contemporary art and criticism is that they become unable to make a critical statement about their own situation without re-presenting the discursive mechanisms of its expressive distress. The only way to escape this dilemma would be to dodge participation in the discursive economy by imagining a place outside of discourse. And this, writes Mann, is "a place that, one is assured, does not exist" (91).

Or if "it" does exist, it exists in a way that cannot be articulated without being drawn into the wholly affirmative character of discourse, for "discourse has no negative force that is not reduced to dialectical systems-maintenance" (88). This means that if I am to do what I am about to, that is, to suggest how contemporary boredom intimates an "escape" from discourse without actually dying the death of absolute silence, I should really stop writing and let a little nihilism loose on my own words. However, it is clear by this point that I won't. I should at least suggest a conclusion, one whose even modest inference or speculation will compromise the chance of aesthetic boredom to be unjustified.

Well...I can't go on, I'll go on.

Perhaps in losing the operational difference that distinguishes between aesthetic and mundane boredom, a loss diagnosed by Baudrillard as a consequence of media saturation that takes us beyond questions of representation, contemporary "aesthetic" boredom (which should now be put under erasure) articulates the uncertainty of its own conundrum. Unlike

earlier artworks that focused on boredom's capacity to disturb conventions, to drum up differences in which discourse could be invested, contemporary boredom, in its stuplimity, seems to address the metaphysical ambiguity that has always been evident in boredom's rhetoric. Boredom, as the phrases "That song is boring" and "I'm bored" reveal, is a way of speaking about the felt sense of senselessness and the uncertainty affecting a subject caught between a withering paradigm of faith and the reflexive proclivities of modern epistemological skepticism. Thus, whereas a work like Steve Reich's *Four Organs* (1970) once promised to eliminate the uncertainty of being neither a faithful nor empirical "self" by annihilating this duality in an immersive gesture of extinction, Barrett's *Derivation XI*. transcribes and simulates the ambivalence that has allowed boredom to spread beyond the desert of art into the wasteland of the mundane, where the intensity of being unjustified becomes indistinguishable from a day at the office. But this is no hard-won insight. It is the simulation of an insight into the fact that our waiting no longer pays off in the revelation of hitherto unknown interests, an insight into the theory-death that waiting tries to infinitely postpone. Waiting is stuplime: It is an uncertain witnessing of the time of events in their infinite eventuality and a way of listening to nothing in particular in order to imagine the impossible possibility of disappearing into an event that always never takes place.

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Notes

This work is dedicated to the memory of Art Jarvinen (1956-2010).

1. The "sensuous infinity" that I refer to in this essay is the sense we have of a perpetually receding end-point, or inversely, of a continually dividing mid-point. This can be represented in two ways using the familiar example of a number series (m, n, o...). The former is what's called an *extensive* infinitude wherein along a real number series we can always count one more term beyond the last. This is represented by the formula (m, n, o...)+1. The latter however, is called an *intensive* infinitude, wherein between two terms of this series lies a third. The formula for this sense of infinitude is *½(m+n)*. I am using the term "sensuous infinity" rather than the more common "bad infinity" in order to emphasize the experiential aspects of boredom's sense of endlessness.

2. While repetition, slowness, and suspension are not exclusive to experimental composition, I emphasize the Cagean tradition of composition here, for a certain conviction and celebration of boredom is fundamental to the aesthetics of post-Cagean composition in a way that the droney doom metal of SunnO))) or the numbingly pensive groove of British dubstep never is.

3. This, of course, is Elaine Scarry's argument in *The Body in Pain* (1985), which presents an elegant theory of how sentience can be represented as a spectrum hemmed by complementary extremes: At one end is the imagination, wherein the act of imagining coincides with the object imagined, and at the other end is pain, in which the act of perception takes itself as its own object.

4. This sense of "perfection" alludes to eighteenth-century German aesthetician Georg Friedrich Meier's

notion of beautiful thinking (*ars pulchre cogitandi*), which he borrowed from his mentor Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten.

5. Warhol's notorious reputation for "being bored" can be illustrated in many ways, but perhaps, owing to their time-based expression, his films *Sleep* and *Empire* are representative of his aesthetic tedium. Both *Sleep* (1963) and *Empire* (1964) are eight-hour films that fixate on the passage of time by focusing the camera on a single event. In the case of the former, the film is a partially looped shot of a sleeping John Giorno, while the latter is a continuous shot of the Empire State building as late afternoon dusk passes into evening darkness. On Mac Low's poetry, which is noted for its use of chance operations and the application of arbitrary systems for selecting and assembling new text from pre-existing source material, see Mac Low 2009.

6. Elisabeth Goodstein, in her work *Experience Without Qualities* (2005), argues that the rhetoric of boredom develops around an ambiguity or contradiction in Enlightenment discourses of subjective experience that aim to describe the persistence of an immaterial dimension of being within an otherwise orderly, objective material reality.

7. Music has a long association with the phantasmatic. Though the most common sense of this is inherited from religious and folk traditions that treat music like an incantatory form that conjures a quasi-mystical space-time into being, more obscure formulations include Susanne Langer's theory that musical morphology expresses the affective "semblance" of the "inner life" (a concept borrowed from Schiller's notion of *Schein*), Jacques Attali's sense that the suppleness of music's medium simulates a hyper-fast economy of relations presaging political orders, and David Burrows's thesis that music operates on a synthetic plane of sensory immediacy that compensates for the abstraction of language. See Langer 1953, Attali 1985, and Burrows 2007.

8. Three novels composed entirely of one year's worth of New York City weather, traffic, and sports reports.

9. Ngai uses the term "agglutination" rather than accumulation to describe the holding together in perception or formal relations "the mass adhesion or coagulation of data particles or signifying units" (263).

10. I think that Ngai relies too heavily on the formal elements of the works she studies to exemplify the affective response to iterability. Although her examples are persuasive, particularly as they draw attention to the way the repetition of finite elements undermines the stability of formal concepts by mutilating the signifying relays of the system granting them meaning, she overlooks the detail that we can only now, after having suffered a century of aesthetic boredom, appreciate, and we can only now feel alternately bored and interested by the same experience. It's not merely the individual work's linking of boredom and astonishment that expresses the stuplime, but the collective history of ways we've developed to aestheticize and thereby unsteadily elevate the mundane or picayune.

11. A derangement refers to a permutational mode in combinatorial mathematics whereby no element of a given set (i.e., C major: C D E F G A B) appears in its original place.

12. For example, in addition to using common audio recorders and transposing the captured sounds into musical notation, Barrett has designed a piece of software capable of performing a spectral analysis of a recording whose results are converted tones mapped onto a specified instrument or ensemble.

13. "There must now then be more description of the way each one is made of a substance common to their kind of them, thicker, thinner, harder, softer, all of one consistency, all of one lump, or little lumps stuck together to make a whole one cemented together sometimes by the same kind of being sometimes by the other kind of being in them, some with a lump hard at the centre liquid at the surface, some with the lump vegetablish or wooden or metallic in them. Always then the kind of substance, the kind of way when it is a mediumly fluid solid fructifying reacting substance, the way it acts makes one kind of them of the resisting

kind of them, the way another substance acts makes another kind of them the attacking way of them. It and the state it is in each kind of them, the mixing of it with the other way of being that makes many kinds of these two kinds of them, sometime all this will have meaning" (Stein 345).

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