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OBLOMOV'S DREAM: AN ART PRACTICE-LED ENQUIRY INTO RADICAL BOREDOM IN THE NETWORK WORLD

A refusal to engage with, or to share in, a digital network culture that demands a permanent state of receptivity can be a powerful statement both personally and politically. In this paper I discuss how strategies of resistance to the technological enframing[1] of experience in the network world may be developed through a kind of 'radical boredom,' developed in response to the 'radical distraction' (Morozov) of the network world. I explore this in relation to my 2015 video work *Oblomov's Dream*, referencing Jan Verwoert's concept of performing dissent through embracing 'I *Can't*' as a form of agency (92-94).

Radical boredom

Concern about the effect of modern culture on our attention span and intellect is nothing new: in 1903 Georg Simmel published the essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life" in which he criticised the blasé attitude that city dwellers held towards the world, blaming their indifference on an overstimulation of the senses. An absence of focus and an itinerant attention, characteristics typifying the modern subject, both indicated a coping mechanism adopted to blunt the city dweller's ability to react to new sensations, a psychological defence mechanism which made city life less mentally straining. Simmel's erstwhile student Siegfried Kracauer went even further, suggesting that only "extraordinary, radical boredom" (Kracauer, quoted in Morozov), as opposed to the 'radical distraction' of a real-time social media news feed, could reunite us with our body, our heads and the lived materiality of the world. The endless novelty of the modern world affected a disembodiment of experience: it alienated the individual from his or her 'spirit', enchanted as it was by the surface spectacle of modernity, manifesting as an endless and evanescent series of images invoking leisure and the pleasures of consumerism. Modernity, to Kracauer, had created a 'culture of distraction' wherein everyday life had been colonised by "commodified forms of communication" (Kracauer 302) and was left vacant and banal as a result. Only in moments of silence and solitude could one flirt with radical and unscripted ideas. Boredom was rethought as political.

Kracauer was writing in 1924 about the early days of mass media such as radio and cinema, yet his observations resonate with many contemporary critiques of life in the digitally networked world. He describes how modernity demands a "permanent state of receptivity," (Ibid 303) a statement that could as easily apply to the live feeds of social media as it once did to radio. Kracauer rethought boredom as being something inherently political, a state of mind in which one could experience the world at different temporalities and reimagine not only what the present could look like, but also what the future could look like. In being bored the urgent, 'just in time' temporality of the network world is disrupted and we are reminded that: "we are not in charge of time… we are subject to time" (Svendsen 118).

The boring boring and the unboring boring

We are surrounded by anti-boredom devices, and we can be bored as well as overwhelmed by information overload, but it is a mediated form of boredom that differs substantially from Kracauer's concept of 'radical boredom'. Kenneth Goldsmith writes of these two types of boredom in terms of the "unboring boring" and the "boring boring" (Goldsmith). The difference between the two, he writes, is that:

Unboring boring is a voluntary state; boring boring is a forced one. Unboring boring is the sort of boredom we surrender ourselves to when, say, we go to see a piece of minimalist music. (Ibid)

Where enduring five seconds of a sponsored advertisement on Youtube, or writing an email that one has been putting off can both be read in terms of the "boring boring," Goldsmith's work goes some way towards an expression of an "unboring boring." Take, for example, *Day*, in which Goldsmith transcribed the entire text of a day's issue of *The New York Times*: a task both masochistic in its tedium and "surprisingly sensual," (Ibid) an act of endurance that achieves a kind of transcendence of the material and the act of transcription. It brings to mind John Cage's famous statement on the necessity of boredom:

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. (John Cage, quoted in Goldsmith)

A culture of distraction demands not only a permanent state of receptiveness, but also a permanent 'now.' The temporality of the network world is one of urgency, of being 'just in time' rather than 'in the moment'. Zygmunt Bauman describes this as "the insubstantial, instantaneous time of the software world," (Bauman 118) a temporality that is also *inconsequential time*, immediately evanescing from experience into "exhaustion and fading of interest" (Ibid). Bauman's analysis stands in contrast to the words of Google Chairman Eric Schmidt, in his keynote speech to the 2011 Digital-Life-Design conference in Munich. In the age of the Internet, he states:

"you're never bored" (Google). Boredom has been replaced by "wasting time," idly traversing the world's knowledge on the Internet. As I have argued earlier—contra Schmidt—we can be bored as well as overwhelmed by an overload of information. However, this is a mediated form of boredom that operates in the flat, 'instantaneous time' of the network, a kind of "boring boring" (Goldsmith) that allows no room for thought or reflection as it is fixed in a permanent state of receptivity (Morozov).

The curious temporality of the "unboring boring," its unfolding over time, brings us again to Heidegger and to his concept of 'profound boredom.'[2] It is described by Lars Svendsen as a state in which one is "bored by boredom itself," (Svendsen 121) wherein one encounters the emptiness of existence and of time. Profound boredom is a mood that, once awakened, "leads us directly into the problem complex of being and time" (Ibid 116). Profound boredom opens an allocentric perspective on one's own existence and presents the possibility of the liberation of the self in the moment. Contained within the negativity of profound boredom is the kernel of a positive possibility, "a boredom so radical as to be able to bring about a turnaround to authenticity" (Ibid 125).

The terror of total Dasein

To Kracauer, too, boredom held a positive possibility. Boredom was not only our "modest right" (Kracauer 303) to do no more than be with ourselves, but also "the necessary precondition for the possibility of generating the authentically new" (Ibid 301-2). If an individual is never bored, then they are also never really *present*. So, if to be bored is to be *present*, then 'radical boredom' relates not only to Heidegger's 'profound boredom' but

also to his concept of *Dasein*, 'being in the world,' wherein human existence is grounded in the body and in the specific place in which we live. Being in the world emphasises that we are more than just an incorporeal self that is distinct from the "confining prison house" of the body, as expressed by John Cottingham, that consciousness is more than a string of information that can flow seamlessly between the synapses of the brain and the silicon chips of a computer (252) An explanation of consciousness as an informational pattern that is equally replicable in organic or non-organic materials falls short of accounting for Dasein.

In the essay "The Terror of Total Dasein: Economies of Presence in the Art Field", Hito Steyerl argues that in the "technologically enhanced market for attention, time, movement" of the contemporary art world, in which there can be no scarcity of digitally reproducible commodities, presence itself becomes a rarity – "the scarcest option among a range of alternatives." The artist must not only be present but "exclusively present" in a context in which actual physical presence is conflated with the liberating potential of the 'being present' of Dasein.

> *The idea of presence invokes the promise of unmediated communication, the glow of uninhibited existence, a seemingly unalienated experience and authentic encounter between humans. It implies that not only the artist but everyone else is present too, whatever that means and whatever it is good for. (Steyerl,"The Terror of Total Dasein")*

While the 'being present' of Dasein invokes a temporal state radically different from the instantaneous and insubstantial time of the network world, the kinds of presence Steyerl writes about operate in the frenetic temporal zone of "junktime… wrecked, discontinuous, distracted," a zone of constant engagement and exhaustion. They are in fact not so much forms of presence as "a range of grades of withholding absence" (Ibid). The demand for the artists' presence can be read as a symptom of the constant demands on our time and attention, and the intense "pressure to conform and perform" (Steyerl, "The Spam of the Earth") exerted by a network hegemony. As Franco Bifo Berardi has written, "everywhere, attention is under siege" (134).

Physical presence becomes a proxy for Dasein and Dasein itself becomes reified, "a cult of presence" (Steyerl "The Terror of Total Dasein"). In this context, the strategic withdrawal of one's presence (like the negativity of profound boredom) holds the kernel of a positive, or even radical, potentiality. Steyerl relates this kind of withdrawal, or "absenteeism" to the action of a strike – a refusal of the alienating labour of "self-production" demanded by the network world (Steyerl, "The Spam of the Earth"). As pointed to by Brian Holmes, this process of self realisation through actions of sharing, liking and other forms of (inter) activity can be traced to the collapse of factory models of production in the mid 20th century and their replacement by a fractured, dispersed and individualised social form modelled along network lines. Thus, strike action would seem an apt historical metaphor. However artistic strike action, such as Gustav Metzger's Art Strike of 1977-1980, has more often resulted in a total disappearance than a strategic withdrawal. As Simon Sheikh says of Metzger's *Art Strike*, "nobody noticed" (Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw). New strategies are undoubtedly required to resist a culture of 'radical distraction' and the exhaustion and alienation it affects, strategies that I will go on to explore in a discussion of the single channel video work *Oblomov's Dream*.

Oblomov's Dream

The idea of boredom and refusal as forms of active resistance to the commodification of time and attention fed into the development of my single channel video work, *Oblomov's Dream*. The script is adapted from the 1849 novel *Oblomov* by Ivan Goncharov, a satire on the indolence of the Russian aristocracy, with additional material from *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* by Jonathan Crary and the essay "Exhaustion and Exuberance: Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform" by Jan Verwoert. A disembodied narrator reads this adaptation over a shifting backdrop of still images and video that are culled from multiple sources both online and offline, a backdrop that at times is entirely abstract, and at others resembles a computer desktop, an online pin-board or a Tumblr dashboard (Figure 1).

In the original novel, Oblomov is a young nobleman who, although he is good-natured, is incapable of making decisions or undertaking any action. Oblomov's indolence is extreme, to the point that remaining recumbent in bed "represented his normal condition" (Goncharev 2). A city dweller, living in St Petersburg on an income from his rural estate, he dreams of a simpler pastoral life in the Russian countryside of his childhood, a life without change or incident (Ibid 36). Oblomov possesses vague ideas on how to reorganise this estate, yet comically fails to get past the first sentence on a letter setting out his ideas, a letter he has laboured over for years. Similarly, his reluctance to commit to any action results in the end of his relationship with his fiancée Olga. His fatalistic torpor has even spawned its own term: Oblomovism. In the novel the non-events of Oblomov's life play out as a tragi-comedy, and Oblomov's eventual fate of an early and ignominious death is nonetheless upsetting in spite of its inevitability. In the original text the eponymous hero, doomed to permanent inaction by indecision and anxiety, has been interpreted by many as a biting satire on the decay of the Russian ruling classes. In

Figure 1: Still image from *Oblomov's Dream*, video, 17.45 minutes, 2014-15. Image by the author.

my reworking of the text into a narration for video, Oblomov is elevated from being the ultimate 'superfluous man'[3] to the position of an anti-hero. His refusal to perform any social function and to produce anything of use is reinterpreted as a radical political action, an oppositional stance in a digitally networked world that prizes performativity and proofs. Oblomov does not withdraw from the world in the equivocal manner advocated by proponents of 'digital detoxing,' nor does he stage a disappearance from it by means of cryptographic practices or strike action. His strategic withdrawal from the world is the end result of an exhaustion brought on by the demands of what Steyerl has called "the pressure to represent and be represented" (Steyerl, "The Spam of the Earth"). Oblomov's depression becomes politicised, a weariness brought on by the labours of self-production online and offline. Introducing Oblomov, the narrator in *Oblomov's Dream* reads:

> *Who is this, our hero? He is the man who says, "I can't". He is non-aligned, non-compliant, unwilling. He is an anti-performer, a man who stubbornly re-sists the demand to choose, to perform and to produce. Neither consumed nor consuming, he will never exhaust his potentials or ever run out of ideas, for he has incapacitated himself to the point where nothing more can be expected of him. (Doran)*

Both the network and the human body reveal their limitations when brought to the point of exhaustion by the relentless ac-celeration of the cycles of production and consumption. Exhibiting exhaustion in art "deprivatises exhaustion by exposing it as an experience that may be shared" (Verwoert 92). Exhibiting exhaustion begins to reveal it as a shared horizon of collective experience, our energies dissipated by the constant demand on our time and attention by the endless stream of images and information of digitally networked modernity. As the doctor says to Oblomov in my reworking of the text: "You are fatigued. There is an epidemic of it currently" (Doran).

Performing the 'I can't'

When writing the script for *Oblomov's Dream* I wanted to explore through the character of Oblomov what it could mean to resist what Verwoert has called "the pressure to perform," (Verwoert) without recourse to the forms of agency commonly associated with resistance. Movements and events (e.g. the Cryptoparty movement)[4] could potentially be considered modes of high performance in and of themselves: they make things happen, they create an event. Verwoert suggests that we find other, more subtle means to "perform dissent":

> *What silent but effective forms of non-alignment, non-compliance, uncooperativeness, reluctance, reticence, weariness or unwillingness do we find in everyday life…What can make us utter the magic words I* Can't*? Does it take a breakdown to stop us? (Verwoert 92)*

To resist a culture of high performance, Verwoert suggests that we embrace the idea of *I Can't* as a "form of agency"(Ibid). Performing the *I Can't* has the potential to break the spell of "the pressure to pro-duce for the sake of production" (Ibid) that characterises life in the digitally networked world, to interrupt the circuits of exploitation and accumulation that typify the network world. Performing the *I Can't* and embrac-ing ones own incapacities becomes deeply
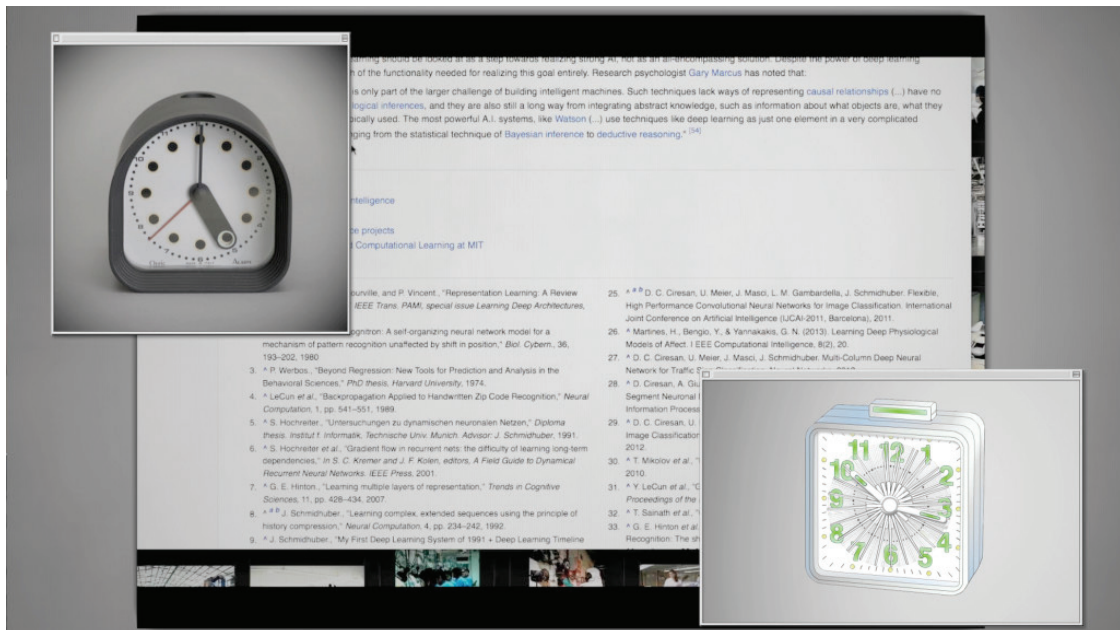
**Figures 2 & 3: Still images from *Oblomov's Dream*,
video, 17.45 minutes, 2014-15. Images by the author.**

transgressive in this context, opening other potentialities for agency that challenge the dominant socio-economic rationale. Oblomov, in embracing the *I Can't*, exhibits his agency by deliberately squandering his own 'human resources' through passive acts of self-destruction.

Against the narration a stream of images and videos shift and dissolve, appropriated from multiple sources and arranged in a flat image plane, alike to a computer desktop or the home-screen of a smartphone or tablet (Figures 2 and 3). Multiple 'windows' close and open, as directed by the hand of an unseen user. In *Oblomov's Dream* this desktop becomes a psychological and psychogeographic space as well as a virtual one. The images, video and audio all work to hint at the state of mind of Oblomov, and of the unseen user browsing through the files on the desktop. That the personalised desktop can reveal something of the individual and their psychology seems analogous to ways in which office workers might express themselves through the decoration of their cubicle, or prisoners their cell. Personalisation is alike to a process of self-realisation, appealing to the user's sense of their own autonomy and personal agency, fulfilling a desire for the external environment to reflect one's sense of self, and for a modicum of authorial control over the interface. The choices made in personalising such as space as a computer desktop excite and engage the emotions of the user on multiple levels, transforming the desktop from a neutral space or even a 'non-place,' to one interwoven with affect and desire. The desktop becomes a portal to another world, a window into another universe.

In *Oblomov's Dream*, I deliberately leave the identity of the unseen user, browsing the desktop, ambiguous to the viewer—although this is the character with which I myself most strongly identify. This character has no words, only disembodied actions

curating a selection of images and video in a role that mirrors my own labour of constructing the work. The invisible user appears to have a particularly itinerant attention, flicking between images and video rapidly and without apparent purpose, echoing Berardi's description of attention under siege in "a cognitive space overloaded with nervous incentives to act" (Berardi 134). This activity of browsing provides the core visual structure of the film: the montage of multiple overlapping elements within the confined space of the virtual desktop. The visuals travel from archival photographs of Bauhaus furniture to a hand-made perpetual motion machine, from a cat mesmerised by the motion of a metronome to a concept video for a new tactical surveillance technology from DARPA. Time contracts and dilates, illusionistic spaces are created from disparate elements, words and images emerge and dissipate. Time and again in the work the images accumulate to a points of excess, building towards a dizzying overload of visual information before dissipating quietly and beginning the process again.

Oblomov's 'squandering' of his life relates to Georges Bataille's concept of the "inevitable squander" (Sützl) that is part of any capitalist economy, acts that do not give any return of value. In Bataille's analysis of political economy, art stands alongside human sacrifice, spectacle and non-reproductive sex as the "accursed share" (Bataille) of the economy: the 'squander' of productive energy for which there can be no use-value and no possibility of return. It is the part of wealth that is "doomed to destruction or at least to unproductive use" (Bataille 25). Oblomov does not accumulate profit of any kind, preferring to "waste it and get wasted," to "refuse to save anything or be saved by anyone" (Verwoert 107). Throughout *Oblomov's Dream*, via assemblages of image, audio and text, I speculate

on the possibility that acts of excess, waste and squander could begin to "break the spell of the death drive towards exhaustion" (Ibid). Verwoert has argued that while exhaustion is the inevitable result of the over-participation and over-sharing demanded by the network world, withdrawal and recuperation are not necessarily solitary and isolated acts but a shared experience which has the potential to serve as "the point of departure" (Ibid 110) for new forms of solidarity. As Verwoert writes, "the exhibition of exhaustion produces public bodies" (Ibid 107).

Oblomov became a vehicle through which to explore a particular way of living in network society, how the negativity of boredom or withdrawal can be refigured as a productive affective state, alike to art, in that they too are possessed of an 'accursed share.' Within a system of technological enframing, art (alongside boredom) can be seen as inefficient and unproductive in the sense that it does not generate quantifiable evidence of its own operativity. However, I argue that rather than producing surplus, both art and radical boredom represent the *surplus of being*, what Antonio Negri has called "the index of man's inexhaustible capacity to turn being into excess" (Negri 69-70).

Notes

[1] I use this term in reference to Martin Heidegger's critique of technocratic society (Heidegger). 'Technological enframing' refers to the instantiation of an instrumentalist mode of thought, one that sets strict parameters around what can and cannot be said and understood. Under a system of technological enframing the world is reduced to a standing reserve of productive energy, and all things to resources awaiting use.

[2] Boredom in the original German, *Langeweile*, literally means 'a long while'.

[3] The 'superfluous man' is a Russian literary archetype of the 19th century. The term was first taken from Ivan Turgenev's *Diary of a Superfluous Man* (1850), and refers to characters who, although talented and capable in many ways, are somehow alienated from society. They may be intelligent, idealistic and possessed of good will yet they are afflicted by self-absorption and incapability for effective action, much like Shakespeare's Hamlet.

[4] CryptoParty is an initiative started in Berlin in 2011 to promote knowledge of cryptographic tools that preserve anonymity and privacy online.

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