

PROVISIONAL TITLE:

Unlocking the Utopian Potential of Boredom

MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION:

Could there be a utopian potential of boredom and how could poetic practice as activism make use of this potential?

Understanding boredom as a multi-faceted experience which can inform creative practice in a range of different ways, the project will approach the overarching question by dividing it into the following three (mutually connected) research areas:

Boredom and the artist

This research area will focus on the impact boredom may have on creative practitioners, their work and process. Related questions may be:

- Can the experience of boredom spark creative practice?
- In what way does boredom influence the artistic process or the final artwork or text?
- Is boredom more helpful in certain parts of the creative process?
- Is it possibly useless or disruptive in others?
- Are there types of boredom which are better or worse for creative practice?

Boredom and the audience

This research area will be concerned with the experience of audiences as they are confronted with creative work which addresses or expresses the topic of boredom. Related questions may be:

- Can the topic of boredom as a familiar experience make art more accessible and engaging for audiences?
- Is it possible for deliberately ‘boring’ art to create a space for thought and reflection for audiences?
- Can the uncomfortable experience of boredom be utilized for activist messages in art?

Boredom and society

In this research area, the focus will be on social questions surrounding the topic of boredom and artistic practice. Related questions may be:

- How can the topic of boredom act as a tool for addressing and exploring current social issues such as the impact of smartphones on people’s lives as constant sources of entertainment and work?
- By explicitly addressing one of the major prejudices about modern art (i.e., ‘it’s boring’), is creative practice about boredom able to transcend its own marginalized position within the overall cultural framework?

As the project develops, I expect that this list will undergo changes and developments as some of the questions mentioned above will prove more or less relevant.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH:

The focus of this research project is on creative practice as activism. The project uses the topic of boredom to investigate forms of art-based activism and their efficiency and power to engage and inspire audiences. Following in the footsteps of artists such as Jenny Holzer,¹ Alfredo Jaar,² and Adrian Piper,³ the proposed project aims to draw from a range of different creative practices while giving the material of language centre stage. Further reference points will be the more contemporary practice of activist artists such as Ai Weiwei,⁴ Suzanne Lacy,⁵ and Martin Firell,⁶ as well as the sound works of Caroline Bergvall,⁷ and the poetic practice of Juliana Spahr,⁸ and Cecilia Vicuña.⁹ In the course of its investigations into different forms of art-based activism, the project will also engage with more general, underlying questions about the legitimacy and cultural status of activist art. The recent wave of global activist movements about social issues as diverse as sexism (Me Too), racism (Black Lives Matter), and corporate responsibility (Occupy), has sparked a renewed discussion about artists' involvement in political protest and social activism.¹⁰ Addressing some of the problems which might arise from the 'utilization' of art for activist causes will therefore form a relevant part of the project.

In addition to these research objectives in the area of art, the project, however, also hopes to contribute to the field of boredom studies. By exploring the potential of boredom for creative practice it will gather insights into the way people deal with boredom, how it shapes their perception of time, and in what way boredom can indeed reveal 'utopian potential.'

RESEARCH CONTEXT:

Boredom studies is a relatively young field of research which spans philosophy, history, art, and literary studies, as well as sociology and psychology. It is dedicated to answering the question what boredom is, how, why, and when we experience boredom, and what consequences these experiences have for individuals and for society as a whole. Even though boredom is generally categorised as a negative, unpleasant experience, many researchers in the field highlight the particular potential of boredom to spark curiosity, spur action, and facilitate change. Contained within boredom is what J.M. Barbalet calls the 'emotional imperative to [...] meaning'¹¹ or as Walter Benjamin famously put it, the 'threshold to

¹ See, e.g., Holzer (1978-87, 1989, 1993-94, 2006-2008).

² See, e.g., Jaar (1987, 1992, 1994-2000, 2008, 2009).

³ See, e.g., Piper (1986, 1988, 1991, 2003-13).

⁴ See, e.g., Weiwei (2010, 2014, 2017, 2017-18).

⁵ See, e.g., Lacy (1974, 1977, 1993-94, 2010).

⁶ See, e.g., Firrell (2003, 2006, 2007, 2016).

⁷ See, e.g., Bergvall (2004, 2011, 2017).

⁸ See, e.g., Spahr (2001, 2005, 2011).

⁹ See, e.g., Vicuña (1998, 2002, 2011)..

¹⁰ See, e.g., Groys (2014) and Sholette (2016).

¹¹ Barbalet (1999:643).

great deeds'¹² – the urge to escape the seemingly unbearable monotony and pointlessness, and to find a more rewarding occupation. This antidote to boredom might take many different shapes and forms, not all of which are constructive. Yet, considering the ubiquity of boredom in the lives of many people in modern Western societies, it seems important to explore the hidden potential of boredom in greater detail.

With the advent of boredom studies there has also been an increased interest in the connection between boredom and art. This development is manifested in recent publications such as Julian Jason Haladyn's monograph *Boredom and Art: Passions of the Will to Boredom*,¹³ and the essay collection *Boredom*, edited by Tom McDonough.¹⁴ While these texts suggest interesting links between the development of modern art and the experience of boredom, their focus is on a historical review. Critical texts which address boredom as an artistic tool for political or activist messages are less frequently encountered. Eugenie Shinkle's 2018 contribution to the *Boredom Studies Reader*¹⁵ is one of the few examples in this area. Taking the findings of researchers like Haladyn and Shinkle a step further, my research project will use the techniques of practice-led research to test some of the hypotheses of more theoretical inquiries into boredom and art.

Whereas the theoretical groundwork laid by researchers in boredom studies might still be rather thin, my project will however be able to refer to and build upon a rich tradition in art theory, literature, and aesthetics. The topic of activist art and socially engaged creative practice has received particular attention in recent years, not only through the success of the before mentioned grassroots movements. There has also been a stir at the very centre of art institutions themselves, e.g., reflected by the activist artist Ai Weiwei taking over the Tate Modern turbine hall in 2011¹⁶ and the Turner Prize, Britain's most prestigious art prize, being awarded to the architectural collective Assemble in 2015.¹⁷ These developments have given theorists occasion to reconsider the question raised by Nina Felshin in 1995: 'But is it art?'¹⁸ Boris Groys' 2014 article *On Art Activism*¹⁹ was one of the key publications which according to Paul Serafini, Alberto Cossu and Jessica Holtaway 'sparked a wide discussion [...] on some of the most important arenas for contemporary art debates.'²⁰ Under discussion are not only questions of definition and delineation of terms such as 'activist art,' 'socially engaged practice' and Suzanne Lacy's term 'new genre public art,'²¹ but also underlying assumptions about the role of art in society and what the relationship is between art and the 'real world' outside the gallery doors. In this way, the topic of activist art also touches on different theories of aesthetics in its understanding of the 'mediating discourse between subject and object, between the somatic and the rational, and between the individual and the social.'²² As my project requires a firm theoretical groundwork for successful

¹² Benjamin (2003:105).

¹³ Haladyn (2015).

¹⁴ ed. McDonough (2017).

¹⁵ Shinkle (2017).

¹⁶ Hancox (2012).

¹⁷ Searle (2015).

¹⁸ ed. Felshin (1995).

¹⁹ Groys (2014).

²⁰ Cossu, Holtaway & Serafini (2017:21).

²¹ Lacy (1995:19).

²² Kester (1998:8).

practice-led research, it will also negotiate these different currents and contribute to developing useful tools for the understanding of activist art.

SIGNIFICANCE:

Art as activism is nothing new. The desire to inspire audiences to engage with certain topics on a deeper level is something that is shared by many creative practitioners. It can be found in almost any art form, sometimes in subtle ways, sometimes more blatantly.

Discussions about the role of the artist in society have been occupying the art world at least since Tristan Tzara's 1918 *Dada Manifesto* which demanded of his fellow artists: 'We must sweep and clean. Affirm the cleanliness of the individual after the state of madness, aggressive complete madness of a world abandoned to the hands of bandits.'²³ One hundred years on from Tzara's call to (artistic) arms, the topic is however once again in the spotlight. If Dada can be understood as a response to the First World War, to a rise of nationalism and capitalism in the early 20th century, artists working today might find themselves in a situation of similar discontent – and their reasons are manifold. Their activist passions might be ignited by 'the actual material conditions of laborers, migrants, stateless people, prisoners, people of color, the homeless, interns and unpaid art laborers, as well as [...] the natural environment,'²⁴ to name just a few.

It is undoubtedly the case that Western societies are currently facing some significant challenges. Climate change, globalisation, automatization, and a growing world population are likely to require profound changes in the way people organise their work, live together, and interact with the ecosystems around them. It is in this context that creative practice as activism plays an important role in shaping public discourse. Gaining a fuller understanding of art-based activism, its forms, strategies, and potential, will be valuable not only for artists and scholars, but also for the kind of grassroots activist movements which are essential for democratic societies.

In the context of the challenges given above, it is however not only the topic of activism which can provide significant insights. Boredom is likewise an issue with far-reaching implications. Far more than a benign, temporary nuisance, boredom can have significant detrimental effects on people's mental and physical health. In their paper *Rethinking Occupational Deprivation and Boredom*, Marion Martin, Gaynor Sadlo, and Graham Stew name among other things obesity, aggression, impulsiveness, sleep disorders, and attention deficit as examples of health and behavioural problems associated with boredom.²⁵ Boredom, it seems, can have significant impact on our lives and wellbeing – and it is on the rise. In her 2007 article *The Boredom Boom* Sandi Mann compiles a striking list of research results showing an increase of feelings of boredom, particularly in a workplace context.²⁶ Against the backdrop of current developments towards the increased automatization of even more jobs and the growing digitalisation of many aspects of our lives, this trend is likely to continue, leaving more and more people struggling to find meaningful occupation in their lives.

²³ Tzara (2001:288).

²⁴ Sholette (2016:8/17).

²⁵ Martin, Sadlo & Stew (2012:54).

²⁶ Mann (2007:91).

Building on the theoretic groundwork laid by researchers in a variety of different areas within boredom studies and incorporating them into its practice-led approach, this project will make a unique contribution to a better understanding of boredom and its implications.

Finally, unlike other areas of boredom studies, the project will not be limited to academic discourse but will be directly engaging with the public. The work produced as part of the project will be accessible to the wider public through exhibitions, performances, and digital content. In this way it will also encourage dialogue and reflection about the topic of boredom in a wider context. This will help raise awareness of the significance of boredom studies as a whole.

PROPOSED RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS:

The project is designed as practice-led research. The core work will therefore be focussed on creative practice in different media. This will include written texts as well as sound works and videos which will be accessible for audiences in different ways, including traditional gallery-based set-ups, print and online materials, performances, and site-specific installations. The work will negotiate the topic of boredom in three distinct ways:

- 1) Boredom as method – using the subjective experience of boredom as motor for creative practice.
- 2) Boredom as topic – creative work which focusses on the topic of boredom and its implications on an individual and societal level.
- 3) Boredom as experience – creative work which is designed to be boring in order to create certain emotional responses in the audiences.

These three approaches will be adopted individually for certain creative work but might also be combined. Whereas some projects may, e.g., be focused on boredom as a topic or incorporate boredom as a method as part of the creative process, there may also be projects which are not only about boredom as a topic, but which also include boredom as a method or aim to create the experience of boredom in the audience. In this way the project will allow the use of a range of possible techniques and creative styles.

This practical part of the research project will be underpinned by traditional scholarly research into boredom as well as the topic of creative activism. Adopting an approach widely used in practice-led research, the project will be marked by a circular work process in which the two different kinds of research continually feed into each other.²⁷ Insights gained through the practice will therefore be incorporated into the scholarly part of the project while in turn, the scholarly part will feed into the practice.

Documentation of the research process will play a key role in this circular approach, as it will enable more detailed reflection on the process and make creative decisions more transparent. Through the process of autoethnography in the form of keeping detailed journals and notebooks, I hope to be able to develop a scientifically sound method which considers questions of reliability, generalizability, validity and relational ethics. In their character as ‘both process and product,’²⁸ the autoethnography records will also form a part of the creative output of the project itself. They will be published in a web-based archive

²⁷ This approach is discussed, e.g., in Scrivener (2004) and Combrink & Marley (2009).

²⁸ Ellis, Adams & Bochner (2011:273).

which will offer audiences insights into the creative process throughout the entire project. The digital format will allow easy integration of different media, including sound and video footage.

Since the research focus of the project also includes the question of the effectiveness of the creative practice as activism, another element of the research will be feedback from audiences in the form of surveys, audience participation, and discussion events. For this part, the project will rely on methods developed in the context of art impact assessment studies, while also addressing some of limits and methodological issues of these approaches.²⁹ The data drawn from these sources will likewise feed back into the practice and the research as a whole.

PLAN OF WORK:

The project is conceived as a collection of linked artworks and poetic texts, drawn together by the overarching topic of boredom. To reflect my own creative practice, they will not be limited to one particular form or medium but will include page-based work as well as performances, sound works, installations, and web-based digital content.

While accompanied by continual scholarly research about boredom and different forms of creative activism, I plan to organise bi-annual exhibitions and performance events. Building on my previous experience at organising local poetry and art events,³⁰ I hope to expand the audience of these events beyond the circle of academics and artists already working in similar areas, to also include members of local activist groups or the interested general public.³¹ These events will present the work in progress and offer opportunities to gather feedback from audiences in the form of short anonymised feedback forms or informal conversations during/after the event.³² In addition, I will be keeping an online archive to document the development of the project as a whole.

In the second year of the project I also hope to conduct participatory art projects. Built on initial insights from the research and the first two preliminary presentations of work, I hope to be able to open up the discussion about boredom and its societal implications to the general public by involving people outside the world of academia and art. This could take the shape of workshops with school students, undergraduate students, or even professionals to explore how boredom affects people's lives in schools, university, the work place, and online. While my own experience with participatory art projects is limited,³³ I will be able to rely on a broad basis of academic literature³⁴ to guide my practice. I also

²⁹ An overview of current methods and discussions about their reach and appropriateness can be found, e.g., in Brown & Ratzkin (2011), Brook (2018), Brown & Novak-Leonard (2013) and Belfiore & Bennett (2007, 2008).

³⁰ These include a series of poetry events at bakery47 in Glasgow in 2015 as well as collaborations with other artists and poets for the organisation of larger music/art/reading events such as 'A Cut Above' (Old Hairdressers, Glasgow: 2018) and 'One Word With Us' (Kinning Park Complex, Glasgow: 2017).

³¹ Recent self-help / popular science book publications such as Mann (2016) and Zomorodi (2017) show a growing interest in the topic of boredom also in the general public.

³² See previous section for details on possible methods for the gathering of audience feedback as well as comments on ethical issues mentioned in the following section on ethical issues.

³³ As part of the CCA's Public Engagement Programme 'Cooking Pot' in 2015, I collaborated with the team at bakery47 for the participatory event 'bread & memory / poetry & potluck' (bakery47, 02/11/2015). For details see: <http://media.cca-glasgow.com/b4bb933b-1fae-4af5-a5c0-8df8518c1e992ppweb.pdf> (p.10-11).

³⁴ A useful starting point will be, e.g., Bishop (2006, 2012), Walwin (2010) and obviously Lacy (1995).

intend to find suitable, more experienced collaborators for these projects to ensure the relevant practical and ethical aspects of audience interaction are considered.

OUTCOME:

Ever since ‘the illustrious triad represented by Plato, Aristotle and Horace,’³⁵ supporters and critics have been fighting about the possible impact of art on audiences and its implications for society. In light of this long history, it will be hard to deny that art has impact. It can make a difference. As Alan Brown and Jennifer Novak-Leonard put it in the introduction to their 2013 article on *Measuring the intrinsic impact of arts attendance*:

The intrinsic experience and value of the arts have long been recognized and deeply valued. The transformative potential of the arts may stem from its ability to inspire, challenge and unite people, as well as the innate complexity and uniqueness in how it can affect individuals.³⁶

The intended outcome of this project is, in the sense of the quote above, to transform public and academic awareness about boredom, facilitated by its various artistic elements as well as by its theoretical ones. Exhibitions, performances, workshops, panel discussions, and (last but not least) academic papers will contribute to this outcome by exploring relevant key problems and concerns. In this way, I hope to spark a discourse about the topic which may provide a stepping stone for more palpable changes in the way individuals and society understand and deal with boredom. The results will provide an extension of the more traditional scientific and psychological discussions of boredom and bring together creative activism and boredom in an attempt to truly ‘unlock the utopian potential of boredom.’

ETHICAL ISSUES:

Ethical approval will be gained for each part of the project which will involve human participation.

All feedback provided by audiences (e.g., online surveys or paper-based surveys at exhibitions) will be handled confidentially and will be anonymised. Participants at events will be made fully aware of the research question wherever possible. In the case of artworks deliberately designed to be boring in order to provoke emotional responses from the audiences, a full disclosure of the research aim might interfere with the research objective. In these cases, participants will however be made aware that the event is part of a research project beforehand and will be provided with detailed explanations after the event.

³⁵ Belfiore & Bennett (2008:193).

³⁶ Brown & Novak-Leonard (2013:223).

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