

# the something else NEWSLETTER

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## Boredom and Danger

by Dick Higgins

Boredom was, until recently, one of the qualities an artist tried most to avoid. Yet today it appears that artists are deliberately trying to make their work boring. Is this true, or is it only an illusion? In either case, what is the explanation?

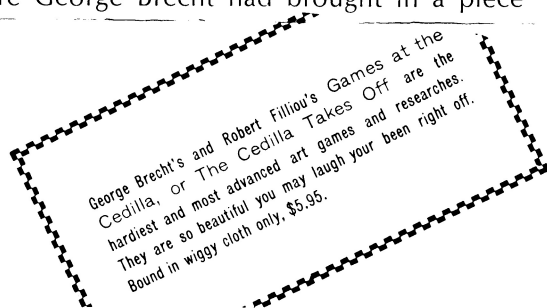
There was a time, not so very long ago, when music was considered a form of entertainment, perhaps on a higher level than some other forms, but still part of the same world as theater, vaudeville, circuses, etc. Similarly, apart from religious art and purely functional art, the fine arts were basically used for decorative purposes. But with the rise of the idea that the work of art was intended first and foremost as an experience, that its function could be spiritual, psychological and educational, the situation began to change. Kandinsky's view of art as a means of deepening one's spiritual life is a landmark along this way. The musical parallel to this conception is found in Arnold Schoenberg's writings, in the letters and in *Style and Idea*.

But it is still a very long way from musical expressionism, which merely denies that entertainment values are at all to the point, to the situation in which boredom and other, related feelings might actually play a part. In music the key personality in this development, as in many others, is Erik Satie. Satie composed a piece shortly before World War I, *Vieux Sequins et Vieilles Cuirasses*, a characteristically programmatic piece in which he spoofs the military and the glories of nationalism. At the end of the piece there appears an eight-beat passage evocative of old marches and patriotic songs, but which is to be repeated 380 times. In performance the satirical intent of this repetition comes through very clearly, but at the same time other very interesting results begin to appear. The music first becomes so familiar that it seems extremely offensive and objectionable. But after that the mind slowly becomes incapable of taking further offense, and a very strange, euphoric acceptance and enjoyment

begin to set in. Satie appears to have been fascinated by this effect, because he also wrote *Vexations* (published in John Cage's article in *Art News Annual*, '58), an utterly serious 32-bar piece (although the bar lines are not written in) intended to be played very softly and very slowly 840 times. Today it is usually done by a team of pianists, and lasts over a period of roughly 25 hours. Is it boring? Only at first. After a while the euphoria I have mentioned begins to intensify. By the time the piece is over, the silence is absolutely numbing, so much of an environment has the piece become.

During the 1950s many artists and composers felt a growing dissatisfaction with the conventional relationships between the spectator and the work, and it became increasingly important to them to experiment with the possible relationships. Robert Rauschenberg included mirrors in some of his early combines, with startling results. Allan Kaprow included audience relationships in his collages on an increasingly intense scale, until his collages began to become performances and he formalized the idea of the Happening. Not even stopping there, he has continued to experiment with audience relationships, and his recent Happenings have no passive spectators, only participants. John Cage also made many investigations into and out of music, and found that some of the problems he was considering had been dealt with also by Satie. Much of the present interest in Satie is due to Cage's calling him to our attention.

If it can be said that Satie's interest in boredom originated as a kind of gesture—there is a certain bravura about asking a pianist to play the same eight beats 380 times—and developed into a fascinating, esthetic statement, then I think it can be said with equal fairness that Cage was the first to try to emphasize in his work and his teaching a dialectic between boredom and intensity. I recall a class with him at the New School for Social Research in the summer of 1958, where George Brecht had brought in a piece



which simply asked each performer to do two different things, each once. When each participant had done two, the piece was over. Cage suggested that we perform this piece in the darkness, so as to be unable to tell, visually, whether the piece had ended. This was done. The result was fascinating, both for its own sake and for the extraordinary intensity that appeared in waves, as we wondered whether the piece was over

or not, what the next thing to happen would be, etc. Afterwards we were asked to guess how long we had been in the dark. The guesses ranged from four minutes to 25. The actual duration was nine minutes. The boredom played a comparable role, in relation to intensity, that silence plays with sound, where each one heightens the other and frames it.

The point which we have been coming to, then, is that in the context of work which attempts to involve the spectator, boredom often serves a useful function: as an opposite to excitement and as a means of bringing emphasis to what it interrupts, causing us to view both elements freshly. It is a necessary station on the way to other experiences, as in the case of the Satie.

The arts in which boredom has been a structural factor have been predominantly the performing arts (as emphasized in Cage's class), and the kind of performances in which boredom has been most structurally implicit and useful are the events (miniature Happenings) associated with the Fluxus movement. Fluxus was an attempt to provide a coordinating rostrum for a large body of Happenings and events activities which were not oriented towards the visual arts, and were therefore unable to effect continuity of information through the art galleries, as the visual Happenings did. Just to indicate the variety of backgrounds of the participants, among the original Fluxus members were George Brecht, the maker of small art objects and early minimal art; Jackson Mac Low, the poet; La Monte Young, the composer; myself, a composer and poet; and ten or twenty others of similarly disparate original concerns. (A detailed history of Fluxus can be found in my own 1964 essay, *Postface*.)

The Fluxus performance arose from a feeling that the best of the performing arts should not be entertaining nor should they inherently even be educational. It was felt they should serve as stimuli which made one's life and work and experience more meaningful and flexible. The use, in Fluxus format works, of boredom became not so much a structural factor as an implicit factor, as, for example, when Jackson Mac Low proposed a project, a film which, for financial reasons, was not executed (but which was widely published). The film was to be made of a tree on which the camera would be trained from the start of light to the end of light in the course of one day. This film would clearly have been more environmental than entertaining, cinematic or educational. One would relate to it in direct proportion to the ability to look with concentration at it. Boring? Of course; if one were to ignore the more intense activity involved, which we might call "super boring," and which took one beyond the initial level of simple boredom. This has very much to do with the Satie idea.

In the same vein, La Monte Young composed a musical piece which consisted of a *B* and *F* sharp, to be

\*Something Else Press, Inc., New York 1964

played simultaneously on as many instruments as available with as little variation as possible. But the performed result established a drone over which, while it was intended to have the most neutral, blank character possible and was therefore made of plain, open fifths, one would begin to imagine all kinds of goings-on. In fact, most of La Monte Young's most recent performances have consisted of the playing of just such fantastic patterns over a similar drone.

In a parallel spirit, I tried to achieve a similar effect in a series of pieces by using "blank structures," in which I simply established a rule matrix for the performance, and gave neither explicit clues to my intentions nor any working materials, apart from the matrix, to the performers. What they or the audience contributed became both subject matter and perceptible form. At a Fluxus performance in Copenhagen in 1962 the extremes of this kind of work were tested—with the excitement inseparable, again, from the boredom. During my *Second Contribution*, each performer chooses something in the environment of the performance to cue him to perform an action, which he has also determined. The poet Emmett Williams and the composer Eric Andersen each chose to do his action when he became the last person on stage. The resulting hours of waiting to see which would break became very exciting. Each stood motionless. The audience became bored, impatient and upset. But the word began to circulate, through those who knew the piece, as to what had happened. And then the audience quieted down and became fascinated. Very few left. The end of the performance came by accident—one of the performers, offered a drink by someone, misunderstood and thought he was being ordered off stage. It was a very fortunate misunderstanding, since both Williams and Andersen are sufficiently tough-minded to be there still today, six years later, if necessary.

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 it's a masterpiece, **yes**, by the acknowledged father of concrete. **yes**, but whoever heard of a masterpiece you could like, like this one? **yes**, clothbound and paper too. **\$4.50** and **\$1.95** respectively.

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## SWEETHEARTS for sale!

no, the **something else press** isn't going into the pandering business. it's just that as howard junker described it in **newsweek**, "**Emmett Williams'** book-length love-cycle **sweethearts** manipulates the eleven letters of its title to give the reader 'something to read, something to ponder and something to play with kinetically.'" on the

first pages the "he" and the "she" sound each other out. later they get down to the basics—and **how!** but always implied in the typography, which is, shall we say, a bit special? and the book has on its cover the new authorized **marcel duchamp, les coeurs volants**. good stuff for people in the pondering business.

cloth, \$6.95

paper, \$2.95

This, then, was the way boredom was used in the event pieces associated with Fluxus. The environment would become part of the fabric of the piece and vice versa. This environmentalism was implicit in most of the work. Fluxus today, of course, is mainly the name of a very interesting publisher of editions of art objects, run by one of the founders, but at that time Fluxus was actually a movement, not so much exploring the frontiers of art as implying them. Most of the early Fluxus pieces could, conceivably, have been executed as absolutely conventional music or theater, simply by ignoring the more extreme possibilities of the structure and by filling in very conventional materials. This last, incidentally, one of the former Fluxus artists, Nam June Paik, the composer, has been doing in recent years, with very interesting results.

But many later pieces were built to avoid this possibility. They became very specific about what object was to be used, and how. This is true of many of the Japanese Flux people (Takehisa Kosugi, Chieko Shiomi), and of many others, including Tomas Schmit and the early work of Eric Andersen, who, however, has more recently been using blank structures. Both are originally composers, and their work pushes this kind of piece about as far as it can be taken.

Tomas Schmit's pieces tend to be extremely private, basically incapable of public performance. For example, there is a piece called *Zyklus*. To perform this piece a circle of Coca-Cola bottles and one performer ideally are used. One of the Coca-Cola bottles is filled with water. The water is poured into the next bottle as carefully and with as little loss as possible, then into the next, and so on, around the circle, moving always in one direction, clockwise or counterclockwise. When all the water has been spilt (as slowly as possible, of course) the performance is over, unless, as one can only imagine, all the water should evaporate first. A performance of this piece can last for two hours, five hours, maybe even twenty-four. The longest performance that I know of is one which Schmit did himself in New York in 1964, which lasted six hours.

Eric Andersen's pieces, on the other hand, are so involved with the simple concept that it is sometimes impossible to discover if a piece is taking place at all. He not only takes blank structures to their logical extreme, but minimal art as well, which results in his establishing interesting new orders of boredom. For example, there is the following piece:

**Opus 48: which turns anonymous when the instruction is followed out**

It comes through the mail with a piece of cardboard, that reads:

**place the chosen tautology**

So one chooses a tautology and hides it and has a secret. Only the sender and those he tells know what became of it, so it really does become both anonymous and private, making the title observation true. The public performance of a piece like this is unnecessary, however, by its nature. Still, the act is somehow boring and, through this, interesting. But we have now reached the point where performance art merges into non-performance art, which brings us to the visual arts, among other things.

In our society the visual arts have a problem: they are essentially being produced for sale. In order for a work to be attractive enough for someone to buy it, it must be appealing and therefore the artist must take into consideration the audience factor, even if only unconsciously. He may think that what he is doing is done as a free agent, but this is seldom the case. More often, he is doing it, I think, because it seems "important" or because it seems to him something he can do well. He tends always to be preparing for an exhibition of some kind ultimately. Therefore, the visual artist is not as free as the performance artist to produce private pieces. The only time I know of such work being done is in the early sculptures of Walter De Maria, described in his short essay *Useless Art\** in which, for example, he describes a small gold ball

\*In *An Anthology*, La Monte Young and Jackson Mac Low, New York 1962

## 246 Little Clouds

by Diter Rot

*A very grey book from a grey December voyage on a tramp steamer where the not-so-grey Icelandic poet/designer drew many grey conclusions and produced this, his first and not-at-all grey text in English. With an introduction by Emmett Williams, an explanatory appendix, and almost 200 drawings by the author, clothbound, \$5.95.*

being placed in a concealed spot on one of his objects. No one but he knows it's there. But here we have the visual art equivalent of boredom and its projection, private art. Again, presumably anyone who buys a large Robert Morris construction, one which can be rearranged in many ways, is going to do so, and nobody except Morris will know which was the first intended way of arranging this work.

There is still another aspect of what lies behind boredom and private art, which I have suggested are interrelated, and that is danger. In order to build intellectual excitement into work there must always be the sense that it was a near miss—a near failure. I think this has always been true. The opening few measures of the last movement of Beethoven's 9th Symphony are as close as one could come, within the harmonic concepts of the day, to simple hysteria, and they work because they take the risk of degenerating. The same could be said of many of Mahler's most ambitious works. In the past, then, a great deal of work was exciting because it was so colossal and attempted so much that it was in danger of becoming utterly banal or preposterous. Today there is little point in trying to work as large as possible, so the challenge tends to be toward the other direction. And, a sense of risk is indispensable, because any simple piece fails when it becomes facile. This makes for all the more challenge in risking facility, yet still remaining very simple, very concrete, very meaningful.

Also, the composer is perfectly well aware of the psychological difficulties which his composition may produce for some, if not all, of the audience. He therefore finds excitement in insisting on this, to the point of endangering himself physically or even spiritually in his piece. To point up this effect, I wrote a series of compositions called *Danger Musics*, each of which emphasized one spiritual, psychological or physical danger that seemed appropriate to the general esthetic means I was using. Again, Robert Whitman, in doing a *Happening* about 1962 at Bennington College, is said to have turned in a performance so violent that the performance area was covered with blood—his blood. In the course of one of Al Hansen's improvised *Happenings* in 1962 a young lady fell through a glass roof and was very badly hurt. But her involvement in the piece caused her to do this, almost consciously, and it became incorporated in the intensity of the piece. Most spectators thought it had been planned. In a world in which there isn't so much overt physical challenge as formerly, it is very tempting sometimes to see not how much one can get away with, but how much one can use the challenges that are there. Therefore it becomes extremely attractive to the artist to use danger, hazard. This is not the same as chance, of course, which is quite a different sort of idea, and which ultimately becomes either a technical means of realizing a set of values and textures, or, if one is using



## *New from the European avant-garde—* (or especially worth mentioning again) —

### *Books*

- Bazon Brock, Eine Saubere Sache** (Edition Et #13). This book is a box of identical views of the same subject, namely the author (very handsome), and as such is a sort of manifesto against extreme impersonality. \$4.00.
- Reinhard Döhl, bedepequ** (Edition Hansjörg Mayer). An ingenious typographic work consisting of geometric constructions based on the similarly-shaped letters "b," "d," "p" and "q" in two colors. Spiral bound, 32x32 cm, 200 numbered copies. \$14.00.
- Edition Et #2.** This is a square box containing individual works by Eric Andersen, Ludwig Gosewitz, Jürgen Graaff, Hein Gravenhorst, Günter Günschel, Bernhard Höke, Rainer Kallhardt, Jiri Kolar, Arnulf Letto, Roy Lichtenstein, Wolfgang Ludwig, Bernhard Lüthi, Franz Mon, Heinz Nickel, Nam June Paik, Sara Quand, Peter Roehr, Diter Rot, Gerhard Rühm, Hans R. Schläpfer, Wolfgang Schmidt, Schmidt-Rehn and Wolf Vostell. German language, but mostly visual. \$5.00.
- Edition Et #3.** In the same format as Edition Et #2, this book contains works by George Brecht, K. P. Brehmer, Christo, Hein Gravenhorst, Juan Hidalgo, Bernhard Höke, Jean Paul Jacobs, Fritz Köthe, Lynn Lonidier, Bernhard Lüthi, Walter Marchetti, Tomás Marco, Robert Morris, Meret Oppenheim, Arnulf Rainer, Peter Roehr, Diter Rot, Gerhard Rühm, S. D. Sauerbier, Schmidt-Rehn, Serge Stauffer, André Thomkins, Timm Ulrichs, Ben Vautier, Wolf Vostell and Stefan Wewerka. German language with some French and others. \$5.00.
- Ludwig Harig, Das Fussballspiel** (Edition Hansjörg Mayer). This is the spectacular and complex score for a huge "sound poem," concrete poetry's acoustic cognate. In German, spiral bound but paper covered, 32 x 32 cm, \$14.00.
- Juan Hidalgo, Viaje a Argel** (Zaj). This is surely the wildest and woolliest text to come out of post-war Spain, with its lyrically cut photos, its green ink, its short, whimsical sentences, etc. In Spanish, 502 pages, paperbound, \$12.00.
- Heinz Mack, Mackazin** (Typos Verlag). A documentation in the form, visually, of a magazine, of the Düsseldorf artist Mack, best known (in the USA) of the Zero Group. In German, paperbound, with hundreds of photographs, \$5.00.
- Franz Mon, ainmal nur das alphabet gebrauchen** (Edition Hansjörg Mayer). A collection of the works since the late 1950's of one of the best-known Concrete Poets. 32 x 32 cm, visual or in German, spiral bound in paper, \$14.00.
- Wolfgang Schmidt, Lilli** (Typos Verlag). This green, blue, red, orange, white, and purple, completely non-verbal book is fairly typical of the recent works of this well-known German artist/designer. 26 x 26 cm, spiral bound, paper covers shielded with acetate, \$6.50.
- Schrift und Bild** (Typos Verlag). Originally conceived as the catalogue for the great exhibition held in 1963 at Baden-Baden and Amsterdam on the interrelationships of writing and painting throughout history, this book is far and away the best reference work on its subject. In addition to twenty-five color reproductions and almost three hundred black and white ones, it offers texts dealing with every conceivable aspect of the field. Hardcover, 216 pages. German, with parallel French text, 23 x 23 cm, hardbound, \$8.00.

- Wolf Vostell, Ziehung der Lottozahlen.** (Edition Et #14). The famous German artist and Happenings man has often applied his Dé-coll/age principle to television. This box, in the Edition Et format, documents the results in photographs. \$5.00.

### *Posters*

- Futura** broadsides which have recently appeared, in addition to the first seventeen, include —
- #18. **Pierre Garnier, Six Odes Concrètes à la Picardie.** Longish poems by the founder of spatialism. In French.
- #19. **Bob Cobbing, Chamber Music.** Score of a poem for six or twelve voices or for electronic instrument. In English.
- #20. **Edwin Morgan, Emergent Poems.** Quoted sentences are taken as fields. Then individual letters are selected to form new words and new meanings. In English.
- #21. **Dick Higgins, January Fish.** Three structural poems and one found poem by the composer-writer. In English.
- #22. **Wolf Vostell, Dé-coll/age Aktionstext.** A highly expressive field of type. Language not identifiable.
- #23. **Herman de Vries, Permutierbarer Text.** The title of this speaks for itself—"permutable text."
- #24. **Peter Schmidt, Programmed Square II.** A highly unusual work, visually.
- #25. **André Thomkins, Palindrome.** For years this German surrealistic artist-poet has been composing multi-lingual palindromes. This is a sampling, in French, German and English.
- #26. **Robert Filliou, Galerie Ligitime.** For years this magnificent French poet had the world's smallest art gallery—in his hat. Now a foldable paper hat has been published to commemorate the gallery.
- Futuras 1-13** are available in **Sammelband I**, for \$5, and **Futuras 14-26** are available in **Sammelband II**, also for \$5. Individual **Futuras** are available at 50¢ each.
- Ed912** of Milano has a few new posters too, at \$4.00 each, that have just arrived as this goes to press. They are:
- Gustav Klimt, from Fish Blood.** An attractive art nouveau piece which is apparently the first of a new, erotic series.
- Alison Knowles, White Stripes for John Cage.** Conceptual permutations of a blue photograph, by the designer of the John Cage **Notations**.
- Hermann Nitsch, Die Rituelle Kastration.** #2 of Ed912's **Manifesti sulla crudeltá** series, this is surely the ugliest poster ever printed.
- Movimiento Mondo Beat.** A new printing of the old N° #7, now in color but as violent and expressive as ever.
- Mieko Shiomi, Game around a revolving door.** A characteristic and marvelous performance game by one of Japan's most very special Fluxus and Happenings people.
- Adriano Spatola and Claudio Parmeggiani, Africa.** A very striking graphic collaboration between one of the better-known of Italian Concrete Poets and an artist.
- (Unidentified Artist), Christian Barnard.** This is #1 of the new **Manifesti sulla crudeltá** series.
- (Unidentified Artist), Art & Technology.** A political poster, identifying art with General Giap and technology with General Westmoreland.

it spiritually (that is, for the philosophy of the piece), of creating a chaos that suits one's sense of anarchy and of embodying one's views.

In the visual arts there has not been very much work that uses danger in a pure way. One of the few examples I can think of are some works by the Japanese sculptor Ay-O. Ay-O has constructed many small boxes into which one places one's finger or one's hand. In each of these boxes is an object or substance to be touched. Most are relatively soft and safe. For example, some may contain flour, water, tacky glue, perhaps some marbles or some cotton. But others contain razor blades, knives, broken glass. The freshness with which one approaches the boxes (and not all of them are presented as boxes—some are presented as feeling holes in the bodies of cut-outs), not knowing if one will be delighted or hurt, develops the intensity and graciousness of experiencing them. This, I would say, is another expression of the same motivation which attracts composers, performers and, to some extent, the visual artists.

\* \* \*

To sum up, it has become almost a hallmark of our mentality to accept the possibility of boredom and danger; a work which is without these possibilities only decorates life and so is merely a commodity; the most

*There's a little ambiguity  
over there among the bluebells*

by Ruth Krauss

poem plays, play poems. very  
pretty book. \$3.95 just.

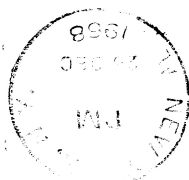
intense art is necessarily involved with these things, boredom and danger, not as a new mode, but because they are implicit in the new mentality of our time. This mentality is one in which total success is impossible, total victory inconceivable and relativism axiomatic. Ours is a mass of society, and, while we do attempt to do what we do with maximum quality, quality has for us become one among other indications of integrity. Today we do not equate quality alone with the value of a work. Most of the interesting works of our time are works which shed light on our mentality without necessarily trying for the same standards of success as works, say, of twenty years ago. It is simply not our intention, though we are perfectly capable of achieving the old standards.

The intention is more to enrich the experiential world of our spectators, our co-conspirators, by enlarging the repertoire of their over-all experience. These values cannot be achieved by emotional impact alone, and such impact has become, for the new artist, merely a language tool, a way of communicating which we can draw on when necessary. I said earlier that we do not want to overwhelm. This is not quite true. We only want to overwhelm when to do so seems a positive factor. There was nothing more overwhelming than Hitler's speeches as staged by Goebbels. There has been a great deal of that in our world and one way to avoid it is to use more sophisticated values in our own work, and the acceptance of boredom and danger as valuable is indispensable to this end.

Due to the complexities of survival, orders from private individuals will not be accepted unless accompanied by payment. However, such prepaid orders will not be charged postage or handling.

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