Maaike Lauwaert &
Francien van Westrenen (eds.)

Facing Value

Radical perspectives from the arts

Valiz

1. Be unproductive
2. Hesitate and question
3. Share
4. Improvise
5. Invite and participate
6. Embrace the void
7. Play!
8. Support
9. Unite

Yto Barrada, *Briques (Bricks) (Backsteine)*, 2003/2011

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BOREDOM

Siegfried Kracauer

People today who still have time for boredom and yet are not bored are certainly just as boring as those who never get around to being bored. For their self has vanished—the self whose presence, particularly in this so bustling world, would necessarily compel them to tarry[1] for a while without a goal, neither here nor there.

Most people, of course, do not have much leisure time. They pursue a livelihood on which they expend all their energies, simply to earn enough for the bare necessities. To make this tiresome obligation more tolerable, they have invented a work ethic that provides a moral veil for their occupation and at least affords them a certain moral[2] satisfaction. It would be exaggerated to claim that the pride in considering oneself an ethical being dispels every type of boredom. Yet the vulgar boredom of daily drudgery is not actually what is at issue here, since it neither kills people nor awakens them to new life, but merely expresses a dissatisfaction that would immediately disappear if an occupation more pleasant than the morally sanctioned one became available. Nevertheless, people whose duties occasionally make them yawn may be less boring than those who do their business by inclination. The latter, unhappy types, are pushed deeper and deeper into the hustle and bustle until eventually they no longer know where their head is, and the extraordinary, radical boredom that might be able to reunite them with their heads remains eternally distant for them.

There is no one, however, who has no leisure time at all. The office is not a permanent sanctuary, and Sundays are an institution. Thus, in principle, during those beautiful hours of free time everyone would have the opportunity to rouse himself into real boredom. But although one wants to do nothing, things are done to one: the world makes sure that one does not find oneself. And even if one perhaps isn't interested in it, the world itself is much too interested for one to find the peace and quiet necessary to be as thoroughly bored with the world as it ultimately deserves.

In the evening one saunters through the streets, replete with an unfulfillment from which a fullness could sprout. Illuminated words glide by on the rooftops, and already one is banished from one's own emptiness into the alien *advertisement.* One's body takes root in the asphalt, and, together with the enlightening revelations of the illuminations, one's spirit—which is no longer one's own—roams ceaselessly out of the night and into the night. If only it were allowed to disappear! But, like Pegasus prancing on a carousel, this spirit must run in circles and may never tire of praising to high heaven the glory of a liqueur and the merits of the best five-cent cigarette. Some sort of magic spurs that spirit relentlessly amid the thousand electric bulbs, out of which it constitutes and reconstitutes itself into glittering sentences.

1 Kracauer here plays with the resonance between *langweilen* ('to bore') and *lange (ver)weilen* ('to tarry' or 'to linger').

2 In the copy of this article pasted by Kracauer into his scrapbook, this adjective was crossed out in pen. It reappeared, however, when the essay was reprinted in *Das Ornament der Masse.*

Should the spirit by chance return at some point, it soon takes its leave in order to allow itself to be cranked away in various guises in a *movie theater.* It squats as a fake Chinaman in a fake opium den, transforms itself into a trained dog that performs ludicrously clever tricks to please a film diva, gathers up into a storm amid towering mountain peaks, and turns into both a circus artist and a lion at the same time. How could it resist these metamorphoses? The posters swoop into the empty space that the spirit itself would not mind pervading; they drag it in front of the silver screen, which is as barren as an emptied-out palazzo. And once the images begin to emerge one after another, there is nothing left in the world besides their evanescence. One forgets oneself in the process of gawking, and the huge dark hole is animated with the illusion of a life that belongs to no one and exhausts everyone.

Radio likewise vaporizes beings, even before they have intercepted a single spark.[3] Since many people feel compelled to broadcast, one finds oneself in a state of permanent receptivity[4], constantly pregnant with London, the Eiffel Tower, and Berlin. Who would want to resist the invitation of those dainty headphones? They gleam in living rooms and entwine themselves around heads all by themselves; and instead of fostering cultivated conversation (which certainly can be a bore), one becomes a playground for worldwide noises that, regardless of their own potentially objective boredom, do not even grant one's modest right to personal boredom. Silent and lifeless, people sit side by side as if their souls were wandering about far away. But these souls are not wandering according to their own preference; they are badgered by the news hounds, and soon no one can tell anymore who is the hunter and who is the hunted. Even in the cafe, where one wants to roll up into a ball like a porcupine and become aware of one's insignificance, an imposing loudspeaker effaces every trace of private existence. The announcements it blares forth dominate the space of the concert intermissions, and the waiters (who are listening to it themselves) indignantly refuse the unreasonable requests to get rid of this gramophonic mimicry.

As one is enduring this species of antennal fate, the five *continents* are drawing ever closer. In truth, it is not we who extend ourselves out toward them; rather, it is their cultures that appropriate us in their boundless imperialism. It is as if one were having one of those dreams provoked by an empty stomach: a tiny ball rolls toward you from very far away, expands into a close-up, and finally roars right over you. You can neither stop it nor escape it, but lie there chained, a helpless little doll swept away by the giant colossus in whose ambit it expires. Flight is impossible. Should the Chinese imbroglio be tactfully disembroiled, one is sure to be harried by an American boxing match: the Occident remains omnipresent, whether one acknowledges it or not. All the world-historical events on this planet—not only the current ones but also past events, whose love of life knows no shame—have only one desire: to set up a rendezvous wherever they suppose us to be present. But the masters are not to be found in their quarters. They've gone on a trip and cannot be located, having long since ceded the empty chambers to the 'surprise party'[5] that occupies the rooms, pretending to be the masters.

But what if one refuses to allow oneself to be chased away? Then boredom becomes the only proper occupation, since it provides a kind of guarantee that one is,

3 Kracauer here plays on the resonance between *Funk*, which means 'radio,' and *Funke*, which means 'spark' or 'flicker.'

4 The semantic fulcrum of this sentence is provided by the ambiguity of *Einfi fangnis*, which can mean both 'reception' (as in a radio broadcast) and 'con ception' (the result of a sexual—as opposed to radiophonic—dissemination).

5 This English expression, rendered as 'surprising party' in the first printing of the article in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, was subsequently corrected in the 1963 reprinting.

so to speak, still in control of one's own existence. If one were never bored, one would presumably not really be present at all and would thus be merely one more object of boredom, as was claimed at the outset. One would light up on the rooftops or spool by as a filmstrip. But if indeed one is present, one would have no choice but to be bored by the ubiquitous abstract racket that does not allow one to exist, and, at the same time, to find oneself boring for existing in it.

On a sunny afternoon when everyone is outside, one would do best to hang about in the train station or, better yet, stay at home, draw the curtains, and surrender oneself to one's boredom on the sofa. Shrouded in *tristezza*, one flirts with ideas that even become quite respectable in the process, and one considers various projects that, for no reason, pretend to be serious. Eventually one becomes content to do nothing more than be with oneself, without knowing what one actually should be doing—sympathetically touched by the mere glass grasshopper on the tabletop that cannot jump because it is made of glass and by the silliness of a little cactus plant that thinks nothing of its own whimsicality. Frivolous, like these decorative creations, one harbors only an inner restlessness without a goal, a longing that is pushed aside, and a weariness with that which exists without really being.

If, however, one has the patience, the sort of patience specific to legitimate boredom, then one experiences a kind of bliss that is almost unearthly. A landscape appears in which colorful peacocks strut about, and images of people suffused with soul come into view. And look—your own soul is likewise swelling, and in ecstasy you name what you have always lacked: the great *passion*. Were this passion—which shimmers like a comet—to descend, were it to envelop you, the others, and the world—oh, then boredom would come to an end, and everything that exists would be . . .

Yet people remain distant images, and the great passion fizzles out on the horizon. And in the boredom that refuses to abate, one hatches bagatelles that are as boring as this one.

The Mass Ornament. Weimar Essays. Transl., ed. and with an introd. by Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1995, pp. 331–334 (originally published as 'Langeweile', *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 16 November 1924)

Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966) was a German writer, journalist, sociologist, cultural critic, and film theorist. His theories on memory revolved around the idea that memory was under threat and was being challenged by modern forms of technology, such as photography.

ON LAZINESS AND LESS WORK

Bojana Kunst

The aim of this book is to draw on the relationship between art and work, as well as on reflections on the characteristics of artistic labour, in order to show how art approaches capitalism and at the same time resists the capitalist appropriation of human power and creation. The contemporary relationship between art and work is closely connected to the relationship between work and life as well as with the ways that life (subjectivity, sociality, temporality, movement) has been entering the core of contemporary production. My argument is based on the belief that art is a way of life, but not in the sense that the border between life and art is disappearing; in fact, this border establishes itself time and time again, creating forms and representations of life as well as shaping the language of art. Art is a form of life, its perceptive and aesthetic power, the life yet to come. These ways radically change the conditions of common life, the intensity of co-being and the existing forms of subjectivisation. Art could therefore be connected to the disclosure and shaping of life conditions as well as with perceptive, affective and presentational proposals. Such proposals can profoundly shatter the conditions of art itself, as they are articulated regardless of existing power relations. Today, the relationship between art and life is highly topical because their merger underlies the capitalisation of human powers and their exploitation for the generation of profit. In contemporary ways of working, the boundary between production and reproduction is disappearing. In this, art is of central importance; it comes across as the ideal and most speculative representation of this disappearance, which is why it is at the very centre of the capitalist interest in generating value. It is therefore essential to critically analyse the labour of the artist and connect it to the post-Fordist way of working, as well as with capitalist exploitation procedures.

This kind of understanding of art is especially important at a time that often feels one of crisis and transformation—a time of an excess prevalence of capitalism on the one hand and the radical powerlessness of political activity and the inability to think the future on the other. Interestingly, after two decades of 'political art' and constant transgression of the border between life and art, the art of today faces a deep crisis in terms of value articulation and its social role; at the same time, it is under attack from rightist politics in connection with the neoliberal understanding of freedom.

Although we have been confronted with numerous engaged, political and critical artistic projects over the last two decades, their pseudo-activity makes them ineffective and they fail to penetrate and affect the social field. The pseudo-engagement of art has also contributed to making art a target of dangerous populist reproaches that art is but 'leftist elitism'; in this, it is claimed that art is an activity