

**BOREDOM AT WORK:  
TRACING EXPERIENCES OF WORKPLACE BOREDOM THROUGH  
CONTEMPORARY ART, LIFESTORY INTERVIEWING AND  
CREATIVE METHODS**

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## Declaration of Authorship

I hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Katy Lawn', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Katy Lawn

Date: 18<sup>th</sup> February 2021

## Acknowledgements

I wouldn't say that I am a reluctant Geographer; but with it being such a broad discipline I had always seen myself as someone more on the fringes, with an interest in what the arts can tell us about social life, and what they can contribute to our understanding of lived realities. Art and 'the Arts' have always meant a great deal to me, as I found them to be a form of expression that moved me in ways that 'science' did not; and so, selfishly perhaps, I have always sought to bring them in to my work. Through the course of my postgraduate career, I have happily come to the realisation that I am in fact far less alone in this than I first thought when I first entered the field as an undergraduate; and so one of the great pleasures of this PhD project has been to gift me a great sense of belonging and recognition in finding like-minded academic staff, theorists and peers whose knowledge and insight I am indebted to.

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## Abstract

Few geographers have addressed the concept of boredom, despite a interest in the topic from psychology, literary studies, popular culture, organisation studies, cultural theory, the arts and philosophy. Taking inspiration from classic humanistic accounts of work, this thesis is concerned with narrated experiences of working life. It puts these stories of workplace boredom in dialogue with conceptual concerns around how boredom is theorised and experienced.

These issues are investigated through the deployment of two principal empirical strands. The first concerns an analysis of the way that three contemporary artists – Santiago Sierra, Tehching Hsieh, and Ignacio Uriarte – foreground the act of ‘boring work’ as art. The second empirical strand of the thesis uses in-depth interviews and photo-elicitation to gather accounts of working life from ten participants. In addition, four poets collaborated with the researcher in crafting the workers’ testimonies into a series of poems. The data from this strand is first presented as a set of ten ‘portraits’, composed of poems, photo-essays and a narrative account that presents each participant’s narrated experience of work and boredom. The workers’ testimonies are also central to a more thematic analysis of experiences of boredom at work, focused on issues of time, meaning and response.

Each of these empirical strands offers a set of ‘ways in’ to boredom, attending to boredom’s ambiguity and complexity. In considering lived experiences of boredom in working life alongside artistic deployments of boredom, this thesis reframes workplace boredom – which has predominantly been theorised as a problem which must be managed in the process of manufacturing productive corporate cultures and working subjects - as an experiential register which shapes our working life in complex ways, particularly in relation to our senses of time and meaning. It also argues that the ‘profound’ boredoms which are seen to hold radical potential, and which are often centred in boring artworks, are fundamentally unavailable to the everyday working subject.

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# INTRODUCTION

## I. Preface

As a child, I remember asking my dad what he did. My mum was a primary school teacher – and I knew what that was like, I reasoned, because I went to school. But my dad worked in an office, and I recall asking him: “but what do you actually *do* all day?”

His answer was vague, but I remember that he said something about having lots of emails and meetings. As a child I knew that neither of my parents really loved their work – and so I had also wondered what job I would end up doing, and whether I would enjoy my job. Work, to me, has always seemed rather curious. I have never felt ‘cut out’ for it, and so I always assumed there was some secret; some point where you mysteriously become a ‘worker’ and suddenly possess the requisite seriousness, reliability and social manners to be good at it all. At the age of 28, I still do not know the secret. Perhaps that is why as a researcher I felt a call to respond to the statement that “scholarship to understand the changing nature of work is fundamental to understanding the human condition” (Wills et al. 2000: 1523). This thesis is one approach to addressing this relationship between experiences of work and experiences of being human in the contemporary world.

Work is something that shapes our lives, and one of the things I have learnt from speaking to the people portrayed in this thesis is exactly that: that work is never really just work. I had always suspected this – and the weight of it sometimes felt crippling. Its *importance* felt too much, as if one’s entire happiness depended on finding the *right work*, the *correct* job. Viewing the project from another perspective, however, it was also borne of a desire to understand *what makes working life good*. Boredom is a lens that offers a fascinatingly nuanced ‘way in’ to this issue, because of its association with issues of meaning and experience, and the way in which it is always already tied to working lives and routines.

The irony of studying boredom was never lost on me. I realised, particularly in the past year, that many of the boredom-producing factors which my participants had discussed – and which I had been turning over in my mind throughout the fieldwork and research process - were ones that I was experiencing day to day. The daily struggle of having a lack of structure, too much restriction, a lack of agency, a repetitive task, a desire to be somewhere else or do something different; a desire for time to go faster or slower during my journey, having too much or too little to do – all were intensified in the final stages of the PhD. This was largely due to the advent of that now-dreaded acronym, COVID-19. But, as Agatha Christie famously quipped, “There’s nothing like boredom to make you write”.

The fieldwork in this thesis was done ‘pre-COVID’ and written up during the worst of the pandemic. If the timeline is to be divided into pre- and post- COVID, then this thesis sits at an odd location since the events of the past 18 months or so have changed the landscape of work dramatically. Studies of emotion throughout the pandemic showed a huge spike in boredom, as well as fear, anxiety and stress (YouGov, 2021). That we have continued to live (and work) through this - with the hope of a return to something more recognisable on the horizon - is testament to humans’ innate adaptability. It also serves as an indication of the practical *necessity* of work, as well as the resilience of its underpinning ideology. Even when it looks different to how we usually come to recognise it – even when a global pandemic brings society to a juddering halt - work persists.

Returning finally to my own experience of work during the pandemic, I must quote Lars Svendsen here as his words resonated so completely with my own feelings at certain (fraught) moments in the writing-up of this thesis. He writes, with true honesty and self-knowledge: “I have never been so bored as when I was in the process of completing a large dissertation after several years of work. The work bored me so much that I had to mobilize all my will in order to continue” (Svendsen, 2012: 35). This project is the result of a similar struggle, but a struggle in which I have also experienced excitement, fulfilment, joy, as well as the soothing and restorative effects of boredom. Boredom is an experience full of contradictions - at once quotidian and profound – a productively ambiguous phenomenon, as I hope to elucidate for the reader. In exploring those experiences of boredom, I seek to contribute both to humanistic accounts of work and creative theorisations of boredom, as well as illuminating the ways in which these two imperatives can be productively put in dialogue.

## II. Beginnings

*“Working life is the central arena of the classics of social theory [...] Even when the analyses concern religion, culture, music, and the family, the emergence of a labour market, capitalist wage labour, and the concentration of production in large industries provide the reference point.”* (Karlsson and Månson, 2017: 107)

Working life is central to social theory as a phenomenon which cuts across almost all areas of our lives; from family life to music and religion – as Karlsson and Manson suggest. In addition, jobs now appear to require more and more of *ourselves* and our social and psychological capacities (Rose, 1999; Fleming and Spicer, 2004; Cederström and Fleming, 2012). Work has always been something which “exceeds the rationale of production” - and this *excess* is what makes for the most interesting study (Yard 2013: 55).

As such, this project focuses on working life. Taking initial inspiration from Studs Terkel’s seminal work, *Working* (1973), this thesis addresses how people feel at work and about work. *Working* is a hefty tome compiled of more than 100 verbatim interviews with workers across America, filled with interviews which are “honest, earthy, seasoned with experience, and, oftentimes, brutally frank” (Cox, 2004: 757). As Terkel wrote in the preface: “this book, being about work, is, by its very nature, about violence – to the spirit as well as to the body. [...] It is about a search, too, for daily meaning as well as daily bread” (Terkel 2004: xi). Terkel was a renowned social historian, diligently documenting the lives and experiences of everyday Americans, with a political commitment to voicing the quotidian and profound experiences of everyday life in all their complexity; a commitment which speaks to the core concerns of humanistic geography more generally, as well as the specific approach taken in this thesis.

Just as work is central to our lived experience, boredom, too, has wide-ranging impacts and expressions in social life. Boredom has been identified - particularly since the advent of modernity - by literary theorists, artists, poets, sociologists and psychologists as a key mode of experience in day to day life; and specifically day to day life *at work*. It is frequently addressed in cultural products from novels to film, art and theatre – and indeed often in relation to work, or a lack of it. This prevalence – what we might call our cultural attunement to boredom - is what leads Svendsen to assert that we are now living in ‘an age of boredom’ since “boredom is not just a phenomenon that afflicts individuals; it is, to just as great an extent, a social and cultural phenomenon” (2005: 52). This is further confirmed, perhaps, by the advent of ‘boredom studies’ as a flourishing area of academic enquiry, one with increasingly rich scholarship which is remarkably interdisciplinary in nature (Gardiner and Haladyn, 2017).

This thesis, then, considers *boredom* from the point of view of its intersection with *work*. These are two concepts which many philosophers, sociologists and cultural theorists have considered as having something of a complex interrelationship. The word ‘work’, for many, “conjures up a vision of the more or less direct exercise of power upon the body of the worker: exploitation, discipline, coercion, control” (Rose 1999: 55), as set forth in classic accounts of managerial and organisational control of workers. Increasingly, however, work is something which is regulated, managed and perpetuated through more subtle channels, from “emotional engineering” (Weeks, 2011: 71) to biopolitical forms of control (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011; Fleming, 2013; Fleming and Spicer, 2014; Alexander, 2015). This has something to do with boredom as the experience of a *limit* – whether this is a limit to our own ability to find meaning, or a limit to our freedoms which produces boredom.

Alternatively, we might consider boredom as an experience which is related to the regulation and administration of time. Proceeding from E.P. Thompson’s classic account of ‘time discipline’ (1967) in which he explained how industrial capitalism was itself made possible by a set of technologies, conventions, rules and techniques around time, we can see that this is part of a modernist push towards rationalisation and standardisation. This ‘disenchantment’ and the ordering of social worlds according to time discipline, bureaucracy, administration and so on, itself is identified by many scholars as a key driver in producing a particular form of contemporary boredom (Musharbash, 2007).

On the other hand, we might think of work as providing a respite *from* boredom; as something which helps to create *meaning* in our lives. In some cases, our work may even provide ‘too much meaning’ and can foster an over-commitment to a job which goes against our human interests – a classic example of this could be in social work or care work. In this case “undertaking meaningful work is not necessarily associated with a wider, meaningful life” and can therefore be both “binding and ennobling” (Bailey *et al.*, 2019: 482). However, it is also true that boredom, experienced as a lack of meaning, “emerges as an episodic feature” of working life – it is always in flux, rather than being a fixed attribute reserved for certain kinds of jobs or certain kinds of subjects (Bailey and Madden, 2015: 13).

The ambiguity of boredom is one of the key justifications for the methodological approach taken in this thesis, where the project seeks to attend to the complexity, subjectivity and fluidity of the category of boredom in the context of its relationship to work.

## Research Design

The central principles underpinning this project are two-fold: firstly, the need to give due consideration to the voices and knowledge and experiences of workers themselves; and, secondly, also to re-assert the central role of culture, cultural products and cultural perspectives in both shaping and reflecting worldviews, philosophies and realities. In terms of its theoretical positioning, the project sits at the intersection between cultural approaches to studies of work and the workplace, and creative practice as a way of knowing, researching, and getting at the more elusive dimensions of lived experience.

The methodological approach used in the thesis is expressed in three strands. The first empirical strand concerns an analysis of the way that three contemporary artists – Santiago Sierra, Tehching Hsieh, and Ignacio Uriarte - have understood, deployed, and used boredom as an active aesthetic technique to speak to debates around the experience of work and the nature of experience under capitalism. In this instance, my argument is that these artists (and other cultural products) ‘get at’ boredom in particularly engaging, innovative and creative ways which address boredom’s ambiguity and subjectivity.

The next empirical strand of the thesis uses in-depth interviews and photo-elicitation to gather accounts of working life from ten participants. Here, I am concerned with attending to the role of worker-led narratives - or what Rhodes (2004) calls narratives ‘from below’. Collecting these narratives in this way allows the participants to express and communicate their experiences and understandings of boredom through conversations, story-telling, photographs and discussions around those photographs.

The final strand concerns a set of processes performed using the empirical data. Firstly, the transcripts were used in a process I call *poetic re-presentation*. Here, poets were brought in to collaborate with the researcher. They were given an anonymised interview transcript and asked to re-present the experiences of the participants by working with the words of the workers’ testimonies to produce a set of poems. Alongside this, I produced a textual ‘portrait’ of each of the participants written as narrative non-fiction, and selected photos to create a photo-essay to sit alongside the poetry and narrative texts. Each of the ten stories are told through these outputs, each case study being comprised of: a poem or set of poems, a photo-essay and a story-portrait. The process of presenting these case studies constitutes an analytical process, as well as a way of offering three ‘paths’ through the same data, each contributing a different ‘take’ on the same story.

The framing of this project as a multi-disciplinary, creatively-informed thesis stems from a concern that there are a lack of studies in social science which understand boredom as the complex and varied phenomenon that it is. Though quantitative forms of interview-based research and self-reported boredom statistics have helped identify the *presence* (or prevalence, even) of boredom at work, there is room now to explore the textures of this boredom. It is an affective experience, a feeling, a mood, an emotion, an embodied state, a path to creativity, a prison, a form of relaxation, a route to creativity, a form of violence – and this research approach intends to probe these more elusive dimensions as well as asking questions about the experiences and effects of boredom at work in specific studied cases.

## **Thesis Structure**

Each part of the thesis serves to inspire a contemplation on the subject of boredom, with each empirical part being grounded in the philosophical, historical and methodological reviews in the introductory chapters of the thesis. These discussions, combined with the empirical chapters, offer a set of perspectives on the ubiquitous experience of boredom in modernity, ultimately arguing that boredom's understandings across contemporary conceptual art and everyday lived experiences each tell a very different story. As such the thesis is structured as below.

### *Context*

The thesis opens with a review of the literature around boredom and work, arguing that a theorisation of each can contribute to the other. The subsequent chapters of the thesis are underpinned by this discussion, which outlines in particular different theorisations of boredom in philosophy, psychology, popular culture and art; as well as reviewing currents in studies of work and contemporary critical management studies. This chapter positions the project as part of a humanist vein of scholarship that considers lived experiences of work as emotionally complex, and identifies a space for studies of economic life that are rooted in those humanist concerns.

### *Methods*

This chapter sets out the mixed methods approach used in the project. I begin with a discussion of how analysing cultural products – from fine art to literature – can elucidate lived experiences and social conditions, before turning to photo-elicitation interviews, poetic re-presentations and photo-essays. Throughout the chapter I explain the justification for the approach, as well as reflecting on the processes and outputs of the approach taken. More generally, this chapter makes the case for creative methods, collaborative research and the central role of the arts and

creativity in interpreting lifeworlds, which is of particular importance in attending to the complexity, contingency and ambiguity of boredom.

### *Artists*

The *Artists* chapter considers how contemporary conceptual artists have understood, deployed, and used boredom as an active aesthetic technique to speak to debates around the experience of work and the nature of experience under capitalism. In particular, it analyses how in foregrounding the act of ‘boring work’ as a form of artistic production, artworks can offer up meaninglessness as a kind of aesthetic critique of work. There are three case studies which comprise the three sections of this chapter. The first focuses on the work of Santiago Sierra, who contracts disadvantaged people to ‘perform’ his artworks for him, asking them to do pointless, degrading or boring tasks. Sierra’s practice therefore casts particular light on exploitation and the way that boredom can be a form of violence. Tehching Hsieh’s *Time Clock Piece* is the focus of the following section. Here my interpretation is concerned with the administration of time as a practice which both evokes, induces and critiques boredom and boring work. The third case study attends to Ignacio Uriarte, an artist who uses his own experience of working as a business administrator to poke fun at bureaucracy using process-based artworks made of office materials. The final section of the chapter discusses the relationships between these artists and their work, and argues that these artists unveil the conditions of contemporary life which *produce* the phenomenon of boredom, as well as producing work which is deliberately inefficient and boring, thereby running directly against the capitalist doctrine of expansion, accumulation and stimulation.

### *Portraits*

The *Portraits* chapter presents each of the ten participants’ working life stories in three ways. Each portrait opens with a set of poems created from the participant’s interview transcript, followed by a photo-essay comprised of the photos that they submitted, and a short piece of narrative non-fiction writing written by myself. These three outputs form a richly textured tapestry which seeks to get at the indeterminacy and complexity of boredom by offering the reader three different ‘paths’ through the same stories, as well as connecting to worker-centric accounts of working life that attend to lived experience.

### *Experiences*

The *Experiences* chapter engages in particular with the interview materials, but also makes connections across the other empirical and theoretical strands, and consists of a three-fold thematic analysis which structures the chapter into three parts. *Boredom and Time* considers boredom in its temporal dimensions, in particular participants' experiences of subjective time and the role of attention, working rhythms and waiting. *Boredom and Meaning* considers boredom's implications for meaning(lessness) in the case of simple and profound boredom, repetition, and order/disorder. The third section, *After Boredom*, reflects on those materials to consider how people feel when they are bored, as well as how they have responded to boredom and its effects.

### *Conclusions*

The final chapter, *Conclusions*, puts forward an argument about how 'simple' and 'profound' boredom are differently represented in the artists' work and the stories of boredom that were communicated by the participants. Putting these two parts of thesis in dialogue reveals the ways in which boredom's rehabilitation as a radical act of dissent has not made its way into everyday understandings of boredom, particularly in the context of work. I also advocate research that allows stories of boredom to breathe and flourish, since they are so often pushed away and denied in the working context, whilst also recognising that humans' natural propensity for meaning-making is not always a 'lost opportunity' to dwell in boredom, but a mode of being that makes life liveable.

# CONTEXT

*This thesis lies at the intersection of two key concepts: boredom and work. With a view to setting out a theorisation of each of these concepts as they relate to the other, I begin with an exploration of how the project fits into wider debates on the workplace, both classic and contemporary, before considering boredom's emergence, philosophical and practical understandings, and expression in the Arts. In the final part of the chapter I then turn to the intersection of these concerns more directly, considering the role of boredom in the contemporary workplace and how it has been theorised and addressed. A brief contextualisation of the creative methods used as the empirical substance of the thesis is also offered, initiating discussion of an aspect to the thesis that is further elaborated in the 'Methods' chapter.*

## I. Theorising Work

As a jumping-off point, we might consider that for Marx the work relation is the mediating force between nature and society. In performing this role, work in itself is not problematic – far from it. Reflecting his Hegelian roots, Marx understands work as how we come to recognise ourselves in the world. However, under capitalism, this work – or *labour* - relation becomes fundamentally antagonistic because of the alienating and exploitative way in which the relation is configured. Workers, as labour, are alienated from their work and hence also from themselves. Kant, too, writes that work is essential – particularly in terms of *not being bored*: “the only cure is work, not pleasures [...] man *feels* his life through actions and not enjoyment” (in Svendsen 2012: 54, emphasis in original). This amounts to an assertion that work is the way that we give our life meaning. Again, Kant speaks of ‘work’ in a more existential, general sense, but the implication is firstly that work is a crucial meaning-making exercise; and secondly, that it is perhaps not work, per se, that might be problematic. Perhaps it is certain *forms* of work, and certain ways of carrying out this work under specific conditions, that can make it problematic for individuals and wider societies. As such, it is worth stating explicitly that this thesis is primarily concerned with waged labour in the advanced-capitalist West.

Geographers have long been concerned with work. It is, after all, an undeniably spatial phenomenon requiring organising in space: from global exchange networks, to the development of cities and urban planning, work has shaped the landscape of our world in profound ways. Geographers have most notably studied the spatial division of labour (Massey, 1984), the relationship between labour and gender (Hanson and Pratt, 1995) and the way in which the circulation of capital shapes cities and social relations within those spaces (Harvey, 1973). As Wills et al. write, workers do not just happen to be in a particular location at a particular time: rather, they appear in-place “with a certain package of skills, experiences, and opinions – as a result of previous rounds of economic investment” (2000: 1524). The geography of labour under capitalism is formed by the confluence of these social and economic forces, but as Crang (1994) suggests, many such accounts fail to address the lived experience of work. This thesis is concerned with work at a more experiential human scale, and so belongs to the tradition of humanistic geography more broadly; concerned with issues that resonate with the agenda set forth by Ley and Samuels in their classic edited collection *Humanistic Geography* (1978).

Classic accounts of the worker tend to hinge on the development of time-discipline in the factory (Thompson 1967; Stein 1995), and even earlier descriptions of the emergence of the leisure-time / work-time divide that facilitated the development of the very concept of ‘work’ as

we currently understand it. Scientific management texts, such as Braverman's account of labour de-skilling (1974), alongside other classic workplace studies, are highlighted by Bondi et al. as being an acutely emotionally barren terrain in geography (2007). However, as Thrift writes, organisations and workplaces are now starting to be acknowledged as entities “where emotional attachments are formed out of the play of anger, elation, envy, disappointment, shame, suffering, even violence of various kinds” (Thrift 2008:244).

It is now accepted that the worker is not simply the neutral subject of Taylorist ‘scientific management’, the classic Fordist line-worker or the robotic ‘Organisation Man’ that William H Whyte (1956) discerned in the fifties. Instead, employees are entangled within complex relations of power, domination and resistance; each with their own emotional and psychic lives. One vein of scholarship that addresses this struggle is Labour Process Analysis (LPA), which attends to the indeterminacy of the labour process and, more specifically, the indeterminacy of labour power; that is, the tensions and conflicts implicit in wage-effort bargaining. Whilst offering “fresh insights into how work relations are structured and de-structured through the machinations of a dialectic of struggle and resistance”, LPA as an analytical approach remains ambivalent on the concept of subjectivity – and this has been at the heart of a sustained critique of LPA (O’Doherty & Willmott 2009: 932).

The negotiation of *emotion*, *subjectivity* and *identity* in the workplace has become especially important since employees are now subject to judgement on criteria such as: “the intrapersonal competencies of knowing one’s emotions, managing emotions, motivating oneself; and the interpersonal competencies of recognizing emotions in others and handling relationships” (Hughes 2005: 604). As Bondi, Davidson and Smith write: “in economic geography and employment studies more generally, for example, workplace performance and productivity are generally conceived of in terms of wages, human capital, working conditions and so on. [... but] what happens at work may depend on the most personal, private and emotionally-present intricacies of a worker’s complex life” (2007: 8). This echoes Noel Castree’s declaration that geographers should examine “the geographies of employment [...] not in themselves but as windows onto the wider question of how people live and seek to live” (Castree 2007: 859). Labour, then, cast in relation to life. This reorientation contains a clear ethical agenda – albeit one that is rather broad. Nonetheless, the issue of ‘living’ is really at the core of this project, as a counterpoint to the predominant emphases in labour geography on economic and organisational matters. For this thesis, lived experiences of work are central.

## Shifting labour: emotion, experience and affect at work

*“That capitalism has undergone a series of transformations over the past few decades, and that these transformations have been reflected – at least to some extent – in a qualitative change in the nature, form and organisation of labour is increasingly undisputed”* (Dowling, Nunes and Trott, 2007: 1)

Lived experiences of work are not simply external to the labour relation or shifting organisations of our cultural economies. Numerous scholars have argued that there has been a spatial, quantitative and qualitative shift in the nature of work over the last few decades. At the most essential level, they posit an historical shift in labour, from industrial labour (whose main focus was bodily abilities) to kinds of work which have been variously labelled ‘immaterial’ (Lazzarato, 1996), ‘creative’, ‘emotional’ (Hochschild, 2003), ‘passionate’ (McRobbie, 2015); or, more generally as ‘knowledge’ or ‘information’ work (Liu, 2004). Related to this is idea of the ‘social factory’ - or what Fleming and Sturdy have labelled the ‘electronic sweatshop’ - with uncertain spatial and temporal boundaries (2011). The experience of such an expanded version of the workplace - no longer clearly spatially or temporally demarcated in many cases - also requires a shift in management; and in the capacities and skills required of workers.

These ‘emotional’ concerns are therefore implicated in work as an economic activity, but also correspond with a widening of the understanding of *work* as something that exceeds its strictly economic function. This understanding has led to a rise in studies on emotion and subjective experience in relation to economic life. The fields of economics and social sciences have, historically, had a somewhat frosty relationship stemming from a rigid divide between diametrically opposed concepts like ‘money’ or ‘economics’ in contrast to ‘feelings’ or ‘emotions’. This divide is now widely recognised to have been mutually detrimental, and emotions have been acknowledged and studied in various areas of economic life – for example economic sociologist Jocelyn Pixley on the role of emotions in finance organisations (Pixley, 2004, 2012) or Ko Kuwabara, from the perspective of organisational behaviour studies, on the role of affective attachments in online marketplaces like eBay (Kuwabara, 2004).

One classic sociological account of the ‘softer’ or ‘non-rational’ elements of work came from Michel Crozier. He never separated his research from activism and a commitment to social change – and after being awarded a scholarship to study the labour movement in the United States, returned to France to begin work on what would become *The World of the Office Worker* (Crozier, 1971). Another of his books, *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* argued against the Weberian account of organisations as rational, efficient spaces (Crozier, 1964). His work, though

concerned with the structural elements of working life, very much centred on the effects of those structural elements on the worker. Similarly, he critiqued the notion of organisations being seen as rational entities or places where efficiency erased all emotion and traces of the human. He writes:

*“The classic rationalists did not consider the members of an organization as human beings, but just as cogs in the machine. For them, workers were only hands. The human relations approach has shown how incomplete this rationale was. It has also made it possible to consider workers as creatures of feeling, who are moved by the impact of the so-called rational decisions taken above them, and will react to them.”* (Crozier, 1964: 149)

Thinking more specifically about *working* as an economic activity that exceeds economics, sociologist C. Wright Mills’ *White Collar* (1951) put forward the idea of a ‘personality market’ wherein ‘intimate traits’ of employees become commodities, drawn into the labour market’s sphere of exchange. “With anonymous insincerity the Successful Person thus makes an instrument of his own appearance and personality [...] the cash nexus that links one man to another in transient contact has been made [...] to bite deeper into all areas of life and relation” (Mills, 1951: 187-188). Following from this, Arlie Hochschild’s seminal account of emotional labour posited that the management of emotions was central to many forms of labour, using case studies of flight attendants and bill collectors (2003 [originally published 1983]). This emotional management is in itself a highly skilled part of working life and is becoming ever more widespread; although arguably this kind of emotional management has long been implicated in the labour relation, even where it was not a primary part of the job. Hochschild explicitly grounds emotional labour in Marx’s theory of wage-labour and alienation, thereby stressing its human cost and exploitative nature (Brook, 2009).

Erving Goffman’s classic *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, is an account of the performative or dramaturgical ways in which we present ourselves in our everyday social interactions, which he terms ‘impression management’ (1959). Crang, writing about his experience of waiting tables at a themed restaurant, Smoky Joe’s, elaborates this theme, writing that:

*“Busy nights were emotional roller-coasters, full of swapped stories and swear words at the bar dispense area, the occasional shout of frustration at the chefs or barmen, the whispered obscenity when there was no tip, the satisfied grin and feeling of real pleasure when there was [...] the first words to me from Alice, a waitress on her first night (a busy Friday): "Hi. God this place is weird. It's hysterical.”* (Crang, 1994: 685)

The emotional nature of the work is explicitly foregrounded, as well as the way in which the notion of ‘performance’ comes through in the social interactions inherent in the job. Crang also

explains that the metaphor of ‘performance’ was even used by the ‘front of house’ staff in their own understanding of their role, and that “the performances required of staff are of socially embodied selves, embodiments for which they are held accountable” (Crang, 1994: 699).

Focusing more directly on the wider power relations in workplace embodiments and performances, Nikolas Rose makes explicit a concern with the *increasingly* invasive ways that corporations and employers are deploying identity and emotion now. Rather than *appearing* to be happy, employees are, he suggests, required to authentically *be* happy at work. Rose cautions: “the apparent discovery of a fortunate coincidence between personal contentment of the worker and maximum efficiency and profitability for the boss is merely another dissimulation of the fundamental conflict between capital and labour” (Rose 1999: 58).

Perhaps this is why – though emotions have long been of interest to psychologists and sociologists – they have more recently been of particular interest to organisational researchers (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993, 2013; Morris and Feldman, 1997; Fineman, 2000, 2005) as well as geographers (Davidson, Bondi and Smith, 2016; Urry, 2016). Studies of emotion in Geography have ranged across topics as diverse as the emotional experience of ageing as presented in Victorian painting (Hepworth, 2017), the way in which world-travellers visiting a McDonalds is experienced as a guilty pleasure (Germann-Molz, 2017) – or the role of emotions in geopolitical processes (Pain, 2010). One area in which geographers have been particularly open to the study of emotion is in critical studies of chronic illness and disability. This includes studies of the emotional life of people dealing with mental health conditions such as agoraphobia (Davidson, 2003) and OCD (Segrott and Doel, 2004). Thinking specifically of how this crosses over with workplace studies, Pamela Moss notably examined the emotional turmoil of negotiating ill-health in workplaces, drawing on her own experience of M.E. (Moss, 1999). Embodied geographies also speak to this area, considering how the body and its boundaries are perceived and negotiated in emotionally complex ways - as the work of Robyn Longhurst, in particular, attests (2001). Such studies also made a more general point about how embodied emotions are connected to specific places, contexts and sites (e.g. Domosh, 2001). In this vein, Melissa Gregg has written about the “limited range of affective states and subjectivities permissible in workplaces” – and, unsurprisingly, boredom doesn’t feature as a desirable asset (Gregg, 2010: 250).

Research on emotions at work also reveals complex and contradictory relations in the way that emotions feed into forms of workplace power relations. Hughes’ research on emotional intelligence in the modern corporation, for example, reveals the ways in which conforming to

managerial expectations can in fact be a form of resistance (2005). Paulsen (2014) figures these conflicts, in a general sense, as tensions between adaptation and resistance in the workplace, with literature on new forms of normative control and new/old forms of resistance being a key strand in organisation studies. This thesis focuses not on resistance per se; instead arguing for the need to understand lived experiences of work more generally. Somewhat problematically, the entry of emotion and experience into many academic accounts of corporate life seems still to relate – implicitly or explicitly - to this managerial impulse: a rational-economic concern with optimizing labour productivity. In popular management literature as well as organisation studies literature, emotions *matter* in the workplace precisely because of their value to the corporation; their entanglement in the profit-production process. That is to say: they *matter* in the workplace because they can be managed, augmented and optimised - just as Taylorist principles sought to optimise the physical capacity of the worker. This thesis is in agreement that emotions matter in the realm of work; but rather than advancing a concern with profit and production, I argue that they also matter because of a humanistic concern with what makes a liveable life.

Indeed, management practices that seek to augment and manage people's emotions, their identities and personalities – perhaps through 'corporate culture' initiatives cloaked in the language of authenticity – are uniquely invasive and bring up complex questions around subjectivity and which identities, emotions, and behaviours are allowed or encouraged. As Peter Fleming has found, these kind of management practices and approaches – which create an environment in which not only behaviour, but *feelings* and *identities* come under scrutiny - can have negative impacts. He found that “workers also experienced anxiety and chronic stress because of the normative pressures placed on them [...] this created a feeling of claustrophobia and periodic psychic decline” (Fleming 2005: 290). The ideology of work now is dangerous to us precisely *because* it has “decoupled itself from income, task and function and is now more about who you are” (Fleming 2015: 10). Through this logic, we are constituted as subjects who now primarily “produce, discover and experience ourselves” through work (Rose 1999: 103).

Critiques of 'new wave' forms of control which target emotions and identity - for example 'culture management' as outlined by Fleming and Sturdy (2011) - have come hand in hand with accounts of new incarnations of (sometimes old) resistance tactics. These range from not-working-at-work - “empty labour” (Paulsen, 2013: 351) - to "subtle forms of subversion that are invariably invisible" to managers and peers - what Fleming and Sewell call 'organisational Svjekism' (2002: 859). Peter Fleming and Andre Spicer have both been prolific in documenting the ways in which workers resist co-option into management initiatives which now hinge on 'the

freedom to be yourself', which is a demand for 'authenticity' and 'self-expression' in the workplace; a demand that often, in actual fact, manifests distanced forms of *ina*uthenticity and self-denial (Fleming & Spicer 2003; 2004; Fleming 2005; 2015). Thrift, in fact, refers to something similar with his political commitment to deconstructing the now "thriving traditions of emotional engineering" in the workplace (Thrift 2008: 244).

Fleming's notion of 'psychic decline' (caused by the invasive demand to be happy, engaged and fully identified with your job role) seems not too far removed from Richard Sennett's argument on the negative psychosocial impacts of the 'New Capitalism' - which he diagnoses in his seminal work *The Corrosion of Character: the personal consequences of work in the New Capitalism* (1999). Sennett describes a permutation of capitalism in which "the emphasis is on flexibility. Rigid forms of bureaucracy are under attack, as is the routine nature of work processes. Instead, workers are asked to behave nimbly, to be open to change on short notice, to take risks continually, to become ever less dependent on regulations and formal procedures" (Sennett, 1999: 9). Sennett's argument, unlike Fleming's, doesn't hinge on the concept of authenticity and self-expression; but rather the way in which the rapidly shifting terrain of work makes impossible a stable sense of self and one's place in the working world. In a version of capitalism so rooted in short-term thinking, movement, uncertainty, impatience; in a working world where organisations and jobs are constantly being redesigned, reorganised and re-engineered – how do we find our feet? Painting this as 'flexibility' he argues, makes it *look* like a working world with more freedoms. Instead, however, it creates new forms of oppression and ultimately disorients individuals and undermines their emotional and psychological wellbeing. Sennett figures this through the concept of *character*, explaining that "character particularly focuses upon the long-term aspect of our emotional experience" (Sennett, 1999: 9). This is where Fleming and Sennett share the most ground: their concern with modes of power, control and resistance. Sennett – in a line that could have been written by Fleming - writes that "the pursuit of flexibility has produced new structures of power and control, rather than created the conditions which set us free" (1999: 47).

### **Emotion / affect; and boredom and geography**

The interplay between embodied emotions and *affect* is one divergence in the theoretical literature on what might broadly come under studies of 'emotion'. The key distinction between affect and emotion lies in the favouring of the cognitive vs. the non-cognitive elements of experience. Emotion and thought of course involve elements of pre-cognition, such as intuition, déjà vu, sensations and so on. Affect, thought and emotion are therefore entangled with each other. Though affect is generally seen as momentary or ephemeral in nature, and has been criticised by

Tolia-Kelly (2006) for its lack of historicity and its ‘universalising imperative’; it is also true that affect “leaves a trace, a mark on a body or a disposition [...] in this sense we can treat it pedagogically, as an accumulated body of affect which affects our sense of self” (Watkins 2010: 272). Thrift writes that “a considerable part of the academic literature on business seems to want to set affect to one side as having no official place in business” because of an overwrought emphasis on quantification, accounting and calculation (Thrift, 2008: 244). This thesis responds to Thrift’s call to take the affective dimensions of labour seriously.

Admittedly, in studying boredom, this project considers something that cannot simply be quantified; or indeed simply classified as an *emotion*. Boredom is part of the affective texture of work; part of the human experience; something complex with a specific philosophical history, as well as a kind of collective cultural experience. This ambiguity will be elaborated later in this chapter, but for now it is necessary to note that in considering emotional life in part through gathering narrated experiences, this thesis does not seek to return to a safe representational space in which a *knowing subject* transmits experience in a transparent and uncontested way. Rather, it attends to an ethical imperative which stresses the importance of people’s capacity for self-expression and self-understanding. If affect studies, as part of ‘non-representational theory’ (NRT), evade representation because affect simply *cannot* be represented, studies of emotion and thought would seem to do something very different. The task of this thesis, in engaging with participants in the research process, was to gather from people a communicable representation of their lived experiences: their stories. And, since this project hinges on these stories – these consciously-articulated experiences – it might seem to preclude a productive engagement with affect, since “affect is temporally prior to the representational translation of an affect into a knowable emotion” and is “spatially located below cognition and consciousness and beyond reflexivity and humanness” (Pile 2010: 8). In its humanist impulses, this thesis has an ambivalent relationship to affect - at once recognising the role of affective forces in our lives and the world around us and using some concepts and ideas from NRT in exploring theorisations of boredom; but particularly interested in *how* those affective forces are implicated in our everyday experiences, emotional lives, senses of self, and ways of finding of meaning.

Certainly, Ben Anderson’s account of boredom as “a sadness [...] that diminishes the affective vitality of life” holds value for a theorisation of boredom not only for Geography in general but in studies of boredom at work more specifically (Anderson, 2004: 751). Anderson posits boredom as evidence of a depletion in a kind of ‘experiential plenitude’, rather than as a by-product of social changes or part of an epochal or structural narrative. His argument, positioned

as a folding of affect into concerns around ‘new materialisms’ in geography, explains that boredom “discloses how life can be at risk of *lessening*” (2004: 740). In so doing, Anderson contests an initial predominance of more positive affective registers in non-representational thinking, particularly associated with emphases on enchanted materialisms, of life as inherently characterised by plenitude, abundance and liveliness - a line of scholarship that Jane Bennett developed in response to the cultural attitude that modernity is characterised by secularisation, rationalisation and *disenchantment* (Bennett, 2001). These two positions are not mutually exclusive, and in fact share much common ground with different philosophies on boredom: that on the one hand, it could be the result of a failure to attune yourself to the liveliness of the world; but that on the other, it might stem from seeing the world for what it is – something with no essential meaning; a void. Supporting the more ‘optimistic’ argument of the two, Nigel Thrift writes - seemingly in support of Bennett - “the magic has not gone away” (2000: 236).

A crucial theorist in terms of the rationalisation and disenchantment of modern life – particularly in the sphere of work and organisations – is Weber, whose characterisation of bureaucracy it is useful to elaborate. For him, the rationalisation of the world was an inevitable process, and bureaucracy itself was a matter of progress and efficiency. This is in contrast to how bureaucracy is frequently viewed now, which is that it is “in general, associated with very negative features of organisations, such as delays in operation, action centred on opaque standards and excessive requests for documentation” (Serpa and Ferreira, 2019: 12). In Weber’s estimation, bureaucracy was framed in terms of its potentialities - it was “a collective effort to build a controllable social world” (Serpa and Ferreira, 2019: 13). This is what leads Paiva to write that in short, bureaucracy is the “phenomenon of affirmation of the rationalisation of the world” (Paiva, 2014: 439). But, on the other hand, Weber also cast bureaucracy as a threat to individual freedoms, it being “a system of domination” through knowledge (Weber, 1978: 219). This reflects his ambivalent politics around his conceptualisation of *disenchantment*. On the one hand, Weber’s account suggests that “standardized and hierarchical formalities of bureaucratic control lead to feelings of disenchantment”, but on the other, this process shows a productive sense of ordering, knowability and scientific precision (Fleming, 2009: 32).

As such, the role of the worker within the ideal-type Weberian bureaucratic system is as an operational agent who – in their most efficient form – is not swayed by ‘irrational’ emotion; and is instead rational, logical and impersonal. Thus, the ideal bureaucratic employee is constituted by the suspension of individuality, emotion and irrationality: “eliminating from official business love, hatred and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements” (Weber, 1948: 216).

Following from Weber, Van Erp and Verstricht reflect that the theories underpinning corporate organisations are constructed as “pragmatic worlds” which “do not reflect the inner world of the individual” (2008: 8). This, they argue, calls forth a ‘will to escape’ – from the restrictive rationality of the organisation and its demands. Here, this ‘will to escape’ could manifest in any number of ways, but one example might be disengaging from work in an effort to protect and separate the ‘authentic’ self. Nikolas Rose (1999) makes a similar point, emphasizing that the lived realities of work are totally distinct from ideological management models; and that rationalising human actors is always going to provide a partial understanding.

As a final consideration in terms of the positioning of this thesis, I turn to holistic, humanistic accounts of working life which indeed inspired the initial framing of the project. In particular, Studs Terkel’s 1974 classic *Working* (2004 [1974]) and Ronald Fraser’s *Work* (1968) and *Work 2* (1969) are emblematic of a humanistic impulse to capture, record and transmit human experiences of working. Terkel’s book, comprised of over 100 verbatim transcriptions of people talking about their work, suggested that in addition to wages, many workers value the chance to feel that they are making a contribution to society, as well as doing work that they find interesting. Terkel’s first oral history book, *Division Street America* was published in 1967, composed of 70 accounts of living in an American metropolis, and the effects of this on the human spirit - *Working* explores similar themes, but from the perspective working life.

Terkel, like Ronald Fraser, was a staunchly left-wing, with both being instrumental in long running political publications. Fraser was on the editorial board of *New Left Review*, and in fact published *Work* and *Work 2* some years before Terkel’s *Working*. It is reasonable to assume that it was inspired by Fraser, since Terkel was asked to write it by Andre Schiffrin, who knew Fraser and was his American publisher at Pantheon Books. Fraser, rather than recording interviews, however, solicited written contributions; “less anecdotal and more substantial” with both collections being “unambiguously socialist” (Anderson, 2012: np). These classic accounts of working life have inspired more recent iterations, such as edited collections like *Gig: Americans Talk About Their Jobs* (Bowe, Bowe and Streeter, 2001) and Joanna Biggs’ *All Day Long: A Portrait of Britain at Work* (2015) and reflect a sustained fascination with the conditions and experiences of working lives. Fraser himself asserts that this “widespread interest [...] points to the lack of occasion under monopoly capitalism for serious individual expression on the meaning and purpose of work” (Fraser, 1969a: np). This is precisely what makes these kinds of narrative accounts of working life both fascinating and essential.

## II. Theorising Boredom

Boredom is at once individual and collective. It is constituted subjectively, but also effected by environmental, social and cultural stimuli (or lack of). It is immaterial; but also causes hormone changes in the body. You can even be bored without realising you're bored. It is both emotional and physiological; banal, enjoyable, revolutionary and distressing. This radical ambiguity – and the multitude of ways that boredom has been theorised – make *boredom* fertile as an object of analysis and an analytical tool.

In fact, 'boredom studies' is now a booming area of research "which both recognises being bored as a reflective moment on the nature of subjective experience and actively mobilises boredom as a conceptual framework for sociocultural critique" (Gardiner & Haladyn 2017: 4). This is the critical division: boredom as an experience or state; and boredom as a conceptual framework for understanding the "issues and problems of experiencing meaning under the conditions of modern contemporary society" (Gardiner & Haladyn 2017: 4). Here, I seek to bring together literary, academic and philosophical sources on the theorisation of boredom as both an experiential phenomenon or 'state' as well as a critical theoretical concept, and in so doing demonstrate the context of boredom studies from which this project proceeds and to which it contributes.

### The beginning of boredom

*"The concept of boredom comes into existence with its doppelganger term 'interest' – these two affective states, in a sense, representing the two key poles of the modern subject"* (Haladyn 2017: 32)

The first appearances of the words 'bored' and 'boredom' are said to be in Dickens' *Bleak House*, published initially as a serial between 1852 and 1853. Lady Dedlock is said to be 'bored to death' with Paris and is described as being 'in the desolation of Boredom and the clutch of the Giant Despair'. However, the verb 'bore' – in the sense of 'to bore somebody' -- came about as early as 1768; and the noun, used to describe someone *as* a bore, was in common usage after 1778. Even before *Bleak House*, there are other wonderful examples: in 1823, Lord Byron published *Don Juan*, in which he writes that 'Society is now one polish'd horde, / Form'd of two mighty tribes, the Bores and Bored" (in Higgins 2014: np)

The exact 'birth of boredom', then, is murky, but related concepts such as the French *ennui*; the German *langweile* [literally, *the long while*], Latin *horror vacui* [translated as *horror of the void* or *fear of empty space*] are undoubtedly part of the evolution of modern boredom. *Acedia*, for example, has a

complex history stretching from antiquity to the late medieval period, where it fell out of common usage and ‘melancholy’ emerged in popular parlance. Melancholy, in Freud’s terminology, was a form of grief, but a grief defined by its being without a definite object of loss. The exact tracing of related concepts is useful for a more complete history, but most pertinent here is a focus on boredom as it emerges in modernity. In this sense, Elizabeth Goodstein, in her book *Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* (2005), provides the most comprehensive study to date. She argues for a contemporary *form* of boredom which emerges with the onset of modernity, and for particular reasons. She writes:

*“The boredom that spreads throughout European society in the course of the nineteenth century is thus less a new feeling than a new way of feeling – or, more precisely, a form of reflective distance that becomes a new attitude to experience altogether”* (Goodstein 2005: 3)

This thesis takes this as the most convincing argument for a modern understanding of boredom: that as a *state* it is not new, but the role it plays in our orientation to the world *is*. If boredom signifies ‘an attitude towards experience itself’ it is implicated in the meaning-making practices in which everyone is engaged in everyday life. It is an attitude which finds experience *itself* lacking. The arguments for the proliferation of boredom in modernity, apparent across a range of academic fields, have been succinctly set out by Yasmin Musharbash who writes: “the interdisciplinary literature collocates the emergence of boredom with that of modernity, linking boredom to secularization, an increased focus on the self, the belief in one’s entitlement to happiness, the work-leisure distinction, sensory overload, and standardisations of time organization” (2007: 314). In other words, the culprits of the perceived rise in boredom are: individualism, secularization, leisure and bureaucracy. What is fascinating here is that all of these phenomena relate directly to the role of work in society. Individualisation erodes social contracts and replaces them with a drive towards individual accumulation – through work, usually. Secularization eradicates the sacred and/or metaphysical enchantment of experience - but the religious undertones prevail in a kind of moral code around work. Leisure time arises only in distinction to work time; and bureaucracy – if, as Weber described it, it is an expression of the rationalisation of the world – is an organisational form which disenchant the world and creates a sense of mundanity.

So, are we now immersed in what Svendsen calls “a culture of boredom” (2012: 7)? It is certainly true that we have developed a pronounced cultural lexicon of boredom and have found ourselves with a cultural orientation which is attuned to the experience of boredom. In other words: we have very definitely learnt to recognise, label and experience boredom, and it seems

ubiquitous. The ‘beginning of boredom’, then – or at least its manifestation in modernity – is connected to the way in which society is organised and what experiences are available to subjects under modernity; and work is crucial to both of these arenas.

### **Theorising boredom: a philosophical perspective**

The starting point for modern philosophers’ theorisations of boredom is often cited as being either Soren Kierkegaard or Arthur Schopenhauer. Here, we begin with Heidegger, as his division between *types* (or ‘levels’) of boredom is particularly useful since many different understandings of boredom seem to relate to radically different sorts of boredom. As psychoanalyst Adam Phillips writes: “perhaps we should not speak of boredom, but of the boredoms” (Phillips 1993: 73). The thinkers are then arranged along a continuum, according to the positivity or negativity of their understanding of boredom.

Heidegger, between 1929 and 1930 gave a series of lectures which were published as *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* with sections 18 and 39 devoted to theorising boredom. In these lectures, he distinguishes between three different types of boredom: being bored *by* something, being bored *with* something; and, finally, *profound boredom*. In the first case, he gives the example of waiting for a train – we are bored *by* something, i.e. the quality of boredom comes to us as the result of *something* boring in the world and so boredom here has a kind of oppressiveness. In the second case, he writes that one might go to a party, find it pleasant, but then reflect on the experience and find that one was bored – this is a kind of retrospective boredom. Here, there is no specific stimulus that causes boredom: instead, it stems from “an emptiness that comes from within us [...] an emptiness in us is not fulfilled by the experience of the party” (Kenny 2009: 108). The key distinction so far has been boredom from without versus boredom from within.

In *profound boredom*, however, the phenomenon “overcomes us in such a way that we can neither struggle against nor evade it by passing the time, for we sense that it tells us something about ourselves” (Stafford & Gregory 2006: 163). This has been called existential boredom by other thinkers, and implies a certain elevation beyond the mundane, into metaphysical and existential territory. To put this another way: when bored *by* or bored *with*, we are not attuned to the existential realities of human life – we simply use these forms of boredom as an excuse to evade deeper questions over meaning and therefore uphold a level of inauthenticity. In contrast, profound boredom involves a claim to authenticity precisely because it speaks, he says, to our *Dasein* (our being; our existence). As Goodstein summarises: it is “a way of being into which we

are thrown [...] it does not define us as subjects, as individuals with identities in the everyday world, but rather exposes us as being faced with the problem of the meaning of our transient being” (2005: 325).

Heidegger’s typology of boredom is not without its critics but what is key at the most prosaic level is a distinction between *simple* and *profound* boredom; variously called ‘everyday’ and ‘existential’ boredom respectively. At the very least it is analytically helpful that there should be a distinction made between these broad categories, though one may lead to the other and these categories come with politically problematic baggage. It seems, broadly, that in early modernity, *simple* boredom has been theorised as a trivial annoyance, at best; and at worst, the territory of the uneducated mind or the moral failure of an individual who simply can’t amuse themselves. *Existential* boredom, in contrast, might be seen as an authentic state which denotes an elevation of mind. This speaks to the class-based dynamics of boredom in modernity – or what Kenny calls a sort of “intellectual elitism” (Kenny 2009: 109). This was a hangover from the time when “boredom was a status symbol” reserved for monks or the nobility as they were the only classes with the material necessities to indulge boredom (Svendsen 2012: 21). Nonetheless, boredom (of all types) now is said to have been ‘democratised’, having become available to all strata of society (Goodstein, 2005; Haladyn, 2017).

Heidegger also makes the claim that profound forms of boredom can be used as a contemplative stance. Nietzsche shares this view, seeing boredom as philosophically important “not because it offers proof of the meaninglessness of life but because it points to a need to reconceive questions of meaning” (Goodstein 2005: 262). Schopenhauer, like Nietzsche, also sees boredom as inevitable, writing that “life swings like a pendulum to and fro between pain and boredom” (quoted in Gardiner & Haladyn 2017: 7). He conceives boredom to be to do with desire and the loss of desire. Simply put: you’re either in need of something (which causes pain) or you have no desire (which triggers boredom). Crucially, he also suggests that there is no action or desire that can ultimately fulfil these needs, and the ‘pendulum’ will always swing back to boredom. Human existence, in his understanding, has an “unavoidable will to life driving the self ever forward, dooming it to seek in life something that is beyond its limits” as Gardiner and Haladyn write (2017: 7). The impossibility of escaping these two poles makes his account one of the most damning, but as Svendsen points out, Schopenhauer (somewhat inadvertently) suggests that:

*"Boredom is the most sublime of all the human emotions, because it expresses the fact that the human spirit, in a certain sense, is greater than the entire universe. Boredom is an expression of a profound despair at not finding anything that can satisfy the soul's boundless needs"* (Svendsen 2012: 58)

Kierkegaard, like Schopenhauer, saw boredom as a negative ideal; a force *against which* things can be set in motion, famously writing that “boredom is a root of all evil” (2004: 228). He quips that idleness – which the Bible quotes as the root of all evil – is, rather, “a truly divine way of life so long as one is not bored” (Kierkegaard 2004: 230). Hannah Arendt was to adapt this idea in her very specific philosophy of boredom. Her understanding of ‘the banality of evil’ from her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1994), originally published in 1963, initiated a key strand of research looking at the relationship between boredom and acts of violence. One might also ask whether boredom itself is a form of violence; or alternatively, as Žižek contends, it is in fact *doing nothing* which is the greatest act of violence (Žižek, 2009).

Like many thinkers since, Kierkegaard also imagines boredom as a necessary by-product of living in a post-Kantian world. In aesthetics, Kant’s so-called ‘Copernican Revolution’ dictated that beauty, as perceived in art, is not inherent in the art object itself; rather, it exists as a contingent act of judgement on the part of the viewer. Similarly, there are no interesting *or* uninteresting qualities inherent in the world around us, making it our task to perceive or construct *interest*. This inversion between subject and object meant that society entered a world where “personal interest and its maintenance are made the responsibility of the individual who must willingly find – or create – meaning within lived experience” (Haladyn 2017: 7). We are therefore blessed with a radical kind of freedom. But, as Erich Fromm argued in his book *The Fear of Freedom* (2001), too much freedom may be catastrophic. If we are no longer being told what to believe, then there is a risk that we no longer know what to believe *in*. The discovery of meaning thus becomes a personal voyage; and a task for which we are arguably ill-equipped (Svendsen, 2012).

Walter Benjamin extends Nietzsche’s treatment of boredom in the Arcades Project (an unfinished work written between 1927 and 1940), pairing a theorisation of boredom with the Nietzschean idea of ‘eternal return’, relating them both to questions of history. It is important to note that it is likely that Benjamin writes concerning the epochal scale of human history rather than individual experience, stating:

*“We are bored when we don’t know what we are waiting for. That we do know, or think we know, is nearly always the expression of our superficiality or inattention. Boredom is the threshold of great deeds.”* (Benjamin, quoted in Moran 2003: 176)

Here, he is at once alerting us to the impossibility of recognising authentic meaning, and also suggesting that boredom can be generative. In saying that it is the ‘threshold of great deeds’ he is not speaking in the shallow sense (i.e. if you’re bored you’ll eventually come up with something

more interesting to do); rather, boredom itself is – philosophically speaking - *a condition of possibility*. It suggests that *something should be done*. Crucially, Moran points out Benjamin’s assertion that the masses *mistakenly* experience boredom - which is “produced by specific historical circumstances” - as “a form of ahistorical and personal alienation” (Moran 2003: 178). This would seem to go against conceptions of existential boredom as something metaphysical or essential, casting it instead as a pragmatic response to modernity. Benjamin thus locates boredom in concrete historical processes, not as something which is fundamentally human in some abstract or ahistorical sense.

What to make of all this thinking on boredom? Firstly, as has been suggested, the experience of boredom involves our relation to time (which, like space, is one of the fundamental ordering principles of human lives). But, at its most essential, it is about meaning. Boredom is variously seen as a condition of possibility for progress; a negative ideal; an irritation. In most conceptions, it holds potentialities – and acts as what Benjamin called ‘a threshold moment’ which can prefigure things “becoming otherwise” (Anderson 2004: 745). However, Lesley Kenny quite rightly points out the difficulty of grasping boredom itself, saying that we can only really write about its epiphenomena. In this sense, many accounts address what boredom *produces*, rather than boredom in itself. For Benjamin, boredom is a defence against ‘the eternal return of the same’; for Arendt, it causes violence; for Schopenhauer it is an inescapable part of human life which proves the boundlessness of the human spirit. What is certain is that boredom – in all its conceptualisations – is now being more fully recognised as a valuable theoretical tool.

### **A psychological perspective on boredom and work**

Turning now to a psychological perspective on boredom, occupational therapist Louise Farnworth writes that boredom is “intimately linked with human occupation and meaning” (1998: 140). Farnworth’s article, tellingly titled ‘*Doing, Being and Boredom*’, suggests a necessary link between doing (employment) and being, which gets to the crux of the issue: that boredom is intrinsically related to *what* we do and what *meanings* we derive from what we do. I will discuss here paid labour specifically, though this by no means seeks to ignore boredom studies scholars who look specifically at *unemployment* and unpaid domestic labour and the gendered elements of contemporary boredom (e.g. Pease, 2012).

Boredom has been linked variously to a range of negative outcomes including: poor performance at work, high correlation with anger, accidents, absenteeism, increased errors, higher levels of stress and stress related health problems such as heart attacks; risk taking behaviour, drug and

alcohol use; job dissatisfaction; and even property damage (see Mann 2007). In addition to this, a study cited on Forbes.com found that millennials are nearly twice as likely to be bored at work than Baby Boomers and that employees who reported feeling bored were twice as likely to leave work or job hop in the next 3-6 months (Zimmerman 2016). Far from the romantic pose of existential angst, boredom in psychology and health sciences is conceptualised as a malady of both body and mind which has serious physiological, as well as psychological, symptoms. In laboratory studies, boredom has been found to cause the release of cortisol: a stress hormone. The Whitehall study, led by Sir Michael Marmot, which looked at civil servants over a ten year period, found that those who reported being bored at work were more likely to die during the research period, than those that reported no boredom (Marmot *et al.*, 1991). In particular, they were more likely to die of cardiovascular problems or heart attacks - and this is likely because of the health impacts of raised cortisol levels over prolonged periods, since increased levels of cortisol in the body correlate to higher risk of stroke, heart disease and early death. Boredom's significance for our health and wellbeing, then, is potentially huge.

Psychologist Cynthia Fisher's (1993) article *Boredom at Work: a neglected concept* is one of the earlier attempts at formalising the factors which increase the likelihood of boredom. She divides factors into: task, environment, person and person-environment fit. These are, respectively, the properties of the job-task, the qualities of the working environment (i.e. colleagues, architecture, work culture), the individual's personality and propensity to be bored; and the way in which the personality and environment fit together (e.g. that an extrovert might be more likely to be bored than an introvert in a particular type of environment).

However, since this thesis is concerned with the subjective nature of boredom – through subjective constructions of *meaning* and subjective constructions of *time* – the emphasis that psychological studies have placed on 'person factors' (to use Cynthia Fisher's phrase) is of great interest. The boredom-proneness scale is one of the most recent and comprehensive psychometric measures used to quantify this propensity. Originally proposed in 1980s by Farmer and Sandburg it proved effective in discovering correlations between boredom and depression, low energy, introspection; and of course, predicting boredom-proneness (1986). There are a multitude of other ways in which psychometric measures to gauge boredom levels have been configured (see Vodanovich, 2003 for a comprehensive review) - but as Isis Leslie suggests: "an exclusively psychological approach is inadequate to understand the phenomenon of boredom in the modern world. Instead, political, sociological, and historical theoretical approaches to its study are necessary as well" (Leslie 2009: 38).

## Experiencing boredom

Thinking now in more detail about boredom as an *experiential* phenomenon, occupational therapist Louise Farnworth writes that it is:

*“a subjective experience that occurs when one lacks physical or mental challenges. Time is experienced as passing more slowly. [...] signals are either lacking or, alternatively, are highly predictable, such as in repetitive process work”* (Farnworth 1998: 142)

Boredom here is understood as a lack of appropriate external stimuli – a form of ‘simple’ boredom to which anyone is susceptible. Still, this ‘situational’ boredom, related to external stimuli, is also affected by our different individual propensities to *be* or *become* bored. Consider this in relation to how philosopher Lars Svendsen defines boredom as: “basically to be understood as an absence – an absence of personal meaning” (Svendsen 2012: 45). To put this another way, when someone says they’re bored, the statement isn’t suggesting there *is* nothing to do, but suggesting that there is nothing *of meaning* to do. This complicates Farnworth’s overly simplistic definition, though her delineation between an *absence* of stimulæ or *repetitive* stimulæ as boredom-producing factors is instructive.

Boredom also has manifestations in the body, which is to say that it has observable physical signs. Farnworth writes that “its outward sign is restlessness (fidgeting, yawning, doodling, sighing), indicating that it is experienced as a bodily tension” (Farnworth 1998: 142). This idea of tension is interesting since it exorcises entirely the notion of boredom as an empty category since tension is a kind of active, wound-up state. That these physical ‘signs’ of boredom are experienced; that it involves a sense of tension, apprehension, impatience – explains the connection to high cortisol levels and boredom being a form of stress. Boredom, however, may be experienced as the opposite, as a bodily ‘looseness’. Artist and collector Dawn Parsonage created an exhibition composed of photos depicting people in bored states at the Bermondsey Project Space in 2019. The images variously show yawns, half-lidded eyes, slouching, wide eyed frustration. Alongside the images, she exhibited films of people sitting still, doing nothing for 30 minutes, with a stationary camera (see ‘Boring Anna’ for just one example; Parsonage, 2019). Anna’s eyes dart around, looking for a focus; she yawns, readjusts her hair, blinks slowly... sighs.

And yet, even in the case of simple boredom, the implication is that there is “a metaphysical component, e.g. issues of time and being” (Kenny 2009: 41). This temporal element is reflected in Farnworth’s assertion that time passes slowly for the bored person; an intriguing facet of the phenomenon which has been proved in countless experiments, and has led psychologists to

theorise that our own experiential timescapes are related to the type and amount of information our brains receive at any given moment (see Zakay 2014). This kind of ‘experiential’ time sits opposed to rationalised clock time, and denotes a “non-linear apprehension of qualitative temporality – of time as perceived, felt and experienced through the body [...] which is woven through psychological perception” (Bissell 2007: 284).

This sense of time - as *felt, perceived, experienced* – is crucial to the analysis in this thesis. Indeed, Daly argues that time as a category has suffered from “conceptual deprivation” in the study of work; that it has been treated simply as a “value-neutral reified quantum” where, in fact, it should also be viewed as a socially-constructed expression of meaning (Daly, 1996: 2). Henri Bergson’s theorisation of time and consciousness is key in this regard, though his impact on philosophies of time and subjectivity has been hugely under-estimated, especially within Anglophone circles (Richmond, 2007). Bergson first put forward the concept of *duration* in *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, first published in 1889 (Bergson, 2014). In part, it was a response to the understanding - in simple terms – that for the individual, time can speed up or slow down; whereas in scientific terms, clock time always remains steady. For him, this constituted a great inadequacy in the theorisation of time. He proposed that the objective measurement of time by a stopwatch or clock is only an abstract, artificial representation of science that people need for practical purposes: a misperception of the true nature of time. He writes: “we give a mechanical explanation of a fact and then substitute the explanation for the fact itself” (Bergson, quoted in Phipps, 2004: np). Instead “real time is *durée* (duration); where each moment flows with our memory of the past and appears to us as new and unrepeatable” (Vannini, 2002: 195). This is *intuitive duration* “woven through psychological perception and creative spirit” (Bissell, 2007: 284).

Literary and cultural modernism, in fact, was hugely influenced by Bergson’s theory of time. Writers at the time were soaking up his ideas and applying them to novels - Kafka, Gertrude Stein and William Faulkner, for example. Other writers who weren’t explicitly ‘Bergsonian novelists’ but were likely inspired by his conception of time as flow or flux include Proust and Virginia Woolf. Keith Ansell-Pearson demonstrates the point, asserting that Woolf was a serious novelist of time. In *Mrs Dalloway*, you get all the sounds of Big Ben punctuating the various events that make up the narrative of the novel; at the same time you get “these incursions of experiences of psychological time, where the characters are experiencing the past and memories of the past completely encroaching on their perceptions of reality, or the present” (Ansell-Pearson, Thomas and Sinclair, 2019, 44:50 - 45:37). This demonstrates exactly the contrast

between clock time and experiential time as a lived experience of *duration* – taking what Thompson and Bunderson call a “phenomenological view of time” (2001: 21).

As Vannini writes: “whereas we mundanely experience time as a dimension dictated by the movement of the clock - if we allow intuition to dominate over our habitual intellectual mode of inquiry we may become intensely aware of our lived experience of time” (2002: 195). It is exactly this *becoming acutely aware of our lived experience in time* which characterises bored time-spaces; and paying attention to time and our existence within time is exactly what causes it to be perceived as slowing down. This may be experienced as restorative or elevating – for example, in meditation; or, alternatively, as agitating and uncomfortable. Anyone who has ever tried meditation will be able to attest to the slippage between the two categories.

Similarly, when we *want* time to go faster it tends to pass more slowly, and when we want time to go slowly it tends to pass faster. These kinds of relationships to time are intricately woven into questions around experience, enjoyment, interest and meaning; and are part of the fabric of all lived experience, but especially lived experiences of work, where we are contracted to carry out particular tasks at particular times in particular ways. Aligning with the positive conception of boredom as a state with generative potentialities, Bergson proposes that the temporal dimension of consciousness is synonymous with freedom and creativity – something that is in fact reflected in psychological research showing that short periods of boredom lead to higher instances of creative thinking (Mann and Cadman, 2014).

### **Boredom and popular culture**

A cultural perspective on the phenomenon of boredom has – I argue – the ability to depict, critique and question boredom in particular ways. It is therefore no surprise that boredom is frequently tackled in cultural products, from literature to film and music. Many accounts of boredom in contemporary popular culture centre in fact around *working life*, and the way this is tied into the quality of experience we are provided in a working world characterised by a demand for accumulation – leading so often to meaninglessness, repetition and vacuousness (Phipps, 2004). One particularly striking example is Patti Smith’s recording *Piss Factory*. In the song, she gives an account of her first job inspecting pipes in an industrial factory. She provides a deeply poetic account of a dead end job and the struggle to retain a sense of forward momentum: “because you see it’s the monotony that’s got to me / Every afternoon like the last one / Every afternoon like a rerun” (Smith, 1974). Whilst popular music frequently reflects boredom in terms of lyric themes, the Buzzcocks’ song ‘Boredom’ speaks directly to boredom through its *form*: in

the song, there is a guitar solo which is just 2 notes repeated 66 times (Buzzcocks, 1977). The song was said to be a kind of satire, and is typical of the punk-era's rejection or received meaning and received identities.

In terms of literature, we also see a conspicuous concern with boredom. This is particularly expressed in the rise of 'existentialist fiction' in modernity – that is, novels defined by a bored antihero such as Kafka's Gregor Samsa in *Metamorphosis* (2014) or Sartre's Antoine Roquentin in *Nausea* (2000). This is a common theme in many of the most well-known literary offerings on boredom - the central character tends to be indecisive, drifting through life with a sense of aimlessness, anxiety and alienation. More broadly, authors whose works consider boredom include: Baudelaire, Goethe, Flaubert, Beckett, Chekhov, Proust, Ibsen, Dostoevsky, and T S Eliot. The subject of boredom is in fact "so comprehensively described [in modern literature] that any such list is arbitrary" (Svendsen 2012: 20). The key here is that these writers all belong to the modern period. More contemporary incarnations of fictional offerings on boredom are also presented by authors like Michael Bracewell (cultural critic and self-titled advocate of Morrissey's 'miserablism') who has written novels on alienated office workers and the ennui of metropolitan life in London at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Bracewell describes in a 2001 interview this sense of dysfunctionality that he sees:

*"Suddenly our generation had people in it who had been through that conveyor belt that shouldn't break down -- you go to grammar school, public school, you get your A levels, you go to college, you get a job. So how come all these people are having nervous breakdowns and trying to commit suicide and having terrible affairs? Real dysfunctional stuff. We saw it, this middle class dysfunctionality, people going steadily mad"* (in Marshall 2001: np).

One cause of this, could, conceivably be the disillusionment borne of *boredom*. His choice of the word 'conveyor belt' is interesting, since a lack of perceived autonomy over the conditions of one's life is a common precursor to and effect of boredom. Bracewell presents a particularly British version of ennui which can be traced back to the 'Angry Young Men' – a group of British playwrights and novelists who came to prominence in the 1950s, a disparate umbrella term including writers such as John Osborne, Kingsley Amis and Harold Pinter.

Barbara Dalle Pezze and Carlo Salzani point out, fascinatingly, that the industrial revolution, and the concurrent invention of leisure time as a form of time to be filled with pleasurable pursuits provides a link between "the invention of the novel as literary genre" and boredom itself (Dalle Pezze & Salzani 2009: 13). That is to say, the novel as a format emerges in tandem with leisure

time – which is the thesis of Ian Watt’s 1957 book *The Rise of the Novel* (Watt, 1970). It is no surprise, then, that many of the most sustained investigations of boredom – including Elizabeth Goodstein’s *Boredom and Modernity* (2005), Reinhard Kuhn’s *The Demon of Noontide* (Kuhn, 1976), Patricia Spacks’ *Boredom* (1996) and Allison Pease’s *Modernism, Feminism and the Culture of Boredom* (2012) – have come from the field of literary studies. All four of these academic books engage with boredom as it emerges in contemporary fictional literature. Pease stands out in arguing – fantastically well - that boredom is “an important category of critique” in terms of everyday life (2012: vii). What the treatment of boredom in literary studies can tell us more generally, is that boredom *must* be a cultural phenomenon, the nuances and experiences of which are often communicated and addressed through what we might generally call ‘the Arts’.

Management scholars have long been aware of the role of cultural products in reflecting and shaping attitudes to work. Carl Rhodes’ (2004) wonderful paper, *Utopia in Popular Management Writing and the Music of Bruce Springsteen* contrasts different perspectives on work in two pop-culture products. He argues against our suspicion of ‘the popular’ as being of limited use in theory. As ten Bos describes: the ‘popular’ tends to be thought of as though “it can’t be intelligent and it is linked to vulgarity, tastelessness, gaudiness and even to a certain laziness [...] by those who think that they do not belong to the populus” (ten Bos, 2000: xiii). This elitism is Rhodes’ jumping off point for his examination of Bruce Springsteen’s lyrics alongside popular management theory. As he explains: “my interest [...] is to examine and critique the potential for the popular to offer valuable means to understand work and organizations” (Rhodes, 2004: 2). His work on the links between popular culture and work also bridge literature, music, film, and images (see Rhodes, 2004; Rhodes and Brown, 2005; Rhodes and Parker, 2008; Rhodes and Westwood, 2008), and this impulse to bring cultural products out of obsolescence is mirrored in other literature in the field. Martin Parker, for example, also considers what Ian Fleming’s *Bond* novels can tell us about the changing nature of work and employment (Parker, 2018). Similarly, Peter Fleming and Graham Sewell use a piece of Czech literature written over one hundred years ago – Jaroslav Hašek’s *The Good Soldier Svejk* - to discuss modalities of organisational resistance (Fleming & Sewell 2002). In this sense these scholars are part of the theoretical footprint of this project, which also aims to claim a space for cultural products and their role in social theory and the living of lives.

Other cultural products like the BBC sitcom *The Office*, in which David Brent delivers lines like: “put the key of despair in into the lock of apathy. Turn the knob of mediocrity slowly and open the gates of despondency – welcome to the day in the average office” (in Bolchover 2005: 18),

act as a foil to management theory over the last 40 years, which has seen the championing of vitality, flexibility, fluidity, creativity - and even fun - in the workplace. This impulse is epitomised by writers like management guru Tom Peters, whose titles include *Thriving On Chaos* (1987), *The Pursuit of Wow!* (1994) and *Re-Imagine! Business Excellence in a Disruptive Age* (2003) – with the latter being billed as “a passionate wake-up call for the business world” (TomPeters.com, 2017). His success, according to theology scholar Stephen Pattison, lies in the fact that he offers his readers a collection of secularised business parables (1997). The storytelling elements of his books, however, go beyond an attempt to engage the reader: Peters even suggests – in *Re-Imagine* - that the chief purpose of managers is to act *as* organisational storytellers – a striking parallel with academic research on the role of poetics, storytelling and language within organisations (e.g. Phillips, 1995). Some management scholars, among them David Collins, assert that Peters’ storytelling has now become too anecdotal, too emotional, becoming “more a crank than a guru [...] text that all but effaces his once bold and insightful credo” (2008: 331).

Peters’ approach is an example of what I term ‘post-corporate corporatism’. This approach hinges on discourses that reframe corporate life and corporate concepts in radical, inflammatory language. It connects to wider narratives over the gamification of work, and the trivialisation or ‘rebranding’ of concepts like ‘chaos’. For example - rather than being a state of uncertainty and fear, chaos should be seen as a radical opportunity for freedom, innovation and novelty, if we are to adhere to the Tom Peters ‘thriving on chaos’ ideology. Another example of this kind of post-corporate corporatism can be seen in the rhetoric used in another popular management book, *ReWork* (Fried and Hanemeier-Hanson, 2010). The chapters have absurd titles like ‘EMULATE DRUG DEALERS’, ‘FIRE THE WORKAHOLICS’ and ‘MEETINGS ARE TOXIC’. This is advocating an approach to work which is couched in anti-corporate, radical language; and yet other forms of popular culture are awash with the very boredom that Tom Peters and Fried and Hanemeier-Hanson try to dispel.

If contemporary life is concerned with - and full of - boredom, it should be no surprise that our music and literature reflect this preoccupation. What is offered here is not an exhaustive list of boredom-related cultural products, merely a small selection to suggest its presence in cultural life. The key point, rather, is to ask: what does this presence *mean*? As cultural phenomenon, boredom is remarked upon, actually, very frequently - implicitly or explicitly - which leads Svendsen to assert that “boredom is not just a phenomenon that afflicts individuals; it is, to just as great an extent, a social and cultural phenomenon” (2005: 52). This cultural echo-chamber

both instantiates, reflects and magnifies an “imprint of meaninglessness” permeating a world which, as Ben Anderson suggests, tends towards being read as increasingly disenchanted and desacralised (2004: 741). It also confirms the fact that “boredom has become increasingly recognised as a critical concept that centres on issues and problems of experiencing meaning under modern and contemporary society” (Gardiner & Haladyn 2017: 4). As such, the cultural everywhere-ness of boredom signals some of its critical possibilities, particularly since as an experience, a cultural phenomenon and a critical concept boredom “gets to the heart of the complex relationship between everyday life and modernity” (Moran 2003: 168).

## **Boredom and Art**

More recent interest in boredom as a feature of fine art has emerged, confirmed perhaps by the recent publication of the book *Boredom* (McDonough, 2017), as part of the Whitechapel Gallery’s ‘Documents of Contemporary Art’ series which addresses key themes in modern art. In it, there are excerpts from Andy Warhol, John Cage, Valerie Solanas, members of the Fluxus movement and other giants of modern art; as well as cultural theorists from Georges Perec to Lefebvre, Sontag and Bourriaud.

The theorisation of boredom put forward in the analytical sections of this thesis hinges on boredom having three key conceptual themes. These qualities are: a relation to time, meaning(lessness) and repetition. Nestled within these themes are further tendencies around administration, systematisation and productivity. These themes are found in the literature on boredom across a range of fields – and, concurrently are precisely those which can be seen in relation to contemporary artworks as modes by which artists *use* elements of boredom and the experience of boredom to offer a critique or comment on the nature of experience. Among artists associated with the modernist avant-garde there is “an active attempt to use this lack of interest to challenge people” and in this sense boredom presents the possibility of creating meaning; outside of prescribed meanings ‘a threshold of great deeds’ as Walter Benjamin put it (Haladyn, 2015: 5). Here we might consider Warhol’s ‘stillies’ – his long-duration films, which address a kind of modernist-profound boredom. The film *Empire* (1964) consists of eight hours and five minutes of slow motion footage of a view of the Empire State Building. It reduces cinematic experience to the passing of time, and in doing so asks questions of what art is, how things are interesting, whether enjoyment or interest really *matter*. As Elizabeth Legge writes, “artistic techniques of boredom include repetition and postponement of a conclusion or inconclusion” (2017: 90).

Furthermore, Reinhard Kuhn, who equates ennui with boredom, points out that in the sphere of the arts boredom is not just an idea. Instead: “inextricably linked with the notion of time and space, ennui is not only the subject of certain works of art but also a part of their temporal fabric and spatial structure” (Kenny, 2009: 30). In this way, works of art can address and express “the tediousness, banality and frustration with which boredom dulls time-space” as well as presenting critiques, alternatives and moments of reflection (Anderson, 2004: 751). Haladyn summarises this sense of boredom being used as a moment of potential meaning-making thus:

*"In its most affirmative wilful state, the experience of being bored goes beyond this act of (personal) retreat and becomes an active position of (aesthetic) refusal that approaches boredom as a form of will. It is the creative and passionately affective potential of subjectivity enacted through this will to boredom that challenges the perceived meaninglessness of lived existence within modernity."* (Haladyn, 2017: 32)

Examples of contemporary artworks that address this notion of meaninglessness in relation to labour include works such as Nedko Solakov's *A Life (Black and White)*. The piece was recently acquired by the Tate, and was performed as part of an event titled *Artists and the City* at the Tate Modern in February 2020. It consists of a performance in which two workers continuously paint the gallery walls. One uses black paint and the other uses white. The painters follow each other around the space, painting over each other's work; a process that is constantly repeated for the length of time the work is on display. Acclaimed Japanese conceptual artist On Kawara is also particularly prolific in this thematic vein, creating serial works such as *Date Paintings*. Beginning the series in 1968, he painted a single canvas each day until his death in 2014, simply depicting the date of the artwork in stark, uniform lettering. *Reading One Million Years* is also concerned with the boredom of extended timescales and futility. The work has been presented in cities and galleries around the world. In it, two performers sit side by side and take turns to read a single year from On Kawara's ten-volume bound book, which lists each year from 998,031 BC to 1,001,980 AD.

These sketched connections between boredom and contemporary art – figured through relations to time, meaninglessness and repetition - will be elaborated in a later chapter, *Artists*, where I will discuss the artworks of Santiago Sierra, Tehching Hsieh and Ignacio Uriarte. The crucial thing to note at this juncture is Julian-Jason Haladyn's contribution to the field of boredom studies and its engagement with art. He argues that the type of boredom explored in modern art relates to “a subject's experiential lack of meaning within modern life. It defines a borderland of experience which confronts us with, rather than distracting us from, the crisis of meaning in

modern culture” and that *this* is why it holds such potential - in both analytical and political terms (Haladyn, 2017: 33).

### III: Theorising Boredom and Work Now

By now it will be evident that work and boredom have a history in which each is implicated in the other in often complex and contradictory ways. That is to say: work is advocated as the remedy for boredom as much as it is said to be its cause. On the one hand, when one speaks of boredom, the first motif one envisages is perhaps a factory production line. On the other, work is thought to be morally virtuous and beneficial for society and individual, holding at bay the dangers of boredom. I now discuss different perspectives on the particular genre of work that this project deals with - waged labour in the advanced capitalist West.

There is an interesting split occurring in cultural attitudes towards work now. On the one hand, a kind of zeitgeist-y anti-work sentiment; and on the other hand, there is a call for work to be an endlessly fulfilling, enjoyable pursuit, something we are tirelessly passionate about and enjoy. Attempts to redefine what work *means* and how it is *experienced* are at the heart of many recent management initiatives, which manifest as attempts to “enchant rationalized work systems” – in other words, as attempts to rebrand *work* as the (new) opiate of the masses (Fleming 2005: 298). Nevertheless, work is still subjectively seen as a means to an end by the general population (Sayers, 2005). This is not surprising given that even the Puritans considered work a means to an end, and the synonyms suggested by the Oxford Dictionary for the word are: labour, toil, exertion, slog, drudgery, task, job, chore or assignment (Oxford Dictionary 2012). This throws into contrast the way in which ‘work’ is conceived, perhaps having come to stand for just one form of labour under a particular system, when in fact conceptually work can also be an authentic self-actualisation exercise: just perhaps not under the conditions of advanced capitalism.

The anti-work sentiment is perhaps best exemplified by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams' manifesto *Inventing the Future: postcapitalism and a world without work* (2015); History Professor James Livingston's wonderful treatise on the subject, tellingly titled *Fuck Work* (2016); and Peter Fleming's *The Corporatisation of Life and its Discontents* (Fleming, 2015a). These contributions owe much to earlier schools of thought, from the Italian Autonomists like Antonio Negri, and a range of social critics including the authors of the Frankfurt School; all of whom demanded the right to work less and live more back in the 1960s and 70s. This was, as David Frayne summarises, “a vision of social progress based on a reduction of work” (2015: 2).

Even before the total disruption of workplace patterns by the global pandemic in 2020, the call for alternative ways of organising work was already strong. This was recently seen in Europe, with the French government considering legislation which entitles workers to ‘unplug’ from their work by not checking emails outside of work hours. In Sweden there is call for a four hour working day, and across 2017 and 2018 Finland piloted UBI (universal basic income) for a sample of 2,000 unemployed citizens. Also of note are the proliferation of utopian ideas around flexible working hours, hot-desking, collaborative office spaces and, even, offices with free beer and new ideas over the ‘gamification’ of work (Dale, 2014). In London specifically, WeWork seem to lead the market on this surge of ‘rebranding’ work and workspaces as aesthetically pleasing, vibrant, ‘buzzy’, spaces. This is mirrored in popular management literature around vitality, disruption, ‘ripping up the rulebook’ – and amounts to a movement towards what looks like a total denial of boredom in the workplace. This rhetoric of vitality is largely present in relatively ‘privileged’ white-collar professions. On the other side of the coin, as Angela McRobbie writes, truly ‘working class’ jobs are now more punishing than ever, with zero hour contracts, precarious work, and wages proportionally to other jobs staying terminally low (McRobbie, 2015).

In any case, the proliferation of anti-boredom rhetoric is at odds with worker narratives and the proliferation of boredom as expressed in popular culture; as well as the way that we all know – anecdotally at least - boredom manifests at work. This disjuncture provides just a small part of the justification for the thesis. The call for work to be experienced as authentic and enjoyable (*not boring*) when demanded by employers and corporations is viewed with cynicism, since the alienation of the wage-labour exchange and the power dynamics of this demand seem to preclude an authentically pleasurable working life (Fleming, 2005). However, the anti-work sentiment and the demand for us to *enjoy ourselves* at work share some common ground. In an attempt to satisfy both poles of this argument, it is becoming more and more common for work to be organised in ways that make it look *less like work*: in this case, we ‘work’ less (because work no longer looks like work) and – supposedly – this makes it more enjoyable. As discussed, this manifests in designing workplaces to look like living rooms or hotel lobbies, or letting people work from cafes, or changing the design of a job role so that it has a ‘fun’ title and a ‘culture of fun’ around it. The call to ‘not work’ or ‘work less’ thus fuses with the demand to work *more*, because if it doesn’t look like work, then... are we really working?

Of course, people want to enjoy their work, but if we are *demande*d to enjoy our jobs by the people who employ us then we are obliged to display the correct emotions, the correct level of

enthusiasm and to perform our happiness. As Nina Power writes: “to smile and be paid for it is to not really smile at all” (2012: 36). As Peter Fleming (2005) discovers, the necessity of being impelled to ‘have fun!’ can produce a cynical attitude among some employees. The call to ‘be authentic’ at work is a call to be authentic only *up to a certain point* and *only in ways which benefit the corporation*. This amounts to “an ironing out of ‘bad affect’” (Mcrobbie 2015: np), and as such, boredom is not welcome (Gregg, 2010).

There are some parallels to be drawn between this and a central idea put forward by Fleming in his book *The Corporatization of Life* (2015a). Life, he says, has become corporate. In this sense Fleming’s thesis also contests rationalised accounts of work and working, redefining the ideal employee now *not* as the Weberian ideal (impersonal, unemotional, rational) but as a *new* kind of ‘corporate’. Pzaz, enthusiasm, and even anti-corporate sentiment (denoting fearlessness, risk-taking and bohemianism) is a reintroduction of ‘life’ into the corporation. ...Or is it? Alan Liu writes that “we don’t need to be kind, generous, tolerant, accepting, sympathetic, or, in a word, social anymore. We just need to be *user friendly*, which is the same as being corporate” (Liu 2004: 172, emphasis added). This goes hand in hand with the idea that work is social and involves social capabilities and emotional labour, but that this is not being social or emotional in any ‘real’ sense – rather, we are being ‘user friendly’. This is to say that it is a manufactured sociality with clear limits, still, as to what emotions and affects are allowed (Gregg, 2010). This is just one of the reasons that “work and the corporation do not enrich our worlds or gift us with life” (Fleming 2015b: 158). Instead, they are *using* life as it already is, and stripping the life out of it. This is where Fleming puts forward his positive thesis: because capitalism uses what we already *are*, we are in a position to reclaim this for ourselves.

The qualities required of us at work tend to concern the use of vitality, energy, individuality and creativity. Boredom is not eliminated, but becomes hidden, as Mann discovers in her paper detailing that boredom is in fact “the second most commonly suppressed emotion in the workplace” (Mann 2007: 91). To re-state the overall claim: I suggest here that the generalised cultural shift which appears to demand that everything be *interesting*, *exciting* and *vibrant* has had impacts on the workplace. This produces particular cultural narratives, management techniques and subjectivities, and a situation in which corporations now are desperate not to appear ‘corporate’. As such, there has been a radical introduction of ‘pzaz’ and the co-option of other areas of life in order to try and redefine what ‘corporate’ means. Work is being rebranded as a vibrant form of self-expression; and indeed “when people spend their time in identity-affirming activities, be they at work or pursuing nonwork interests” they will tend to perceive less conflict

between work and life and therefore be happier (Thompson and Bunderson, 2001: 18). Whether ‘identity-affirming’ work is genuinely possible under the conditions of work in the advanced-capitalist West is open to debate, however.

Interestingly, some studies have outlined how the experience of meaning and meaninglessness at work (and the ways that people cope with it) in fact has common internal logics across varied jobs. Bailey and Madden, in a comparative study of stone masons, refuse collectors and academics, found that meaningfulness arose moment by moment in each job, and that these were moments where each worker sensed social connectedness; felt that they had done the job well; or could see the connection between their task to significance in a historical or future sense – for example, the refuse collectors experienced meaning when they considered their work as something that helped maintain the environment for future generations (Bailey and Madden, 2015). The implication of this is that meaningfulness can still arise in jobs that people may see as ‘dull’ or ‘dirty’; and, by extension confirms what Sandi Mann argues - that boredom is also “affecting jobs you would never expect to be dull, such as teaching, marketing, the law and management” (in Hollis 2007: np). This is particularly interesting because it suggests that the experience of boredom isn’t limited to ‘boring’ things or boring jobs; nor meaning to traditionally ‘meaningful’ jobs.

The wider political question then concerns the fact that boredom perhaps becomes “something that can be marshalled, in biopolitical fashion so as to uphold dominant mechanisms of social control and capital accumulation, especially through exigencies of work and consumption” (Gardiner & Haladyn 2017: 14). This echoes Nietzsche’s suggestion; that work in fact might be “the best police, i.e. that it holds everyone in check and effectively hinders the development of reason, of greed, and of desire for independence” (Nietzsche 1911: 151-152). And, in a further echo, the loss of desire is – in Freud’s understanding – the exact specification for boredom. Guy Debord, however, makes the claim that we have all become “hypnotized by work and by comfort: by the garbage disposal unit, the lift, by the bathroom, by the washing machine” (in Gray 1998: 16). For Debord, this is symptomatic of a cultural crisis which he terms ‘banalisation’ – the crisis being that we are comfortable with our own boredom and the sense of banality we are used to. This begs the question of whether a comfortably bored subjectivity plays into the hands of conformity, causing inaction (as in the Situationists’ slogan - ‘Boredom Is Always Counterrevolutionary’). On the other hand, we might ask whether certain forms of boredom “help prepare the ground for critical agencies that gesture towards, however tentatively or

inchoately, more autonomous forms of meaning-construction, in a world that always teeters on the brink of nihilism” (Osborne 2006: 14).

#### IV. Conclusion

*“Boredom itself [...] is an experience (however dimly understood as such) of the emptiness that lurks at the heart of human existence, an emptiness into which each moment fades, into which all finite things pass away”*

(Raposa 1999: 60)

According to Spacks, boredom’s function is as “a paradigm of the ordinary” (1995: 141). What this seems to suggest is that ‘the ordinary’, being synonymous with the mundane, is a sort of base-level experience available to all. And, as Bertrand Russell wrote in his book *The Conquest of Happiness*, it is vital to accept that “all great books contain boring portions, and all great lives have contained uninteresting stretches” (Russell 1932: 63). Boredom, it seems, is ever-looming; it is inevitable, and full of contradictions. This thesis explores this ambiguity, but proceeds from the assumption that boredom is also an inevitable part of the human experience. As such, it is analytically unhelpful here to pathologise it or exalt its restorative qualities; instead this project aims better to understand the experiential textures attendant to boredom in a workplace context, and to consider it in its context as a cultural, economic, structural and subjective phenomenon.

Broadly, then: what does it mean to have a geographical sense of boredom? Of great importance is the assertion that economics and experience are interlinked, particularly through the act of working. If the economic and structural changes brought about by the industrial revolution are said to have precipitated boredom in its modern incarnation, it follows that the changes we are seeing to work as a cultural idea or value (Fleming, 2015b), and as a practice (Mann, 2007; Paulsen, 2013) will have some bearing on the way in which we experience the world. Boredom is a key link between these questions, and this is precisely why a culturally attuned, philosophically rooted, creatively driven account of boredom at work is fruitful.

Nonetheless, it is of the utmost importance to acknowledge that “work today is a site of relative privilege when compared to the hard labour of past epochs” (Anderson, 2016: np); but also that it is precisely this fact which has allowed technologically advanced, post-industrial, post-modern, late-capitalist societies – the ‘reflexive distance’ which Goodstein tells us is a pre-requisite for the modern experience of boredom. Since modernity “unlike previous social formations, valorises the notion of perpetual self-actualisation, in which [...] daily life, in and of itself, must always be ‘interesting’” (Gardiner & Haladyn 2017: 15), boredom comes to the fore against this generalised

imperative for everything to be interesting – and this, arguably, is an impulse that is particularly present in the way in which we understand our own subjective experiences, particularly at work.

# METHODS

*This project is woven out of three empirical strands. The first is to do with contemporary conceptual art and the ways in which it addresses the themes of boredom and work. The second concerns people's narrated stories of how boredom seeps into and shapes their lived experiences of work. The third strand of the project concerns the way in which these stories of boredom and work can be represented, reinterpreted and communicated through creative expressions, most notably poetry. As such, this chapter is separated into three separate sections: 'Art, Geography and Work', 'Working Life Stories' and 'The Poetics of Work'.*

The research design of this project came out of an understanding that boredom is a complex phenomenon that is at once collective and personal; and that it also has something to do with the conditions of modern life. Similarly, I was drawn to the idea that work is never really just work; that it constitutes a space in which we are - as Studs Terkel wonderfully put it – engaged in “a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread” (Terkel, 2004: xi). Since boredom is tangled up with our ability to find meaning, and our experience of meaning - or meaninglessness - is tied up with work, it struck me that it would be productive to first excavate the philosophical underpinnings of boredom and work and then to enquire into these phenomena using a combination of creative methods: photo-elicitation interviews and subsequent display and interpretation of data using poetic re-presentation and photo-essays.

Throughout this chapter I also offer a consideration of the ethical issues that I grappled with during the research process. These ethical considerations existed at various different levels in the project, since the research involved myself as the researcher, ten participants, four poets, my supervisor and co-supervisor; and various other parties in more informal ways. To set the scene for these reflections, it is important to state that throughout the research project, the ethical approach has been framed by the understanding that “the use of qualitative methods to construct thick descriptions of the lives of ordinary people inevitably raises more ethical difficulties [...] in maintaining the confidentiality and privacy of those with a personal involvement in the research” (Cloke et al., 2007: 164). In addition to maintaining privacy, this type of in-depth research necessitates thinking about the following core ethical considerations: informed consent, reducing harm; and being wary of exploitation, power and reflexivity (from Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995 and Cloke et al., 2007). This project was reviewed by Royal Holloway’s ethics panel and was approved in accordance with the university’s ethical review policies (Universities UK, 2012).

## **I. Art, Geography and Work**

As outlined, the first empirical strand of this thesis engages with contemporary conceptual art as a way of ‘getting at’ boredom and work in new and innovative ways. Three artists are considered: Santiago Sierra, Tehching Hsieh and Ignacio Uriarte. It is perhaps helpful to briefly elaborate the journey that led to this methodological turn. Previous iterations of my research interest in work as a site of boredom and disengagement were expressed through analysis of literary representations of unhappy workers, and their internal struggles (for example Michael Bracewell's novel *Perfect Tense*, 2002). These investigations naturally lead towards exploring

scholarship looking at other cultural forms which consider issues of meaning and experience at work, ranging from the UK sitcom *The Office* (see Bolchover, 2005), to the poetry of Robert Frost (as explored in Islam and Zyphur, 2006) or the lyrics of Bruce Springsteen (Rhodes, 2004).

This notable concern with boredom in popular culture aligns neatly with the ‘cultural turn’ in Geography, but also connects the fact of boredom as both a cultural trope and quotidian experience with its methodological expressions, which are demonstrably concerned with culture and the everyday. Geography’s interest in culture and ‘the visual’, however, did not begin with popular culture. The arts – especially literature and the visual arts – have been “part of the nature and expression of geographical knowledge for centuries [...] long been recognised by key commentators to offer forceful contributions to the making and mapping of knowledge and worlds” (Hawkins, 2014:2). And yet, in the first instance, Geographer’s concern with ‘the visual’ was narrowly focussed on fine art – initially 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century landscape paintings in particular, where early agendas focussed on interpreting the representational qualities of the works, or exploring the hidden politics and revealing the contested nature of the image (Hawkins, 2012).

Hawkins summarises the lineage of the arts in geography thus: “We find arts practices proffering everything from an empirical naturalism in the service of eighteenth- and nineteenth- century geographical sciences, to the “soul” of twentieth-century disciplinary geography, wherein they provide a riposte to the “arid formalism” of a positivistic geographical science of the mid-twentieth century” (Hawkins, 2014: 2). Geographers have long looked to artists’ work as a way of thinking about geographical issues, and so in one sense, this thesis returns to a classic geographical tradition - fine art as an area of geographical enquiry. However, this thesis considers contemporary conceptual art; much of it non-representational, minimalist, and grounded in abstractions, gestures and performances. Contemporary accounts of art in Geography have always been critical of the notion of art as purely representational, and contemporary art - often emptied of its representational functions - already addresses and advances this idea.

Contemporary conceptual art in particular is well-suited to an exploration of boredom and experience since “the avant-garde aesthetic fundamentally questions the experience of meaning [...] through the subjective nature of art – as *experience*” (Haladyn, 2015: 88, emphasis added). This is where contemporary art becomes a fruitful line of enquiry, as avant-garde artists have – as their central project – tended to question dominant modes of interpretation and meaning-making. If modern boredom is not a new experience, but a new attitude towards experience *itself* - as Elizabeth Goodstein contends (2005) - then artists address this precisely since they critique

the nature *of* experience by providing *an experience*; critiquing the nature of work by *doing* work. As Gardiner and Haladyn posit in the introduction to *The Boredom Studies Reader*, a crucial question for boredom studies is: “how is boredom dealt with or shaped by specific artworks and cultural discourses?” (Gardiner and Haladyn, 2017: 14). Similarly, we might ask: how is boredom in working life dealt with and shaped by specific artworks and cultural discourses?

In engaging with fine art in order to reveal the textures and theoretical complexities of boredom and work, this thesis offers - on one level – a reading of a set of artworks, which is more in line with the more traditional geographic accounts of art which treat artworks as data. On another level, the analysis is also aimed at offering an understanding of boredom that ‘gets at’ something different from the other empirical strands, and uses art as a way to access worlds of work in a different way. The theoretical underpinnings of this approach will be elaborated fully in the *Artists* chapter as part of the analysis, but briefly: this empirical strand considers the ways in which conceptual artists have used work – its actions, material cultures and procedures – as a motif that addresses boredom; and, also conversely – how they have used boredom’s expressions and features to critique experiences of work.

## **II. Working Life Stories: interviews, photo-elicitation and photo-essay**

This PhD, being about something as subjective as boredom, necessitated the collection and investigation of people’s narratives, thoughts and feelings. The fieldwork process was developed with the intention of gaining in-depth, qualitative, richly textured data. The methods used were chosen as a response to the fact that “attempts to research everyday life often fail to capture the complexity of the mundane” (Phoenix and Brannen, 2014: 11). This data is therefore, on the one hand, theoretically informed and theoretically informative. On the other hand, it is also designed to trouble any simple confining within theoretical accounts, embracing the register of everyday life that resists conceptual capture; with a small sample size that is more attuned to data which is rich in depth and complexity.

The fieldwork, in practice, involved conducting two interviews with each of the ten participants, each of which lasted around 40 – 60 minutes. The first interview was a traditional semi-structured interview, at the end of which the participants were asked to go away and take 10-15 photos that represented their experiences at work, thinking in terms of situations, moments, items, feelings, places that represented or produced boredom or excitement. These photos were sent to the researcher prior to the second interview, where they were then used as tool in a

photo-elicitation interview (see fig 1 below for diagram of research design and outcomes of the fieldwork).

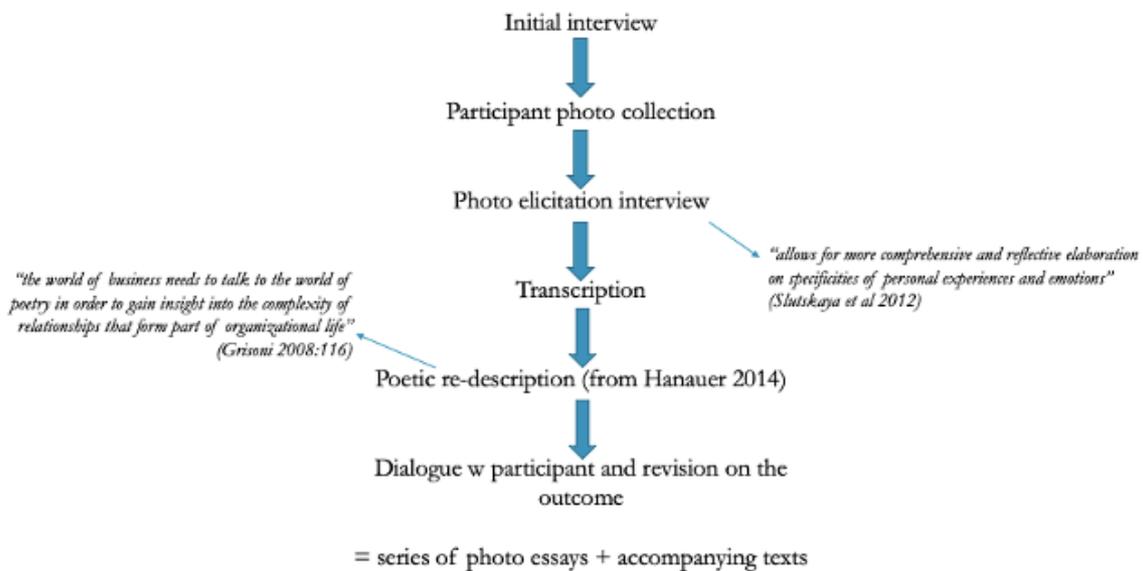


Figure 3.1 Research design flowchart

## Interviews / photo-elicitation interviews

At the turn of the century, Denzin highlighted the need to “re-engage the promise of qualitative research as a form of radical democratic practice” (Denzin, 2001: 23). As part of the broader ‘cultural-turn’, he advocates social research which is reflexive and dialogic, and which seeks to engage narrativisation of experiences as a political act. This ethical imperative is also echoed by Bochner and Ellis, who write that the purpose of qualitative research is that both the audience and the researcher “become more fully immersed – morally, aesthetically, emotionally and intellectually” (Bochner and Ellis, 1996: 4). Reframing the interview in such reflexive terms also brings to light the complexity of the research encounter. One element of this is a consideration of politics and power, something that photo-elicitation interviews are explicitly concerned with.

Harper writes that in essence: “photo-elicitation is based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview” (2002: 13). There are of course a multitude of ways to do this, and multiple terms used to describe this practice – from photo-voice, photo-novella, visual narrative, self-directed photography, auto-photography. The literature suggests that under any of these guises, it is always reductive to think of photo-elicitation as simply using images as

prompts. Rather, “the value of these methods comes from the combination of the verbal and the visual” (Bridger, 2013: 107). Similarly, there is a strong argument that the data gained in this process *adds* something, or generates *different* data – particularly “feelings, and memories [...] due to the photograph’s particular form of representation” (Harper, 2002: 13). In this project, I use photo-elicitation to mean specifically that the researcher asks participants to take their own photos for use in an interview setting.

One of the strongest arguments for this method is that it positions participants “as knowledge creators by placing the power of photographic representation in their possession” (Allen, 2012: 455). It is also true that “the process of making a photograph probably tells us more about the photographer than what he/she has chosen to photograph” (Warren, 2005: 865). Furthermore, in discussing participants’ *own* photos in an interview context, there is the chance for the participant to put *their* topics on the agenda and to experience greater levels of autonomy over the research process (Bridger, 2013). Moving away from the ‘researcher vs. researched’ dualism, much scholarship now seeks to have a more consciously collaborative approach to interviewing – though interviews have arguably always been a collaborative process of meaning-making. Photo-elicitation explicitly answers this call, in that “when two or more people discuss the meaning of photographs they try to figure out something together [...] this is, I believe, an ideal model for research” (Harper, 2002: 23).

It is also a particularly interesting time to be using visual methods, due to what some have called ‘the visual turn’ in recent years. Not only does this denote a greater attunement to and interest in visual culture (which also forms part of this project), but a concern with how to *use* the visual in research – from diagrams, arts-based practice and theatre. Photo-elicitation has its roots in visual anthropology, but is now being used in sociology (Pilcher, Martin and Williams, 2016), nursing and health research (Olliffe and Bottorff, 2007), organisation studies (Slutskaya, Simpson and Hughes, 2012) and critical management studies (Warren, 2002; Shortt, 2015). The field of organisational aesthetics has also been mining this theme – attending to the aesthetic qualities of organisations and workplaces, whether they be visual, sensual or artistic (Strati, 1999; Linstead and Hopfl, 2000). Though this project does not fall into this specific field, the overall concern with the ‘softer’ qualities of working life – e.g. aesthetics, emotion, affect, pictures, feelings – mirrors my own. Warren calls this a concern with “the so-called ‘non-rational’ elements of human-beings at work” (Warren, 2002: 224). Visual methods fit well with this idea of ‘non-rational’, emotional, sensory, experiential data; but photo-elicitation also addresses more broad

conceptual concerns in that: “due to its decentring of the authority of the author, photo-elicitation addresses some of the postmodernism of ethnography itself” (Harper, 2002 :15)

### **Sampling and recruitment**

A sample of 10 participants took part in the project. My first participant – initially intended as a pilot study - was drawn from people in my immediate vicinity: a customer I had chatted to on and off while working at a local pub. This then snowballed, although there was a sense that my sampling strategy targeted different kinds of jobs – those which I had understood might have different sorts of relationships to or assumptions about boredom. In practice, this theoretically-informed sampling strategy manifested as conversational enquiries directed at friends, friends of friends, interviewees, acquaintances and parents’ friends. I would ask if anyone knew, say, a chef or civil servant and ask for an introduction. In August 2018 I extended my search through my academic Twitter account and my personal Facebook account. Despite over 90 retweets to my call for participants, only two people came forward: one charity administrator and one graduate who was in the process of looking for work. They both, however, ultimately decided not to take part in the research.

It was exceptionally difficult – in this case, at least - to recruit people without some kind of pre-existing social connection between myself and the participant, however tenuous the connection may have been. This helped to build and sustain the trust throughout what was a lengthy and sometimes emotional process for the participants. This meant that the participants were drawn from a range of places: some were customers that I had chatted to over two years of part time bar work preceding the research; some were friends of extended family; some were colleagues from previous jobs or friends of colleagues. It goes without saying that acquaintances do not always make ‘best cases’, but we should maintain a critical stance towards the stalwart notion that strangers always make the best research participants. As Blichfeldt and Heldjberg state: “the interviewing of acquaintances does seem to add positively to interpretive research insofar it adds to openness, honesty, and trust” (2007: 30).

In the sample I recruited a rough balance of male and female participants, two people of colour, and a range of different jobs; however it is clear that the sample leans heavily towards younger people – the oldest participant was 54, but the others were all between the ages of 24 and 28. This shows one of the limitations to sampling from your own social circle. Given my own age at the time of research (mid 20’s) and my position as a middle-class, well-educated woman, many of the people I had access to were roughly my age and were university graduates. Interestingly,

psychologists Mirta Galesic, Henrik Olsson and Jorg Rieskamp detail how people tend to "infer how others are doing by sampling from their own immediate social environments" – in other words, your immediate social circle acts as the basis for your understanding the rest of the world (2012). This is interesting because it frames my participants' understandings of their own social worlds, as well as my own frame of reference as a researcher interpreting *their* worlds.

It is important to be aware of how my own positionality will have affected the sample available to me, as well as my interpretation and judgement of the data from my sample. However, with this research project, which required so much of the participants' time, and such a lot of personal information, the benefits of a theoretically-informed sampling strategy using my own social circle were apparent. Firstly, a greater pre-existing sense of trust between researcher and participant eased the process, which in turn made the respondent feel more comfortable sharing the intimate details of their daily lives. Secondly, it meant that the range of jobs available to me in forming the project were opened up opportunistically, as well as theoretically – that is to say: when I explained the project to people, on multiple occasions it happened that the person would immediately suggest someone they knew, alongside an anecdote about how bored (or not bored) they were. This was the case with the gallery assistant – I had initially been looking for a security guard, but an acquaintance suggested Poppy, and her testimony turned out to be one of the most fascinating interviews. Lastly, it is worth noting that all ten participants recruited were retained – that is, no one left the research process once they had started.

### **Research process: semi-structured interview**

As outlined above, I carried out two interviews with each of my ten participants (see appendix, fig. 1). In advance of the first interview, the participant was presented with an information pack containing a letter (see appendix, fig. 2) and information sheet (see appendix, fig. 3) as well as a research consent form (see appendix, fig. 4). The first meeting was a traditional semi-structured verbal interview; the second was a photo-elicitation interview. The first of these interviews was intended as a more general conversation about the participants' work history, their feelings towards their work, and their career trajectory. This interview was guided by a collection of pre-set questions ranging from 'what was your first job' to 'do you dream about work' and 'do you think your parents' choice of work had an impact on what you wanted to do?'

During the process I undertook various strategies in order to minimise distress to my participants. Julia Brannen, for example, suggests that 'sensitive' topics should be introduced gradually into an interview encounter, to reduce the likelihood of distressing the interview

participant (Brannen, 1988). Naively, perhaps, I had thought that asking people about boredom and their working life would naturally be a relatively safe topic in terms of not causing distress. In practice, the discussion of work and boredom lead to conversations about near-death accidents, regrets, deceased parents, unhappy memories and breakups – amongst other things. One example was with Connor, the apprentice bus engineer. The question I had asked was about his dad’s career as a milkman, but as part of his narrative he mentioned he was living with his then-partner. He said:

*“It gets a bit sore when I have to talk about this...”* (Connor, Interview 3.1)

I recall saying: “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to... [...] You can just not answer this question and that’s completely fine”. I also stated, as part of some of the more probing questions, that they could choose not to answer. Part of this was as a result of my knowledge of ethical concerns in interview techniques; but part of it was also due to my innate feelings of guilt at my probing and extracting information from them. My own feelings of guilt as a researcher were also expressed in my paying for any drinks and snacks the interviewees had whilst out at cafes or pubs: good research practice, perhaps – but also something I felt was absolutely necessary given that I had offered no financial incentive for participation. Given that “qualitative researchers frequently discuss the appropriation of stories and question whether it is ethical” it seems I am not alone in feeling this ‘researcher-guilt’ (Butler-Kisber, 2002: 234).

I also tried to be ethical in the way that I asked the questions. By this I mean that I tried to avoid doing what Cloke et al. call ‘unethical’ questioning – for example being aggressive or underhand (2007: 164). I also tried to be ethical in my *responses* to people’s narratives. I recall wondering whether I was over-sharing my *own* experiences during the interviews. This was not deliberate, although in hindsight I believe this was intended as a way to make the encounter seem a little less one-sided and extractive. They shared their stories; I shared some of mine, and we empathised with each other. It also allowed the participants to ask me questions about my experiences which was another way to re-calibrate the power dynamics that come from seeing the research interview as a one-way transactional affair. I worried, however, that at times I had misunderstood the tone of the participants’ words or misinterpreted social cues in a way that could have offended or upset the participant. Particularly in my interview with Richard, the management consultant, his sense of humour was often sarcastic – and when transcribing the interview recordings I felt that I had perhaps laughed when he wasn’t necessarily joking, or had not laughed when he had been joking. In the overall interview this wasn’t problematic, although it did make for a somewhat uncomfortable reflection.

My own positionality as a young female researcher definitely shaped the politics of the interview process. Some interviews were conducted in pubs which may have complicated the ‘feel’ of the interview – on one occasion, once the microphone was off, one of the male participants who was roughly my age said, ‘out of all the girls in this pub you’re the most my type’. There were a couple of these kinds of exchanges which were difficult to navigate at times. My approach was to gloss over them and although it was slightly uncomfortable, at no time did it feel unmanageable. This was partly because none of the participants were complete strangers and partly because they were a similar age to myself. This reveals another benefit of recruiting participants from your social circle: safety. I undoubtedly would have felt more uncomfortable if these comments were made in a situation where I knew nothing about the person, or didn’t know a few of their friends. It also speaks to the emotional entanglements and complexities inherent in the research process, particularly when conducting such involved research. I use the word ‘involved’ deliberately as Cloke et al. characterise ‘involved research relationships’ as the most intimate type of research relationship, where there is “a deliberate departure from ideas about neutrality and observational ‘distance’” in which the goal is not to seek essential ‘truths’, but to try to *see* the world through another’s eyes’ (Cloke *et al.*, 2007: 129).

### **Introducing photo-elicitation to participants**

At the end of the first interview, I introduced the participant to the photo task ‘homework’. All participants used their own camera phones. This was a pragmatic choice since all participants had access to one, and it also made it easier for them to take photos ‘on the job’ without looking conspicuous. The choice of how to frame the task and explain it to participants was one of the more difficult elements of this fieldwork. The explanation of the task went through various iterations, but eventually I settled on this wording:

The goal is to capture moments, places or things that say something about your emotional life at work. The brief is to think about the spectrum from boredom to excitement, but do also include anything you feel is important.

I was aware that there had to be enough detail to direct participants so as not to cause them distress or make them feel like they didn’t know what they were doing. One participant, Poppy, said:

*“I found it quite difficult to reflect, um, and... [...] I just found the whole task quite difficult.”* (Poppy, Interview 4.2)

Another participant, Anika, admitted:

*"I just sort of took pictures a bit willy-nilly"* (Anika, Interview 1.3).

Neither participant was clear about whether this was due to the way it had been explained, but I got the sense that my open-endedness about what I was looking for was challenging for them. Although I offered as much additional clarification as the participants requested and assured them that there were no wrong answers or 'bad' data, and that the 'skill' of the photographs was unimportant, I perhaps could have given a little more structure to the guidance. My approach, however, was in line with Allen, who recognises that "since the strength of the method lies in its ability to hear the voice of the research subject, [...] providing too much direction would inevitably impose my idea of what was important enough to shoot" (2012: 448).

### **Photo-elicitation interview**

The photographs brought to me by the participants created a set of images for each participant that said something about these different poles of their experience, from boredom to excitement. A total of 141 images were produced by participants across the project. This second interview, in practice, involved some preliminary questions and discussion points (often covering any areas that may have been missed in the first interview); followed by a discussion of the photos that the participant had submitted. There were, however, some changes to the format of the photo-elicitation discussion.

In my first attempt at the photo-elicitation interview, I asked the participant to upload the research photos to a Dropbox folder prior to the second interview. The pictures were then downloaded to my laptop and were available as a slideshow on-screen during the second interview. The participant was 'in charge' of scrolling through them, but I found that this resulted in a conversation about a linear succession of photos, which was not 'bad', but I reasoned that some kind of grouping exercise might facilitate a different kind of narrative, and that this would be easier if the photos were printed out. Oliffe and Bortoff in fact suggest that benefits also come from having the photos as physical objects, since it means that interviews are tactile, with "photographs were held, pointed to, compared, turned over, and passed between the researcher and the participant" (2007: 852). Similar image grouping exercises were used by Allen as part of a fascinating project exploring black masculine identity, where the photos were printed, numbered, and then grouped by his participants (2012).

In subsequent photo-elicitation interviews, therefore, I asked the participants to group the photos into ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ groups. I also allowed a third category in the middle; or offered that they could arrange them along a continuum if they preferred. This allowed for easier discussion *across* multiple photos in terms of the different themes, as well as attending to the emotional complexity of work and the ambiguity of boredom, since many of the photos cut across these kinds of distinctions.

During or after the second interview, I asked the participants to fill in a second form, the ‘Photo Release Form’ (see appendix, fig. 4) adapted from Liz Bridger (2013). The form listed each photo a participant had taken and gave them the opportunity to clearly specify which photos need to be anonymised and which photos should not be used in the write up at all. This was a completely necessary step in terms of informed consent, as well as maintaining anonymity and securing copyright permissions, as the participants own the copyright to their images.

Each interview recording (21 in total) was then manually transcribed by the researcher. Far from being seen as verbatim transcripts, the influence of the researcher in the typing-up process has to be acknowledged. As Lahman and Richard write, verbatim transcripts are a fantasy, since the translation process always involves “human error, fatigue, and deliberate alteration” (2014: 346). I was well aware at every stage of the transcription process of the contingency of the choices I was making. One particularly contentious one was that one of my participants, Connor, had a thick Irish accent, and this seemed to change the quality of his words and voice when translated to text. On reading the extracts from the transcript, the poet working with his transcript commented that Connor sounded angry – when this had not at all been my impression during the interview process; in fact I had found it so difficult to decide how to accurately convey the Irish accent that I had decided to type it up non-phonetically (i.e. as standard text), for fear of being patronising or offensive. There is an argument for phonetic transcription - back in 1945 Josef Vachek, the Czechoslovakian linguist asserted that transcription was falling short and should “do far greater justice to the actual acoustic make-up of speech utterances” since “it’s principal *raison d’être* is the optical embodiment of acoustic phenomena” (Vachek, 1945). At the time of making the decision not to textually represent Connor’s ‘Irishness’, I reasoned that the project was more about the content and meaning of the participants’ words. Though the reasoning was sound, I had not foreseen what impact this would have on the poet’s understanding of the participant. In hindsight, the fact that the poets encountered the participants’ words as *text* rather than *voice* gave them an entirely different positioning towards the participant – and this disparity was an interesting realisation.

## Evaluation of photo-elicitation

*“Participant-led photography and subsequent photo-elicitation interviewing has allowed us to explore meanings of everyday life [...] It has, to an extent, provided a means of capturing the ‘ordinariness’ of daily living; and the day-to-day practical activities and personal meanings embedded within personal, domestic and working lives”* (Pilcher, Martin and Williams, 2016: 678).

Having conducted both interviews and photo-elicitation interviews in this project, I am reminded of the classic anthropological paper in which photo-elicitation was first named. John Collier’s team was part of Cornell University’s inter-disciplinary research team examining mental health in communities in the Canadian Maritime Provinces, and as part of the research they conducted a set of semi structured interviews alongside photo-elicitation interviews in order to gauge whether the introduction of photos into the interview setting resulted in different or better responses (Collier, 1957). They concluded that “no matter how familiar the object or situation portrayed may be, a photograph is a restatement of reality; it presents life around us in new, objective, and arresting dimensions” and because of this, “a photograph commands interest, deflects digression, and helps the interview” (Collier, 1957: 859).

Aside from the claim that it eases the research process (something that I can identify with, as I did find that having the photos to discuss frees the researcher from the constraints felt by the responsibility to steer the interview), Collier makes another interesting point. He suggests - as Gillian Rose does - that asking a participant to question, analyse, and justify their own photographs creates a kind of distance from the everyday (see Rose, 2012). This means that whilst you are likely to get reflections that wouldn’t necessarily come out of a traditional interview, you are also dealing with a paradox. Photography is now an everyday practice (just think of the commonplace use of phone cameras) but it can also create this sense of distance from the everyday; and it’s fascinating that an everyday practice can produce these distancing effects. This was something verbalised by my participants. Many of them said that they found that the process allowed them to think about or bring to light parts of their daily life that they had previously not considered or noticed. As Pilcher, Martin and Williams put it, it “enables participants to make their familiar environments or daily practices seem different or strange” (2016: 683). This was shown in one of the comments from Anika, the civil servant when she said:

*“I guess it may be a bit more aware of when I’m - of what I enjoy and what I don’t enjoy at work.”* (Anika, Interview 1.3)

None of the participants overtly told me that they enjoyed the task. In fact, Connor said he found it “a wee bit stressful” (Interview 3.2), and Richard said it “made me think... in a way, negatively, about most of it...” (Interview 2.2). Poppy said the task was “a useful one – because I realised I wasn’t reflecting at all properly” (Interview 4.2). Alex, the chef, reflected: “yeah, the task was fine” (Interview 7.2). It’s hard to say whether the photo task made people more engaged than they would otherwise have been, but there was a sense across all of the interviewees that the photo task didn’t make anything *worse* or *better*; it just magnified whatever they were already feeling, or helped them work out what it was about their job or tasks that caused them to feel a certain way. “It definitely wasn’t harmful” as Poppy said (Interview 4.2). The most positive feedback came from the teacher, George, who said:

*“it helped me appreciate the interesting parts a lot more as well, because I got to put into words why I found them [the photographed moments] interesting, which then made me value it a bit more”* (George, Interview 9.2)

Practically speaking, the photo-elicitation task had limitations. I initially had wanted to interview a policeman who I had been in contact with, but there was trepidation about the task in terms of what he would actually be able to photograph, and this may have contributed to his decision not to take part in the research. Similarly, with George, the teacher, there were issues around photographing in schools, which will have circumscribed his ability to take photos that accurately represent the fullness of his experience. Richard, the Management Consultant told me that there were gaps in his photos because he had had meetings that day, but they were with quite senior people. Similarly, Emma, the barista, also noted that it was difficult to carry out the task because of the pace of her work:

*“I kind of kept forgetting about it because again as I’m sure you can tell I get very busy and there’s a lot going on”* (Emma, Interview 5.2)

Nonetheless, one of the great benefits of photo-elicitation is that it gives you access to places that you would never be able to go to or find out about in a standard research interview; those considered to be too mundane to discuss, too private or even ‘back stage’, as Katy Pilcher puts it (2012). In one of my research interviews this was quite literally the case – some of the photos from the sound technician, Theo, show backstage areas in huge stadium arenas across the US. Similarly, Connor, the bus engineer offered for me to visit the garage:

*“Yeab, see [...] I can bring you into a bus garage! I can do it, but it’d be murky...”* (Connor, Transcript 3.1)

I responded that part of the reason the photos are so helpful is because I can't go into everyone's workspace; that they enable the researcher "to 'see' that which is often 'unseen'" (Pilcher, Martin and Williams, 2016: 682). The participant photos also served an 'aesthetic lens' through which to explore my research questions, and "also as foci for reflection and discussion about those questions" (Warren, 2002: 224).

The multiple meanings that can emanate from a single photograph also make it a fantastic medium for attending to complex subjective issues to do with experience. As Oliffe and Bottorff wrote of their own experience of using photo-elicitation: "engaging with a single photograph often yielded narratives about binaries" (Oliffe and Bottorff, 2007: 853). The binary at the heart of boredom is that it is both a spur for action and a form of inaction; a 'threshold of great deeds' or a path to more of the same. It can also be pleasant or unpleasant; individual or collective; revolutionary or stifling. Similarly, many of the 'boring' photos my participants took were described as positive as well as negative, or had multiple meanings. When discussing their photos, many of them – particularly Poppy who waited 6 weeks between the two interviews - reflected that they had taken a photo for a particular reason; but that by the time of the interview they interpreted the image in a completely different way. This attends to the contingency of meaning, and the way that we can record experiences and then revisit those experiences with an entirely different set of meanings; much like experience and memory itself.

One of the quirks of photo-elicitation is that "unlike many research methods, it works (or does not) for rather mysterious reasons" (Harper, 2002: 22). This may be due to the subjective nature of judging 'the visual' – as in artworks or poetry, the judgement of what has 'worked' is, to some extent, is down to the viewer. Nevertheless, the primary concern is not whether the photos worked as art objects; more how they functioned as a way of understanding and communicating lived experience. As a method of eliciting narratives from participants, I would argue that photo-elicitation offers something far more nuanced than a semi-structured interview alone. In terms of describing experience, the photos show things that we can't verbalise; places we will never go; things we will never *see* – at least not in that moment or through that person's eyes.

Thematically speaking, photo-elicitation has perhaps most commonly been used to explore identity, which underlines it's suitability as a way of investigating subjective or complex understandings of experience (e.g. Croghan *et al.*, 2008; Allen, 2012; Pilcher, Martin and Williams, 2016; Cooper, 2017). Experiences – particularly experiences of meaning or meaninglessness and subjective experiences of time – are the key focus here, though identity of course is implicated in these processes. Bridger, in particular, emphasises the ability of

participant-generated photographs to explore spatiality and temporality (2013). It is clear from this, as well as my concern with contemporary art in theorising boredom and work, that the visual is an integral part of attending to the complexity of boredom in this project.

### **Photomontage, photo-essay and the uses of participant photography**

The photographs gathered during the research process, having served as an integral part of the interview process, also form part of the research output presented in this thesis. In this sense they are both a method and a form of research communication and presentation.

When thinking about the use of photographs in relation to studies of the workplace, it is important to acknowledge that they have their own complex history. Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, who expanded upon Frederick Taylor's concern with time-motion studies and work efficiency, are foundational in considering of the role of photography in work studies. What made the Gilbreths' project revolutionary was that where Taylor had carried out his research with just a stopwatch, they introduced the camera into scientific management. The Gilbreth's work was concerned with a similar goal - reducing waste and carrying out tasks with the minimum of 'motions' - and initially looked at bricklaying. But, pertinently, as academic and curator Sharon Corwin notes: "the visualization of efficiency in the Gilbreths' time-motion studies necessitated the erasure of the body of the worker and the standardization and abstraction of the act of labour" (2003: 144).

Considering the photographic documentation of work for these classic time-motion studies, it is possible to see this thesis as being opposed to that approach, concerned instead with re-stating the worker as the *producer* of their own experiential knowledge, rather than as a passive subject of management. Contemporary academic projects using photography to explore work are often underpinned by this value, and are opposed to the idea of using photography as seemingly objective documentary technology; let alone as a management tool. Samantha Warren writes that: "on one level all research practice is visual since we are in the business of describing researched worlds to our readers and students so that they can visualise our words" (Warren, 2005: 862). It is this idea of visualisation – itself a product of communication and understanding – that guided the choice to include the photos in the *Portraits* chapter as a photo essay.

When considering how to use the images and present them in a photo essay format, I had the good fortune in the autumn of 2019 to meet with Dawn Parsonage, an artist who had just had an exhibition at the Bermondsey Project Space called *The Boring Exhibition* (June 25 2019 – July 6

2019). Her work uses found photography, and so the exhibition consisted of a collection of found photos depicting moments of boredom alongside some of her own photographs of bored friends and colleagues. We discussed our routes into being interested in boredom, and I also asked for her insight on how best to visually present the fieldwork images within each case study. The photo essays in the *Portraits* chapter are the result of this exchange, with the conceptual and experiential concerns around boredom – sameness, repetition, lack of variation – resulting in a set of black and white index-style prints presented alongside the poems and texts for each participant: tiny grey windows into each person’s experience.

As Foster and Lorimer write: “collaboration can also be used to ask awkward questions of your own conventions and accepted working practice (...) for a geographer, it is counter-intuitive to let images offer a lead and structure (...) the simple process of sequencing images before writing text” becomes an opportunity (2007: 428-429). Within the *Portraits* chapter this was explored, since I had access to the images before the poems, and the images are what lent structure to the second interview with each participant. In order to reflect this, as well as provide a helpful framing to the reader, each case study has a title and feature image, followed by the poems and images; and lastly the narrative text outlining their story. In this sense *Portraits* is a slightly misleading title in that it suggests a unidirectional process in which the researcher observes the sitter and creates the portrait. This process, in fact was more collaborative, and through displaying their photos alongside their words in poetic form, as well as my own narrated version of their story we see instead three different portraits which reveal slightly different versions of the truth of their experience.

The images, when set alongside the poetry, constitute a richly textured representation of the data with collaboration and creativity at its heart. It also reflects a concern with producing engaging research ‘texts’ that do different things with data. As Mia Hunt writes of using visual essay as a communicative research practice, “there is a nuanced politics to the liveness of the present; fragments, stories, and voices” (Hunt, 2016: 270). The mixed-methods approach, positioning text and images alongside each other – as Hunt does in her paper – makes use of the images as both a methodological tool and research output; and is a way in which we can communicate this complexity and nuance - by painting a visual, as well as textual, representation of lived experience.

### **III. The Poetics of Work: poetry as research practice**

In tandem with the concern over boredom as an *experience*, and in thinking about how this features in working life, this project is also concerned with how creative methods can help us to understand, analyse and communicate research data more generally. The ‘creative impulse’ running through the project should by now be evident, and in the third empirical strand of the research process, this is again coupled with a collaborative impulse. In the latter stages of the research process, interview transcripts were processed and passed on to one of four poets, who were asked to create poems using the interview data. I refer to this process here as poetic representation.

### **Poetry in social research**

Poetry is part of a timeless tradition of story-telling, but is not a widely-accepted or widely-used as part of the toolkit that social researchers have to tell stories. As Carl Leggo writes, it is a “relatively recent but rapidly evolving research enterprise”, with the vast majority of poetically-informed scholarship emerging in the last two decades (Leggo, 2008: 169). Butler-Kisber writes that increasingly scholars have realised that “the more traditional, textual descriptions of qualitative findings do not adequately reflect the complexity of studying human behaviour” (2002: 229). Creative methods more generally can be seen as a response to this ‘crisis of representation’ which prompted scholars in the social sciences to seek adequate means of describing and capturing social reality (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

A 2012 edited collection by Monica Prendergast, Carl Leggo and Pauline Sameshima uses the term ‘poetic enquiry’ as an umbrella term for the practice of using poetry in research (also echoed in Leavy, 2014). ‘Poetic enquiry’ has been sub-divided or referred to as ‘poetic transcription’ (Glesne, 1997), ‘found data poetry’ (Emmett *et al.*, 2011), ‘prose poems’ (Clarke *et al.*, 2005), ‘transcription poems’ (Lahman and Richard, 2014), ‘poetic ethnography’ (Hanauer, 2014), or ‘research poems’ (Furman, Lietz and Langer, 2006). In fact, in a comprehensive review of poetry and its use in social science, Prendergast found over 40 different terms (Prendergast, 2009: 544). I choose the term ‘poetic representation’, after Laurel Richardson (1994). This term appeals because the poetry in this project isn’t *just* descriptive or a static representation – the point is more that Richardson stresses the *re*-presentation, as an iterative process that follows *after* the communication of experience. This is particularly prescient as in this project it is not the researcher carrying out the poetic representation, but an independent poet.

## Poetry and geography, and a note on collaborative methods

In the field of Geography, much of what we could call research poetry positions ‘Geography’ as necessarily being about as ‘place’; almost as if there’s a need to keep one foot on solid ‘geographic’ ground in order to put the other into the more ‘adventurous’ realm of poetry. This is limiting when we consider the breadth and depth of topics covered in other disciplines. Poetic enquiries from Sociology, Literary Studies, Social Work and Anthropology have tackled subjects as broad as living with HIV (Poindexter, 2002b; 2002a), being an Arab-American trainee teacher in America in the aftermath of 9/11 (Newton, 2005), homelessness and mental illness (Clarke *et al.*, 2005; Carroll, Dew and Howden-Chapman, 2011), being a female soldier (Hicks, 2011), family memories of the Kindertransport (Hanauer, 2012), elderly voices and illness (Emmett *et al.*, 2011), experiences of suffering in cancer patients (Öhlen, 2003) and living in Israel through the Al Aqsa Intifada of 2000-2004 (Bassett, 2012).

Tim Creswell is one Geographer who has used poetry / becoming a poet in his work – his paper *Geographies of Poetry/Poetries of Geography* is precisely “a reflection on the process of becoming a poet as a geographer” (Cresswell, 2014: 141). In fact, this was a process that I was intentionally *not* interested in. I very deliberately wanted to collaborate with poets, and to not become the ‘poet’ myself. Having produced my own research poetry in a previous project, I had found it almost impossible to adequately describe what exactly I had done to create the poems, and felt that I couldn’t be sure that what I had produced even ‘counted’ as poetry. As Poindexter points out, creating research poetry from transcripts “is so reliant on the gut feeling and literary hunches of the researcher [...] The aesthetic and emotional criteria are very personal” (2002b: 2).

There was also a personal desire not to produce ‘bad’ poetry; something which has been discussed in a number of papers in which the researcher features as both researcher and poet. This raises a key philosophical debate in arts-based research – the question of whether research poetry is ‘art’ or just ‘art-like’ (Prendergast, 2009). Should research poetry be subject to the same standards of critical analysis as poetry? Should researchers be trained in the art of poetry? Piirto has a decisive view on this in her tellingly titled paper ‘The Question of Quality and Qualifications: writing inferior poems as qualitative research’ (2002). Piirto is both a trained writer and an academic, and emphatically makes the point that researchers should have proper training in the arts in order to qualify themselves to use this method of enquiry. Tim Creswell is one geography scholar who has taken this route, gaining a second PhD in poetry. It seems I am in good company in my anxiety over my creative abilities - Straughan (2015), Revill (2004) and Wylie (2010) have all expressed their struggles in various sorts of creative-geographic pursuits,

from taxidermy to performing French folk music. However, as Hawkins suggests, perhaps “we might reflect on skill and its acquisition less in terms of identifying a ‘lack’ and rather more through a celebration of the possibilities of learning and doing” (Hawkins, 2018: 974).

Lahman and Richard, on the other hand, advocate the use and practice of ‘good enough research poetry’ – because “without the space to poke around and to think poetically, the converging of science and art will remain a site of tension, embracing some and excluding others” (2014: 352). This is a sentiment that feels genuinely inclusive – but even they admit that this is only “while the research poet hones their craft” (ibid.). So does this really leave space for amateur poetry? If, as Prendergast contends: “the best examples of inquiry poems are good poems in and of themselves” then perhaps this work is surely best left to those with the knowledge and skills to carry out this work (2009: 545). Whilst I do not support the exclusionary nature of this argument, I appreciate the value of poets’ knowledge and training, and was excited to have the chance to collaborate on this project and to see how the poets’ expertise informed the research processes and outputs.

In this project, the choice to collaborate with poets was informed by the arguments elaborated above. However, it was also a pragmatic choice which came from a desire to *use* the expertise of poets as a counterweight to my own academic knowledge in exploring the possibilities of collaborative research. This relates to a wider body of work which discusses the benefits of collaborative research projects. Harriet Hawkins writes fervently on the creative impulse in geography as a powerful force for exploration, particularly in the arts: “the potency of this investigative force is being increasingly realised across geography, as we see everyone from geomorphologists to climate scientists and economic geographers turn to the possibilities of working alongside creative practitioners” (Hawkins, 2018: 978).

The rise of interdisciplinarity – or, indeed, post-disciplinarity – is tied to this collaborative impulse, and constitutes an acknowledgement of the value and legitimacy of different knowledges and skills; as well as the different ways that these skills and knowledges can be co-produced or work together. As Foster and Lorimer contend, there are myriad ways that geography and the arts have already been intertwined, even if unacknowledged:

“Geographers look to artists to help their research ‘outreach’ to communities; geographers have been curators of art exhibitions; artists exhibit and perform at geography conferences, as well as offer papers; university departments host artists’ residencies; artists contribute to geographers’ research projects; geographers evaluate the social impacts of public art projects; artists employ a

spatialized vocabulary to label, describe and explain their work that geographers recognize as their own” (Foster and Lorimer, 2007: 425-246).

Now, however, geographers and artists “are alive to our affinities, shared interests and values, and alert to the opportunities that exist for their fuller investigation” (Foster and Lorimer, 2007: 425). Hawkins argues that we should be using the arts not just as ‘source material’, but as a way to “recognise the expanded role of artistic and creative practice-based research within geographical scholarship” (Hawkins, 2014:3). This thesis addresses this call in multiple ways. Firstly, by using artists’ work as a source of insight about the way that work and boredom are represented, critiqued and theorised. Secondly, by using collaborative interview methods which aim to position the participant as the expert in their own experience rather than a *subject* the researcher extracts information from – another form of creative collaboration. Thirdly, by collaborating with poetic practitioners to co-produce the interpretation and presentation of fieldwork data, using poetry as a mode of analysis and interpretation as well as a research output.

### **Poetry and work**

There is a narrow – but incredibly rich - vein of work which tackles the use of poetry in organisation studies. According to Darmer and Grisoni (2011) there are five main approaches to the use of poetry in organisational research (though these also could apply more generally):

- 1) Poetry applied to improve the performance/ management of an organisation
- 2) Poetry seen as a way to gain new, better or different understandings of organisations and management
- 3) Poetry used as a way to spark creativity and innovation in organisations
- 4) The work of a poet or a specific poem analysed for insight on organisations or management
- 5) Poetry used to understand or develop research or specific aspects of the research process.

Crudely, the distinction might be between two approaches. The first is the use of poetry in the research *process* itself – for example as a tool to reflect on your own experiences of the research process (e.g. Faulkner, 2005) or as a way of gathering data (see Grisoni's use of collaborative poetry-writing in a workshop format, 2017). The second is the use of poetry as a way of *presenting* or *communicating* research data. In this thesis poetry certainly functions in the latter of these two categories: as a representational tool to communicate research stories about each participants’ experiences. The process of producing the extracts to send to the poets and supervising the production of the poetry, however, also functions as a form of analysis - a way of processing and understanding the data. Viewing your data through a poetic lens, as Butler-Kisber writes, “will

bring the researcher closer to the data in different and sometimes unusual ways that can yield new and important insights” (2002: 235). This is especially true since “poetry is a form of attention” as Donald Revell writes – it is the product of *paying attention* to things in a different way (in Faulkner, 2009: 5).

### **The research process**

The seedling of the idea to use poetic representation as part of this project was planted in 2016, whilst I was completing an MA in cultural geography. David Ian Hanauer, a Professor of English and Applied Linguistics at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, had written a paper named *Being in the Second Iraq War: A Poetic Ethnography* (Hanauer 2014). It was the first paper I’d read which used poetry as a research method, and it had immediately struck me as one of the most poignant and emotionally affecting research papers I had ever read. In it, Hanauer interviews an American soldier who recounts his experiences from the second Iraq war in 2003, and presents a series of poems constructed using the soldier’s words. The subject matter itself is of course emotive, but it was also the *way* in which he had conducted and presented the research which amplified this effect: the *method*.

Hanauer sets out his method simply, explaining that all the words in the poems are the direct words of the participant, but that he had arranged them poetically. This has a number of benefits. As Hanauer outlines, research poetry “has the ability to makes someone else’s experience accessible and it is the closeness to lived experience with all its paradoxes, details, pain, joy and contradictions that elucidates and counters simplistic, dichotomous notions” (2014: 83). The set of poems provided a richly textured, emotive record of lived experience which complicates – in Hanauer’s case - the dominant political narratives around the Iraq war. In social research, poetry has been used as a part of what he calls ‘a tradition of critical ethnography’ (2014). By ‘critical ethnography’ he means research that offers a way of presenting, explaining and offering access to individual or personal experiences as a counterweight to hegemonic or culturally dominant discourses. It became apparent that due to the nebulous and intensely subjective elements of boredom, using poetry as a way to explore and re-present participants’ lived experiences of working life held great promise; particularly as a way of getting ‘under the skin’ of one of the most ubiquitous human experiences.

After transcribing each of my interview recordings, the transcripts were edited. Each of the ten participants was to be treated as an individual case study, so each set of interviews was grouped together into ten longer transcripts before the editing began. Initially this involved redacting any

identifiable details like names of people, places, places of work, so as to maintain the anonymity of the participants. The next stage was to prepare extracts of the transcript to be passed on to the poet. The scripts were sifted, looking for statements that were explicitly or implicitly relevant to the question of boredom, as well as extracts related to my key conceptual categories concerning boredom (time, meaning and repetition). I also looked for emotionally engaging imagery and contextual information that seemed interesting; but the process was selection was of course very intuitive, emotional and personal. I also considered any themes that the participant had brought up two or more times, and phrases that had seemed important to the participant. This was a lengthy process of gradual refinement as some of the transcripts were in excess of 27,000 words, and my goal was to give the poets roughly 1,000 – 2,000 words to work with.

These extracts were then passed on to one of four poets. Two of the poets were recruited via a contact at Goldsmiths University. Jack Emsden, at the time of the research, was completing a creative writing MA at Goldsmiths, and Emily Foster was set to start the MA course there the following year. The third, Lewis Parker, is a poet I recruited for a corporate event but who was also able to participate in this project. Lastly, Sian Ephgrave is a scholar who I had met at a conference in 2018. Her PhD project uses poetry to explore the experiences of school teachers, but she is also a poet herself. Each poet had been briefed on the process by which they were to create the poems by way of an information sheet (see appendix, fig. 5) and a short meeting to discuss any questions or concerns. I also provided them with a copy of the Hanauer paper *Being in the Second Iraq War* (2014). Initially there were no limits placed on the form, length or content of the poem(s) – other than that they were to rearrange the words of the participant.

As the research progressed, there were some changes made to the poetic representation process. For example, when I handed over the first transcript to Jack, I had handed over 3,500 words of the transcript for him to work with. Jack explained that he felt anxious about capturing the themes that I wanted. It became apparent that handing over this much text was making it more difficult for the poets to ‘find’ the themes in the text. After this point the transcripts sent to the poets were a maximum length of 1,000 - 2,000 words.

On reflection, handing over less of the transcript was also helpful as it meant that the resultant poems were closely aligned to the central themes of the research project. The key questions this thesis is concerned with are around boredom, but because there was so much *other* fascinating stuff that came up, there was a tendency by the poets (in the early stages especially, when the extracts were less focussed) to be attracted to writing about other themes; for example, in the case of the bus engineer, Connor, his struggle with dyslexia. This in fact mirrored my own

interests and fascination with things *other* than boredom. I had found these themes fascinating and incorporated them into the transcript I had handed over – which is indicative of my own impulse to remain holistic, whilst also tackling the central concerns of the project. In Connor’s case Jack produced a set of poems, some of which directly tackled boredom; some which were more contextual. In fact, in around 50% of the cases the poets responded to a single transcript with more than one poem – not all poems are included in this thesis.

### **Participants’ responses to the poems – whose voice?**

In terms of the responses to the poems, I had varied feedback from participants. In one case, the participant felt that her words had been misinterpreted. Anika, the civil servant, felt that the poems criticised the government for its inefficiency, and she told me that this isn’t really how she felt. There are potential explanations for this disconnect. Firstly, there was a gap of 18 months between Anika completing the interviews and receiving her poem. She admitted “I think I’d give quite a different interview now” (fieldnotes, 21.05.2019). Also, at the time the poem was being written Britain was in the midst of Brexit, and there was a widespread feeling of disillusionment with government, which perhaps the poet, Jack, had read into it. Jack had spoken to me at length about his anxiety over twisting people’s words, so I was surprised that there was such a perceived disconnect between the transcript extracts and the poem. In other cases, people reported that their poem “sums up how I feel pretty well” (George, fieldnotes, 16.04.2019). In one case, I heard from a mutual acquaintance that one of the participants had said “I didn’t want to upset her but I thought the poems were shit” (fieldnotes, 28.06.2019). This fascinated me, and I reflected on how interesting it was that, seemingly, none of the papers on poetic re-presentation seem to report these kinds of negotiations or moments of dissonance.

In fact, from the scholarship on poetic re-description, it would seem that participants are nearly always pleased with the poems produced. Butler-Kisber recounts that one of her participants “wanted this story told for her. [...] she was gratified that I had spent time trying to understand and give voice to her experience” (2002: 234). Additionally, Corinne Glesne’s 1997 paper, *That Rare Feeling* is a wonderfully rich and evocative paper in which she presents recollections from Dona Juana, an 86 year old professor at the University of Puerto Rico, in poetic form. However, Glesne’s paper contains none of the awkwardness and contradictions that I experienced in the research process. We have to be wary of being so creative with our writing so as to obscure the grit and awkwardness inherent in the fieldwork process.

It is also important to reflect on the fact that the poems are formed of a combination of the participants' experiences, my filtering, and a poet's interpretation of their words. This raises the question of whose voice we are hearing when we read these poems, particularly as the poets were detached from the interview and transcription process. The only data the poets saw were the 1-2,000 words from an anonymised transcript. I had considered sharing the photos with them at one point before deciding it might detract from their understanding of the participants' narrated experiences – admittedly I also was curious to see whether the two sources interpretations would conflict or cohere. Glesne classifies poetic re-presentation as offering a 'third voice' that comes from the communication between the participant and researcher and develops during the poetic interpretation (1997). Does the introduction of another party (in this case, an independent poet) change this? Perhaps not as much as we might think, as Leavy argues that: "likewise, insights from a literature review or theoretical scholarship may be a part of this third voice" (Leavy, 2014: 84).

Leavy also argues that poetry offers a way of negotiating tensions between a commitment to the participant's voice and our own political motivations and insights as researchers (2014). Notwithstanding the explorative nature of the project in experimenting with creative methods and collaboration, the central goal is still to hear the participants' voice; to understand their experience and to represent that experience. This commitment to representing the participants' lived experience is precisely what gave rise to the idea of setting the poetry alongside the research photos. These photos have an immediacy that supports (and occasionally counteracts) what we see in the poetry and the narrative writing, as they are not mediated or 'interfered with' by myself or the poets - except for my anonymising them by blurring any details or faces and changing them to black and white - and therefore provide another route of access into the participants' experience.

### **Found poetry, modernism and boredom**

One criticism of poetry as used in social research is that it is often not properly contextualised in the literary tradition. In agreement with that point, it is necessary here to acknowledge that poetic representation from transcripts "mirrors the practice of found poetry that has an established history and practice in literature" (Prendergast, 2009: 547). In fact one of the poets who took part in the project, Lewis, observed that the poetic re-presentation process was similar to found poetry which he had had experience of.

Kenneth Goldsmith, a proponent of ‘uncreative writing’ – sampling, copying, repeating, regurgitating, remixing, reusing - is particularly renowned for his Found poetry. *Traffic* is a well-known example (Goldsmith, 2007b). The poem consists of a direct transcription of the traffic reports from a New York Radio station over a 24 hour period (Goldsmith famously read from this collection at the White House in 2011). Similarly, Mike Maggio’s ‘Found Poem 41’ consists of re-arranged words taken from a food product label (Maggio, 1997). Martha Collins, who uses found historical texts in her poetry, claimed that what truly interested her about the process of Found poetry was “the tension between the fact that it is poetry and the fact that we’re dealing with material that usually isn’t treated poetically” (Collins, 2007: np). This impulse runs through found poetry and research poetry.

The impulse to re-use, re-hash and re-contextualise also has parallels in the visual arts, with Dadaist ‘readymades’ (taking everyday objects and placing them in a new context, as ‘art’) and the artistic practice of ‘appropriation’, as seen in Warhol’s soup can prints. One of the artists I will discuss later in this thesis, Ignacio Uriarte, also uses everyday office items such as ring binders and presents them as art. I make this point in order to show the linkages between found poetry, research poetry, the visual arts, and boredom. Goldsmith himself, in a statement on poetics, wrote: “I am the most boring writer that has ever lived” – precisely *because* of his refusal to be original (Goldsmith, 2007: 361). In this sense, Found poetry is perhaps one of the closest literary equivalents to conceptual art, in that it seeks to re-present something taken as being mundane, taken-for-granted or ‘unoriginal’, presenting it *as art*, in a new context. ‘Unoriginal poetry’ - like ‘unoriginal art’ – asks questions over meaning and value which are themselves central to experiences of boredom (Perloff, 2012).

Rather than a poetic sub-genre, found poetry perhaps exists as a technique encompassing varied methods, ranging from presenting texts exactly as they are, to rearranging them, to putting small parts of found text into larger texts (Rhodes, 2013). Goldsmith’s work exists at the extreme of this spectrum, with most of his work “simply retyping existing texts [...] There’s nothing I love more than transcription” (Goldsmith, 2007a: np). Interestingly, this also mirrors the case studies I address in the *Artists* chapter of this thesis, in that many of the art works discussed focus on the deliberate laboriousness of the task which creates the art. In Goldsmith’s philosophy, my unedited transcripts can already be poems – albeit “marvellously unreadable” ones (Goldsmith, 2014: 6).

## Poetry in research... a way forward?

It goes without saying that more experimental forms of writing do not always yield greater insights. In particular, poetry, which tends to be more cryptic than prose might seem like a strange choice. Schwalbe launched a staunch critique of poetry in social research, writing that “we can't meet our aims and responsibilities as qualitative researchers by writing poetry” (Schwalbe, 1995: 393). These ‘responsibilities’ included communicating clearly and creating access to social worlds; that is, telling our stories clearly.

I would argue that reality does not lend itself to clarity, and that there is value in attending to that fact. This is in line with the postmodern impulses in social research more generally – and that poems contain multiple meanings and can be complex and emotive is an important facet of this approach. We can also “ask whether storytelling is the reason for research poetry or whether the question itself raises a false dichotomy between a narrative and lyric impulse” (Faulkner 2009: 3). It seems to me that the poets remained closely wedded to the story-telling function of the poems, but this is not to say that they are devoid of lyricism. The poems produced are a creative response to the world of work that is important in understanding work and boredom: they are evocative, and they explore people’s experiences in new and different ways; and “the properties of poetry allow unique insights into the world of work” (Islam and Zyphur, 2006: 526).

This being said, the poetry only forms one part of the wider project. Alongside the photo-essay and poetry, I will also be conducting a more standard thematic analysis and discussion of the interview data. Some research projects use poetry as the sole means of presenting research (e.g. Glesne, 1997; Öhlen, 2003; Hanauer, 2014) but here the poems provide a vignette of experience presented in condensed form, with the understanding that there is *more to say*. Laurel Richardson in fact suggests that social research “needs to be evaluated through two lenses: science and arts” (Richardson, 2000: 253). Combining thematic analysis of data with representations of study participants in a series of prose poems can be seen as “artful-science,” offering “a different window into the lives of the study participants” (Clarke *et al.*, 2005a: 913).

## IV. Conclusions

As Colin Robson has noted, research projects are – more often than not – largely shaped by what is practical rather than what is epistemologically desirable. To this end, he conceives of the process of developing a methodology as being governed by the “art of the possible” (Robson, 1993: 188). There is truth in this, and what was possible did indeed shape what was done.

However, I also seek to sketch out some of the connections between my three methodological strands and my conceptual, empirical and epistemological concerns here.

To borrow from Harriet Shortt, whose words ring true for this project as well as her own: creative methods are “aligned with the ontological and epistemological foundations of the wider study; the concern being with the participant’s subjectivity and individual experience of work” (2015: 639). Similarly, Ann Rippin, who uses quilting as a research method in management studies argues that her method “has an interesting provenance, it is an interesting method in its own right, it produces an interesting result, and it has interesting and unexpected applications.” (2006: 3). The same is true of the approach outlined in this chapter when considering conceptual contemporary art’s relationship to boredom and work alongside fieldwork that uses photo-elicitation and poetic re-description - particularly in the case of the latter, since there is so little work using the method in the field of Geography.

Tradition might suggest that certain representational forms are more apt for describing different phenomena. But, as Ben Highmore writes: “a poem might be seen as a more fitting form for attending to the world of feelings and emotions than a sociological study” (Highmore, 2002: 21). Given my own methodological leanings, I happen to agree on that point. However, Highmore also writes that researchers “might benefit from the attention of purposefully inappropriate forms of representation [...] to use Surrealism to conduct sociological research or to insist on montage as the technique for historical study [...] is also to test the potential of different forms of representation to apprehend the experience of everyday life” (Highmore, 2002: 22). In this sense, there is no ‘wrong’ or ‘right’ method – rather each holds insight; and different methods and combinations of methods give us different versions, different insights, different data and different possibilities.

I am wary, however, of Harper’s accusation that many researchers are guilty of thinking of photo-elicitation and other creative methods “as a waif on the margins rather than as a robust actor in a developing research traditions” (2002: 15). Instead, this thesis positions them as rigorous, valid and exciting methods which produce co-created knowledges about experience, and which attend to lived experience as inherently complex, contingent and vibrant, even in the case of boredom. This thesis uses a research methodology designed in the spirit of enquiry, seeking interesting ways to attend to my research questions; ways that – as I have outlined – fit with the theoretical and thematic concerns laid out in this project.

# ARTISTS

*This chapter discusses the artworks of Santiago Sierra, Tehching Hsieh and Ignacio Uriarte, three artists who use boredom – and specifically boring labour – in their artworks in different ways. Three examples of Sierra’s artworks are discussed as morally-problematic reproductions of the capitalist labour processes placed in an artistic context. Sierra pays people to perform meaningless tasks for his performances, specifically using boring labour as a form of degradation. Tehching Hsieh’s Time Clock Piece is the second case study – a long-duration performance piece where he spent an entire year punching into a time-clock on the hour, every hour, day and night. Here, an argument is developed around bored time-spaces characterised by temporal restrictions and repetition, leading to a closing-down of life’s textures, experiences and possibilities. Three artworks by Ignacio Uriarte are then discussed in the chapter’s final substantive part, advancing the argument that repetition and office gestures, rendered as art, can offer comment on the nature of time and meaning. I also discuss why the aesthetics of work - the office, in particular - are such a suitable channel for this kind of critique.*

*Broadly, these case studies develop an argument around the way that labour is implicated in boredom and boredom implicated in labour. These artists speak to philosophical debates about the nature of experience, the nature of time – as we truly experience it, in the Bergsonian sense – as well as confronting the viewer with a boring or seemingly meaningless, empty, encounter with artworks which confront us with a void of meaning which, paradoxically perhaps, stimulates our natural urge towards meaning-making. As Julian-Jason Haladyn explains: “rather than being sources of meaning that we are given, [these artworks] are catalysts meant to encourage us to create meaningful experience” (Haladyn, 2017: 151). In advance of the three artists considered here, I therefore introduce the chapter by sketching the connections between boredom, work and art, and considering the relationship that artworks have with production and labour. I particularly pay attention to the way that time-based artworks - specifically performance works - present a unique opportunity to consider boredom and labour, since they foreground the process of labour itself as art.*



## I. Boredom and art/works

Art has, traditionally, been cast as separate to the sphere of ‘productive work’. With the advent of the industrial revolution, work began to be measured in terms of economic productivity, which “distinguished it [work] almost categorically from ‘unproductive’ art, thereby almost completely excluding the artist from economic theories of modernity, from Adam Smith to Karl Marx” (Sigler, 2017:16). However, this separation of art and work is, of course, also routinely problematised. Most generally, art is labour, as reflected in the very term artwork. Art too is economic, as trumpeted in contemporary renderings of creative economies. But this chapter centres on a more specific relating of art and work, one where work itself, and in particular its implication in boredom, is the focus of artistic engagement. One of the case studies in this chapter, Ignacio Uriarte, is an artist whose practice is informed by a decade spent working in a business administration role; another (Sierra) takes the role of a manager / orchestrator; another (Hsieh) subjects himself to an incessant, endless, brutal routine of ‘clocking in’. Some artists, like Tehching Hsieh, use the motif of the factory in their artwork; some, like Uriarte or On Kawara, deploy an administrative, archival practice as art. Some – Santiago Sierra, for example - make employment relations central to their practice by paying people to ‘do’ their performances for them. What all of these artists have in common, though, is that they use qualities of boredom to express their critique of both work and art: repetition, sameness, mundanity, rationalisation, the strict manipulation or regulation of time; even meaninglessness and emptiness.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Yasmin Musharbash’s diagnosis that the emergence and proliferation of boredom can be correlated with the advent of modernity is widely shared. As she states:

*“the interdisciplinary literature collocates the emergence of boredom with that of modernity, linking boredom to secularization, an increased focus on the self, the belief in one’s entitlement to happiness, the work-leisure distinction, overload, and standardizations of time organization”* (2007: 314).

Whilst Gardiner and Haladyn’s contention that “different instantiations of boredom can be linked to discrete phases of capitalist development” (2017: 13) suggests a singular modernity may be too crude an epochal rendering, the broader argument I developed in Chapter Two is that labour and work are at the heart of the production, experience and expression of modern boredom. Perhaps this is why boredom, culturally, is often imagined *through* the idea of work; specifically labour which is repetitive, meaningless, performed over long durations. That this has been adopted in the arts, with a particular concern with the aesthetics of organisation, rules,

systems, and the regulation and measurement of time is of particular interest. As philosopher Lars Svendsen writes, boredom - as either a concept or a direct experience, particularly in its profound, existential form - “fundamentally concerns the inability of subjects, either individually or collectively, to sustain a viable project of meaning-creation when faced with the task of living in a demythologised and hyper-rationalised world” (Svendsen, 2012: 15). This is, in part, why Svendsen contends that boredom cannot be thought of separately to work: because the organisation of work has been one of the key forces of this rationalisation and ‘disenchantment’ that characterises the (post)modern experience. As business scholar Rasmus Johnsen writes:

*“The boredom that arises as an epidemic mass phenomenon in the European cities of the 19th century is deeply associated with the tragedy of alienated labour and with the futility and pointlessness of any kind of mental involvement that this kind of labour comes to signify.”* (Johnsen, 2016: 1410)

In Chapter Two I considered varying attitudes to this phenomenon. For example, is boredom a reasonable psychological response to this truly dulled, flattened, disenchanted and rationalised world? Or does boredom simply denote a failure to *attune* ourselves to the liveliness of the world, its ever-present enchantment? It is around these kinds of questions that art can ‘do work’, through creating about and *with* work.

Conceiving of art as ‘object-events’ helps us to unpick these connections. As ‘object-events’, art works are both *thing* and *encounter*. This, broadly theorised, is constituted by the work of art itself vs. the interplay between the viewer and the art – or, alternatively, art seen at the level of artistic production vs. consumption. Whether the art – the ‘thing’ – is a performance, an installation, a sculpture, or a painting; it is worth noting that all art, in some sense, is a record of labour. This may be more evident in processual performance pieces involving actions that *look* like work, but as Martin Creed points below, all art is always a record or trace of *work*:

*“A painting is basically... that’s a recording of the movements I’ve made, you know. In fact all work is basically the ramifications of the results of movements you make; whether it’s talking on the phone, you know, or moving your arms around in mid-air, which is what you do if you do a painting...”* (Martin Creed in Tovey and Diament, 2019: 46:02 - 46:56)

The artists I will discuss take the reality of art-as-work and foreground this act of *working* – specifically *boring* work - as a form of artistic production. The works by Santiago Sierra and Tehching Hsieh discussed in this chapter may broadly be conceived of as performance works. These are works which may have been experienced by some people in the moment of their

creation; but for the majority are consumed or experienced through the traces left behind – the residue, or record, diligently collected in the form of photographic images and documentation. As Adrian Heathfield asks of Hsieh's *Time Clock Piece*, in which the artist created a stop-motion video out of the 8,627 'mug shots' he took over the course of the work: "is the film the accumulation of the work, or is it its residue, its waste product? Is the film the work itself or its archival document, the piece or the trace?" (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015: 33).

Ignacio Uriarte works across various media but creates his art objects out of office materials – imaginative abstractions that are at once sculptural and banal. His oeuvre includes sound installations and video works that complicate a divide between 'performance' and 'object'. Similarly, Hsieh's early work included paintings rather than performances – though these also showcased an early concern with process, repetition and temporally-bound actions. So whilst a crude distinction can be made between art as *process* (e.g. performance) and art as the *output* of a process (e.g. a painting) it is perhaps more a matter of what *part* of the creative process an artist chooses to present as *art*. Nonetheless, many of the pieces I will discuss involve some element of performance, and as Adrian Heathfield points out, performance art as "an art of time par excellence" privileges "process over product; labour over end result" (Heathfield, 2012: 28).

This is why performance art is a medium that lends itself so well to a consideration of work, since it makes explicit the labour of creating art as a form of labour in itself. These complex labour relations, whether the art *work* is undertaken by the artist, or outsourced to a third party, showcase labour relations taken to the extreme; and as Santiago Sierra asserts, "extreme labour relations shed much more light on how the labour system actually works" (in Margolles, 2004: np). In addition, 'durational aesthetics' – or, put simply, art that is concerned with time; especially long-duration artworks – are particularly apt in exploring these themes since: "de-naturalising and de-habituating perceptions of time, durational aesthetics give access to other temporalities, excluded or marginalised within culture's increasingly rigorous temporal organisation" (Heathfield, 2012: 29).

Whether the artist presents an object or a performance, the role of administration in each of the artworks presents itself as a distinct form of production, apparent in all the three cases considered in this chapter. This 'administrative impulse' threads through the fabric of the artworks themselves, as well as through the documentation of the performances in the form of photos, videos and other materials. This impulse even continues through to the titling of the works and their framing within a visual and textual language connected to boredom. Perhaps this is not surprising since, as art critic Chris Fite-Wassilak explains, there is a level of administration

already implied in the role of the artist. He writes that contemporary art is of course influenced by “the simple fact of how most artists now spend a majority of their time: a desk jockey sat in front of a computer, sending countless emails and applications [...] The artist is no longer a wayward artisan [...] The artist is a freelance project manager.” (Fite-Wassilak, 2016: 69).

## II. Santiago Sierra

To say that Sierra's work is divisive would be an understatement. The explosive and inflammatory nature of the work largely stems from the 'shock' value and dubious morality of the pieces, in which he contracts people – paying minimum wage, if he pays them at all – to perform pointless, dehumanising tasks. Those he contracts are often vulnerable to (his) exploitation: homeless, drug addicts, those marginalised in labour markets. Many of the pieces I will discuss take place within the anonymous white cube spaces of the art gallery and involve tasks ranging from: people having a line tattooed on their skin (see fig. 4.1 and 4.2); digging 3,000 identical holes (see fig. 4.3 and 4.4); sitting inside cardboard boxes (see fig. 4.5) sitting or standing facing the wall (see fig. 4.6 and 4.7); or even masturbating on video. He has also paid people to clean visitors' shoes without their consent at a gallery in Mexico City, or to sit tied to a wooden block. He also stages his works outside of traditional gallery spaces, in various locations, from streets in Birmingham to Berlin and sandy coastal swathes of land in Cadiz.

His work *20 Pieces of Road measuring 100x100cm pulled up from the floor* (1992) – in which heavy segments of asphalt were cut, dug up and relocated into the gallery - signified the beginning of Sierra's interest in "work (labour) as opposed to work (art object)" (Walton, 2013: 1). Visually, both his early work and more recent pieces are notable for their interest in minimalism – an avant-garde practice which speaks to the core of boredom. Simplicity, absence, space. Black, white, grey. An absence of colour, of stimulation, of information – an absence onto which the audience must project their own interpretations.

This minimalist thread has been a persistent aesthetic concern in his work, particularly expressed where he documents his 'actions' or 'performances'. The documentary photos tend to be black and white, high contrast – artistic, yes, but also a distanced form of documentation. In this context, his minimalist aesthetic helps to position the camera as a dispassionate recording device, with the photos sometimes seeming somehow anachronistic, or slightly strange. The 'documentation' of his works is exactly that: a *document*. Dispassionate, disconnected; almost like an image of a crime scene. Or - where there are people present in the photos - a kind of anonymising documentary photo-evidence. This grim, indifferent recording of the pointless degradation he enacts adds a further layer of emotional dislocation.

American cultural critic Jennifer Doyle suggests that "the outrageousness of [his] work grows from the banality of the crime at its core" (2008: np). The taken-for-grantedness of the exchange of money for services – the exact relationship which shapes the very conditions of possibility for

our own lives – here is shown as what it is: bare-faced exploitation. It is pertinent to note that Sierra works with and draws attention to groups of vulnerable people *already* being exploited, people that have already been rendered invisible, unimportant, forgotten – from homeless people and illegal migrants to prostitutes and heroin addicts. Rosero describes Sierra as using ‘social readymades’ – and so, in a further dehumanising turn, we might think back to Duchamp’s readymades, particularly *The Fountain*, his revolutionary 1917 artwork composed of a urinal displayed on a plinth. Exhibiting what already *is*, but exhibiting it as art, in Duchamp’s case, made a claim for the veneration of the everyday - the banal as worthy of attention. In Sierra’s case, however, he highlights the stark *brutality* of the mundane - in particular the social and economic work relations that structure technologically advanced late-capitalist societies.

Sierra’s work is not a valorisation of the everyday, nor is it a critique in the conventional sense. Instead, “his works enact a tactic that could be described as criticality by complicity” (Rosero, 2013: 102). This echoes Guillame Désanges’ claim that contemporary art works often express a “denunciation of an economic system” by “critical mimeticism, distance, structural irony” (Désanges, 2003: np). One way in which this denunciation is enacted is through the degradation of the people he pays to perform these pieces; enacted often through the deployment of pointless, banal, repetitive or invisible tasks – read: boring - rendered as ‘art performances’. In this way, *boredom* - figured through repetition, temporal regulation, strict systems and rules, and meaninglessness - is part of the structure of Sierra’s art and is entangled in a complex political negotiation around working life.



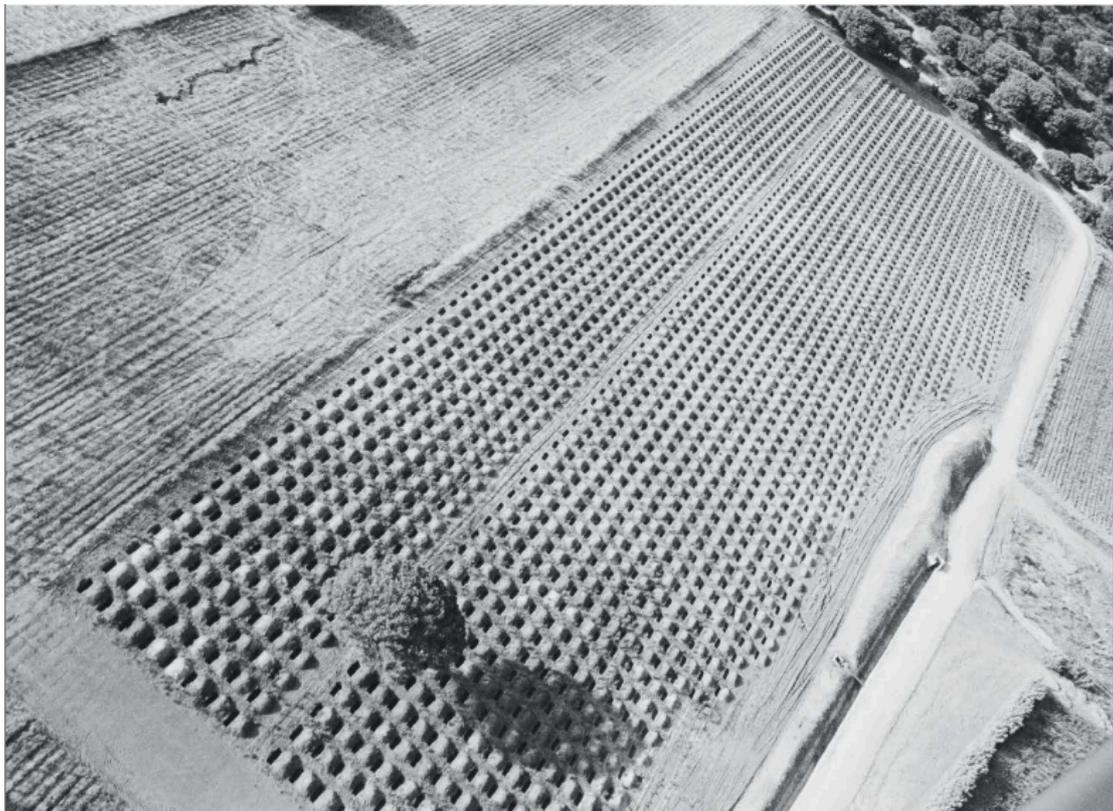
*Figure 4.2 Santiago Sierra, 'Line of 160cm Tattooed on 4 People' (2000)  
El Gallo Arte Contemporaneo, Salamanca, Spain, December 20000. Taken from Sileo and Henke 2017, p100-101)*



*Figure 4.2 Santiago Sierra, 'Line of 250cm Tattooed on 6 Renumerated People' (1999)  
Espacio Aglutinador, Havana. December 1999. Taken from Sileo and Henke 2017, p105)*



*Figure 4.3 Santiago Sierra, '3000 Holes of 180 x 50 x 50cm' (2002)  
Debesa de Montenmedio, Vejer de la Frontera, Cadiz, Spain. July 2002. Taken from Sileo and Henke 2017, p.136*



*Figure 4.4 Santiago Sierra, '3000 Holes of 180 x 50 x 50cm' (2002)  
Debesa de Montenmedio, Vejer de la Frontera, Cadiz, Spain. July 2002. Taken from Sileo and Henke 2017, p.137*



*Figure 4.5 Santiago Sierra, 'Workers who cannot be paid, remunerated to remain inside cardboard boxes' (1999)  
Guatemala, August 1999. Taken from Margolles 2004: np.*



Figure 4.6 Santiago Sierra, 'Workers Facing the Wall' (2002)  
Lisson Gallery, London. Taken from <https://www.lissongallery.com/exhibitions/santiago-sierra-part-2> [accessed 07.02.2021]

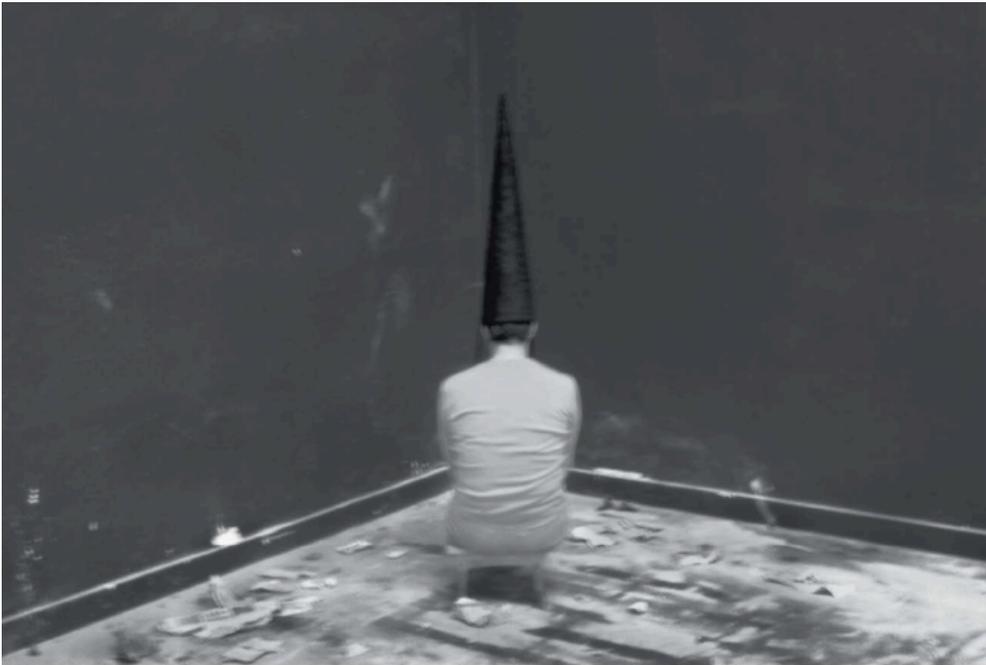


Figure 4.7 Santiago Sierra, 'Hooded Woman Seated Facing the Wall' (2003)  
Black and white photograph of performance at the Spanish Pavilion, Venice Biennial. Venice, Italy. May 2003. Taken from <http://www.artnet.com/artists/santiago-sierra/hooded-woman-seated-facing-the-wall-bpwbv8G2Oun6se9q0pPOVQ2> [accessed 07.02.2021]

**The artist as orchestrator / manager: 24 Blocks of Concrete Constantly Moved During a Day's Work by Renumerated Labourers (1999)**

*“10 laborers of Mexican or Central-American origin were hired [...] They were asked to proceed, during the day's work, to continually move the 24 pieces along the spaces of the gallery, without concern for its physical well-being and using only metal bars as handles. The exposed result consisted of marks left behind by their work in the form of damages on the floor and walls of the gallery, together with the tools and materials employed by the workers, the remainders of consumed food and drinks and the concrete blocks.”*

(Sierra, in Sileo and Henke, 2017: 160)



*Figure 4.8 Santiago Sierra '24 Blocks of Concrete Constantly Moved During a Day's Work by Renumerated Labourers' (1992) Ace Gallery, Los Angeles. Taken from Sileo and Henke 2017, p. 161.*

The first piece of particular interest is *24 Blocks of Concrete Constantly Moved During a Day's Work by Renumerated Labourers* (1999, hereafter *24 Blocks*). Sierra explains the piece in the quote above, describing how 24 2-tonne blocks of concrete – modular units often used in coastal defences or breakwaters – were brought into a gallery space in Los Angeles. Turning firstly to the role of Sierra as the orchestrator, this work is interesting because it provides a bridge between his earlier works (for example *Prism*, 1990, see fig. 4.9) and his later works, which focus more on work (labour) as art. His early formal simplicity - characterised by the deployment of clean lines, everyday materials and geometric forms - is expressed here alongside an interest in pointless labour. In this sense, he shares some ground with Sol LeWitt, whose “delegation of execution eliminated the expressiveness of the artist’s hand” (Kleinberg Romanow, 2013: 9). Here, the expression of the work *is* this deliberate removal of expression, where the artistic performance is reduced to an exchange of goods (money) for services (delegated labour).



*Figure 4.9 Santiago Sierra, 'Prism' (1990)*  
*Wood, truck tarp, 100 x 200 x 250 cm. Exhibited in Hamburg, Germany. Taken from <https://kow-berlin.com/artists/santiago-serra/prism-1990> [accessed 07.02.2021]*

It is evident that there are multiple layers of labour implicated in this work. On one level, the labour of the workers paid to move the blocks is clear - but the human labour itself is obscured,

with only the traces of the actions remaining. This echoes Martin Creed's diagnosis that all art is, in some form, a record of labour; just in this case, a record of labour carried out under contract for minimum wage. On another level, Sierra's labour in orchestrating and framing the event is evident, but perhaps even more obscured. This does not mean, however, that he is completely absent from the pieces – "quite the contrary, as [...] the works develop and abide following his careful instructions" (Rosero, 2013: 107).

Sol LeWitt's often cited principle that in Conceptual Art "all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair" (in Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015: 16) elevates the artist's idea to a privileged position and puts the material realisation of the work in a subordinate role. This mirrors exactly the way in which immaterial or cognitive labour is, culturally and economically, placed above work seen to be menial or unskilled (Braverman, 1974). The chasm is reflected in the fact that the workers employed to perform *24 blocks* were paid minimum wage, but that a photographic print of this piece sold for £10,000. As Rosero explains: "this duality suggests that work can be clearly antithetical to freedom for some in a system of advanced, corporate, capitalism while deceitfully emancipatory for a select few" (Rosero 2013: 99). Taking into account the physicality of the task – each block was huge, weighing two tonnes each – this labour was likely experienced as an extremely visceral, physical, undertaking. The participants' recompense for this labour was so small, so acutely degrading when set in the context of a luxury market like the art world, that it reflected Sierra's vision of work as a site of a perpetual struggle between subjugation and freedom. He seems to say: subjugation always wins.

There is also a clear comparison to be drawn between *24 Blocks* and the Sisyphus myth. Meaninglessness, in the case of Sisyphus, is figured through labour that is repeated with no real progress or purpose – in Homer's *Iliad* and other Greek myths, Sisyphus was cursed by the Gods to roll a huge boulder up a mountain, only to have it roll to the bottom and have to repeat the toil each day. Here, Sierra takes the role of the Gods, demanding this repetitive toil. And yet, unlike Sisyphus, Sierra's work is also defined by an absence – Sisyphus, at least, had a name. In *24 blocks*, you can see the traces of human presence and human striving, but there is no-one to be seen and the work in no way addresses the workers or their work directly. In this sense labour haunts the piece as a ghostly presence. There is a sense that someone was here, *doing* something – and that someone orchestrated or organised this, but is not present either. This makes the site of labour harder to identify, and "in the constant displacement of work from one context to the

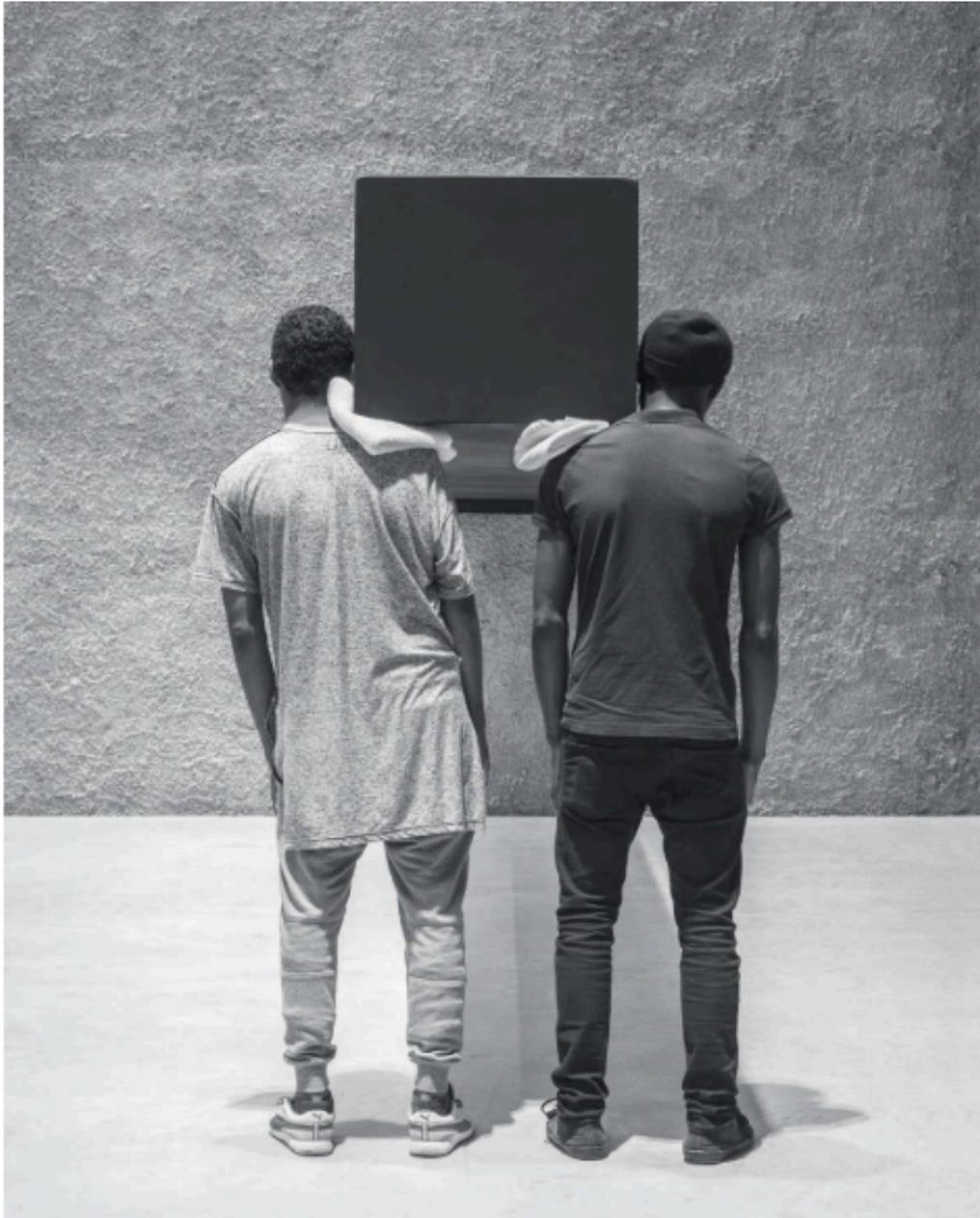
next, the spectator never fully grasps the existence of a subject that generates the work” (Rosero, 2013: 108).

*3000 Holes of 180 x 50 x 50cm Each* (2002, hereafter *3000 Holes* see fig. 4.3) shares this concern with repetition, labour and formal simplicity but adds a more starkly expressed concern with rationality, conformity, exactitude and measurement – as can be seen in fig. 4.4 where each carefully measured hole is arranged according to a strict grid system. *24 Blocks* had a strict overall temporal regulation – an 8 hour working day – but the practices within that were more based on the chance spatial encounters between worker and concrete block as they moved around each other in the gallery, since the basic rule involved moving the blocks, but with no particular instructions as to where or how. Of course, in both cases, the labour is physically demanding, exhausting, badly remunerated, repetitive and – crucially – circumscribed, whether in spatial or temporal terms. Both cases illustrate how Sierra’s rule-based performances are titled in such a way they describe the task in dispassionate, prescriptive terms – much like a job description document.

**Human resources and the body as labour power: Form of 600 x 57 x 52cm Built to be Sustained Perpendicularly to a Wall (2016)**

*“A sculpture built with black wood was sustained without binding from one of its sides to a wooden structure fixed onto one of the gallery's walls, and from the other extreme held by a group of four workers of different origins. They took turns during the day to do the job, charging a wage per hour.”*

(Sierra, in Sileo and Henke, 2017: 224)



*Figure 4.10 Santiago Sierra, 'Form of 600 x 57 x 52cm Built to be Sustained Perpendicularly to a Wall' (2016) König Gallery, Berlin, November 2016. Taken from Sileo and Henke 2017, p.225*



*Figure 4.11 Santiago Sierra, 'Form of 600 × 57 × 52cm Built to be Sustained Perpendicularly to a Wall' (2016)  
Konig Gallery, Berlin, November 2016. Taken from Sileo and Henke 2017, p.227*

This piece was first staged in the Konig Gallery in Berlin, in November 2016 (see fig. 4.10 and 4.11), followed by other iterations of the piece staged in various locations. In an even more explicit commentary on the way that the capitalist labour system uses people, in this work Sierra *literally* objectifies the worker. This is labour traditionally conceived – a wage for your body's

physical capacities. Sierra doesn't request any emotional, performative or cognitive labour from those he contracts; just the workers' physicality, their brute there-ness, their being-in-place. That the vast majority of the workers' capacities remain largely unused, that people are remunerated to remain still performing a menial task, on one level reflects what we might call the 'deskilling' of labour; but on another, is a violent form of denial against the specificity of individual experience, skills, and desires. Treating the participants as a kind of sculptural element – displaying them in a gallery, these 'social readymades' to use Rosero's phrase - and paying them to support the weight of the object for an extended period of time, exerts power in a way that objectifies and degrades the individual.

Anarchist and literary critic George Woodcock wrote in 1944 that "the clock turns time from a process of nature into a commodity that can be measured and bought and sold like soap or sultanas" (Woodcock, 1944: np). The tonality of Sierra's work involves purchasing his worker's time in exactly this way – as nothing more than a resource to be utilised. Furthermore, it is somehow more degrading to be on display, to be *seen* performing this meaningless labour. The labour of standing still, holding a weight, being visible - exposed as being a resource, a manifestation of human labour power and nothing more. In defence of this piece Sierra explains that "extreme labour relations shed much more light on how the labour system actually works. A yuppie is also a servant of capital and he also has a price, but he's sweetened by a certain glamour and is thus not useful in terms of what interests me" (in Margolles, 2004: np). Sierra is in the same system, but his work provides status, economic security, cultural cachet; and he makes a huge amount of profit off the labour of disadvantaged groups. Sierra explains: "it's possible to have dignity in society, but it costs money. A person without money has no dignity" (in Margolles, 2004: np). His 'employees' demonstrate this completely, since "work, in their case, entails a subjugating, demeaning practice" (Rosero, 2013: 108).

And yet, looking at the photographic images of *Form of 600 x 5 x 52cm*, there is a real, tangible beauty to them. That we are seduced by the image before understanding its context is fascinating. The aesthetic of the wooden structure, and the way in which it is supported on the shoulder of each of the men also speaks to the cultural practice of carrying a coffin on the shoulders. This seems incongruous with their casual dress, and so to the uninformed observer the images seem ambiguous. The visual language of the images, nonetheless, is grey, white, black, clean lines, simplicity. Minimal; although I would argue that the images of this work are framed and produced in a more deliberately 'artistic' way than many of the others (e.g. compare with *Hooded Woman Facing the Wall*, fig. 4.7). Instead of a documentary-style photo, the use of the body

as a sculptural or structural element is emphasised through artistic framing. Despite the beauty of the images, all roads lead back to Sierra's core practice, which hinges on dehumanisation: "with bodies reduced to their labour power, they also come to be treated as interchangeable units" – much like time, money and other abstract units in the production process (Groom, 2017: np). Treating humans in this way means that all roads lead back to a poverty of experience; of action, meaning and fulfilment: which is to say that they lead to boredom and its more vicious colleagues such as disillusionment, sadness, silence, powerlessness, violence and anger. And, as Sierra reminds us: "boredom is very close to anger" (in Margolles, 2004: np).

## Doing nothing and boredom as a form of violence: 12 Workers Paid to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes (2000)

*“I’ve been called an exploiter. [...] they criticized me because I had people sitting for four hours a day, but they didn’t realize that a little further up the hallway the guard spends eight hours a day on his feet. [...] Many of the people who make those criticisms have never worked in their lives; if they think it’s a horror to sit hidden in a cardboard box for four hours, they don’t know what work is.”*

(Sierra in Margolles, 2004: np)



*Figure 4.12 Santiago Sierra, ‘12 Workers Paid to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes’ (2000)  
Ace Gallery, New York, United States. March 2000. Taken from Sileo and Henke 2017 p.116*



Figure 4.13 Santiago Sierra, '12 Workers Paid to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes' (2000)  
Ace Gallery, New York, United States. March 2000. Taken from Sileo and Henke 2017 p.115

For *12 Workers Paid to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes* (2000, see fig. 12 and fig. 13, hereafter *12 Workers*), Sierra paid twelve women, mainly of Black or Mexican origin, to sit for four hours a day inside a cardboard box in the Ace Gallery, New York, for 50 days. For this work they were paid the minimum hourly wage as stipulated by US employment law. Like many of his works, this was just one iteration of the piece. He also staged a version in Guatemala in August 1999, and in Berlin in 2000. For the Berlin version, he used asylum seekers who were not allowed to work under German law, and so they were not paid. Of this piece, one participant observed: “sitting around in narrow boxes – that’s exactly what we do every day, anyway” (in Heidenreich, 2001: np).

To the viewer, the boxes seem to be, at first, parodied minimalist forms; the audience entirely unaware that there were several people sat silently inside the boxes. Obviously this piece, like the others, is problematic for a lot of reasons – and it is about so much more than ‘boring work’. But looking at this through a boredom studies lens, we can see that boredom, here, is part of the violence that people experience in some forms of work, and in this piece especially, it’s also about *exclusion* as well as exploitation – or “silent excruciating labour” (Rosero, 2013: 105).

Work necessarily involves violence. Studs Terkel wrote in the preface for *Working*: “this book, being about work, is, by its very nature, about violence – to the spirit as well as to the body” (Terkel 2004: xi). The first two works I have addressed show some kind of visible labour, or at least a trace of a labouring body. In *12 Workers* the body is present, but stilled and obscured from view. The workers and their labour are again simultaneously present and absent. As Rosero writes: “the delegated actors are always physically present in Sierra’s pieces (as means to an end) yet always absent in their specificity (as particular, individual, named, subjects)” (Rosero, 2013: 109).

There is an element of physical violence in the strict limitation of what the body is permitted to do – which, in this case, is not much. However, more prevalent is the fact that this strict limitation – this *order* to do nothing - tilts the piece more towards a kind of spiritual violence. It’s a denial of agency, movement, interest and engagement which shows the way in which boredom can be degrading. The futility of it, and the very act of *doing nothing because you have been instructed to do nothing*, is psychologically problematic. We can see this if we consider that solitary confinement and sensory deprivation can be a form of torture or punishment. This is a particular form of labour figured through enforced nothingness. This is a theme that was discussed by one of my interviewees, the Gallery Invigilator, Poppy. Poppy, in an eerie echo of this piece, was being paid minimum wage to stand in a gallery space. She told me that the job was really just a long list of things you *can’t* do, telling me: “because you don’t... you don’t do anything that’s important, everyone treats you like you *can’t*” (Poppy, Interview 4.2).

It is fascinating that over the course of time that *12 Workers* was being exhibited, many of the workers quit; some were replaced by other workers, and some just stopped turning up, leaving their chairs and boxes empty. This adds another layer of uncertainty to the piece – as a viewer, *is* there someone inside the box? Is there not? And yet it also constitutes a delicious kind of resistance – a resounding refusal from the people that Sierra works so hard to make voiceless, invisible and powerless. A knife that cuts through the heavily muffled silences that Sierra creates around individual agency, choice and power.

Comparing this work to *24 blocks* and *Form of 600 x 57 x 52cm*, we can see that Sierra highlights that hard work – whether figured through repetitive actions, hard labour, or doing nothing - can all be equally meaningless. This addresses debates over the ‘speeding up’ of society, with more frenetic action and less meaning; a phenomenon that Ivor Southwood discusses alongside the

changing nature of work itself. He writes that “work is no longer a secure base, but rather a source of anxiety and indignity, both a matter of life and death and utterly meaningless, overwhelming and yet so insubstantial it could run through our fingers” (Southwood, 2011: 76).

*12 Workers* also speaks to debates over boredom through addressing the idea of spectacle. As Sierra explains: “part of what I am doing is to deprive people of spectacle. There are enough of those in the world and they are just a distraction. Frustration, boredom and anger are much more interesting reactions to produce” (in Margolles, 2004: np). Here Sierra seems to equate spectacle with enjoyment and interest, or at least as a distraction from the unfairness and brutality of real life. What he is saying is in line with the idea that boredom, when it is indulged in - as *opposed* to being soothed with a distraction - holds more critical potential, which is an argument made by Alfie Bown in his book *Enjoying It: Candy Crush and Capitalism* (2015). The concept of enjoyment as Bown explains, is also part of the maintenance of the ideology of work itself. He writes: “enjoyable distractions [...] cannot be discussed without reference to the workplace. [...] These forms of enjoyment are part of categorising work as unenjoyable and also ensuring that this unenjoyable work continues unquestioned. [...] ‘distracting’ enjoyment works to hide alienation and prevent organised rejection of working conditions” (Bown, 2015: 21). Here we arrive at a standpoint that is also in dialogue with Haladyn’s thesis that boredom, especially when mobilised in artistic practice, is a moment for meaning-making; of questioning received meanings and imagining new and different realities (Haladyn, 2015).

Distractions and enjoyable trifles – for example a pretty picture or a pleasant, inoffensive painting – aim “to distract us and pass our time, snatch any moments of potential boredom or indeed reflection, leaving us in a constant state of entertainment [...] viewed by almost everyone as a tempting distraction from ‘real stuff’” (Bown, 2015: 21). This is on one level distraction from ‘reality’; but Bown is also developing a more Nietzschean line of argument about the relationship to the self and the role of entertainment and distraction vs. real, critical, self-enquiry. As Nietzsche put it in *Untimely Meditations*: “haste is universal because everyone is in flight from himself; universal too is the shy concealment of this haste because everyone wants to seem content and would like to deceive more sharp-eyed observers as to the wretchedness he feels” (2007: 158). Haste, in the sense of seeking out entertainment and distraction, is figured here as a flight from our inner malaise – our boredom, our guilt, our sadness – and insofar as Sierra’s critique is levelled at the observer who is complicit in a hyper-normalised and systemic form of violence, Sierra, too, refuses to distract us from *ourselves*.

## Interpreting Sierra: labour, boredom and exploitation

As has been discussed, work is located in both the artist (as the organiser, or manager) and also in the ‘performer’. The artist organises and pays the wages, the worker enacts whatever they’re paid to do. It’s a stark display of agency and power, because the boredom is outsourced to someone *else*. Sierra takes on the role of the capitalist – making profit off the degrading labour of those at the other end of the economic spectrum. This is what leads Rosero to write that in Sierra’s art work, “work [labour] is configured as a site of constant struggle between individual freedom and economic, systemic subjugation where the winner is, unsurprisingly, the established order” (2013: 107). But this struggle is also over *experience* and the kinds of experience available to each person, circumscribed *by* this economic system of capital circulation and labour exchange. And in many cases, the experience available to the worker is one of “mindless drudgery” (Southwood, 2011: 45).

The moral critique levelled at Sierra stems in large part from accusations that he uncritically *reproduces* the injustices of our economic reality. As Archambault puts it: “Sierra purposefully formalizes systemic violence in his artworks, emphasizing shock and scandal over reconciliation and appeasement” (Archambault, 2014: 29). There is no activist streak in his work – he simply draws attention to what is *already* happening. Why does he not mount a campaign - intervene? Providing some kind of balm for the starkly dehumanising – even disgusting – exploitation implicated in his works, he argues, would only be delusional: at best a self-congratulatory, empty gesture. He is not interested in “stressing his own generosity” (Archambault, 2014: 29). In fact, in an interview in 2004, Sierra summarised his approach, saying: “negativity is the only coherent reaction one can have in a society where the battle’s already lost” (in Margolles, 2004: np).

He appears to believe that claims that art can ‘make a difference’ are misguided. Art, for Sierra, can only be a palliative in a battle long lost. Cultural critic Stephen Squibb, however, makes the point that: “we’ve grown so accustomed to confusing the occult luxury of cynicism with the rhetoric of honesty that we are delighted by this total denial of agency coming from one so intelligent, so mobile, and so rich. What better person to confirm, to our endless relief and gratitude, *that there is nothing whatsoever to be done?*” (Squibb, 2012: np). This fatalism of course is exactly the mechanism that *ensures* the exact continuation of these relations. In stressing the inevitability of these relations, Sierra simultaneously releases us from our guilt – there is nothing to be done. Sierra’s work, then, “does not seek a new alternative because it believes that under our present conditions it is impossible to conceive of worlds beyond the one we inhabit; not only impossible, but, perhaps, a waste of time” (Rosero, 2013: 102). One might ask whether this

would be more of a waste of time than orchestrating an event, which by his own admission *does* nothing and *changes* nothing – other than allowing him to accrue status, cultural capital and vast amounts of money. When trawling the internet to find out Sierra’s net worth, I found that estimates vary somewhere between \$6 million - \$14 million.

And yet, Sierra has the audience in a bind: in criticising him, we criticise ourselves. The disgust and discomfort we direct at him must always also be our disgust for ourselves and our complicity in a system which enacts the dehumanisation we see in his art works. Work – in fact for the majority of people – involves self-denial in some way, or is at times degrading or boring, and does not make use of a great many of our, complex skills or potentialities. This is despite ‘new world of work’ narratives that tell us otherwise; that work is fulfilling, passionate and enjoyable. As Angela McRobbie has observed, in many cases these narratives are a “neoliberal delusion” (2015: np), with access to ‘passionate’ or fulfilling work being circumscribed by class and power, and therefore exceptionally unlikely to apply to labour undertaken by those in the most disadvantaged positions – like Sierra’s ‘workers’.

Sierra, I think, tackles the great promise of contemporary capitalism: the promise of freedom through work. Instead, he offers a meditation that looks more like “prison labour by Samuel Beckett” or a form of punishment (Etchells, 2015: 357). Liberation, here, is not achieved by hard work. Instead, liberation is shown to be impossible under the conditions of contemporary life, because the exploited worker and the rich capitalist both labour under the same system and are both trapped in different ways. The work relation is shown to be “a violent, exclusive, repressive, hierarchical, alienating [...] exploitative, pervasive and all-encompassing system of control” (Rosero, 2013: 111). Sierra makes this clear in an interview for the Tate, explaining that his work “centres around work and punishment, which is what we have in our society today” (Tate, 2008: np). Sierra offers no hope: only a re-creation of meaningless work figured through boredom as a form of violence.

### III. Tehching Hsieh

*“Whatever you do, life is nothing but consuming time until you die.”*

(Hsieh quoted in Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015: 335)

Tehching Hsieh has been called a ‘master of performance art’ by Marina Abramovic. His story is a strange one. His most renowned works are a string of year-long performance pieces governed by strict rules created between 1978 and 1985. For one year, between September 1978 and 1979, he lived in a cage constructed in his East Village flat and forbade himself to read, write, talk, watch TV or listen to the radio (‘Cage Piece’, see fig 4.14). From April 1980 – 1981, he ‘clocked in’ using a time clock on the hour, every hour, day and night, for an entire year (‘Time Clock Piece’, see fig 4.15). From 1981 – 1982, he forbade himself to enter a building or any form of shelter for an entire year (‘Outside Piece’, see fig. 4.16, 4.17, 4.18). For one year, from 1983 – 1984 he remained tied to fellow artist Linda Montano by an 8 foot piece of rope (‘Rope Piece’, see fig 4.19). This was followed by ‘No Art Piece’. For one year, between 1985 and 1986, Hsieh detached himself from art entirely, stating that he would not talk about art, would not create any art, read anything about art, or enter any art galleries or museums.

These year-long works were followed by *Thirteen Year Plan* (1986-1999). This was a durational artwork during which Hsieh vowed that he would make art during this time, but not show it publicly. The piece began on his 36<sup>th</sup> birthday, 31 December 1986, and lasted 13 years, concluding on his 49<sup>th</sup> birthday, 31<sup>st</sup> December 1999. After this piece, he declared that he was no longer an artist, though he continues to give interviews to art audiences and his work is exhibited around the world. His work remained largely unrecognised until 2009, when the MoMa in New York included *Time Clock Piece* in an inaugural installation of performance art. Since then, interest in and appreciation for his work has grown exponentially. This is, at least in part, because his works were “unparalleled in their use of physical difficulty over extreme durations and in their absolute conceptions and enactment of art and life as simultaneous process” (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015: 11).

Born in Taiwan to a family of 15 children, Hsieh began making art after dropping out of school. His early works involved paintings, almost figurative at first (he describes them as post-impressionist) but moving towards a more minimalist aesthetic, a change which is visible in one of his last painted works in 1973, titled *Paint – Red Repetitions* (see fig. 4.20). The same year, in 1973, he completed one of his earliest performance works, *Jump Piece*, where he jumped out of a

second story window in Taiwan, documenting it in a series of photographs (see fig. 4.21). Though conceptually and visually similar, he had not yet come across Yves Klein's seminal work, *Leap into the Void* (1960, see fig. 4.22). Unlike Klein, Hsieh did not have group of friends holding a sheet to catch him before he hit the pavement (Klein famously doctored the photo after the event using photomontage). Instead, Hsieh shattered both of his ankles.

In 1974, he performed a second jump: this time jumping ship from the Taiwanese vessel on which he was doing compulsory military service. As an undocumented migrant, he made his way to New York. In an interview, he describes how he spent his first years there cleaning restaurant floors:

*"For two years I had done a cleaning job in a restaurant in Soho. My job was that every night I would put up more than one hundred chairs on the tables, sweep and wax the floor, then put those chairs back on the ground."* (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015a: 324)

During this time, Hsieh also made a performance piece titled *Paint Stick* (1978) in which he drew a line on his left cheek in a red oil pastel, and parallel to the line, just below, he cut his cheek with a Stanley knife. He then repeated this process on the other side of his face. To my knowledge there is no documentation of this work that is publicly available. Hsieh subsequently moved away from 'traumatic' performances – the jump, splintered bones, cuts – departing 'from an aesthetic of explicit risk' moving "beyond the frame of the rupturing event, the traumatic instance of performance, and into another order of temporality: duration" (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015: 17). This is where he began manifesting an interest in the endurance and durations of labour. This is the starting point for a consideration of his work here. As Adrian Heathfield writes: "Hsieh's story is all about becoming a sentient witness of time" (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015: 11). The *Time Clock Piece* will be considered exclusively here in relation to the administration of time, senses of lived experiential time, administration, repetition and meaning.

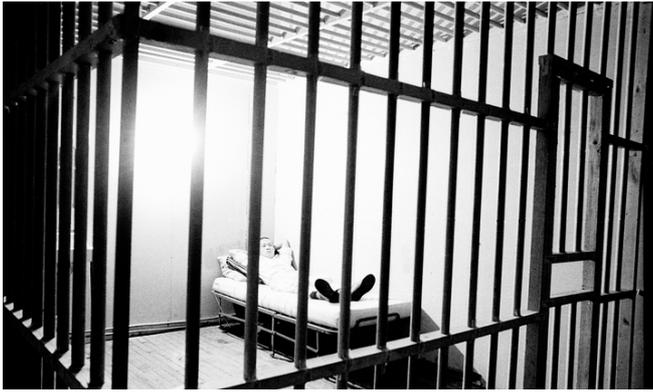


Figure 4.14 Tehching Hsieh, *One Year Performance (Cage Piece)*, 1978-79. Taken from <http://artasiapacific.com/Blog/NoTimeLikePassingTimeAConversationWithTehchingHsiehPart1> [accessed 07.02.2021]



Figure 4.15 Tehching Hsieh, *One Year Performance (Time Clock Piece)*, 1980-81. Performance documentation, New York. Taken from <https://mai.art/as-one-calendar/2016/3/11/lecture-tehching> [accessed 07.02.2021]

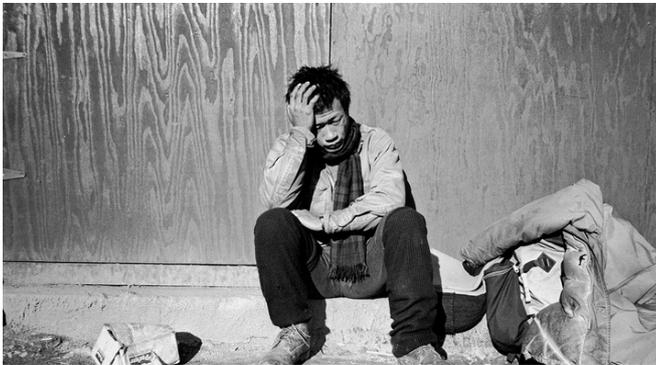


Figure 4.16 Tehching Hsieh, *One Year Performance (Outdoor Piece)*, 1981-82. Performance documentation, New York. Taken from <http://artasiapacific.com/Blog/NoTimeLikePassingTimeAConversationWithTehchingHsiehPart2> [accessed 07.02.2021]



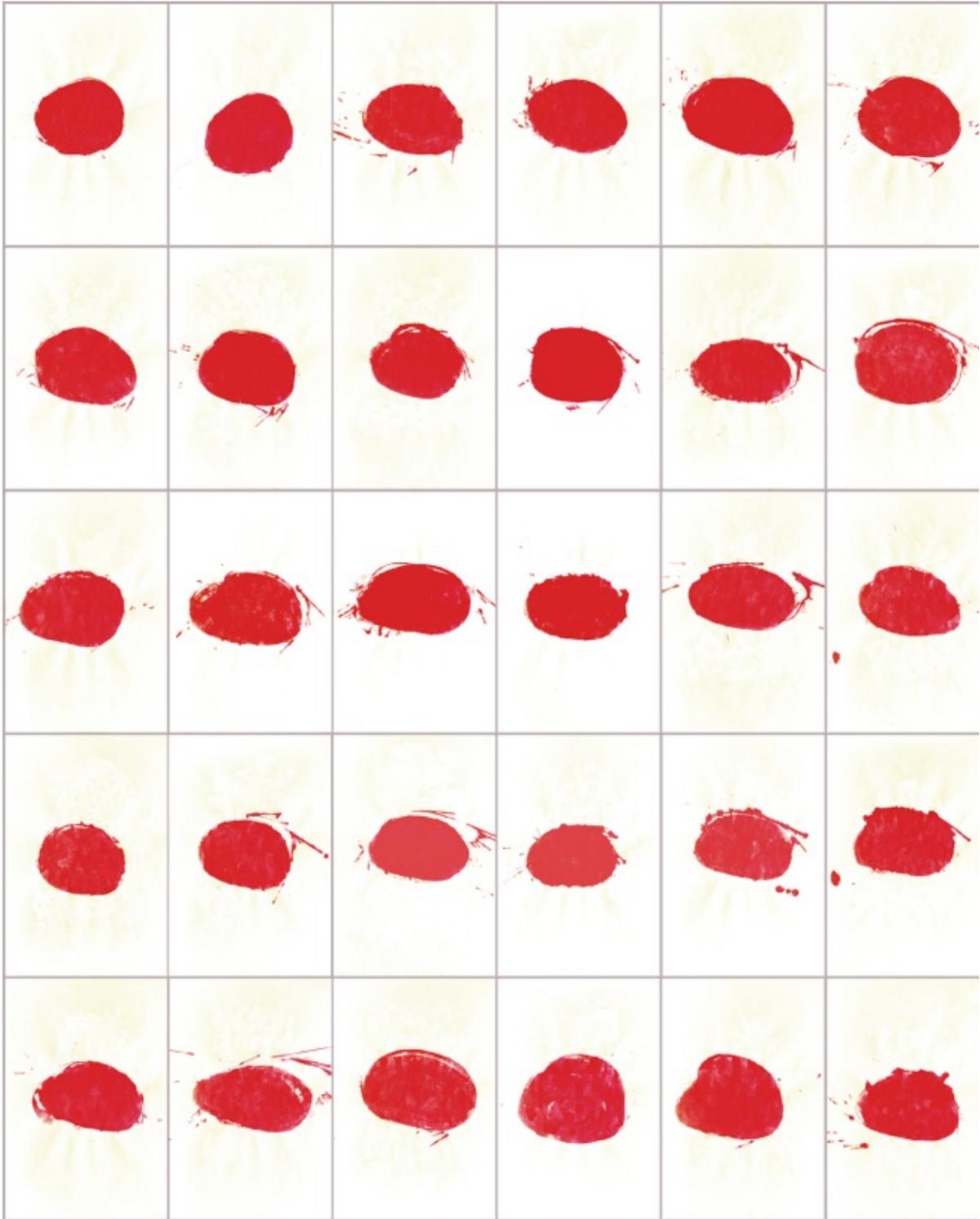
Figure 4.17 Tehching Hsieh, *One Year Performance (Outdoor Piece)*, 1981-82. Performance documentation, New York. Taken from <http://artasiapacific.com/Blog/NoTimeLikePassingTimeAConversationWithTehchingHsiehPart2> [accessed 07.02.2021]



Figure 4.18 Tehching Hsieh, *One Year Performance (Outdoor Piece)*, 1981-82. Performance documentation, New York. Taken from <http://artasiapacific.com/Blog/NoTimeLikePassingTimeAConversationWithTehchingHsiehPart2> [accessed 07.02.2021]



Figure 4.19 Tehching Hsieh, *One Year Performance (Rope Piece)*, 1983-84. Performance documentation. Taken from <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-performance-artist-tied-woman-year> [accessed 07.02.2021]



*Figure 4.20 Tehching Hsieh, 'Paint – Red Repetitions' (1973)  
Acrylic on paper, 30 sheet sketchbook, 15 × 21 in (taken from Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015b: 321)*



Figure 4.21 Tehching Hsieh, 'Jump Piece' (1973)  
Taken from <https://www.conceptualfinearts.com/cfa/2020/06/22/no-leap-is-ever-into-the-void/> [accessed 07.02.2021]



*Figure 4.22 Yves Klein, 'Leap into the Void' (1960)*

*Gelatine silver print. Taken from <https://publicdelivery.org/yves-klein-leap-into-the-void/> [accessed 07.02.2021]*

## One Year Performance (1980-81) ‘Time Clock Piece’

*“The Time Clock Piece is terrifying because Hsieh does not try to mask the remarkable emptiness at the centre of the work. Most of us need to believe that there is meaning in what we do, that our efforts impact, affect, change the world, even in the most miniscule ways”*

(Becker, 2015: 368)



Figure 4.23 Tebching Hsieh, *One Year Performance 1980 – 1981* (‘Time Clock Piece’)

*Documentation of performance, New York. Taken from <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-40-summer-2017/interview-tebching-hsieh-marina-abramovic> [accessed 02.07.2020]*

Like many performance artists of his generation, Hsieh demonstrates a strong interest in the destabilisation of subjectivity and an interrogation of the (in)visible – but in his works he sets off on a distinct trajectory: “an extended investigation of the nature of temporality and lived

experience” (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015: 17). It is this that makes his work a fascinating vehicle through which to consider the themes of boredom and work.

From 7pm on April 11<sup>th</sup> 1980, through to 6pm on the 11<sup>th</sup> April 1981, Hsieh punched a time clock he had installed on the wall of his East Village apartment on the hour, every hour, day and night. This comprised a total of 8,760 ‘clock ins’ and meant that he was living in a constant state of sleep deprivation and couldn’t venture far from his flat. Each time he punched the time clock he took a photo, a stark headshot against the plain blue wall. At the beginning of the piece he had shaved his head, so that the images show his hair growing down below his shoulders over the course of the year. We can read this as a critique of workplace logics spilling out into everyday life, through an *intensification* and *expansion* of the *technologies* and *routines* of the workplace. It is a factory metaphor (just think of the time clock) which turns life itself into constant work. Hsieh explained *Time Clock Piece* to a Wall Street Journal reporter thus: “Punching a time clock is my symbol for work. Most working people do the same boring things over and over again” (in Maddocks, 1981: np).

But his subject in this piece, he says, is *time* itself. And, as Bailey and Madden point out: “time, in modernity, has generally been viewed as a measurable and sequential commodity of the industrial process”, that is as a series of rational units: precise, controlled and – crucially – *productive* (Bailey and Madden, 2015: 4). But, somewhat uncomfortably, this work is seemingly “entirely devoid of purpose, a fruitless exercise in time wasting from which nothing remains but fragments, split-seconds remembered only by the click of a camera shutter” (Stone, 2018: np).

### **Witnessing, administration, recording**

*“Hsieh’s use of statements to inaugurate his work is also resonant of the many scorings of Fluxus artists and the instruction work of Yoko Ono that form the textural-gestural [...] In Hsieh’s case, the determining character of these propositional documents, as in many of those of conceptual Art, is a kind of Duchampian speech act: a declaration of non-art matter (a life) as art”*

(Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015: 16)

For each of his performances, Hsieh produced a written statement setting out the principles of the piece (see fig. 4.24). This document was always validated by a third party, often a lawyer, who signed various documents attesting to their bearing witness to his performances. In the case of *Time Clock Piece* it was David Milne, a lawyer, who signed a document validating his claims, inspected the seal on the camera Hsieh used to take the photos, and signed each of the hourly-

marked timecards (see fig. 4.25). Hsieh also kept a table where he marked the number of times he failed to punch the timecard (133 out of the possible 8,760 punches), as well as the reasons for these lapses, such as having a meal, oversleeping or accidentally punching the timecard early (see fig. 4.26).

The exhibition of *Time Clock Piece*, which I encountered first hand when on display at the Tate Modern in London until the summer of 2018 (see fig. 4.27, or fig. 4.28 for the same display photographed at the 57<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 2017), is comprised of all of these documentary traces of the year-long performance. Each photograph he took as he punched the time-clock each hour is displayed in strips alongside their corresponding timecards. A stop-motion video of each of these headshots, spliced together in sequence, cycles on a projector. You can also see the uniform he wore throughout the piece, folded neatly in a glass case, and the original time clock and camera he used. The documents, in particular the portrait photographs, or ‘mug shots’ that he produced, “contain a certain blankness and frailty that cuts against the systemic means of their production” (Heathfield, 2015: 13). By this, Heathfield is suggesting that the rigidity of the production process, the clarity of its concept and execution, contradict this sense of blankness. That is to say: the boundaries and rules are clear, but we can’t quite grasp their meaning; and there is – nonetheless – something deeply human about the images, despite their framing as expressionless mugshots. His face lacks expression, for sure; but it also somehow mournful, and indeed proud. He stares blankly from the image with an austerity tempered by a certain kind of frailty.

Désanges writes of some conceptual art that “the aesthetics of official documents took precedence over any real activity” (Désanges, 2003: np). In Hsieh’s case, the documents act as a witness, showing a concern with authenticity and commitment to the piece. The action, however, is still the main message of the work: this repetitive gesture of endless *arrival*. Nonetheless, with Hsieh’s work “it is easier to talk about what does *not* occur – i.e. life as we know it” (Becker, 2015: 367, emphasis added). Tim Etchells writes of “how systematic and meticulous” the piece is: “the projects, the execution, the documentation. It’s so legalistic in the setting of rules, and in a certain way it’s so brutalising in its application of system to life, to time” (Etchells 2015: 356). The casualty of this brutalisation is everything that lies outside the strict regulation of the piece. In this sense, “the documents, in a certain way, show everything but tell nothing” (Etchells, 2015: 357).

It is also possible to theorise Hsieh’s work and its documentary traces through the lens of the archive. On one level, the labour of the piece is itself a kind of archiving and record-keeping

focussed on the passing of time. On another, Hsieh creates, through this actions, an enduring record (or archive) which stands alone. Other artists who have used this impulse to create work include On Kawara, whose piece *I Met* (1968-79, see fig. 4.29) chronicled the full name of every person that the artist spoke to each day. Sven Spieker, writing on the Modernist archive as an approach in contemporary art, asserts that artists tend to create disordered archives, playful archives or archives ordered according to arbitrary principles (2008). Hsieh undoubtedly falls into the latter category of the three, though each approach shows the fallacy of objectively recording time or experience. Hsieh's work, conceived of as a modernist artistic archive, records both the *proliferation* of work and the *absence* of experience. This is coherent with the fact that his work "above all... is about time and life considered in an abstract, purified way" -- purification in the sense of the eradication of specificity and the cleaving of lived experience from meaning and texture (Menegoi, 2007: np). To put this in a Bergsonian sense, this is the total subjection of lived experiences of time (intuitive duration) to scientific clock time.

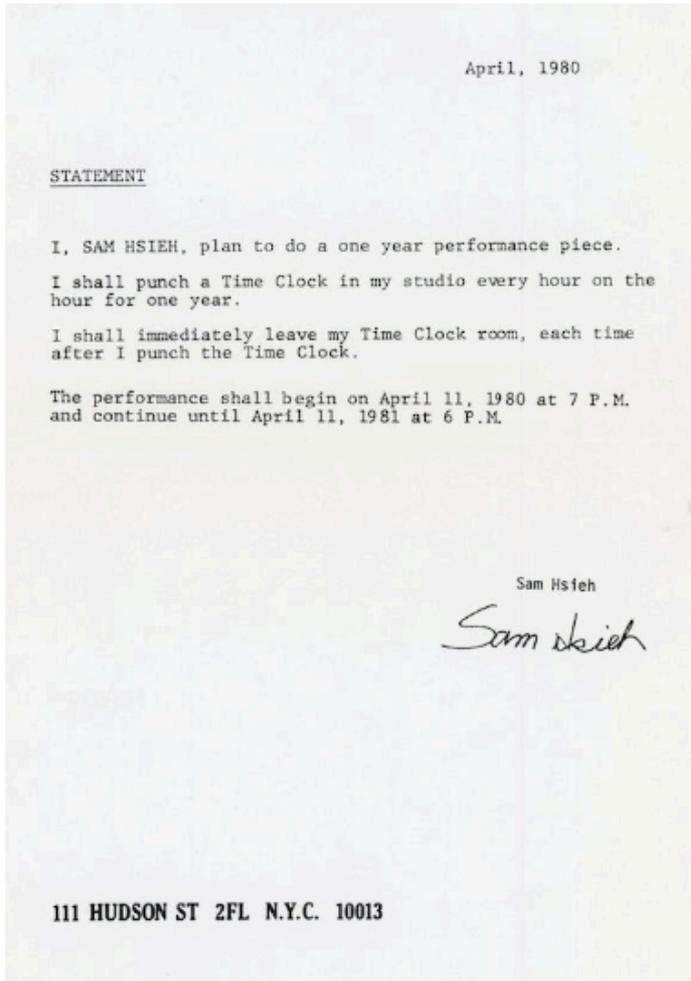


Figure 4.24 Sam Hsieh, 'Time Clock Piece' project statement, (1980) Performance documentation. Taken from: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/tebching-hsieh-sam-hsieh-one-year-performance-time-clock-project-statement> [accessed 07.02.2021]

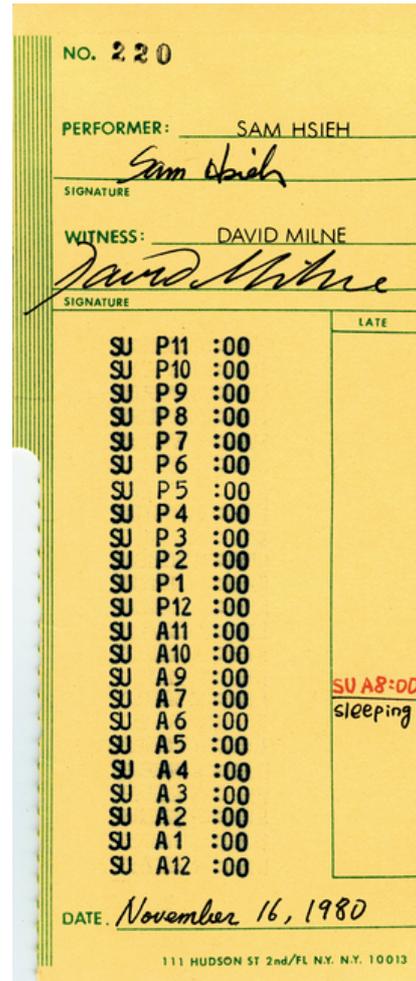


Figure 4.25 Tehching Hsieh, 'Time Clock Piece' time card (1980) Performance documentation. Taken from <http://artasiapacific.com/Blog/NoTimeLikePassingTimeAConversationWithTehchingHsiehPart2> [accessed 02.02.202]

## ONE YEAR PERFORMANCE

April 11, 1980 – April 11, 1981

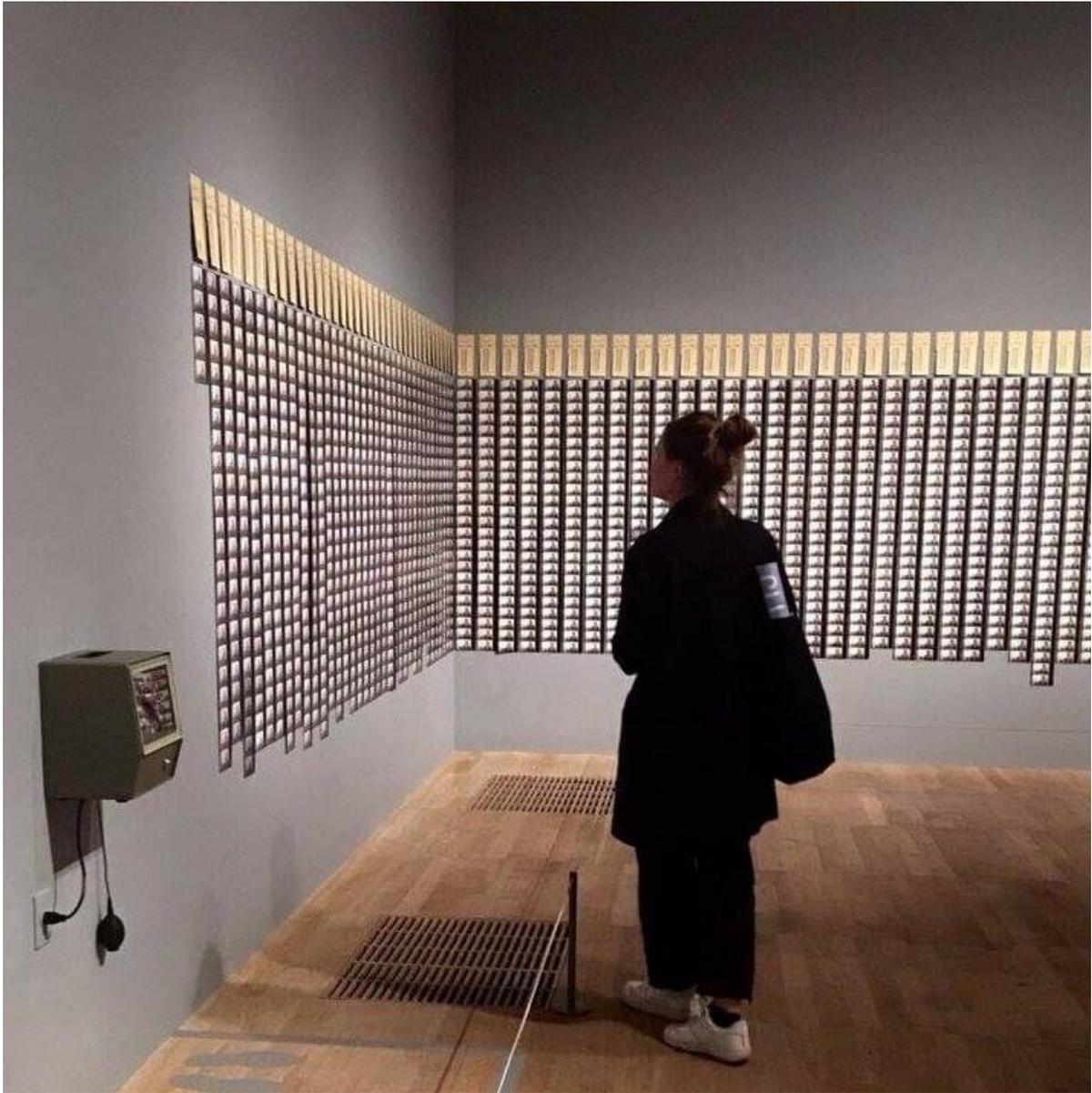
Time clock to be punched 8,760 times for a period of one year.

The following represents a breakdown of how many times, as well as reasons why, I missed punching the time clock.

<u>1980</u>	<u>Sleeping</u>	<u>Late</u>	<u>Early</u>	<u>Total</u>
April	1	0	0	1
May	5	3	0	8
June	7	0	1	8
July	2	1	0	3
August	10	1	2	13
September	10	1	1	12
October	11	0	2	13
November	15	0	3	18
December	22	3	0	25
<u>1981</u>				
January	3	4	0	7
February	7	9	0	16
March	1	6	1	8
April	0	1	0	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>133</b>

(1.52 missed for total year)

Figure 4.26 Tehching Hsieh, *Time Clock Piece* documentation showing missed clock-ins (1981)  
Taken from: <https://www.tehchinghsieh.com/oneyearperformance1980-1981?lightbox=dataItem-jg99ow7v1> [accessed 02.02.2020]



*Figure 4.27 Photo of myself at the display of Tehching Hsieh's Time Clock Piece at the Tate Modern, London, summer 2018  
(own photo)*



Figure 4.28 Exhibition view of Tehching Hsieh's 'Doing Time' at the Taiwan Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale (2017)  
 Taken from <https://hyperallergic.com/385988/tebching-hsiehs-art-of-passing-time/> [accessed 30.01.2021]



Figure 4.29 On Kawara, 'I MET', 1968-1979  
 Image showing a 2004 reprint of the complete set of 12 volumes totalling 4,790 pages. Taken from  
<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/on-kawara-i-met-1> [accessed 02.02.2020]

## Labour and the administration of time

*“In the beginning, I was just wasting time, but then I became conceptual about wasting time. I realized I know how to use this medium — time.”*

(Hsieh, quoted in Masters, 2017: np)

By the 1970s “the allied organising kinetic logics of capitalised temporality – *regulation* and *acceleration* – were firmly embedded in the Western social and cultural milieu, and it is with these forces that durational aesthetics can be seen as being [...] engaged” (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015: 20, emphasis added). This is why time – and rules about time – are the very medium Hsieh works with. Witnessing time, wasting time, passing time. Durational art, as Marina Abramovic puts it, is itself an approach where “time becomes form” (Abramovic, 2015: 351).

Hsieh explains: “in New York, I had already wasted so much time when I was young. From age 24 to 28, I almost didn’t create anything [...] Every day, I had to do dishwashing or cleaning up in a restaurant” (Masters, 2017: np). Here, then, he equates working in the restaurant as being as much of a waste of time as his labour in creating the artwork. On a philosophical level, of course, this is entirely true. This elision of the supposed distinction between ‘art time’ and ‘life time’ is at the very core of Hsieh’s work, and is expressed most fully in *No Art Piece* and *Thirteen Year Plan* with the complete collapse of art into life. Nonetheless, the lengthy timescale he works with, and the multitude of silences contained in the records produced from *Time Clock Piece*, situates his art works “beyond art-as-process or art-as-event and renders art as simultaneous to life” (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015: 13). If the art is simultaneous to life, then life also becomes simultaneous to work; this is exactly what Hsieh alludes to.

Becker writes that humans “are painfully aware that, although we can slow time down, it is always moving forward. In fact, we are time. It exists in and around us” (Becker, 2015: 367). In this sense, time constitutes the ultimate limit to our agency. As Hsieh explains: “it doesn’t really matter how I spend time: time is still passing. Wasting time is my basic attitude to life; it is a gesture of dealing with the absurdity between life and time” (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015: 334). This resignation to the marching-forwards of time is at once a political and pragmatic stance. Elena Gorfinkel, writing on characterisations of weariness in art cinema, asserts: “fatigue, weariness, tiredness, and exhaustion emerge from a relation to a sense of a time that passes, passes on, and passes through the actor’s labouring body, but also never ceases to pass on, to pass through” (2012: 312). This implies a kind of being stuck in time, of not *moving forwards*, as time is *supposed* to do. But this sense of time passing necessitating *progress* or *forward movement* is

also culturally constructed and is one of the reasons why thinkers such as Bertrand Russell have advocated idleness as a fruitfully radical pursuit (Russell, 1932b).

Hsieh, on the most fundamental level, is “concerned with the presencing and marking of time” (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015: 17). And yet, at the forefront of *Time Clock Piece* are just two temporal registers: the hour and the year. This brings his work into direct correspondence with the socially and culturally accepted measure of a life, so that “the durational measure carries a symbolic weight [...] of common human accounting” (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015: 18). Various other rhythms and temporalities, however, are entirely ignored. The passage of day to night, the body’s circadian rhythms, weeks or months do not even register. This is what leads Groom to suggest that “while the clock moves steadily and predictably, with its homogeneous and interchangeably abstract units, the body that tries to obey it registers other temporalities” (Groom, 2017: np). The erasure and silence of *other* felt senses of time and experience are part of the fabric of the work; their eradication signalling the primacy of clock time, labour and task over *life itself*. And yet, within this ‘emptying out’ of experience, more ‘lifelike’ elements were clearly still intruding in between the hourly clock-ins, as evidenced by the 133 times Hsieh missed his allocated clocking-in time. These moments signal “the corporeal slippages, where the full internalisation of clock-time is shown to be impossible” – the *impossibility* of a fully regulated existence lived in clock time (Groom, 2017: np).

### **Temporality and boredom**

*“The exploited worker was not only caught within the vertiginous forces of class oppression but also became a kind of half-living universal equivalent [...] the man without qualities exchanges the rich and painful political texture of a living past (and all of the intimations of a democratic future that it holds) for the fetish of pure phenomenological presence. [...] A prisoner of a perpetual present.”*

(Murtola and Fleming, 2011: 1)

Murtola and Fleming explain how a stripping away of individuality - which supports an overall push to dehumanisation related to the capitalist ‘resource extraction’ impulse (something we see in Sierra’s work) – also works through a temporal frame. Boredom is key here because, as management scholars Bailey and Madden write, when bored, we exist in “moments temporally bound in the present” (2015: 13). These are moments with no future - because the future seems (to all intents and purposes) exactly the same as the present. The repetition that Hsieh subjects himself to is exactly this process; and it also becomes a visual index which reflects the experience of boredom precisely because the past and future are erased by this closing down of experience -

this ‘perpetual present’. And yet, a ‘perpetual present’ is an impossibility since, as performance artist Stuart Brisley reminds us, “nothing is forever. It is the question of the relative durations of the impermanent” (quoted in Heathfield, 2012: 30). This also fits with Adrian Heathfield’s assertion that the concept of endlessness is itself part of capitalism’s sustaining myth; that it presents itself as something that will proceed ad infinitum, which can only ever be a fallacy.

Hsieh also works directly against the doctrine of late-capitalism which demands incessant novelty, a demand that, in itself, becomes boring. The *Time Clock Piece* instead has a quality of incessant *sameness*, giving it an attribute that could be described as an absolute commitment to featureless repetition. This is at once restrictive and liberating. Since the core of the performance – and, indeed, all of Hsieh’s lifeworks – is denial, his artworks tend to be defined by prescriptive and prohibitive statements of intent that shape the action Hsieh is permitted to take. This is however, also liberating in the sense that it runs directly against one of the foundational principles of capitalism: incessant newness and innovation. As Tim Etchells diagnoses:

*“You create an economy of denial which puts itself squarely at odds with the capitalist orthodoxy, an orthodoxy which for growth requires (and manufactures) endless expansive micro (and macro) change – a tedious infinity of new demands, needs, consumptions, social interactions and lifestyle options which must all in turn be facilitated by yet more movement, devices, products, human labour and built spaces.”* (Etchells, 2015: 357)

Hsieh’s work can also be understood through what Pamela M. Lee calls ‘an ethics of slowness’ – “a laborious commitment in a cultural context of acceleration to a different pace and understanding of creative generation” (in Heathfield, 2015: 23). The accelerated, frantic temporal quality of late-capitalism is deeply inscribed in Western social practices and relations. But not only this – it is also central to the entire cultural-technical milieu and in the identities and experiences of subjects. Under current conditions, where our dreams and desires are monitored by algorithms and our phones track our every movement, click, and purchase, the question of how to really waste time is a pertinent one. Everything we do, every moment we live, becomes data which is monetised; as film artist Hito Steyerl writes: “if the factory is everywhere, then there is no longer a gate by which to leave it – there is no way to escape relentless productivity” (Steyerl, 2009: 9). Hsieh pre-figures this historical moment with *Time Clock Piece*, but also suggests that “within the excessive punctuality and clock-time obedience [...] there are also times, time that might be less immediately legible – times of elusion and refusal” (Groom, 2017: np). Because with ‘wasting time’, Hsieh argues, comes ‘free thinking’. Yet, when asked if – as he was doing these performances – he saw it as any different from regular life, he answered: “To myself, I don’t make [see] any differences. I can have my free thinking” (Masters, 2017b: np). It follows

that free thinking is always available and is a space of resistance. But, as Alfie Bown argues, distractions can deaden independent critical thought by keeping us in the ‘constant state of entertainment’ he diagnoses (2015).

### **Interpreting Hsieh: authenticity, administration, boredom and time**

Hsieh’s works have a sincerity and integrity to them that only *not* having an audience can bring – before the last ‘clocking in’ of his *Time Clock Piece*, he had put flyers up around the East Village, advertising an open studio, offering audiences to come and bear witness to the final punching of the clock in the apartment where he lived and worked. The images from the final clocking-in show a paltry audience. And this is what makes the work even more fascinating – why would anyone do this? So often we understand the world on the basis of *shared* meaning – because the shared value system is what comforts us by seeing our own worldview reflected in others’. The works were painstakingly recorded, but at a time where no one was really watching - and this seems somehow as if he is questioning the basis of shared meaning itself. Performance art can so easily seem trite, like an artistic equivalent of David Blaine suspended in a Perspex box over the Thames. Hsieh’s sincerity and the clarity of his concept and execution are part of what makes his work so enigmatic. As he said in an interview, when asked *why* he carried out these works: “I only did it for art” (Hsieh in Masters, 2017: np).

Hsieh cites Kafka as a key influence, and it is interesting to note that almost a century after *The Castle* was written, it continues to feel ever-more relevant. As Chris Fite-Wassilak writes: “when confronted with innumerable, seemingly senseless regulations, incessant forms and questionnaires, we can simply use the adjective 'Kafkaesque'" (Fite-Wassilak, 2016: 69).

However, rather than an outsider who is subjected to ‘senseless regulations’ and bloated bureaucratic processes (as the protagonist, known only as *K*, is in *The Castle*) the contemporary protagonist is a worker *inside* the castle itself, who has internalised these regulations, instead inflicting self-regulation. Senseless regulation is at the core of what Hsieh does, and in that sense, he speaks to concerns around restriction, regulation and the closing down of experiences and possibilities under an increasingly disenchanting, bureaucratized and overly-administered society.

On a more pragmatic level, Hsieh’s *Time Clock Piece* is also “a strikingly relevant visualisation of a historical process. For an increasing number of workers, the 9 to 5 working day has transformed into an all the time condition” (Groom, 2017: np). The collapsing of art into life, and life into work, is almost complete. If, as Hsieh contends, ‘life is just passing time until you die’ then these pursuits are all one and the same: art-time, life-time, work-time. Capital’s growing dependence

on immaterial and information-based labour means that the time, place and scope of work are no longer clearly defined. These are all secondary to the brute fact of our finitude; and yet this can also serve as a call to *find* meaning, to *discover* meaning and to attune ourselves to joy, interest and fulfilment. Hsieh is a philosophical realist who doesn't explicitly call us to do this, but through his work he does seem to pose the question of *what to do with time*. Perhaps even more than this, he states that *what we do with time* doesn't matter all that much. We have this cultural imperative towards action, impact, accumulation... this demand for productivity and efficiency. But as Hsieh explains, this ignores the qualities of time itself:

*"We are temporal beings, yet we rarely pay attention to the passage of time in and for itself. We tend to think of time only in terms of the activities that fill it up. Or else we think about time negatively, in terms of having to wait, when there is something that we want right now."* (Hsieh, quoted in Shaviro, 2000: np)

In viewing his work we "witness an event about the absence of events [...] to articulate non-production, a spectacle completely lacking in the spectacular" (Becker, 2015: 368). In eradicating spectacle, and in doing away with eventhood by using repetitive events that lose the distinction of being 'an event', Sierra leaves us with *time*. As Shaviro puts it: "by pushing our society's reification of time to its ultimate point, Hsieh was able to rediscover an inner experience of time, a sense of pure eventless duration" (Shaviro, 2000: np). The viewer also senses this – in a work which acts only as a witness to time passing, our awareness of time shifts. It is precisely *paying attention to time* which forms the core of the experiential domain of boredom. When there is nothing to focus on – nothing of interest or meaning, nothing to distinguish one moment from the next – all we are left with is the relentless passage of time. This is when time drags, we look at the clock, we tap our fingers impatiently. This is precisely how Hsieh uses boredom as an *active aesthetic approach* to offer an exploration of *time, work* and *meaning*. Durational aesthetics are particularly well suited to this application since they are concerned with this attunement to time which is implicated in the experience of boredom. His work methodology is simply to mechanically record the passing of time – and the banality of it is exactly what makes it so extraordinary.

But this is only one reading. As Hsieh himself explained in an interview: "I leave my work open to different interpretations. For example, some people think of the time clock piece as industrial, as if it is about workers [...] But that is talking only about working" (Whittaker and Hsieh, 2017: np). Our need for *meaning* and *certainty* means that we tend to read the work in such a way as "to bring metaphor to the work's literality, to try to densify it, to make a more layered meaning emerge" (Becker, 2015: 369). It's not that the work *isn't* about those things, but that it's about

*more* and *less* than that too. Hsieh explains: “I am inclined to observe the universal circumstances of human beings instead of pointing to issues. [...] The power of art is leaning toward the exploration of essences” (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015: 330). As Shaviro writes: “Hsieh’s work invites us to an infinite meditation” (2000: np) – and this, surely, is a wonderful irony. An infinite, endless, indeterminate, ever-open *question*.

## IV. Ignacio Uriarte

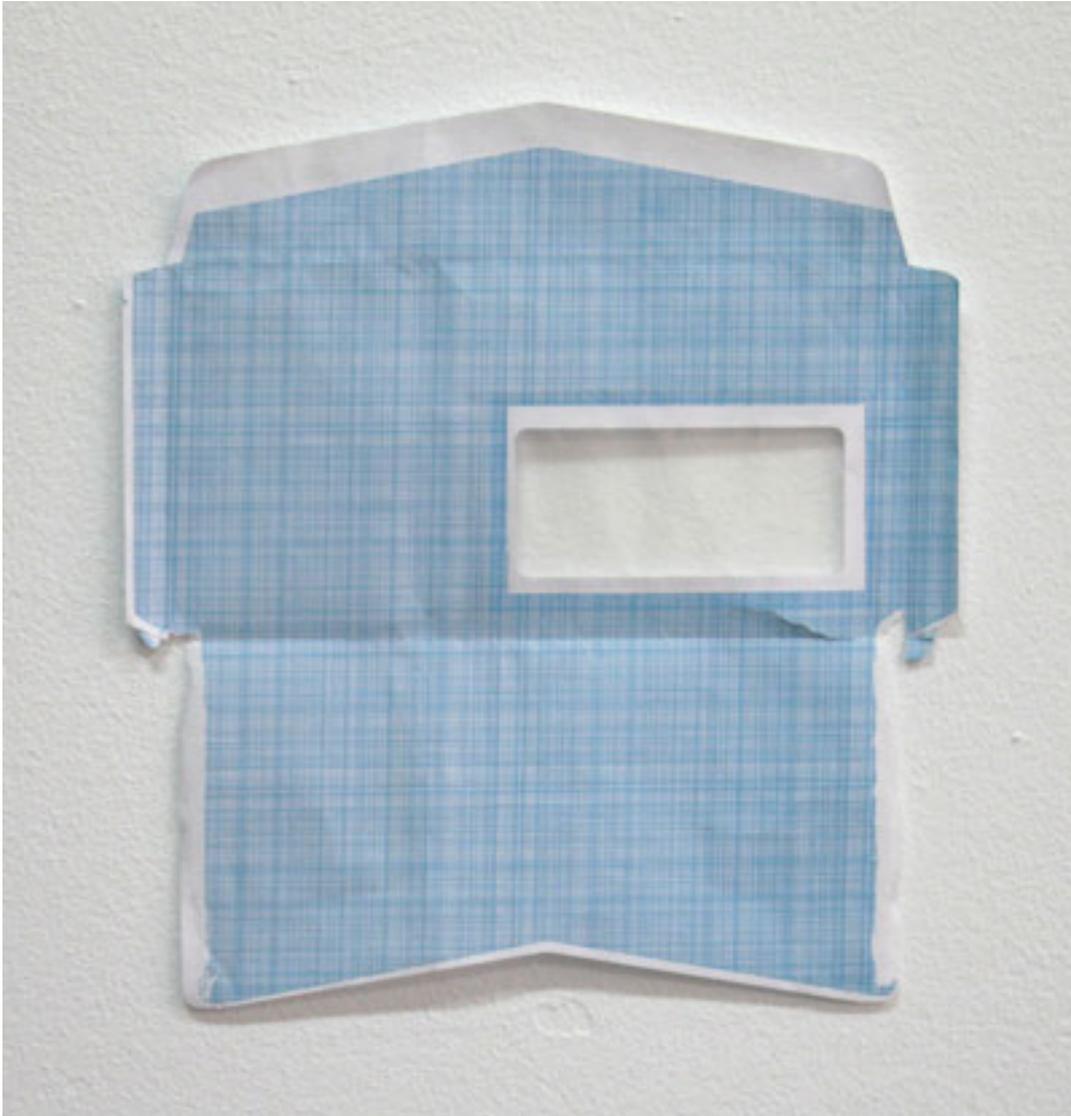
*“I came to the conclusion that to make good art, one has to be honest and the easiest way to be honest is to deal with the things you know best, the things you have experienced and suffered from yourself. In my case it was the repetitive work within the confinements of an office environment, the weight of hierarchies and strict rules, the sensation of boredom and a particular kind of existential meditation inherent to an 8 hour work-routine.”*

(Uriarte in Werner, 2014: np)

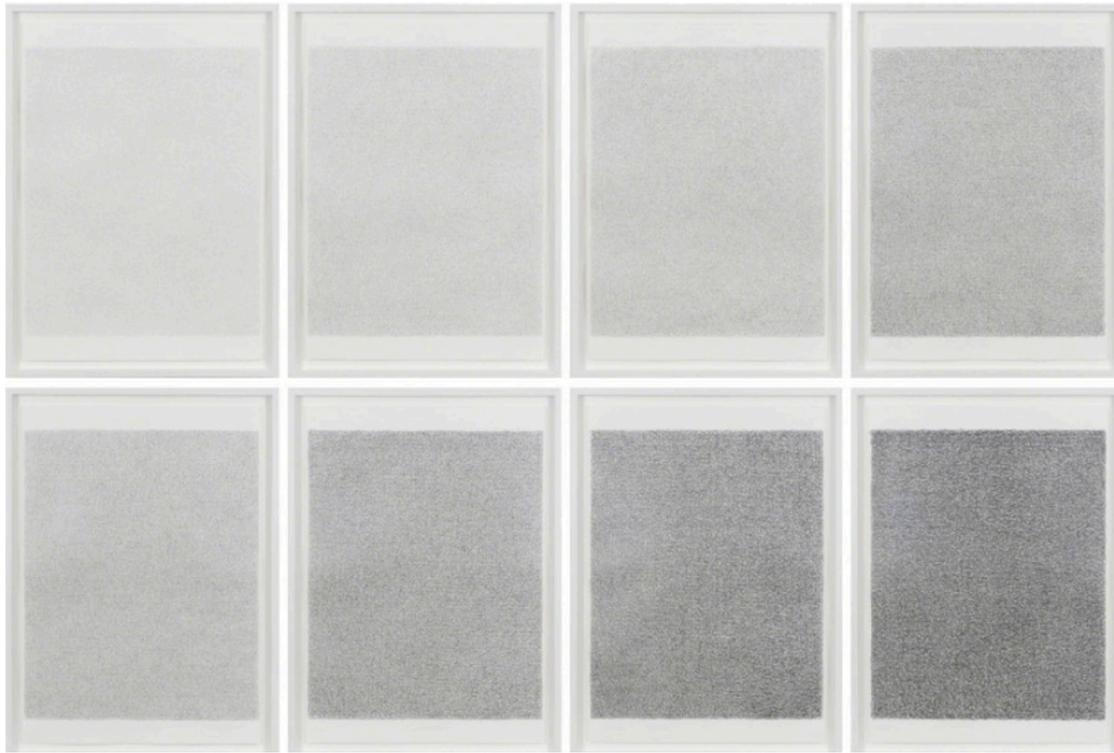
Ignacio Uriarte became a full-time practising artist in 2003 after completing a master’s degree in business administration, followed by a decade of working as an office administrator in multinational corporations like Siemens and Canon. He has since dedicated his time to what he calls “office art”. His work uses the aesthetics and materials of administration - envelopes, A4 paper, files, excel spreadsheets, word documents, biros, ink pens and pencils - as his raw material (Taka-Ishii-Gallery, 2009: np). Some representative works include *Envelope* (2003, see fig 4.30) in which an inside out envelope is installed on a wall; and *From 6h to 8b* (2007, see fig. 4.31), a monochrome drawing made by colouring in fifteen sheets of paper, creating a grayscale series with every possible pencil lead hardness from 6h to 8b. The use of the administrative detritus of the office as the total aesthetic parameter of his work references the totalising ubiquity of office work in modern society. As the successor of the industrial factory, one could argue the office is – and has for a long while – been a central motif of contemporary working life. This is perhaps what leads Sven Spieker to make the claim that the office is “one of the crucibles of modernism” (2009: np). Uriarte’s work certainly supports such a claim, since we can see the legacy of minimalism and conceptual art expressed through the office motif. And yet, Uriarte admits that many of the tools he uses in his artwork are quickly becoming obsolete as administrative work transforms. This adds a nostalgic sense to his work – and he admits that as they disappear he finds himself even more drawn to “these physical ghosts - these tools that are already obsolete, but are still part of our way of thinking and working” (Uriarte in Werner, 2014: np).

Uriarte’s ‘office aesthetic’ even extends to his website (see fig. 4.32). The site not only resembles a computer filing system - it is also deliberately un-intuitive. Each work, when clicked on, opens in a new window; each explanation opens in a new window; and navigation between each window, artwork and explanation is laborious. This echoes the way in which Uriarte critiques the productivity impulse that underpins the work relation - through deliberately creating inefficiency in the production of his art works. Through this laborious production process, Uriarte creates work “whose repetitive gestures extrapolate the banal rhythms of office life into imaginative abstractions” (Hutchens 2011: np). His works, then, can be seen to oscillate between

“bureaucratic delight” and “the futility of the nine-to-five grind” (Andrews 2010: np).



*Figure 4.30 Ignacio Uriarte, 'Envelope' (2003)  
Torn up envelope, 27.6 × 25.4cm. Taken from <http://www.ignaciouriarte.com/works/01/index.html> [accessed 07.02.2021]*



*Figure 4.31 Ignacio Uriarte, From 6b to 8b (2011)  
pencil on paper, 308 x 288 x 4cm. Image taken from <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/ignacio-uriarte-from-8b-to-6b> [accessed  
07.02.2021]*

## Ignacio Uriarte

works  
workshops  
texts  
exhibitions  
contact  
news



*Figure 4.32 Screen capture of Ignacio Uriarte's website.  
Taken from [www.ignaciouriate.com](http://www.ignaciouriate.com) [Accessed 14.08.2020]*

Time: *All My Days* (2004)

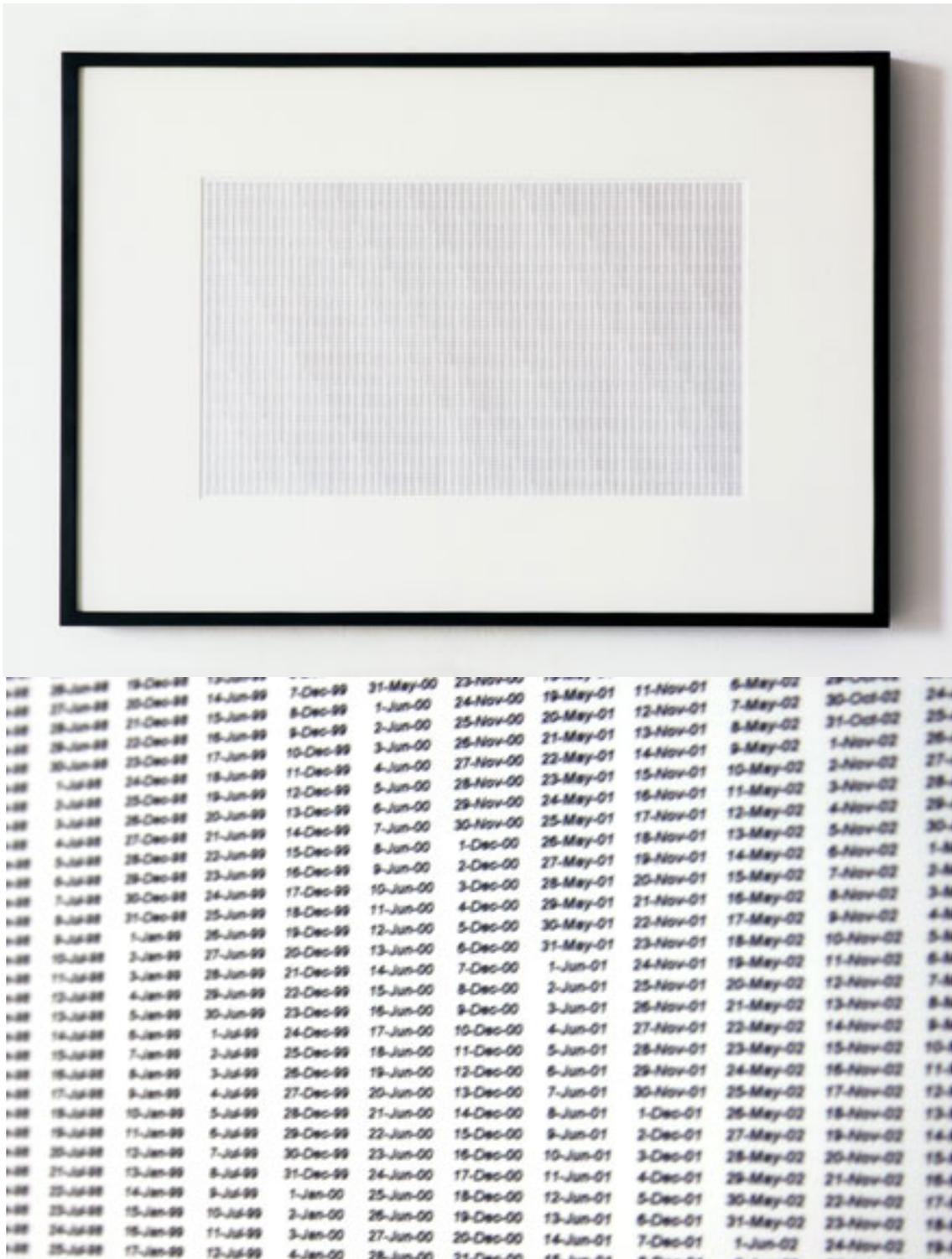


Figure 4.33 Ignacio Uriarte, 'All My Days' (2004)

Framed inkjet print, 53.4 × 69.3 cm and close-up of framed inkjet print, 53.4 × 69.3 cm. Taken from <http://www.ignaciouriarte.com/works/09/index.html> [accessed 17.08.2020]

Time, as a key component of any theorisation of boredom, is also part of the way that Uriarte expresses a concern with meaning and labour within his work. In this way boredom becomes part of the work's 'temporal fabric and spatial structure' as Lesley Kenny writes (2009). Although the theme of temporal regulation runs throughout Uriarte's work, one of the most explicit examples of this is *All My Days* (2004), part of a series of spreadsheet works created in Microsoft Excel (see fig 4.33). Like T.S Eliot's Prufrock who measures out his life in coffee spoons, Uriarte here measures out his life on an excel spreadsheet. He records each day, from the day of his birth (04-Sep-72) until the exhibition date of this work (23-Jun-04), all hand-typed, in an absurd parody of the gestures and technologies of administration and data entry.

In this piece, all distinction between one day and the next is gone. Each and every day follows the standard, accepted format. This standardised format creates a pattern across the piece – subtle diagonal lines - but it is a predictable pattern, governed by mathematical rules. This reflects “the cool analytic emphasis in Conceptual Art on systems, often deployed to critique orders of rationalisation and mechanisation” (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015: 17). Likewise, Hutchens acknowledges that this is a “sarcastic nod” to the misuse of technology in a way that doesn't actually generate any significant advancement, but merely makes possible the multiplication of bureaucratic outputs (Hutchens, 2011: np).

There is a further irony in that there is no real skill, 'artistic' or otherwise required in this work, another echo of the modern tendency towards labour 'de-skilling'. This is technology and minimal skill deployed in the service of multiplying bureaucratic impulses, or creating more work, more data, more actions... and less meaning. Because if the advent of mass-production has taught us anything, it is that with proliferation comes devaluation. Conceptually this speaks to a point made by Ivor Southwood in his book *Non-stop Inertia*. In it he writes that the way society is organised now is that we have “a population revving up without getting anywhere. The result is a kind of frenetic *inactivity*: we are caught in a cycle of non-stop inertia” – and that this extends especially to the workplace (Southwood, 2011: 11). Considering this alongside Uriarte's artistic influences, ranging from conceptual art movements of the 1960s and 70s to the systematic rule-based art works of Sol Le Witt, we can see evidence of a modernist trope identified by Sven Spieker: “the rise of information in or as art” (2008: 12). That the information is meaningless, hard to make sense of or see meaning in, is part of the fabric of the work; a work that questions the value of information, what constitutes creativity, and the nature of meaning itself.

Uriarte's artistic practice is, on one level, a parody of the frenzy of pointless activity (labour) that Southwood diagnoses. In a process which resembles and uses the gestures of 'productive work' he pokes fun at the filling of both time and space with endless bureaucratic processes as well as commenting on their de-individualising effects. As Fleming and Sturdy observed in their paper detailing a case study of a call centre: "the mundane rhythms of technological control lead to boredom and alienation" (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011: 193). Mundane rhythms are the very fabric of Uriarte's work, and he expresses these through subverting the exact technological controls that are used to order and record time. *All My Days* also contains an echo of Japanese-American artist On Kawara's *Date Paintings*. Each and every day, for over half a century, Kawara painted a canvas depicting, in simple letters, the date on which he was painting (see fig. 4.34). The effect is "somehow awesome and modest at once" as one critic put it (Farago, 2015: np). Whilst On Kawara used traditional artistic means – a canvas and paint – Uriarte updates this practice using the technology he recognises from his own experience of contemporary office work, creating something less like 'craft' and more like 'data'.

The tension between appearing to be productive, and actually being productive, is something which Uriarte discusses in a mini-documentary on his work, titled *The Art of Not Working*. (Uriarte and Sluggish, 2015). In the documentary, he recounts an anecdote about an office worker who admitted that he was deliberately inefficient as there was otherwise not enough for him to do. Corinne Maier argues that work is increasingly being reduced to "make-believe," that at the office "image counts more than product, seduction more than production" (in Paulsen, 2014: np). Erving Goffman touched on this in elucidating the concept of 'make-work', which applied to a work context suggests one is not only required to *do* a certain amount of work after a certain length of time but also to "be ready, when called upon, to give the impression that they are working hard at the moment" (Goffman, 1956: 68). A gap, then, exists between image and reality; between looking like you're doing something, and actually doing it. If the *appearance* of doing work is enough, then Uriarte may resemble the perfect employee. Uriarte states: "it looks like work, but it's not... it's like a vacuum, without efficiency" (Uriarte and Sluggish, 2015). As a parody of office work, it seems that this might be a parody in which many office workers already participate.

The marking of time passing in *All My Days* – its archiving - is reminiscent of Hsieh's *Time Clock Piece*, the emptying of units of time into a mere acknowledgment of their existence. This impulse can also be likened to Roman Opalka's *1965/1 – ∞* series (see figure 4.35 and 4.36). The work is a series of canvases which he began in 1965, with the intention of painting each number

from 1 to infinity. The canvases were all exactly the same size, and he always started in the top left corner and finished in the bottom right hand corner, with each canvas continuing the series where the previous one had finished. Opalka had explored many other ways of recording the passage of time before settling on this 'life work' – and he pledged his life to this piece since the project had no definable end. In 1968, he introduced a tape recorder into the process, speaking each number into the microphone as he painted it, and began taking passport-style photographs of himself standing in front of the canvas after each day's work – twenty years before Hsieh was to start his *Time Clock Piece*. The final number he painted before his death in 2011 was 5,607,249.

The introduction of the tape recorder into Opalka's work is resonant with Uriarte's developing practice, since he also created a sound piece which speaks to this approach and addresses time and boredom. From May 29, 2015 to April 11, 2016, Uriarte's sound work, titled *Counting for Eight Hours*, played in the entrance lobby to the Berlinische Galerie in Berlin. In it, the monotonous voice of a man is heard counting continuously for eight hours. The time units are random syllables, lasting one second each. This echoes Opalka and Hsieh's formal approach to the recording and witnessing of time *as a form of labour* in and of itself. Uriarte's description of his sound piece is as follows:

*"One 8-hour sound piece that will be installed for a one-year period. When entering the museum, you will hear the monotonous voice of actor Christian Intorp as he steadily counts away eight hours. Syllables form the units of measurement, with one second allotted to each syllable. So, in the course of eight hours the speaker reaches the number 3599. This is not only a reference to the span of time accounted for by a typical working day and the museum's own daily opening hours. It also reflects the connection between time as an abstract category and language as a way of structuring and defining it."* (Uriarte in Werner, 2014: np)

In this piece, Uriarte offers an understanding of temporality which celebrates, but also runs against, rationalised conceptions of time as a series of identical units to be productively filled. He measures time in the accepted increments – seconds - but the way these seconds are marked is totally *irrational* and seemingly random. Each second is also filled *with nothing* – other than a noise that signals the time passing. He reproduces the tick of the clock, but in a characteristically eccentric and a labour-intensive way, and one which – unlike the reliable, rational time clock – is subject to human error, to vocal stumbles, trips and ticks; and one which is expressed through the language of randomness. As Uriarte suggests in the quote above, this is intended to make us question 'time as an abstract category' and the way we accept it both as a foundational principle in the organisation of society and as a commodity that can be bought and sold.

Another key temporal dimension in this piece relates to the idea of the infinite. Peter Toohey, in his book *Boredom: a Lively History*, writes that “for those afflicted with boredom, it extends ever more slowly to infinity” (Toohey, 2012: 21). And infinity can be a very boring place precisely because it is infinite. It lacks vitality because it has no end – and though the piece is not temporally infinite, to the listener, no edges can be grasped, no end discerned. In this way it is intuitively understood as of potentially *infinite duration*. In *Counting for Eight Hours* there is no clock face, no hourly chimes, no indication of where we are in the expanse of time – just the seemingly endless march of each second going by. In this sense, we have no way of telling *how* much time has passed, or how long we have been there, witnessing the piece – unless we laboriously count each second. Perhaps this is what Uriarte wants us to do; to perform the labour of counting time passing, since he has removed all reference points that we could use to mark time’s passing in the usual clock-time way. In providing us with a measure of time passing, but with no reference points to orient ourselves properly in this expanse, he devises “a non-linear apprehension of qualitative temporality – of time as perceived, felt and experienced” (Bissell, 2007: 284). This is the difference between ‘chronological’ time (as understood for organisational purposes) and ‘experiential time’, which is “woven through psychological perception” and approaches something more like Henry Bergson’s concept of duration (Bissell, 2007: 284). To the listener this is experienced as exceptionally boring – it is highly repetitive, goes nowhere, and there is no reward at the end. The seconds act as markers of time “which strongly evoke lived duration and generate a slowdown within the time of their reception” – a phenomenon central to subjective experiences of bored time-spaces (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015: 17).



Figure 4.34 On Kawara's 13<sup>th</sup> Street studio, New York (1966)  
Image taken from <https://www.frieze.com/article/kawaras-today-series> [accessed 07.02.2021]

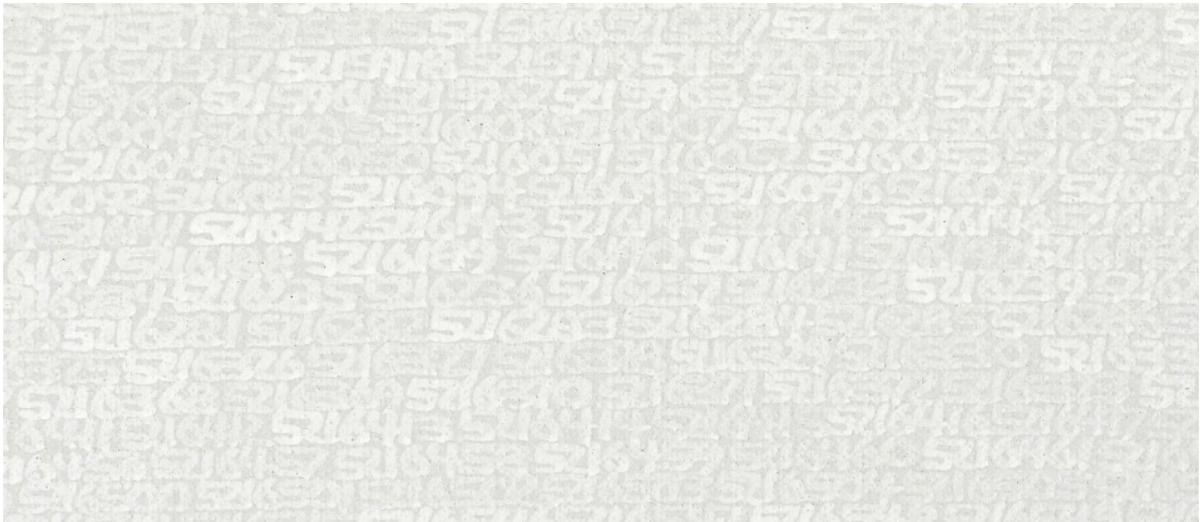
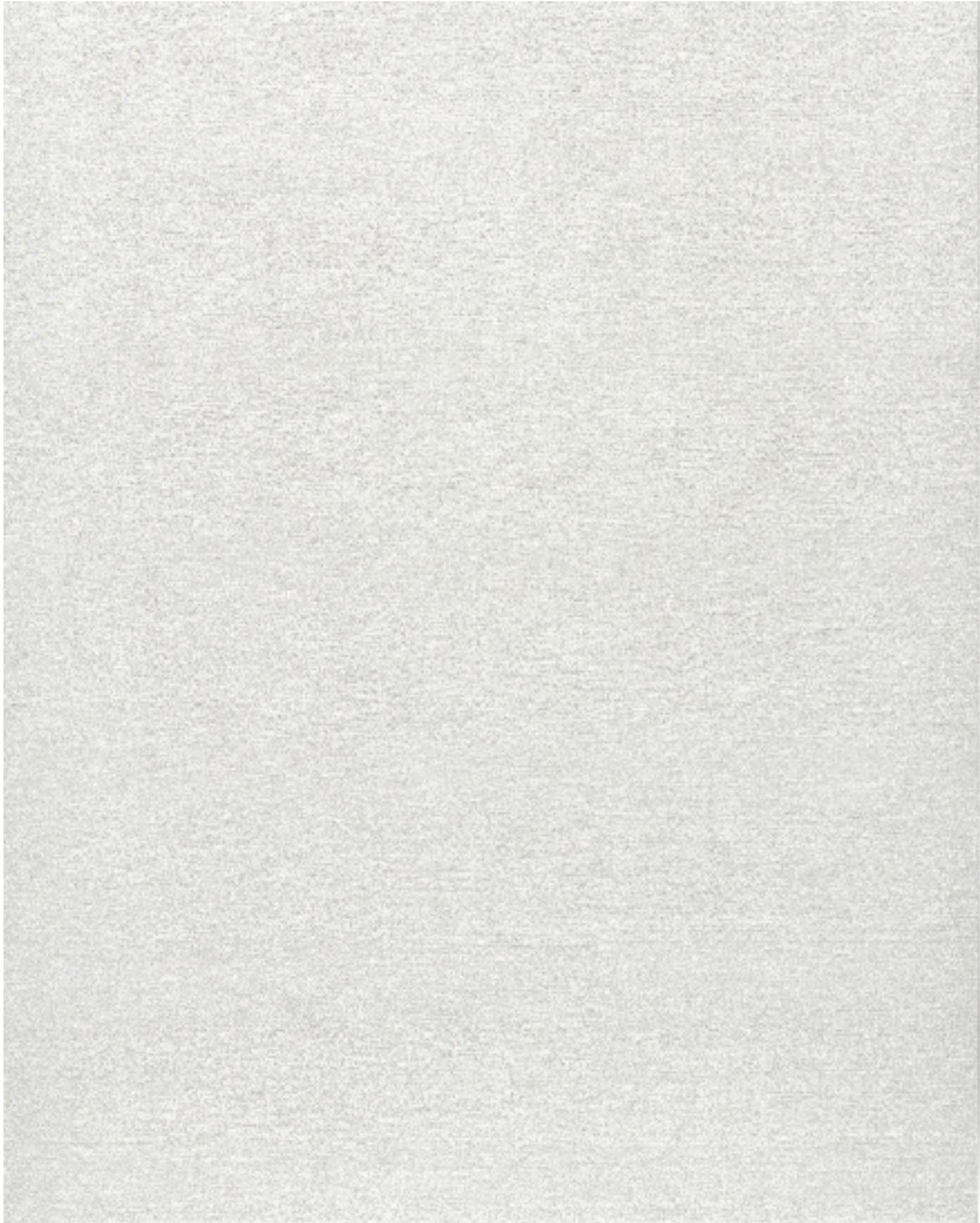


Figure 4.35 detail from Roman Opalka's '1965/1 - ∞' series. DETAIL - 5210331 – 5226270  
Taken from <https://www.phillips.com/detail/roman-opalka/UK010118/39> [accessed 07.02.2021]



*Figure 4.36 Roman Opalka, 'OPALKA 1965/1 - ∞ DETAIL - 5210331 – 5226270'  
Taken from <https://www.phillips.com/detail/roman-opalka/UK010118/39> [accessed 07.02.2021]*

## Labour and the body as a resource: Two Circles (2014)

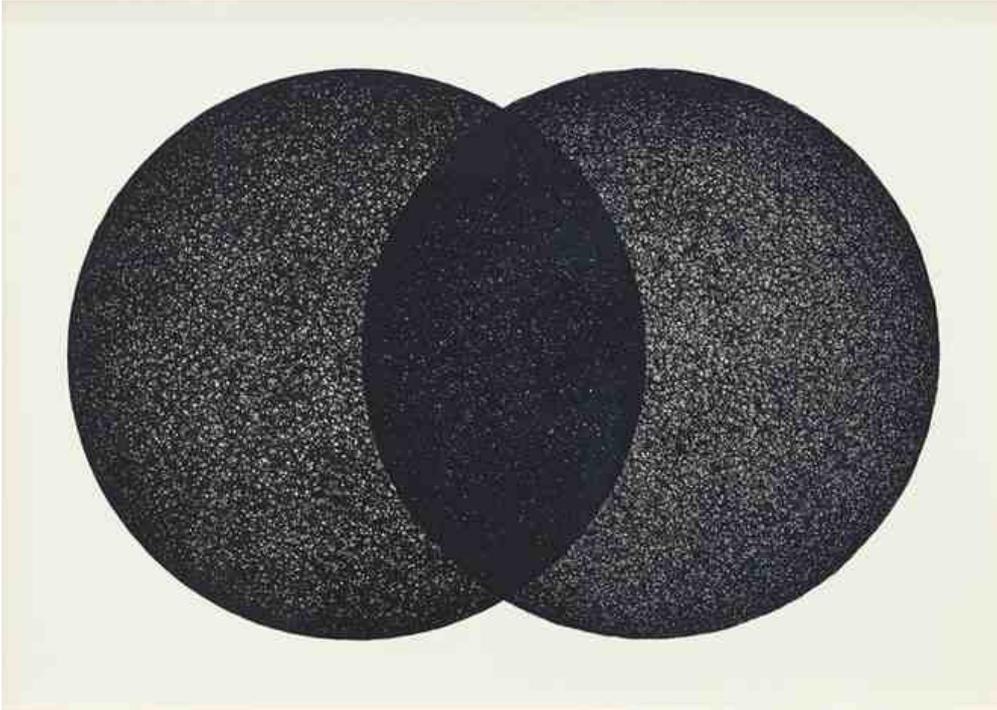


Figure 4.37 Ignacio Uriarte, 'Two Circles' (2014)  
Taken from [http://www.artspace.com/ignacio\\_uriarte/two-circles](http://www.artspace.com/ignacio_uriarte/two-circles) [accessed 07.02.2021]

*“The systematic repetition of these activities according to predefined rules turns them into meta-routines, into re-enactments of the Sisyphus myth [...] the resulting pieces register in detail the methodical and repetitive labour that was necessary for their production.”* (Ignacio Uriarte, in Hutchens, 2011: np)

The conceptualisation of both *time* and *the body* as resources are also brought into question in Uriarte’s work. He states that the starting point for his work always comes from “the little creative moments within office-routines, which mostly have a ridiculously small ‘artistic‘ aspect to them” (Hutchens, 2011: np). He gives the example of a scribble during a phone conversation, which echoes psychologist Louise Farnworth’s (1998) explanation of doodling as a symptom of boredom experienced as a bodily tension. Let me focus in particular on *Two Circles* (2014, see fig. 4.37 above), to develop my argument. This piece is an aesthetically expressed extension of the aimless doodle on the notepad; a moment of idleness writ large; a moment we’ve all experienced, extended. It is an example of precisely why Uriarte’s works are described as stemming from the “behavioural aesthetics of office tedium” (I8, 2010: np).

Here, drawing is made “parsimonious and ephemeral, pointless and playful [...] organised doodling which immediately invokes the intensely handmade and the intensely mechanical” (Kleinberg Romanow, 2013: 9). Uriarte’s work sits comfortably in opposition to the so-called

‘cult of productivity’, an age supposedly obsessed with efficiency and output, epitomised by ubiquitous articles with names such as ‘the 5 habits of highly effective people’. The total misuse of materials (the misuse of the body, specifically) in a process which is entirely unproductive in terms of ‘adding value’ in a corporate context is reflected when Uriarte admits: “my work feels a bit like it used to be [when he was an office worker], with one major distinction: It is non-productive in a conventional sense” (Uriarte in Werner, 2014: np). It is deliberately labour-intensive and time-consuming, or “evidently engaged with laborious and repetitive processes of [...] that admit an extended temporal dimension into the creation of the work” (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015: 17). Visually, it also bears some similarity to Martin Creed’s *Work No. 539* which uses a similar technique and materials but focuses on shorter, more immediate moments of time-wasting (see fig. 4.38).

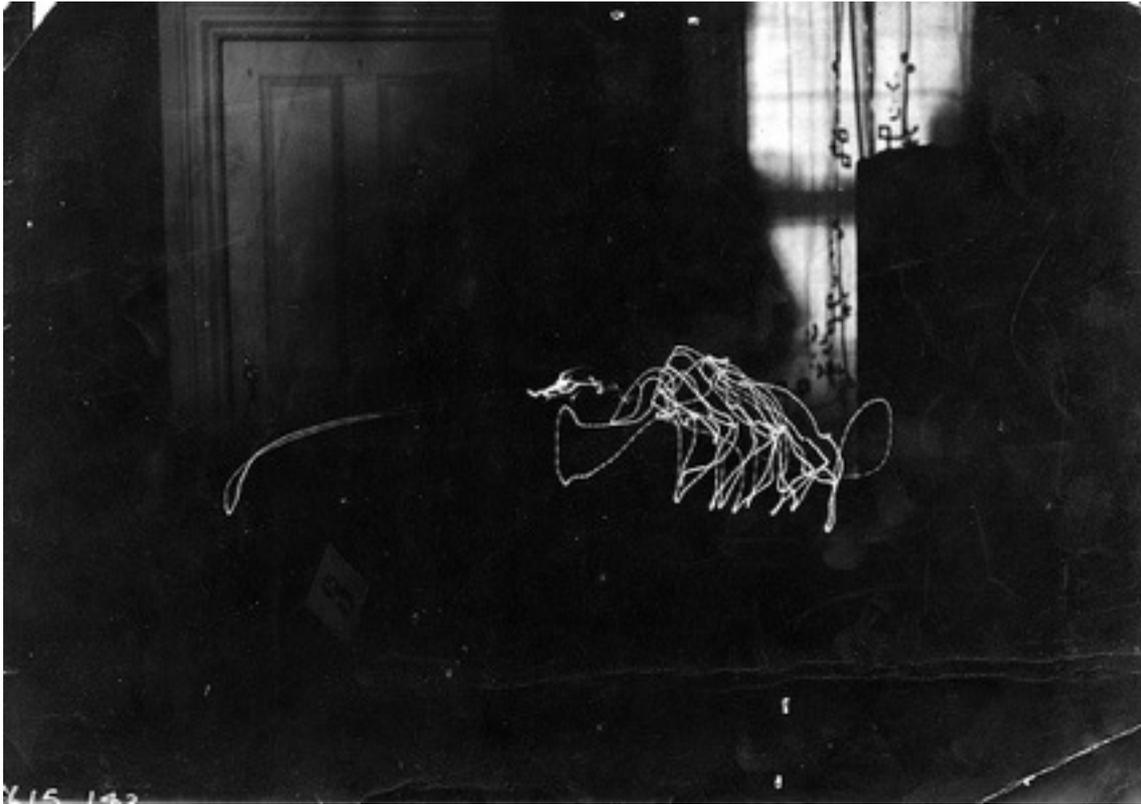


Figure 4.38 Martin Creed, *Work No. 539* (2006)  
*Biro on Paper, 29.1 × 21cm. Taken from <http://www.martincreed.com/site/works/work-no-539> [accessed 07.02.2021]*

In a culture ruled by productivity wasting time is discouraged – instead, “the *aesthetics of activity* become the guiding principle for charting a course that feels something like a career and a purpose” (Gregg, 2015: np, italics added). It is fascinating that Gregg singles out the *aesthetics* of activity as a guiding principle for self-actualisation. Uriarte’s approach becomes a glorious rebellion against this demand to be productive *all the time* and to use time *efficiently*. On the one hand, this piece denotes an intensification of the processes of the office; and on the other, constitutes a rejection of that organisation. In contrast to *Counting (for) Eight Hours*, *Two Circles* has

obvious visual parameters and clear edges. However, a possible sense of infinity is still graspable here – while the piece is ‘finished’ and is displayed as such to the viewer, it is the process of its production which becomes potentially limitless. The viewer cannot see a beginning or an end to the production process, to the hand-drawn line. As such it is emblematic of an embodied process of repetition which cannot quite be grasped.

The labour intensive nature of this work leaves a visual trace of time and motion, mapped through line in space, somehow reminiscent of the photos produced by Frank and Lillian Gilbreth in their time-motion studies. The images they produced – which they called ‘chronocyclegraphs’ - recorded task movements or ‘motion paths’ using long exposure and lights attached to workers’ bodies, and seemed to erase the body of the worker and abstract the act of labour (see fig. 4.39 for an example). This tracing of labour is exactly the process Uriarte follows, using the minimalist line as a trace of his labouring body. Unlike the Gilbreths, however, Uriarte is concerned with *inefficiency*, demonstrating a total commitment to the process, but not the commercial ends of the corporation. In short, “what the corporation would view as wasteful, Uriarte renders as art” (Hutchens 2011: np). Interestingly, *Two Circles* has a rather visually calming effect, allowing you to dissolve your gaze into the varying densities of the pen marks, attending to the possible ambivalence between boredom-as-affliction and contrasting notions of boredom as potentially therapeutic (Robson 2014). It also belies a fascination with processes and rules alongside the realities of randomness and time-wasting, where he allows the pen to wander freely over the page. Guillame Désanges writes that office-based art “denounces nothing except for the vacuity of what it represents” – that is to say, it denounces the emptiness of the office environment, a reflexive emptiness which reflects the emptiness from which it came (2003: np).



*Figure 4.39 Chronocyclograph of surgeon sewing, circa 1915.  
Example of a chronocyclograph from the Gilbreth's time-motion studies, Taken from: [www.we-make-money-not-art.com/the\\_chronocyclograph](http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com/the_chronocyclograph) [accessed 28.02.2021]*

## Office Aesthetics and Administrative Technologies: Ringbinder Circle (2014)

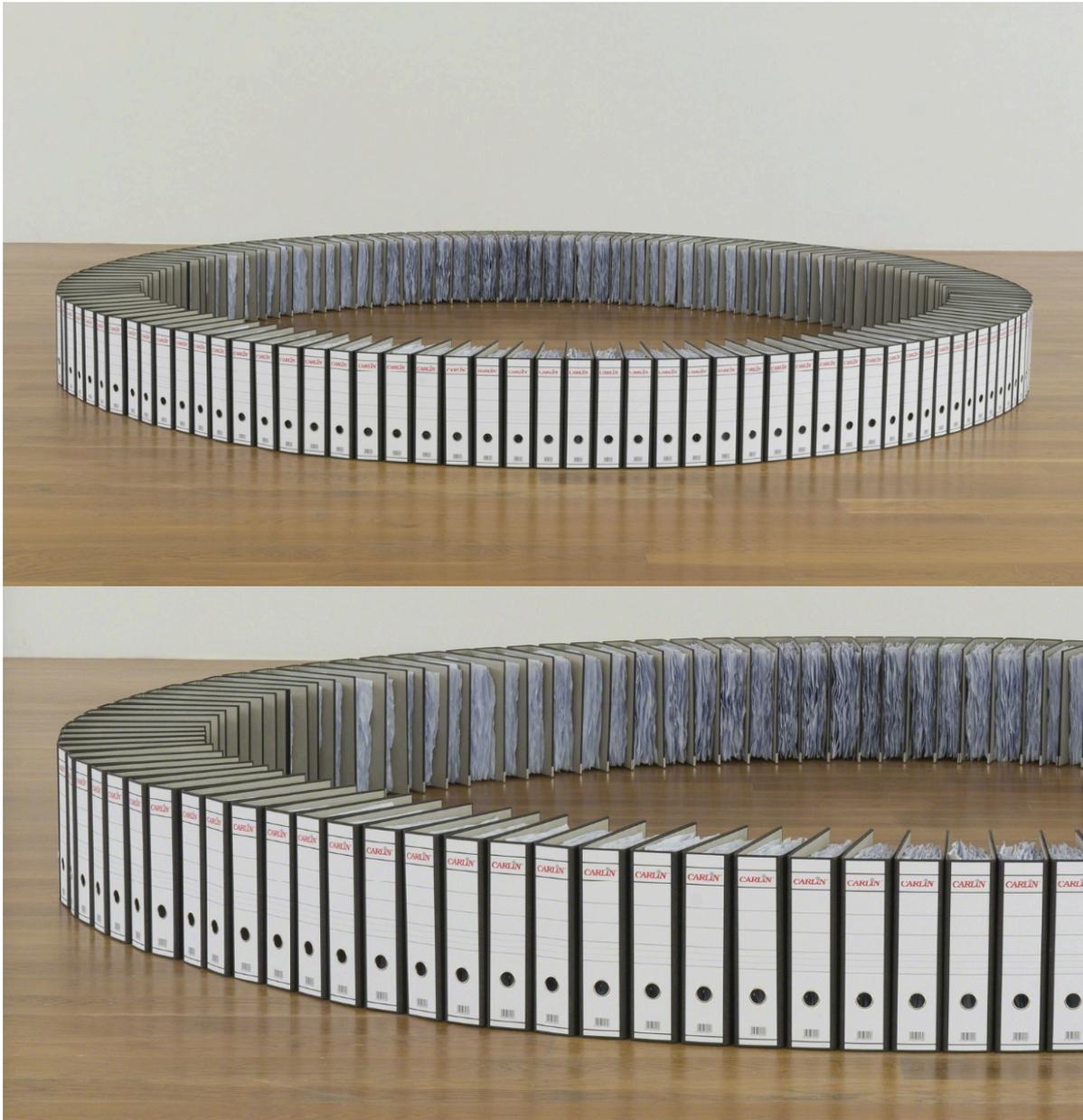


Figure 4.40 Ignacio Uriarte, 'Ringbinder Circle' (2014)  
128 ring binder files. Taken from <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/ignacio-uriarte-ringbinder-circle> [accessed 07.02.2021]

*“With corporate life playing a crucial role in articulating, if not dictating, culture to the rest of the world, Uriarte’s ideas and visual offerings perhaps stand as sublime annunciations of this evolution”*

(Kleinberg Romanow, 2013: 11)

In the sculptural piece *Ringbinder Circle* (2014, see fig. 4.40), Uriarte, in contrast to his other labour-intensive, process-oriented works, shifts much of the work involved in art production to the viewer via self-reflexive framing and the use of found objects. Again, we see a rhythmic

repetition expressed visually - a replication of forms that make the piece. No matter where your gaze begins, you always follow the same circular line and end up at exactly the same point. By stripping the piece of a visible beginning and end, it becomes a celebration of meaninglessness – an infinite circle. A containment, a limitation of possibility constructed through an arrangement of paperwork.

And yet, the symmetry is somehow calming. This attends to the disjuncture between routine as a limiting, dulling force and routine as a comforting structural principle which makes the inherent uncertainty and unknowability of life a little more palatable. It is also interesting that this piece is made out of found objects, or what Burger calls ‘reality fragments’ (in Haladyn, 2015: 129). This piece, therefore, ceases to be a ‘reality edifice’ (a *representation* or an *allusion* to the ‘real’): it *is* the real. This is part of a modernist canon which seeks to overlap ‘life’ and ‘art’. This applies to this piece in the material sense, but also more broadly to Uriarte’s oeuvre, since his artwork - like Hsieh’s - is produced precisely *through* these life-routines: work-gestures and work-rhythms.

Uriarte’s work affirms the *importance* of work and work rhythms – boring or otherwise – in both everyday life and the cultural imagination. Symptomatic of an anti-bureaucratic impulse in modernist art, it also addresses an ambition to produce ordered, rational-looking artworks that dispense with narrative and meaning. The nothingness, the futility, the boredom, the absence. The void of meaning is the point.

### **Interpreting Uriarte: time, meaning and pointless labour**

*“If there is, in the end, a critique, it might be that it articulates itself around a representation of tertiary activity as a production of the void. Nothingness, pseudo-offices that produce nothing”*

(Désanges, 2003: np)

Uriarte’s work addresses “the to-and-fro between the office aesthetic and art, and vice versa” (Désanges, 2003: np). What this says in terms of boredom is two-fold: firstly, that the office aesthetic is culturally coded as being ‘boring’ because it represents a system which speaks for rationalisation, order, and rules. Administration is, after all, a way of making knowable and readable a complex world; and so this almost always involves a radical simplification – at once a diminishment of texture, experience, complexity and depth. Secondly, that Uriarte performs the gestures of this administrative diminishment to such an extent that they become enriching – even beautiful. He extrapolates the rhythms and gestures of the workplace in such a way that they become objects of beauty, both simple and profound.

Uriarte, discussing his influences in an interview, explained: “office materials are my toolbox, but in most cases not my source of inspiration. Often I find ideas in a reflection about universal phenomena of work life, like the periodicity of time or the Sisyphus myth” (in Werner, 2014: np). This reflects the way in which he is – like Hsieh – concerned with more philosophical questions over meaning but explores these through employing a kind of radical mundanity. That Uriarte cites the myth of Sisyphus as one of his major influences reveals his concern with meaninglessness; specifically meaningless or pointless labour. Interesting, too, is that Hsieh reveals in an interview many of the same influences: “I was influenced by Dostoyevsky, Frank Kafka, Albert Camus—especially *The Myth of Sisyphus*” (Hsieh quoted in Masters, 2017b: np, emphasis added). This feeling of not *advancing* or not *producing* anything through labour makes the labour excruciating, because he toils *for nothing* – produces *nothing*. We might think of Hanne Darboven’s proclamation of ‘writing without describing’ – which has also been translated in other sources as ‘I write, but I describe nothing’ (Lippard, 1973). Similarly, Uriarte’s work proclaims: I work, but I produce nothing.

Uriarte also questions time as a stable category, and understandings of our lived experience of time as something *other* than the rational, ordered unit it is described as under capitalism. When time seems to slow because we are bored, we are not experiencing clock time, but rather a kind of *intuitive duration*. Limiting our understanding of time to ‘linear clock time’ severely limits our ability to understand the processes through which subjective meaning can arise, particularly in the case of boredom.

Kierkegaard, in *Either/Or*, writes that the secret to a fulfilled life is not that people should do nothing, but that they should “attach great importance to all the pursuits that are compatible with aimlessness; all kinds of unprofitable pursuits may be carried on” (Kierkegaard, 2004: 298). In a sense, this encapsulates Uriarte’s practice, and highlights that idleness and boredom are not one and the same. This relationship between aimlessness and unprofitability again hints at the disjuncture between profit and pleasure, and is important in a critical analysis of Uriarte’s work. In this sense his work is emblematic of Désanges’ concept of ‘celibate offices’ as a form of art which pays “tribute to the mechanism’s efficiency and plastic beauty [...] one thus faithfully represents the methods and aesthetics of services in a discreetly parodic manner – neither comic, nor pornographic [...] if there is, in the end, a critique, it might be that it articulates itself around a representation of tertiary activity as a production of the void. Nothingness, pseudo-offices that produce nothing” (Désanges, 2003: np).

Though the works “evoke the monotony of cubicle culture—its frustration, its boredom—they also reveal its potential, stolen pleasures” (Taka Ishii Gallery 2009). Thus, even with boredom “what appears to be stilled life is still life: teeming, swarming and bursting with becomings of every persuasion” (Doel, 2003: 162). Just some of the potentialities that Uriarte’s works awaken are “humour, curiosity, criticism, beauty” (Werner, 2014: np). This is what distinguishes his work from the previous two artists I have taken as case studies: playfulness. If there is playfulness in Sierra’s work, it is a cruel kind, exacted at someone else’s expense; and Hsieh is not so much ‘humourless’ as intensely serious about the philosophical implications of his work.

Uriarte’s work, then, can be read as a tragicomic response to the question of how we are to live under the conditions of modern labour. Much like Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, “a comedy of boredom” in which Estragon and Vladimir wait for someone who never arrives (Svendsen, 2012: 95). The viewer of Uriarte’s works is participating in an absurd search for meaning which never really materialises. These are the kind of themes that led Emile Tardieu – a French doctor writing in 1903 – to suggest, rather bleakly, that “life is purposeless and groundless and that all striving after happiness and equanimity is futile” (in Salzani, 2009: 135). This apocalyptic reading shares some ground with Uriarte’s critique of the meaninglessness of contemporary labour practices, but unlike Tardieu, Uriarte doesn’t want us to despair. The humour contained in his works serves as a balm for the futility it exposes.

## V. Connections

### The administration of time and the nature of experience

As I have argued above, one of the crucial areas that Sierra, Hsieh and Uriarte all address is the notion of registering time. All three of the artists produce artworks that “act as an index of time”, recording the passage of time; and this is inherently boring because time itself is a condition of possibility for lived experience, rather than a full experience in itself (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015: 17). This is reminiscent of Elizabeth Goodstein’s characterisation of boredom as an ‘experience without qualities’ (2005). Emptying time of *experience* itself and relegating it to an experience of ‘pure duration’ is a way of hollowing-out the vitality of lived experience, but also perhaps transcending it, of asking questions about the nature of experience itself. In this sense, these artworks “become representations of time, measuring it but also eating away at it” (Kleinberg Romanow, 2013: 10).

It is worth noting that Hsieh in fact influenced Kenneth Goldsmith’s poetic practice. In a writer’s statement, *Uncreativity as a Creative Practice*, Goldsmith declared - in a deliberate echo of the works of Tehching Hsieh - “I am spending my 39th year practicing uncreativity. On Friday, September 1, 2000, I began retyping the day’s New York Times, word for word, letter for letter, from the upper left hand corner to the lower right corner, page by page...” (in Duffy, 2016: 688). This was to become Goldsmith’s seminal ‘anti-creative’ work, *Day*, which was published in 2003, and was a hand-typed copy of The New York Times, transcribed word for word, from the top left to bottom right hand corner of each page, with no consideration for layout, adverts, page numbers and so on. The key point here, however, is the practice of setting out a statement of artistic intent. This sets parameters for the work which seem to function almost as a contract, in a further administrative echo which lays out what can and cannot be done. This also relates to regulation as a form of confinement. Thinking of Hsieh’s cage piece (he was confined in space); time clock piece (confined in time / routine); even through to Sierra inflicting confinement to small spaces (cardboard boxes) or confined actions (remain still) on those he contracts to perform his pieces. Similarly, restriction is central to Uriarte’s practice: “akin to the workplace protocols of his former employers, Uriarte’s systems and constraints are essential to the abstractions he creates” (Kleinberg Romanow, 2013: 9). These all underscore the ways in which *behaviour* and *experience* is regulated, controlled and disciplined through administrative practices.

Sven Spieker, tracing this lineage through modernity, asserts that the exponential growth of paperwork and information storage - one of the key prompts for this kind of artistic approach – also prompted a questioning of the role of administration, archiving, records, paperwork and bureaucracy as an ordering principle in society. Spieker argues that from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the urge towards archiving and keeping records reflected the development of a sense of “trust in the possibility of registering contingent time in the form of discrete traces (records), the hope that the present moment – contingency itself – might become subject to measurement and registration” (Spieker, 2008: 5). Subsequently: “members of the 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde critiqued and ultimately dismantled that confidence” (Spieker, 2008: 6). The nineteenth century push towards rationalisation was, in a certain sense, a response to the radical uncertainty of life; made possible by the rise of print and various technologies that supported this bureaucratic-archival explosion.

### **The Modernist archival impulse: rationalisation, systematisation and the administration of (art)work**

*“The archive is frequently viewed as a cipher for the modern dream of total control and all-encompassing administrative discipline, a giant filing cabinet at the centre of a reality founded on ordered rationality”*  
(Spieker, 2008: 1)

This archival impulse is inherent in performance art since “documentation of the work is essential – [...to] site-specific and performance works” (Walton, 2013: 1). Beyond this, however, all of the pieces discussed go further than this, using the labour of archiving, record-keeping, as an organising principle and descriptive tool to frame the works. We might consider that these kinds of contemporary artworks, what Spieker refers to as ‘modernist archives’, are ordered according to either: on the one hand, accepted but misappropriated principles; or, on the other, entirely nonsensical principles. In the case of the former, Hsieh uses the standard temporal measurements of a life (hours, years) but uses them in the completely *opposite* way we might normally. He records the *absence* of events where, usually, we tend to think of time in terms of events, progress and change. In the case of the latter, one example is Uriarte’s *Two Circles*. He makes the piece by creating a trace of his own action, aimlessly doodling, creating what could be seen as an archive of his action, but according to principles that are random. He circumscribes the shape of the two circles, and then within those, spends hours and hours with a Bic pen, circling and circling, building up a textural surface which registers his labour.

In terms of the textual framing of the pieces by each artist, with particular reference to titling the works, we can also see this administrative impulse at work. The clarity and simplicity of the titles reinforce the feeling of impartial, cool, objectivity suggested by record-keeping. *Ring Binder Circle. One Year Performance 1979-80. 24 Blocks of Concrete Constantly Moved During a Day's Work by 12 Renumerated Workers. Two Circles. Workers Facing the Wall. 3000 Holes of 180 x 50 x 50cm Each. Counting for Eight Hours.* But of course these pieces are anything but an objective or rational phenomenon; instead they are, by contemporary logic, *irrational*, hard to make sense of, with meanings that are constantly displaced, with a logic that eludes us as we try to grasp it, resistant to coherent narration. This is in line with contemporary scholarship which has highlighted the contingency of the archive, the way it is constantly renegotiated and framed, such that it is in fact no more objective than a piece of art. In fact, the artfulness of the archive, considered alongside the archival impulse in art, have elucidated this slippage in much recent scholarship (DeSilvey, 2007; Spieker, 2008; Cresswell, 2012; Sjolholm, 2014).

It is also, in the simplest sense, an uninteresting way of titling the works. There is no intrigue, no mystique; in Uriarte's case, "the radical reduction of means needed to make the work and the transparency of the process itself are reiterated by the piece's title, which readily described what the work is" (Kleinberg Romanow, 2013: 9). But the titling of a work can also be used to naturalise violence. Particularly in Sierra's case: his "works are always titled and described in the flattest of tones, as though they were the most normal occurrences" (Searle, 2004: np). It is this titling that attempts to neutralise the politics of the piece, framing them as inevitable, natural. This is precisely Sierra's apolitical stance: that the violence of Capitalism is inevitable; that there is no viable alternative; and so he "wears the hat of documenter, maintaining a critical distance from the ephemeral action and registering it in posterity" (Rosero, 2013: 109).

Particularly in Uriarte's work, he privileges registration over representation. The aesthetic expression of his works is minimalist, speaking to the dematerialisation of art more generally. Since the office is a dominant cultural trope "it should come as no surprise, then, that artists have consciously taken on the role of the bureaucrat, where administration systems are both their primary source and medium" (Fite-Wassilak, 2016: 69). Similarly, Hsieh is fundamentally concerned with registration. The traces of the work – the photos, the stop-motion video, the timecards - do have a specific aesthetic to them that is more directly representational; but their primary meaning is as *evidence* of the authenticity of his actions, as the result of administering time. This is not uncommon since "much early Performance Art photography engaged in a

rhetoric of authenticity, often arranging its subject in a direct address to the lens, with the camera assumed as a transparent recording device” (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015: 35).

That the idea of the archive as a neutral record of time, experience and ephemera relies on a conception of ordered rationality also brings into focus the fragmented nature of experience and the succession of different artistic ideologies. In 1920s and 1930s in America, in the wake of the chaos and bloodshed of World War I, as Sharon Corwin outlines, an artistic movement – coined *Precisionism* – came to prominence. The term was retrospectively applied to a group of American modernists, including Stefan Hirsch, Georgia O’Keefe, Morton Schamberg and Charles Sheeler, and was based on the values of efficiency, simplicity, rationalisation and precision. Corwin elucidates: “the pursuit of efficiency came to dominate artistic and industrial production, and both were affected profoundly by the intersection between scientific, economic, and aesthetic concerns” (2003: 140). In some sense, this desire for systematisation and rationality across these arenas lead to an excessive focus on order which then, in turn, soured. Artists subsequently began to use this focus on order, precision and rationality self-consciously as a form of critique, exposing the modernist “dream of total control and all-encompassing administrative discipline” as a fallacy (Spieker, 2008: 1).

Guillame Désanges also makes the point that “art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century underwent a transformation paralleling economics; in other words, an increase in the weight of administrative activity within production itself and an explosion of service activities [...] when so much administration is now actually involved in artistic labour processes is it hard to tell the difference between critique and the realities of administration” (Désanges, 2003: np). Sierra undoubtedly spends time making phone calls, drawing up contracts, pitching for funding. Uriarte responding to email enquiries, making notes of new concepts. All of these activities are *not* rendered as art. In acknowledging this, we must also acknowledge something of a contradiction in any attempt to appear efficient: we tend to desire “the *appearance* of minimal effort... despite often protracted labour” and this is often what efficiency truly *is* (Corwin, 2003: 158, emphasis added). All three of the artists discussed in this chapter turn this on its head – deliberate inefficiency, deliberately protracted labour, the appearance of maximum effort, maximum labour.

Through employing, or *misusing*, the visual and textual language of administration, rationality, archiving, objectivity and record-making the artists highlight the fallacy of ordering and rationalising experience. This relates largely to our attempts to rationalise and regulate *time* and our activities within it; and the bureaucratic impulse to register, monitor, objectively record. These technologies and approaches are *the* central pillar on which the evolution of labour as it is

currently configured rests - making work a crucial topic with which each of the artists engage. Their work constitutes a kind of critique of this bureaucratic impulse, though the three artists employ different tonalities ranging from humour to horror.

### **Repetition and the aesthetics of organisation**

*“In workshops with students I ask them just to open the door and close the door, as slowly as possible. You don’t go in and you don’t go out, you just do this for one hour, for two hours or for five hours. Then the door stops being the door and becomes something else”*

(Abramovic, 2015: 351)

As Scott Richmond writes of modernist durational artworks, the formula tends to be that “nothing much happens, very slowly, and for a long time” (Richmond, 2015: 24). This is deliberate because just as interest fades to boredom, boredom – when taken to the extreme – can become interesting. Part of the beauty of repetition is predictability, which can be a good thing or a bad thing. Viewed from a certain angle, Hsieh’s *Time Clock Piece* does seem to have a delicious predictability and order to it. As public administration scholar Professor George Frederickson wrote in his article *Can Bureaucracy Be Beautiful: The Aesthetic Qualities of Organization*: “There is a beauty to predictability, as in the natural passage of time from day to night, from season to season” (2000: 50).

Bureaucracy necessarily involves repetition since it is an approach which hinges on systematisation. Frederickson continues, stating that administration is undoubtedly beautiful “if one agrees that *order* itself appeals to the imagination. And yes, if *precision, harmony, routine, and ritual* appeal to the imagination. It is this aspect of organisational life which is quite like the rhythm of music, the balance of form in architecture, the formation in ballet” (Frederickson, 2000: 50, emphasis added). There are two prescient points to make here. The first is that these are the exact forces pinpointed as the producers of boredom in the contemporary subject (e.g. Anderson, 2004; Goodstein, 2005; Musharbash, 2007). The second is that Frederickson offers a simplistic reading of organisational practices which ignores their contingency, irrationality and constructedness – though this is perhaps unsurprising for a scholar whose personal website features the tagline ‘I never met a bureaucrat I didn’t like’. Organisations are not necessarily rational, nor are organising practices; instead contemporary scholarship positions organisations as ‘emotional soups’, or complex and constantly renegotiated processes which cannot be reduced to instrumental systems (Pile, 2010).

Like organisations, then, when thinking of performances or staged artworks “the performance clearly exceeds the record” (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015: 36). This again reinforces the *partiality* of administration, of record keeping and systems; the way that the aesthetics and techniques of organisational practices are used as a way of flattening or dulling lived experience, always seeking to simplify, reduce and *manage* them. It is inhuman, inhumane; but it also shows us how organisations exceed their systems and attempts at rationalisation, like life itself. In showing us a piece of art created from excessively regulated actions and processes, defined by silences and absences, Hsieh, Uriarte and Sierra express this plenitude and the impossibility of repressing, shrinking and hacking it down to fit the homogenised senses of time we work with; the limited range of experience available to the modern working subject. This is emphasised because in all the artworks, capitalism’s structures are “mirrored without the key element of productivity” (Etchells, 2015: 357). This brings forth the question of meaning and rationality, a question that we then turn on ourselves.

### **Productivity and the aesthetic display of productivity**

Discussing the advent of personal productivity apps, Melissa Gregg highlights that “the aesthetics of activity” now take on further significance since the *display* and *presentation* of productivity is gaining significance (2015: np). And, as Sharon Corwin writes: “in both art and the factory, looking efficient did not always mean being efficient” (2003: 140). Corwin gives the example of documentary photographs: dark rooms are labour-intensive, files must be renamed, all photography processes produce shots that are blurry or unusable; there is always *waste* or inefficiency. Similarly, we might download a time management app and spend time rearranging the colour scheme, duplicating lists, perhaps forgetting to update them and finally end up creating yet another iteration of our own administrative labour in the process. This is to say: looking efficient is always the result of time, effort, waste, unproductivity. Furthermore, the concept of productivity is itself “a hokey Band-Aid covering much deeper problems that affect the way work is arranged in the present” and one which is especially dangerous because it advocates busy-ness above all else, seemingly without needing justifying itself with any deeper philosophical framework (Gregg, 2018: i). These artists expose the philosophical emptiness of the productivity imperative.

Tim Etchells writes that *Time Clock Piece* is “a perfect model of late-capitalism perhaps in its product-less purity. All the discipline without the payoff of an object. Prison labour by Samuel Beckett. Pointless non-manufacture. Absurd. The act of being is what’s regulated in an extreme

form here but it is disciplined to produce nothing” (2015: 357). That it is self-inflicted rather than externally imposed puts Hsieh in direct dialogue with contemporary theories of internalised self-management as a defining feature of contemporary work (Fleming, 2013). As Amelia Groom points out, the true danger in fact appears when the time clock disappears from common usage, because “when we no longer have to clock-in and clock-out, we find that we are never really not working, and work becomes indistinguishable from life” (Groom, 2017: np). The time clock, in Hsieh’s piece is symbolic in that it “historically anticipates current post-Fordist conditions of 24/7 legibility and availability” (Groom, 2017: np). Considering this in conjunction with Peter Fleming’s argument on the biopolitical turn and the devolution of management functions to employees – self management - we can see a political agenda emerging. Hsieh’s work is the Fleming-esque version of postmodern labourer: an entirely self-regulated, self-exploiting worker who performs the task without externally imposed control. Hsieh lives according to the drive to work, work, work. Work thus becomes synonymous with life itself, with Hsieh performing his task with discipline and duty without any purpose - without the need to justify it or give it meaning.

Crucially, as Vannini comments, “if life is made of between-moments that offer nothing to become” then we can conceive of doing *nothing* and being *unproductive* as a dynamic activity (2002: 205). This is to say: if we conceive of lived experience as a series of moments, without this incessant requirement for novelty, value extraction, meaning, progress – and so on – then *experience* has an entirely different quality. It is the culturally-embedded sense of time’s progress as necessitating *progress* and *productivity* that renders waiting, moments of pause, boredom (and even clocking-into a time clock over and over again) their sense of being somehow stultified, wasteful or meaningless. If we do away with this ever-present attunement to the *future* and can see the value in the present moment, this is where the dynamism of boredom lies. Indulging in being in the present moment, or feeling *trapped* there, however are two different things.

Meaninglessness is necessarily at odds with traditionally conceived notions of productivity. Amelia Groom phrases this beautifully in discussing *Time Clock Piece*, writing of Hsieh’s “elaborate, arduous enactment of the meaninglessness of constant arrival” (Groom, 2017: np). Tim Etchells echoes this, writing that “the work is a direct affront to the quadruple pillars of common sense: productivity and usefulness, and self-expression and consumption. [...] But it is always (to be clear) a refusal framed and ordered in the terms of the ruling institution – a reified reiteration – the kind of extreme and profound negation that I guess can only be produced by *excessive compliance*” (Etchells, 2015: 357, emphasis added). This notion of ‘excessive compliance’ is

reminiscent of the way in which Hsieh describes his personality: “personally I’m both self-regulating and indulgent” (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015: 332). This contrast in fact describes the work, which is an absolute indulgence in self-regulation: compliance, excessively performed. This has parallels in work by organisational scholars, which reveals that emotional intelligence at work can be deployed in such a way that compliance – or conforming to managerial expectations – can in fact be a form of resistance (Hughes, 2005).

### **Meaning, boredom, administration and contemporary cultures of work**

*“The avant-garde aesthetic is a recognition of the creative potential of subjective will as the power of the subject to produce its own meaning within an infinite and indefinable world without intrinsic meaning, a task that is in the forefront of modernist avant-garde art.”*

*(Haladyn, 2015: 88)*

Haladyn’s assertion that art can give rise to new meanings and understandings precisely because it contains absences, elisions and illusions fits neatly with the work of Sierra, Hsieh and Uriarte. They contain vast silences: Sierra’s workers are voiceless; Hsieh records a year of life with a complete absence of events, texture or emotion; Uriarte mechanically produces abstracted versions of workplace gestures. We recognise elements, see patterns, see parallels to our own experience perhaps; but we are not presented with ‘a given meaning’, as Haladyn puts it. Instead we must do the labour of framing, understanding and interpreting the work; taking its qualities and context into consideration and using our own capabilities to *create* meaning where perhaps, in reality, there isn’t any. This is the task of humans in a world with no stable meanings; a task for which we are arguably well equipped, according to Svendsen in his book *A Philosophy of Boredom* (2012). Whether the meaning we create for ourselves is positive or negative, it still involves our emotional and cognitive work. Hsieh expresses this, thinking about creating joyful experiences specifically: “I didn’t want people thinking that my works were about endurance, or about the pain of existence. If you want to make joy you have to put in a lot of work” (Hsieh quoted in Masters, 2017b: np).

All of the artworks are figured through “formally enacted deprivation”, in the sense of having rules that define the piece and severely limit what can and cannot be done, in terms of time, action, experience and so on (Phillips, 2014: np). This notion of deprivation is close to the concept of spiritual and physical violence that Terkel speaks of as being inherent to work. We might ask: is *work* just a kind of *formally enacted deprivation*? Boredom is part of this deprivation, and comes in many forms, but is nonetheless related to a proliferation of administrative systems,

regulations, time-regulation and the associated impacts of this on the nature of experience. And yet, this now co-mingles with a demand to feel ‘free’, to ‘express ourselves’ at work. Viewed through the new corporate *Zeitgeist* dedicated to a “lively workplace equipped with recreations, such as pool and football rooms or indoor slides [...] A handful of companies like these have embraced the proposition that work need not always be drudgery, even that ‘office ordinary’ can indeed be satisfying” (Kleinberg Romanow, 2013: 11). This means that there is a “limited range of affective states and subjectivities permissible in workplaces” – boredom, as I discovered in my interviews with one participant who worked in a Tech company, just isn’t ‘on the table’ (Gregg, 2010: 250).

In the context of our current period, which “unlike previous social formations, valorises the notion of perpetual self-actualisation, in which every aspect of our choices and actions must have valid personal worth, implying that daily life, in and of itself, must always be ‘interesting’”, the artworks and approaches discussed have a deep resonance (Svendsen, 2012: 15). Deliberately being un-interesting, deliberately creating boring art which follows rules and creates an ambiguously dull experience, is the very way that the nature of experience itself opens up to critique. Whether it is a rethinking of the concept of labour, the way in which we discover meaning in our lives, or a celebration of administration and the way that it impacts the aesthetics and organisational practices of modernity or late capitalism, these artists free themselves of “the burden to always *be* interesting, and to continually find this *of* interest” (Svendsen, 2012: 15). Svendsen also writes that this task – of being perpetually interesting and interested – is impossible in any case. And so, the search for endless entertainment, interest and self-actualisation becomes dull, demoralising and boring because we *know*, deep down, its ultimate futility.

### **Boredom, labour, art**

The entanglement between labour and boredom should by now be evident. The implication of one in the other has been explored by many theorists in relation to agency, experience, limitation, temporal regulation and identity. Certainly the “development of large-scale economic systems [and] the increasing segmentation of time” have something to do with the way we experience the world as (post)modern subjects (Moran, 2004: 219). Uriarte states this with clarity, referring to administrative apparatuses and organisational processes as: “these tools that [...] are still part of our way of thinking and working” (Uriarte in Werner, 2014: np). Thinking

specifically about meaning, business scholar Rasmus Johnsen asserts that modern methods of organising work, labour and life cause:

*“the experienced dissociation of the individual from the series of instrumental ends that make up the organizing process. Boredom, in this respect, is not a passing fancy; it is a name for the loss of meaning in the everyday activities that make out the fabric of a meaningful life. As such it arises in Western culture as the self-paced rhythms of cultivation are gradually replaced by the empty, linear-quantitative ticking of clock time and its infinitely exploitable future”* (Johnsen, 2016: 1410)

Despite the critical tone of the artworks discussed here, none of the artists are ‘activists’. To return to Hsieh’s understanding of his art: “I don’t think that art can change the world. But at least art can help us unveil life” (Hsieh in Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015a: 330). This idea of ‘unveiling’ suggests a pulling-back-the-curtain on the quality of experience that already exists; of going under the surface; of feeling the textures of different sorts of experience and considering the questions that they raise. Lesley Kenny, however, writes of the difficulty of grasping boredom itself, saying that we can only really write about its epiphenomena (2009). The art works discussed here are examples of such epiphenomena, which work on multiple levels: conceptually, experientially, and at the level of their production. Similarly, art itself is “experience as at once present and absent – as black holes defined aesthetically through the affects they produce” (Haladyn 2017:121). In this way, boredom and art are both similarly elusive.

Like Nietzsche, Hsieh and Uriarte see boredom as philosophically important “not because it offers proof of the meaninglessness of life but because it points to a need to reconceive questions of meaning” (Goodstein, 2005: 262). This does not mean that Nietzsche believes there *is* inherent meaningfulness in life; far from it - but that boredom’s primary function is as a call to reconsider meaning itself. Sierra, who is less overtly concerned with boredom per se, but uses it as a form of violence against his ‘workers’, underscores the political dimensions of boredom in working life and the way that different iterations of boredom are available under different circumstances and power relations. All three artists are, however, concerned explicitly with time and labour. They emphasise the experience of *time*, and the way that our *experience* of time is co-opted into a framework of value-extraction, or ‘productivity’. These artworks are about process, and, if viewed through a boredom studies lens – they are also about the boredom of meaningless, repetitive, endless work. Artists concerned with time broadly fall under the category of ‘durational aesthetics’, which constitutes:

*“a vital means through which the nature and values of these powers [accelerated temporality of late capitalism] may be opened up, their regulatory grip loosened. [...] durational aesthetics give access to other temporalities: to times that will not submit to Western culture’s linear, progressive meta-narratives, its orders of commodification; to the times of excluded or marginalised identities and lives; to times as they are felt in diverse bodies. Time, then, as plenitude”* (Heathfield, 2015: 23)

Put differently, this is time *not* simply accepted as “time as something broken up into equidistant units, and made universally measurable [...] homogenised and quantitative” (Groom, 2017: np). The notion of waged labour itself rests exactly on this instrumental understanding of time; and so *using* time as a form of resistance, by *wasting* it or by accessing other kind of temporality that are felt or experienced (through boredom) rather than measured by the clock, constitutes a form of resistance.

Art is something that always exceeds itself, as Haladyn (2017) argues, and this is precisely why it holds so many possibilities, so much revolutionary potential. Hsieh explains: “you could say a work is about this or that. It is not about something only. It continues to be open. It is possible for you to see it in many ways” (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015a: 326). This uncertainty, this *void* in our knowledge and understanding is a prompt to create meaning, to reconceive meaning. If boredom is, as Svendsen diagnoses, “basically an absence, an absence of personal meaning” then the absence of meaning presented in the work could itself produce boredom and disengagement in the viewer (Svendsen, 2012: 45). Adrian Heathfield, writing on Hsieh’s work says: “you see something in it, but still something is missing” (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015a: 326). This is precisely the generative process that Haladyn (2015) argues positively for, where boredom is used in art; and that Bown refers to as a catalyst for reflection, instead of distraction (2015). The experience of boredom – meaninglessness - can become a threshold over which we pass to *discover* new or different ways of thinking.

By indulging in boredom to create art – using practices which mimic the conditions of capitalist production processes, whether in their aesthetic form, process-based production, or their reproduction of employment relations – these artists unveil the conditions of contemporary life which *produce* the phenomenon of boredom; as well as running counter to the capitalist doctrine of expansion, accumulation, stimulation, enjoyment and distraction. Figured through acts of self-conscious and deliberate labour, they open up another form of boredom not characterised by this ‘speed-up’ or by over-stimulation (in the vein of Simmel’s *blasé attitude*); instead indulging in the qualities of bored time-spaces through durational artworks with a focus on repetition and excessive regulation. In particular, they point to the need to reconceive ideas around the way we

think about our experiences as temporally bound to clock time, how productivity is framed, and how work is generally culturally coded as a meaningful pursuit without proper consideration of how it is experienced.

Finally, the dual imperatives at play in contemporary life – in work especially, but also in our personal lives and leisure time – are a demand for *interest* and for *productivity*. Since we now live in “a society that valorises the notion of perpetual self-actualisation, in which [...] daily life, in and of itself, must always be ‘interesting’” revelling in boredom becomes a radical counter-narrative (Gardiner & Haladyn 2017: 15). This push towards self-actualisation and self-optimisation is also supported by the call for relentless productivity which is no longer limited to the workplace but also involves perfecting the self; since the self in turn has become ever-more central to work. These artists offer an insight into the way that work routines order lives and offer certain types of experience which, in many cases, cannot spiritually sustain us or provide the meaning that we seek – in our search for “daily meaning as well as daily bread” as Terkel so wonderfully put it (2004: xi).

# PORTRAITS

*This chapter presents ten research ‘portraits’, each one encapsulating the stories and experiences of each of the ten participants. Each portrait is formed of a poem or set of poems, a photo essay composed using the auto-ethnographic images from the participant, and a textual portrait written as narrative non-fiction. In all of the portraits, the participants’ voice is mediated by a collaboration between myself and one of four talented poets – Jack Emsden, Emily Foster, Sian Ephgrave or Lewis Parker. Alongside this, the words of the participant are spliced together with narrative text or images, forming a richly textured tapestry, seeking to communicate the complexity and ambiguity of boredom and experiences of working life since “attempts to research everyday life often fail to capture the complexity of the mundane” (Phoenix and Brannen, 2014: 11). What is offered is a set of different paths through the empirical data gathered, each suggesting a possible reading of the participants’ experience.*

## Everything Moves So Incrementally in Government



### I. Anika, Civil Servant

## The Whole Huge Machine

is a government  
and no one really knows how to use it

*there're so many versions of truth*

the civil service is so wide and digital  
emailing imaginary documents  
typed in a read in a rush

people completely misunderstanding  
what you're saying

a whole chain  
of people chained  
people waiting

in a flurry of meetings  
with imaginary lists

a really clunky way to communicate

policy

is people saying things you don't fully understand  
what they're actually saying  
what they're asking each other to do

*am I actually doing anything?*

a whole people  
of chain people

waiting

thousands of colleagues as a machine  
and everything *has* to be  
right I don't know what's going on I can't  
shut down and have a bit of a meltdown

everything moves so incrementally

the big slow government

things move so so so slowly

things can change so easily

the big slow government done and then undone

\*

a lot of what's most important is nothing to do with us

but what happens on the front line

the best thing the huge machine government can do  
is fund the front line and if we're not doing that  
if we've cut funding what's the point

get rid of our jobs

\*

I'm doing this job because I want to help people

And central government is crucial to helping people build systems  
which help people

you have to take the long view avoid getting stuck in the daytoday bog of  
it all

I find cynicism depressing and useless

try to focus on the good bits  
and get really excited about the good bits

and I think it does still feel meaningful

## The Clock, Again

Sometimes

there are days  
where I don't have much to do sitting killing time  
all day constantly looking at time  
pointless time time disorganised and scatty on the tube  
running late

it's a bit of an obsession almost looking at the clock  
waiting for the day to go and sit at its desk

here time is wasting how it covers  
kind of crushes everything and it's all you can think about  
nothing just an expanse of time  
and I'm sitting in it staring at the clock not moving

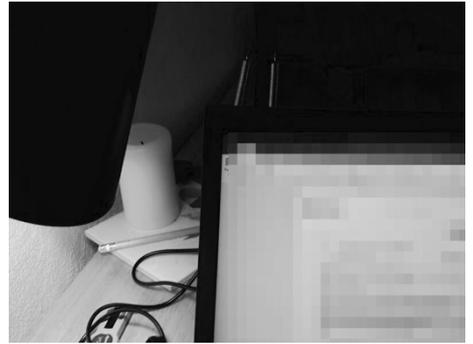
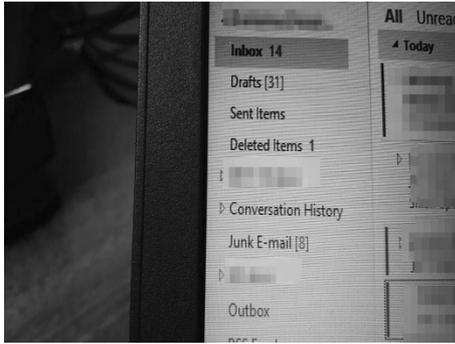
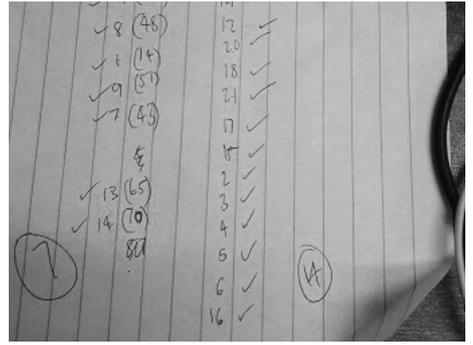
just feeling my way out

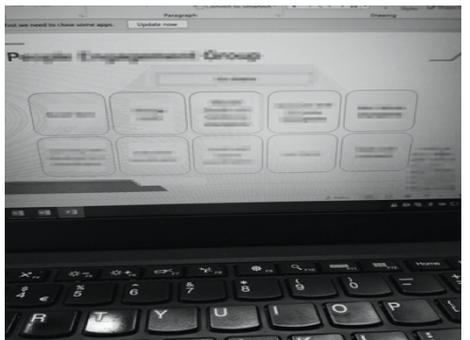
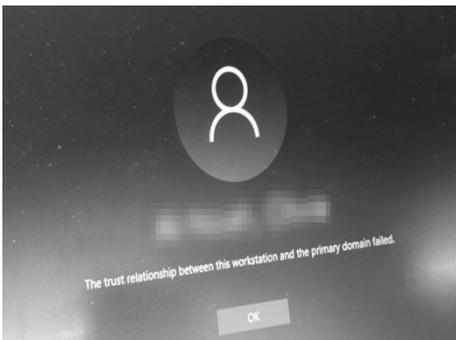
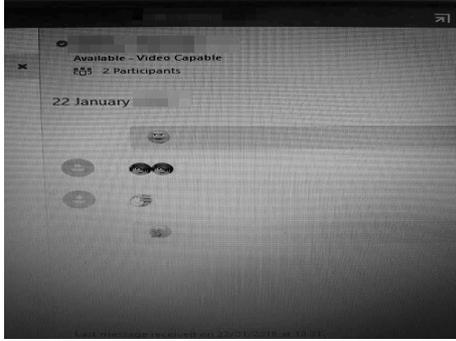
*the alarm goes off & then I snooze for about an hour & then I finally get up & the morning goes kind  
of quickly because I get in late & I have loads to do & I have quite a lot of meetings & the day goes  
really quickly & I like that & I'm happy to do longer hours*

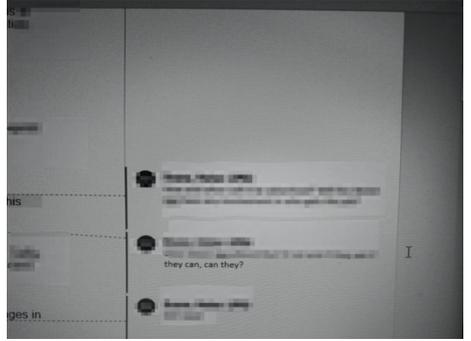
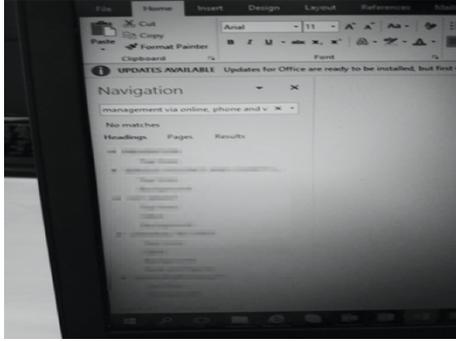
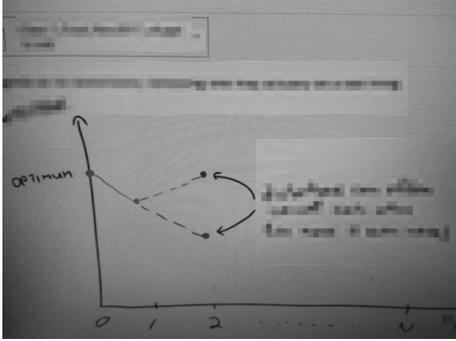
*& I feel really guilty for ever wasting time &*

Sometimes

there are days







## Anika's Story

Anika began her working life doing a couple of hours in her uncle's corner shop every other Saturday. A tenner for 4 hours work - and a free bag of crisps if she was lucky. She worked her way through a history degree at Oxford, supporting herself with agency work and waiting tables. After graduating, there was a short stint at Wafflemeister, where she recalls staring blankly at the slogan 'I waffle therefore I am' emblazoned on the wall opposite the serving counter. She felt lost, applying half-heartedly for advertising jobs, social media marketing jobs, and law courses.

Shortly after this, she started a Social Enterprise course, learning how to build small-scale sustainable businesses that are socially responsible, ethical, and beneficial for local communities. But she hasn't always been particularly interested about the concept of 'doing something meaningful'. At school, she never really even thought about the possibility of *enjoying* work – she just wanted to earn money and have fun outside of work. In fact, she never really thought about *enjoying* what she was doing at all; she just did it. It was all just 'what people did' - the conveyor-belt mentality that comes from a 'good' secondary school education.

She enjoys her job in the civil service, although she's pretty new to it. She has reservations about policy changes which are done and then un-done in the same breath; ministers being seen to be accountable... but never providing a real answer to people's questions. The flurry of email, documents, meetings, policy, emails and meetings... but she is in this job because she wants to help people. She knows the best thing governments can do is to fund frontline services. You can tell she really believes in the value of frontline services... not everyone there does though.

*"You genuinely might as well not be here if you're just gonna be tokenistic about what you're doing. Central government can so easily be tokenistic."*

Being innovative in policy or coming up with new ways to do things is hard because it has to go through so many different layers of people - from senior management to legal - to be cleared. It's the structure, the 'big machine' that makes it hard. Despite this, the people there are innovative, and not quite what Anika expected. There's the guy that spends money on watches and nothing else, and eats boiled eggs every day as an 11am snack. There's the guy she chats to on the work instant-messaging service using only animated emojis. There's Anna with the great hair – they're work friends, which is different to being real friends... partly because they chat out of boredom, rather than anything else. But Anika finds that comforting and enjoys the small-talk and micro-drama of it all.

She often worries that she has done something wrong; missed someone senior out of an email chain, or edited the incorrect version of a document (when there are 31 different drafts). You learn on the job, but the systems and layers of people and how things get done – it’s all very specific. You have to learn the language – ‘holding the pen’ and knowing how to tell different ‘versions of the truth’, as they say in the Civil Service. The workload is sporadic. Sometimes it’s a flurry of urgent tasks; sometimes there’s not much to do. It’s frustrating. The endless Pret and Benugo lunches bore her, and anyway, she resents paying £3 for a sandwich, so prefers to take her own leftovers from the previous nights’ dinner.

Rather than getting frustrated with technology, Anika finds humour in it. She enjoys it when people abruptly leave a Skype meeting because the signal drops out, or their laptop logs them out for no reason. Document drafts duplicating hundreds of tracked changes that she has to go through and change. Chasing people up for meetings that have been synced to their email calendar, but on a Taiwanese time zone. Frustrating email chains with 40 people copied in. Miscommunication, tangled cables, hotdesking, cluttered tables and not being able to find the one person you need to talk to because they’re working from home that day. Someone emailing you again before you’ve even finished your response to their first email.

Most of Anika’s frustration comes from having too little to do. At times, she’ll watch the clock, or prowl neighbouring desks looking for biscuits left unattended. Sometimes you just really want to be somewhere else, she says. Maybe binge-watching Netflix, because then you don’t have to think. It’s worst when you’re in that mindset but you aren’t allowed to leave, and there’s that feeling of being trapped, of watching the clock, waiting to leave. Time goes slowly when there’s nothing to do.

*“There’s just nothing. There’s just an expanse of time... and I’m just sitting in it, staring at the clock, and it keeps not moving very far, and I... and it winds me up loads”*

Sometimes she passes the time Googling house plants – but then ends up feeling guilty. She knows she’s wasting her own time, but also the taxpayers’ money. Now she’s involved in a mental health taskforce in her department – much better to do something *useful*. Doing nothing, being cynical – she doesn’t like giving time to that. She seems to cope with boredom in a constructive way, because she really *cares* about her job.

Personally, she describes herself as scatty, with a bit of a rebellious streak. She’s the kind of person that gets out of bed in the morning at the last possible moment. The commute is only half an hour – but it feels longer when you’re in a rush. She’s never really liked authority; and

even now her manager's comments on her draft proposals piss her off if they don't sound polite enough. But, oddly enough, the most satisfying tasks for her are the ones where she is putting things *in order*. She re-arranged her department's filing system to make it easier to use. She didn't have to – she just wanted to. She keeps meticulous tick lists of tasks and sub-tasks, but on scrap paper. Imposing order, rather than making things dull, systematised, *boring*... gives her comfort. Disorder is what she doesn't like. That and not having work to do.

However frenetic or empty the working day might be, things always move slowly in Government, she tells me. Policy advisors commission research into various issues, the research is carried out, fed back, considered, re-done, re-hashed, discussed over and over by different parties. Recommendations are made, but they get stuck somewhere along the line because of funding issues and internal politics. To Anika, it still feels meaningful. No matter how slow the change or how bureaucratic the processes, you have to take the long view... because that's just like life. You have to take pride in doing the dishes, in the everydayness and the mundanity of it all – not get too bogged down in the day to day; but celebrate the incremental steps along the way.

**After a While, Of Course, it's Just More of the Same**



**II. Richard, Freelance Management Consultant**

## Tap Dance

the empty office/the car in the morning  
the empty office/sat nav/parking in the dark

*they've made the staff canteen a children's playground*

nearly all men/all wearing bluish shirts/fancy suits

cost analysis/spreadsheets/presentations/proposals/contract documents  
corporate statements/missions and values/ambitions  
massive massive letters/on a wall/for everybody to see

people have to live and breathe/these words

*I know they don't believe them*

its emails/its conference calls/conference calls/meetings  
contracts/developing strategies/negotiating suppliers  
on the phone/on your laptop/email

everyone knows/big companies have offices/all over the world

prestige buildings/locations/the technology

*things just don't stop, things really don't stop*

I'm painting a picture of  
Business! Business!

I think it's a picture  
just a picture  
of me  
what I look like in my shirt and my ID and my lanyard

*I have a lanyard everywhere I go*

## About Money

there was a time when I was motivated

success and promotions  
different countries and status

but I've done all of this stuff

now that I'm 55  
I think I work I only work  
for the money for money for the family

Prostituting myself for the highest price

I'm not interested in adding  
more big companies big names to my CV

If I didn't have to work I would be  
travelling the world popping back down to see my family  
renting fast cars driving through deserts  
getting jeeps driving up mountains

Oh a job  
I wouldn't have a job  
if money is no object

isn't that the whole point?

\*

as I get older I feel guilty

I take money from big companies

and things I wouldn't like

I mean I just mean

we've got commitments

I'm trapped by high wages

[the money]

all the countries I've worked in

companies I've worked for

the experience I've got

I used to see myself as successful  
it becomes less and less relevant  
that is perhaps the truth of every situation  
I choose to get the work done focus  
but I've seen it all before  
I sell myself for it  
as something that I'm not  
I can't I can't change  
I've got four kids  
I need to keep the money coming in  
I find it all pretty tough  
anyway

## My First Job

was at a shoe shop  
putting shoes away at the end of the day

I had a job in a supermarket  
stacking shelves

I did physics at university  
graduated and trained to be a teacher

rewarding work  
with purpose

and then I got married  
we had children

I decided to leave  
and went into management consultancy

shelf stacking was much more fun  
I used to mess around all the time  
have fights in the warehouse  
throw tins of tomatoes at each other  
you could go up and down  
the conveyor belts with the food

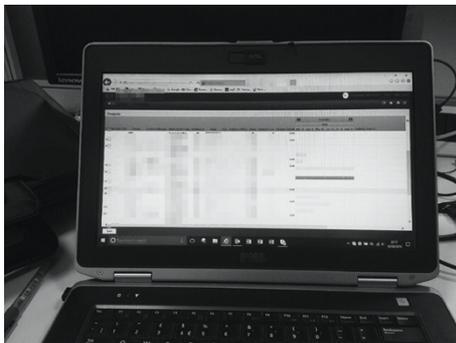
It was a good laugh  
but then I was a student  
and it didn't matter

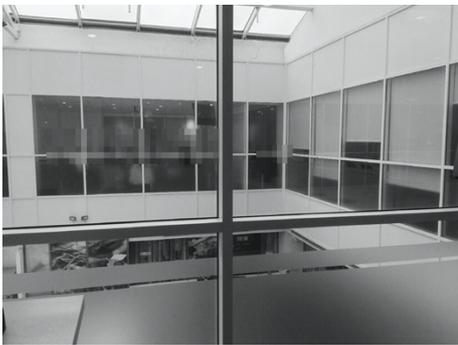
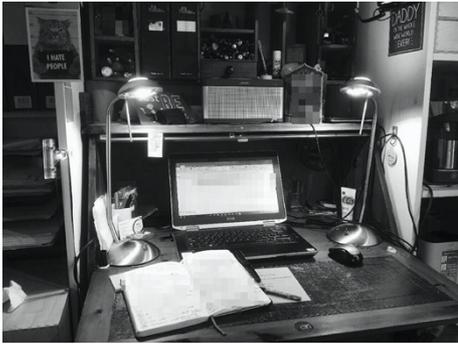
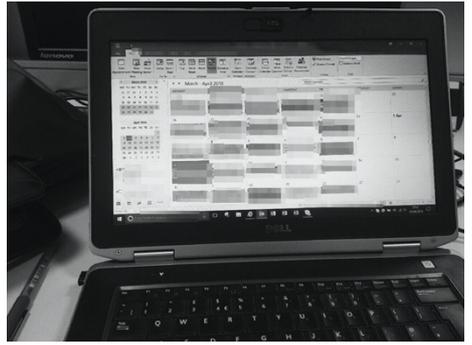
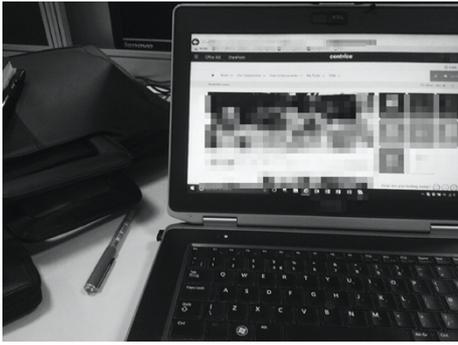
now I've just taken the money  
I'm helping big companies make more money  
a big gas and electric company  
a chemical weapons establishment  
pharmaceutical companies banks  
they outsource and people lose their jobs

inside I'm very sad  
I didn't carry on teaching

that was socially useful  
you make a difference

I'd like to do something that makes a difference







## Richard's Story

Richard's story always had a different perspective on time. His age – 55 – meant that he was looking back at his working life, rather than forwards like many of the other people I spoke to. It was a difficult interview because of the sense of loss – lost time, lost potential. If you are young and lack optimism about your future... well, your future hasn't happened yet. But at 55, he feels backed into a corner. Despite this, the interview contained a lot of laughter alongside the cynicism.

And actually, Richard has had an incredibly successful career. He's been a high achiever, a high earner, and talks about the earlier days of his career fondly, saying that the new millennium "was a good time in the City...". The pace of working life in his recollections is frantic. He tells me that in one of his first City jobs, he was sent into an open office with 200 Partners and Consultants on his first day - and told to find himself some work. Within an hour he was at Unilever's Head Office being sold as a 'Year 2000 Specialist'. He thought it was a bit dishonest; that he was being sold as something he wasn't... but he did the work, delivered the projects and managed to get a couple of big bonuses.

Richard and his wife moved from a small town in the Midlands down to London when they were 21. That was a time where he was motivated by success, prestige, promotions, bonuses, status - but he's not interested in adding any more big name companies to his CV. He's worked on multi-million pound deals for over 100 companies now anyway. Now he works for the money... nothing else. If he didn't need the money, he wouldn't work at all.

He tells me about his first jobs – when he was 12, he got some pocket money for putting the shoes away for a stall at the local market. At 14 he started running deliveries for a local chemist. At 16 he started a shelf-stacking job at a supermarket. That job was far more fun than anything he's done since – they'd throw tins of tomatoes around the warehouse and go up and down the conveyor belts with the food.

The decision to go freelance came about 16 years ago. He had four kids to support, and needed to go after the higher wages. The stuff that clients seemed to want was his outsourcing experience – in other words: saving companies money by outsourcing business functions to other providers. This often involved people losing their jobs – things like moving call centres to India, he says. Sometimes he's had to work alongside people he knows are going to be made

redundant. This seems to be a point of real sadness for him, because the only thing he really seems to like about his work is the people.

He is motivated by working with people and helping people. If you can go into a company and get junior staff members to take an active part in the change management process – it looks great on their CV. It can really help them get ahead – and managers might have a negative view of their staff and think that they can't do things, but 95% of the time they *can* – if they're just given the opportunity. Fancy conversations, at the end of the day, are about simple stuff, he says.

*“I think psychologically, I never finish work”*

The question is whether there is time for boredom when you're under so much pressure, with a family to support – especially as a freelancer. It's stressful when you're working, he says, and it's stressful when you're not. He seems to be the embodiment of 'always on' culture. Business, he says, *never stops*. Especially with the multinational companies – you're expected to be on call. In his line of work, you can get away with good presentation and bad content, but *never* the other way around. You don't get the big money without the stress and pressure. He says the stress comes from his own expectations of himself – but he only has those expectations of himself because the client does. And anyway, the stress is how you get things done – it's how you get the big money. No money without stress.

*“I never feel bored, because I always feel under pressure”*

Sometimes he is bored, actually, he reflects. But only in the sense of what he calls 'normal boredom' – like reading through a long contract document... and even then, he just expects himself to get on with it. I must be motivated, because I keep doing it, he reasons. And he's not limited by managers' restrictions... he doesn't *have* to eat lunch at his desk every day. He could go for a walk for half an hour, drive somewhere, or take an extra-long lunch break... but he doesn't. He *chooses* not to, because he has to be better than everyone else. He has to be better, because he's a contractor and he's being paid a day rate that's twice as much as the senior people there.

Richard is the sole earner in the household. Being a freelancer, the instability of the work and threat of no longer being *needed* creates yet another layer of stress. He has to perform the role and prove his worth, because contractors can be fired at any moment – and it's happened to him a couple of times before. He seems to have *no emotional energy* for boredom. The normal moments of being bored at work are off-limits because they serve no function. Every moment of boredom

is denied, it seems to me; either because it is time wasted, with the risk of being exposed as an unnecessary expense; or because boredom is swamped by larger emotional currents like stress, pressure, guilt and regret.

*“As I get older, and doing it more and more, I feel guilty.”*

When he’s working in Head Office on his current job, he looks across the glass atrium at the people sat, like little chickens, at their desks; sat under a huge corporate mission statement in massive letters on the wall. It’s corporate bullshit, he says. When you detach yourself from it, it all looks a bit absurd. He struggles to find meaning in what he’s doing now, because all he’s done is helped big companies make even more money. He’s worked for big banks, pharmaceutical companies - even chemical weapons manufacturers. He actually trained as a teacher, and wishes he’d carried on teaching kids. Inside, he’s very sad that he didn’t do that, he tells me.

He used to see himself as successful, but as the years have gone by his success seems to mean less and less to him. You’re just selling yourself to the highest bidder; taking the money. He would like to do something that makes a difference and is positive, which is “in fact the opposite of what I do”. But he has commitments, so he needs the money. After a while it’s all just more of the same... meetings and calls, coffees and laptops and shredders. He knows it all serves a function – his job is valuable to businesses, and it funds his family. But for him, the highlight of a day in the office is usually anything that isn’t to do with the work. He looks forward to “human interaction with someone who’s not wearing a suit” – often the staff at the coffee counter.

## **I Can't Deal With People, But I Can Fix Shit**



### **III. Connor, Trainee Bus Engineer**

## A fucking A4 Sheet of Paper

2008, the crash happened

and I was let go  
given a choice

between my father and I  
(and I never finished school)

so I decided to work  
with my father  
delivering milk

but since I was 10  
I wanted  
to be a mechanic  
all I wanted  
was a piece of paper

*says,*

*I know what I'm doing*

money doesn't matter                  no, money doesn't matter

I just wanted  
all I want  
I just want

*I know what I'm doing*



## Do you know what a lump hammer is?

there we go

I'm as sophisticated as that

I can fix stuff

Washing machines

Taps

Gas heater

whatever

doesn't matter

I can fix shit

that's my personality

my superpower

...to be the go to person

it's a toolbox

I've built up

since I started

and when I think I've got nothing

to show for my time

I just look at my box,

like

there's stuff you'll never learn

from any book.





## Connor's Story

Connor swears a lot – he's Irish. I meet him in a pub garden in South London, and he's keen for a drink. He's proud of his work, and it shows. He never finished school. At 15 he walked into a garage and asked them to train him up as a mechanic – it was him and two young Polish boys, until the crash in 2008. After that, he worked two jobs, sometimes 22 hour days, to save up some money. Eventually he had enough to fly to England to start the application process for the job he wanted. He came over for two rounds of interviews, a drugs test and a medical check. He got the job, but he had to drop £2,000 just on the interview process.

*"Since 10 all I wanted was to be a mechanic. All I wanted was a piece of paper says I know what I'm doing"*

Connor is an apprentice bus engineer, due to qualify in 14 months' time. He prepares buses for MOT. Each vehicle comes in to be checked, then sent to test. The job has pressures – if you get something wrong and your bus doesn't pass the test, you're in serious trouble. If it gets sent back, it comes back on you. If you do something wrong, your head's on the block. You can be got rid of in an instant. There's no initiative to really stick your neck out, because if something goes wrong, it's on you. Just keep your head down, learn everything you can, and get on with the job.

*"I want to know how to be able to do... what everyone else is doing. I want to be able to not be shit. I wanna be a decent engineer, someone who other people can rely on"*

Money doesn't matter. For Connor, it's about the qualification – the A4 piece of paper. It's about respect; from other people and from himself. He tells me how all his life he's been put in a box because of this dyslexia. All he wanted, he says, was to be 'to be in a fuckin' classroom with my peers, battling it out'. He still tries to hide it from people. He's always excelled in his mechanics qualifications though – no bullshit, no problems. He was in the top three in his class, and won an award.

*"I'm an immigrant! I'm fucking foreign! Even though it's only an hour away, I'm a foreign person, foreign country."*

He's not got a driving licence, but he moves the buses around the depot because it's classed as private property. If you hit something, you're screwed. A double decker hybrid bus is about half a million pounds new. He's proud of the fact that he can parallel park a double decker bus –

Connor has been able to drive for years. He's got a full licence back in Ireland but it's not valid in the UK, and over here he can't pass his theory test because of the dyslexia.

When Connor was 17, he was nearly killed by an engine that slipped off its axle. He's been to the funerals of two lads that were crushed by cars that weren't being supported properly. The equipment in this job is top of the range, so the job itself is pretty safe – as long as you don't do anything stupid. But he finds it stressful knowing that a mistake from him could kill somebody out there. A single decker bus is 12 tonnes with nobody on it – if you tighten the steering to the wrong specification the driver could kill somebody. Sometimes he goes home and sits there thinking over whether he's done things correctly – they have to be exactly to spec. *Exactly.*

The rhythm of the work is a weekly cycle. Tuesday is test day. You get assigned a sheet, assigned some buses and off you go – until Tuesday. Then you're presenting the buses so you've not really got much to do... 'niff naff stuff'. Last Tuesday it was a bit of a lazy day so he went out and bought snacks, and all the engineers were just stood around the buses eating ice cream. That said, he feels more tired on a Tuesday having not done much all day, than he does working flat out. On a Friday morning they all go for a big fry up– the Belly Buster (although for health and safety reasons they're not allowed to call it that anymore). They're all groaning for an hour after demolishing it. It's the Friday treat; a kind of ritual.

*“There's nowhere I'd rather be than the garage. In the thick of it, like. When shit goes wrong and you're liked, and the boys respect you, you'll have fuckin' people around you.”*

People who don't smoke must go mad on the job, he says. If something isn't going the way he wants it to go, or if he's stuck, he'll stop, take a fag out of his toolbox, walk out to the smoking area, smoke the fag, relax for a few minutes, and go back in. And when he goes back in, nine times out of ten, the problem can be solved. Taking an engine part out and fixing it, rather than just putting a new part in, is so much more satisfying. Problem solving – that's the mechanic's bread and butter.

If the guys in the garage don't make fun of you, they don't like you. You need a thick skin in this line of work – not like in an office. You need a titanium thick skin. Connor gets a lot of shit for being Irish. If this was an office, you'd be fired for the stuff that gets said here. I get the sense that he lacks patience with the younger ones; the ones who he thinks aren't tough enough or working hard enough. He says that none of the younger apprentices would ever admit to being bored – because they don't want to be given any extra work.

Connor, however, doesn't like wasting time. He's terrified of coming out of his apprenticeship and being handed a bus, and not knowing what to do. He wants to be proactive and learn everything he can, but he gets bored when he's got to wait for someone else to finish something before he can start what he's got to do. Those times, he will go and smoke a cigarette or make a drink. I get the sense that the day is somehow measured out in cigarettes – as an ex-smoker, I understand that, I think.

I ask him whether it's repetitive, checking the same things every day – but he says no. Every bus is different. You can work on electric, hybrid or standard buses, and every day presents different problems to be solved. Being a mechanic is about problem solving. There's always a moment of satisfaction when something drops into place, or you find a better, quicker way to do something – it's like a little heroin fix, he says.

*“That's the thing about mechanics and engineering that I love – nobody knows everything. In all the years, and all the year's I will spend doing it, I will never know everything. And that's what's great about it. It's ever progressing... ever progressing.”*

Pointless work annoys him. Often he's asked to check the air filters on the buses – 15 screws for each huge panel. Most of the time they're clean, and then sometimes he has to replace all 30 screw casings just to get it back on. If you've got a tiny, tiny leak in the engine somewhere, it can take 6 hours to replace the seal. But even then, you can always find a better way to do something, or you might have a different variation of the problem to solve every time. What bores Connor is the periods of *waiting* between tasks.

There's a long walk from one end of the depot to the other. Even that can really bore Connor on a bad day. That and lifting the bus up when you have to work on the underside. You drive it over a pit and then you have to bring the pit guards back. There's two, and you can only do one at a time. You have to hold the button for 3 minutes – if you take your finger off the button it stops, so you just have to stand there. Then you have to walk round to the other side and do the same again. Lifting a bus up is the same – 3 minutes, standing there, wondering if you have 2 or 4 fish fingers left in the freezer.

Apprentices get bounced around the garages, learning from different people. He's had managers call up and ask to keep him for longer – because he's good on the job. That's satisfaction; the knowledge that you're doing a good job. Connor has a real affinity with the idea of an 'old school mechanic'. He likes the older guys, the real mechanics who don't take shit and don't

waste time on people who don't care about the job. He looks up to them – there's stuff you can learn from them that you can't get from any books, any training. They seem to like Connor too.

**I Always Experience Frustration at Some Point During the Day**



**IV. Poppy, Gallery Assistant**

## **Time Does Not Go Quickly**

Time does *not* go quickly.

You can say 'I'm bored,' you can complain about it all the time or just try to put it aside.

Sit in a room.

Sit and just think about stuff.

Sit or stand in a room.

Go and sit in a room.

Feel deferential in a room.

It depends on mindset. I get my thoughts organised at breakfast - nice long hour to decide what to think about during the day. (It helps if you have this planned.)

It works on a rotation system.

Every half hour you rotate.

Sit and just think about stuff.

Sit or stand in a room.

Go and sit in a room.

Feel deferential in a room.

Sit in a room.

One second chat with the person behind you and person in front. Little snippets. Little chats. Emotional high points come from talking to people. (Most of the job consists of not.)

Every half hour you rotate.

Sit or stand in a room.

Go and sit in a room.

Feel deferential in a room.

Sit in a room.

Sit and just think about stuff.

Don't touch that please. A lot of it's about security.

(I think something got broken once. It's fixed now.)

One of the galleries there's a video on a loop,  
about activism and art but ... *so* grating listening to it again and again and again and again.

Every half hour you rotate.

Go and sit in a room.

Feel deferential in a room.

Sit in a room.

Sit and just think about stuff.

Sit or stand in a room.

Sometimes I turn to my phone, doing admin, messaging.

Or pacing restlessly, counting up to large numbers.

I carry little sodukos in my lanyard, fold them up really small  
and hide them. (I can always whip out a little sodoku!)

Every half hour you rotate.

Feel deferential in a room.

Sit in a room.

Sit and just think about stuff.

Sit or stand in a room.

Go and sit in a room.

I'm not using *any* skills. When people are bored in admin

at least they're *doing* something! I'm *searching*

for something to do. Please give us tasks!

I'm literally standing here *waiting* to be *given a task*.

Every half hour you rotate.

Sit in a room.

Sit and just think about stuff.

Sit or stand in a room.

Go and sit in a room.

Feel deferential in a room.

It's like a really long road trip. It's a cul-de-sac, doesn't lead anywhere. Get to the point where you feel really frustrated, then come back.

\*\*\*

They called me in for a meeting:

'We don't think you showed enough enthusiasm about experimental workplace policies going forward.'

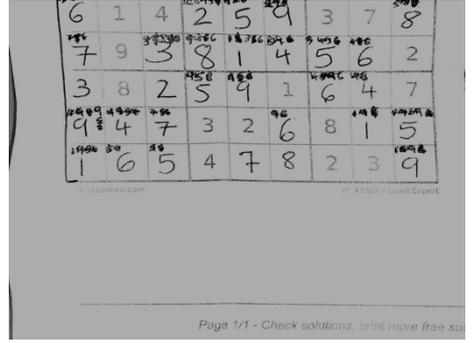
And to be honest? I was really pissed off.

I feel sleepy. (Don't fall asleep.)

I feel reckless.

I really just don't care.

Everyone goes to their separate rooms.



## Poppy's Story

Poppy is from what she calls a 'classic middle-upper class' family – a country house, three kids, two dogs, a dad in finance, a mum who works as a teacher. She always saw herself as somebody who would work in the art world. She did work experience at her dad's hedge fund, but always thought the environment was too masculine for her. Poppy has always done bits and pieces of different things, and seems to have a real 'portfolio career'. It's all still fermenting, she tells me, but she's really passionate about mental health charities, contemporary art and yoga. She says she doesn't handle stress well at all – but that the pressure of having to put your best foot forward and start out in a new role is something she really likes, because it makes her feel alert and alive.

*"Any new job is a good job"*

It is interesting, given this preference for new experiences, that Poppy has been a gallery assistant for almost two years. It's always been part-time, alongside some other paid and voluntary roles – she couldn't do it full time... no, it would drive her mad. She never offers to work the late openings, because even that's too much. As soon as 6pm rolls around she can't wait to get out.

The rhythm of the gallery runs on a couple of different circuits. The gallery has no permanent collection, so exhibitions are always changing. If you take the long view, this might suggest a level of variation that could keep the job interesting. But day to day, for the gallery assistants, it's a rigid timetable. You start at 10:30am and finish at 6:00pm. You are in each gallery for 30 minutes at a time, and work on a rotation system. The shift manager starts off a relay, and everyone shifts to the next gallery. You only get two 30 minute breaks - any extra toilet breaks; you have to radio someone to cover your room.

*"Oh my god, I'm just not interested in developing this career role at all"*

Poppy is very open about the fact that if she was asked to leave this job, she wouldn't really care. It's an empowering position, she tells me. And it is – her parents' wealth means that she doesn't really *need* the job. They've bought her a flat in Clapham where she lives rent free. She has been able to pursue voluntary, low paid work in the creative sector due to their financial support; as well completing yoga teacher training in Bali. She's aware of the privilege of her position, and it means that she is able to take her time in forming her idea of what she wants her career to be. The last time I spoke to her she was considering training to be a psychotherapist, and integrating that with her yoga practice.

A lot of being a gallery assistant is to do with security. It's a contemporary art gallery so the artworks themselves aren't necessarily valuable; it's more about the experience they create or the idea they represent. (She likes that it's not a commercial gallery – she briefly worked in a high end commercial gallery and ended up getting signed off work with stress.) Most of the works are by living artists, who just come in and repair anything that gets broken anyway, so it's not high-stress for that reason... it's not like you're guarding a Da Vinci. She likes it because it's not demanding work, and it gives her a space to think and plan and mull over other things in her life.

She sees her job as being very passive – you're basically a pair of eyes and a conduit for information. You're not really allowed to actually *do* anything, and because you're not allowed to do anything, people treat you like you *can't*. She tells me how this one exhibition had a piece where a tiny seed was placed under a small magnifying glass. When people knocked the plinth, the seed moved out of place – but the gallery assistants are not authorised to juggle the plinth to get the seed back in its place. Instead they have to radio the maintenance guy – who already has too much to do - who *is* authorised to jiggle the plinth.

*“Making sure that you are in the right mental state to go and sit in a room for a long time is important”*

For Poppy, a day at this job is like a road trip – a really, really long road trip with highs and lows. Because of the absence of tasks or noticeable events, it's a job where your attention is acutely attuned to your interior mental state. She tends to do yoga in the morning before work, so that she feels ready for the day ahead, and has a sense of having achieved something before even arriving at work. Most of the high points in the day come from talking to people, but most of the job is the opposite of that. It's rare that visitors actually ask you questions. Mostly they just glance at you furtively, hoping not to be told off.

It's more the small snippets of conversation that you have when you're on rotation; that split second where you exchange a couple of words with the other assistants – it's cold in here / the time is going slowly / how was your show. The community of gallery assistants is full of fascinating creatives, but no one is really in this work as a career. Most of them already have a degree, if not an MA. It's mainly artists that need flexible work that allows them time to work on their creative practice – there's a real sense of frustration about being in a role where you are not allowed to use any of the skills and knowledge you've gained. She tells me that gallery assistants are the most overqualified workforce in any sector. Poppy says she never wants to be defined by her work – but especially not *this* work.

Sometimes, she folds up Sudokus really small and slides them into the back of her lanyard. Being so bored can make her really reckless – sometimes she'll get to a point where she really doesn't care at all, and she'll get her phone out and just do all the things that she's not allowed to do. Boredom, she says, is a bit of a cul-de-sac. It doesn't necessarily lead anywhere – and often it makes her feel like she can't even engage with the art around her; either because she's seen it all before, or it just doesn't speak to her. In the rooms with video art, it gets really grating. Hearing the same sounds, the same voices, the same music on a loop over and over again. The sounds from the first show she ever invigilated? They still come back to her in her dreams sometimes, she laughs.

**Ten Seconds to Get the Washing Up Gloves On, Ten Seconds to Get Them Off**



**V. Emma, Barista**

## Just Me And My Apron

it's a different kind of boredom  
when I get coffee grounds  
in my dreams sausage roll nightmares  
I shut it in the dishwasher  
with the minimum wage exhaustion

you know like when you're a kid,  
and they went, and they were guessing  
my bra size, erm

the latte art of a class  
divide and the condescension  
deadlines of quiche parcels pasties  
spread and butter.

it can make you really sad  
morally selling exhaustion  
sell three jobs at once after  
work I am shattered

erm, elderly men who come in and who say things

a drink a rant a cigarette  
because I'm stressed but I really love my job  
I'm so aware of myself  
aware of everything I'm going to do

aware of

how I'm meant to appear

a woman aware

of size four aware of

Sausage fat

so I'm like right 8 minutes to

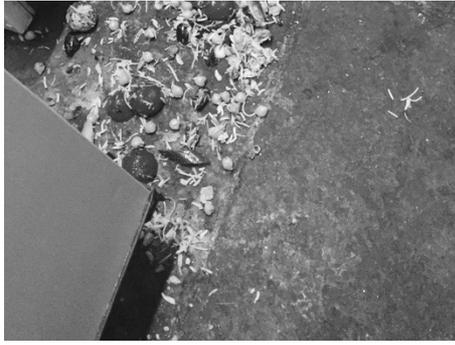
dance around each other

being

customer facing

facing customer

I know exactly [laughs]



## Emma's Story

Emma is naturally very bubbly. She's always been really good at talking to people loves making new friends – she's pretty well-suited to her work, she thinks. But not *so* well-suited that it doesn't all grate on her sometimes. Having to be customer-facing all day every day, maintaining the 'customer service smile' can be really hard when it's at odds with how you're feeling inside. But she's used to it, because she's worked in various different service jobs since she was 14. Anything from waitressing to jewellery shops to huge fashion retailers; from a hair salon receptionist job to cinemas and sports shops. She was even trained as a makeup artist for a luxury brand on a department store counter. At one point she was working three of these jobs at once.

At 26, she's a recent graduate in Art History. She went to university later in life after working every service job under the sun and realising that she wanted to get a degree. Her current job is a stop-gap, while she works out where her career should go. She's worked at this café on and off for around 7 years so she knows all the regulars pretty well. She's the Assistant Manager at the moment, so she'll get in before anyone else in the morning and leave last too. There's no chef on site, so the waiting staff make all the sandwiches, boil eggs, and assemble all the food as well as doing the coffee, salads, snacks and service.

*"The coffee is a whole thing, it's a whole presentation"*

Coffee is a big thing right now, culturally. She did a shift at a coffee convention once – it's just crazy how much people love coffee. But since learning all about it, doing the training and teaching it to other people, she admits becoming one of them: a coffee snob. It's satisfying when you get the latte art *just right*. You can get coffee anywhere – petrol stations, supermarket instant coffee machines, Costa. Even on the high street her café is on, there are about 10 other coffee shops, so it's the quality that keeps people coming back. They have a huge amount of return customers, so the 'patter' is important too. She's good at remembering things about people; asking them how their kids are, whether their dog has had a haircut. Remembering how the regulars like their drinks.

*"I absolutely love to bitch about customers because I spend my day smiling at people who are arseholes to me"*

Despite her naturally chatty demeanour, she finds the job exhausting. It's real physical work, and it's emotionally taxing too. Every day is different, but after work she's not looking to go and hide away from the world or anything. She loves going for a drink - with co-workers or friends or

whoever - and offload 'all the crap' that you have to stand there and just take. Just a rant and a cigarette, and everything is put back into balance, she laughs.

She makes strong bonds with the people she works with – because of the work. It can be draining, but they all laugh so much when they're working together. Some days are a battle, but you just pull through it and then have a drink. She loves going out of her way to help the staff out, because she knows how much it means – especially if you're rushed off your feet and things have got on top of you. Yesterday, someone dropped a whole rice salad on the floor. As a manager you should lead by example and always help out. (Rice gets *everywhere*. It's the worst – second only to chickpeas, which just roll under the fridges where you can't get them.)

*“Sometimes it feels like every second is like a horrible, dragging crawl towards the finish line...”*

She likes it when its busy – when you get a bit of adrenaline going. Most of the time it's pretty busy and the time goes quickly. Especially the morning and lunch – it zooms by and often she's left thinking 'where the fuck have all the hours gone?!' When it's quiet, she knows she should go and do the irritating jobs, like cleaning stray chickpeas out from underneath the fridges.

Sometimes she'll go for a walk to the shop and get herself a diet coke, or a mango. You've just got to get out sometimes, away from the huge pile of washing up – do something different for a second.

*“I'm thinking, it takes me 10 seconds to get the washing up gloves on, ten seconds to get them off... and I've got 8 minutes until the sausage rolls are done...”*

The shift always feels really structured. Every second, she knows exactly where she has to be to get things done. And throughout the day, there are loads of little deadlines. By 3:30 she's got to do a stock take and put in the order for the next day's food – milk, natural yogurt, quiches, rocket, tomatoes... she's usually already got the list sorted in her head. In the morning, setting up, she's got a system for it, because she has to do everything in 30 minutes. When she's washing up, she's planning and ordering tasks in her head.

*“There's nothing new in my job, ever”*

For Emma, it's a specific kind of boredom that she experiences in her job. It's not boredom that comes from inertia – because things are always moving, moving, moving. It's more to do with the predictability and repetition of events. Every day, she knows she'll make loads of coffee. She knows exactly what sandwich fillings she'll be preparing that day. She'll listen to the same songs... on the same radio with the same presenters, with the same questions and the same

jokes. She is especially bored of people asking her what she's doing there, or how long she's worked there. After 7 years at the cafe, and so many more years in service industry, there's not much that catches her off-guard.

But the predictability makes the job easier, and it means that she can do it really well. Her and the General Manager are so experienced that they almost dance around each other when it's busy. It's a really small space they have to work in - once she dropped a whole tray of freshly baked sausage rolls in the dishwasher, because it's crammed in right next to the oven. The big boss came in and she just slammed the dishwasher shut because the sausage rolls are pricey, and that was £200 of stock gone. Sometimes she even dreams about the sausage rolls – that they've not been ordered in on time, that they're all stacked up about to fall on the floor, that kids are about to touch them; or that they're burning in an oven.

Emma is intimately acquainted with the quirks of the café. She laughs and explains that the hob trips the electricity regularly, and there's a toaster ('the devil's plaything') that is too small for the toast. You have to flip it half way to toast all of it, and even then it's uneven so you put it on for 3 minutes and sometimes it'll burn things, sometimes they'll be underdone. The coffee machine drips down the cupboard doors ('at the end of the day it looks like a Jackson Pollock'). Someone told her that she had no aspirations because she was still working in the same place after all these years. People can be really patronising. Sometimes they even think they're being nice, but really they can just be so condescending.

Emma thinks that maybe coffee shops are really about happiness. A lot of the people that come in, it's either a nice treat, or they're a bit lonely and they come in for a little chat... and that can only be a good thing. The physicality of the job - scrubbing away solidified coffee grounds, wiping the oil and butter off your hands, smelling of bacon fat at the end of a 10 hour shift – can get you really tired and frustrated, but it's good fun really. It can be tiring and customers can be assholes, but it's a nice place to work.

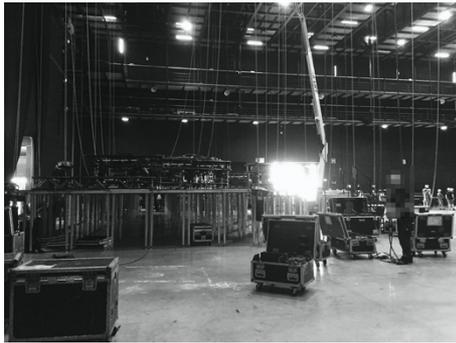
**That's the Reason Why You Wait Around and You Do Your Day and Everything**

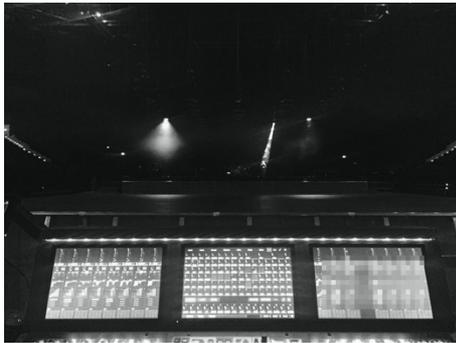


**VI. Theo, Live Sound Engineer**

## Hard Work

Always on the move shouting and yelling I enjoy the freedom  
once the kit is up everyone's trying once rehearsals are done  
in the evening to rip things apart I'd run up the side of the hill  
and watch the sunset quickly as possible over some mountains  
always a day off soon like war like tug of war to look forward to  
wander around and see a bit of a war zone? other countries  
people want me a macho environment that makes me happy  
money motivates me the massive cables to not be worried  
about it that makes me feel and the trucks successful  
family community is nice covered in sweat and dirt I do feel  
successful but it's hard and dangerous to measure how far  
you've gone/the waiting work environment boredoms of sitting  
there doing nothing big heavy speakers there's no room  
for errors the smallest mistakes can crush hands people get very  
very stressed partying can get when a show is set up  
and the gig starts tough sometimes that's the reason you wait /  
5 months away it's part of the sound from my home is pretty lame  
maybe I could do trade drinking something more academic  
would it be easier show how manly you are where it's 9 to 5?  
living in the same place you have to socialise could bore me now  
wishing I was travelling vibes of macho egos just as the wastes  
of time when I'm waiting for this heavy lifting for the show to start





## Theo's Story

*"I don't really want to wear a suit"*

Theo has had some 'pretty terrible' jobs, by his own admission. He worked at a theme park - in a kiosk selling the photos of people going down the water ride (he got fired because he just let everyone take photos of the pictures on their phone). He also did a stint as a takeaway delivery driver, but his car kept breaking down so he never made the deliveries on time. He also worked at a call centre, where they used to mess around and do stupid voices and swap phones because it was so boring. All of these jobs... he's just happy that he doesn't have to do again. You get treated like crap because you're disposable.

*"This is the best job I've ever had"*

Theo had liberal parents who always encouraged music. He played in a band and worked a lot of different jobs before he found this one. He now goes on tour with huge music artists, and has travelled all over the world. He's self-employed so works for a couple of different agencies who allocate him different tours - 3 months in America, 2 months in Europe, a couple of weeks in Canada, then over to Russia. He's been doing it for 5 years now, and it's got to the point where he is getting offered more than he can work. Being in demand... it feels good because you know you're a valued member of the team, and you're doing a good job.

The day to day of it is very physical. There's a lot of heavy lifting. Speakers, motors, huge 200 foot cables that have to be rigged 50 foot in the air. You arrive at a stadium, then you're up at 8am, and you meet your team - you get around 70 local kids from whatever city you're in, and you have to manage them lifting all the gear out of the truck, getting it in the right place, running cables and plugging everything in. Most of them are young lads, around 18, and they want his job one day, so he always makes an effort to explain to them how things work. Some people just boss them around, but the way you get the best out of them is if you get them engaged and you set an example. And you always, always, learn their names.

It's a pretty dangerous working environment - huge speakers can crush hands, and it's all very fast-paced. There is no room for error, because everything has to go up, and you could literally have a huge speaker fall out of a rig. The hardest bit of the job is taking responsibility for all that stuff. It's serious.... And it's a very macho environment so people can react really badly if something isn't right. By 1pm things are in place so your helpers go home, and then you test everything, check the sound, and by 2pm you can go and have a break until around 5pm. Usually

they all just hang around backstage, go for a run, sit in catering or watch tv on their iPads. When people come backstage, they're always surprised at how calm it is before the show starts – everything is set up, and people are just sat around relaxing, reading and stuff.

*“I try to keep myself as busy as possible, because otherwise you're just sitting there doing nothing.”*

Being a live sound engineer, you're either *working* or *waiting*. Waiting is actually a huge part of the job. You travel a lot, so you wait in gas stations, airports, train stations; you set up and then wait for the show to end; you wait for the trucks to arrive... Sometimes you get in at midday and you stay there until 2am, waiting for the artist to turn up for a rehearsal. Sometimes they don't even bother turning up, so you've waited for 14 hours for nothing. Times like that, he'll skateboard around the arena, or do emails, or just try and keep as busy as possible. Otherwise it all just feels like a bit of a waste of his time. He gets paid a day rate so it makes no difference to him really – he gets paid to do nothing a lot of the time; and he can go off and do what he wants, as long as he has his radio on and the crew can contact him.

*“Everything you do is because of that one show, basically... it's pretty good to see it and see that people are having fun”*

It's incredible to see these huge stadiums all set up; the crowd going crazy, the music blasting out, and know you were a part of that. That's what it's all for – and he feels a sense of achievement seeing it all come together. But sometimes on the big tours; where you watch the same show over and over again, it can get a bit tiring. The tour he's currently on is a two and a half hour set. Usually he'll sit on his rig for about an hour, then do a little walk around the arena and see how everything sounds. He even has a hammock that he can hang under the stage so he can have a lie-down while the gig is on. As soon as the show ends, it descends into a complete frenzy. You normally have just a couple of hours to pack everything down again – seven huge trucks of equipment. Theo tells me it's almost like going to war – people get angry and stressed, and there's usually a lot of shouting. He doesn't like yelling at people – he just wants to get it done in good time.

After that, you get back to the tour bus. He looks forward to a shower and a beer. After the gig is packed up you're covered in dirt and sweat so you get clean, pack your tools and go and hang out and have a drink with everyone. On their days off, they all get hotel rooms paid for, but Theo doesn't mind the tour bus – it's easier because they drive through the night so you wake up at 9am and you're already at the next venue. If you have to fly between venues it involves loads

of wasted time... just queuing in airports and getting to bed at 1am and having to get up at 5am for a flight. But he gets paid for the days he spends sitting in airports anyway, so that helps.

*“I like to joke, I like to make people laugh and I like to have fun while I work. I’m friendly to everyone.”*

The job is a good fit because you have responsibility, but at the same time everyone is there to have a good time. You get a real family community on the tours, because you spend so much time together. The job isn’t boring, he tells me. You’re always in new places – and he loves exploring new cities and going out, especially if you’ve got a young crew who like to party. He doesn’t party so much now... but there have been a lot of times where he’s been out drinking until 5am then had to work at 8am. It’s part of the sound engineer trade – it happens a lot. It’s a way of ‘showing how manly you are’, and it helps you get ahead; but he feels like he’s done enough of those nights now.

*“I do, yeah, I do feel successful”*

Theo feels successful because the work is always coming in, but also because he has enough money to have moved out of his parent’s house and not to worry too much about money anymore. But there’s always further you can go, and he’s got goals and ambitions still in the making. He doesn’t see himself doing this job forever. It’s incredible to be paid to travel, but he doesn’t want to spend 6 months away from home all the time, and he’s getting tired of partying. It does all get a bit wearing. He was in Utah recently, and he tells me how he would go for evening runs and watch the sunset over the mountains. He goes to yoga classes wherever he can, and loves chatting to people in the local cafes, and sussing out the best vegan food in the cities he’s in. Not everyone’s into that, and some of the older roadies take the piss out of him. But the money is good for someone who didn’t go to uni, so he’s not sure what else he would do.

## You're Constantly Playing a Game of Catch Up



### VII. Alex, Chef

## **Chef**

I started as a kitchen porter  
and learnt through osmosis  
just being in the room  
learning on the fly

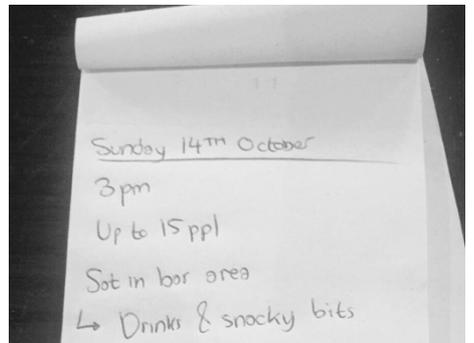
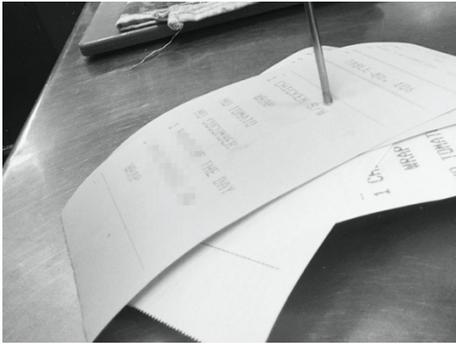
I start at 10 o'clock  
turn on all the lights  
turn on all the grills  
and the ovens and stuff

Yeah... veg prep, any prep  
like cooking up sauces  
cooking tomato sauce  
for pastas and stuff

Roll up over 200 little meatballs  
Everything is on a critical path  
Like sweeping, changing the oil  
Like cleaning out a deep fat fryer  
every single day, it's a critical path

You've got these middle-aged yuppies  
You're constantly playing a game of being a chef

There are dreams about cooking  
There are dreams about food  
There are dreams about working  
There are dreams about the grill



Rolls Week 01/07/2014 PLEASE ENTER TIMES IN COLMNS 1-7 (For total cost & units to separate hours and volume)

Roll Name	Quantity							Unit Price	Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
Roll - Cheese Buns	2,000.00	1,500.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	1.0000	17,000.00
Roll - Meat Buns	2,000.00	1,500.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	1.0000	17,000.00
Roll - Plain Buns	2,000.00	1,500.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	1.0000	17,000.00
Roll - Raisin Buns	2,000.00	1,500.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	1.0000	17,000.00
Roll - Sesame Buns	2,000.00	1,500.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	1.0000	17,000.00
Roll - Whole Wheat Buns	2,000.00	1,500.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	1.0000	17,000.00
Roll - Other Buns	2,000.00	1,500.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	2,000.00	1.0000	17,000.00
Roll - Total	14,000.00	10,500.00	14,000.00	14,000.00	14,000.00	14,000.00	14,000.00	1.0000	119,000.00



## Alex's Story

Alex has always had a job, since he was 15. He got his current job the day after his last A-level exam. He works at a local gastropub. It's not 'top tier', he says – but it's not that they don't care about the food or they're not serving it to the best standard they can. As long as it tastes good and works well with the beer people are happy – there's just less faffing about with garnishes. Although occasional use of parsley (what Alex called the 'turd-polishing-herb') can go a long way on the pricier dishes.

Alex often dreams about cooking; little snippets. But the food is more the point of the dreams, rather than the cooking – and it's never really a dream about *working*. It's about the *cooking*, and his favourite foods tend to turn up. One time he had a dream that he went on a date with a rack of ribs – he laughs, as if he wasn't sure why it had come to mind, and then adds that, actually, he was shouted at by Gordon Ramsay in a dream once.

*“You see what's going on, like, working bottom rung. If you've never done it before you don't really get it sort of thing”*

I ask him what advice he would give to himself at 16. Always, always get a summer job. Always, always get a job when you're young, just to see what it's like working, because experience is the thing that people like. Even if it's a shitty job – stacking shelves or working in McDonalds... you learn a lot from working in a 'bottom rung' job, he explains. Like the MPs that voted to reduce the minimum wage – how many of them have ever, *ever* actually worked a minimum wage job?

Physical labour – people just don't realise what it's like, how much skill is involved, how physical it is. Being a bricklayer is dismissed as this working class thing. Same with food and service. Alex reckons that if everybody worked a minimum wage job for even just a month they'd be a hell of a lot nicer. You'd get less of the 'I want to speak to the manager' yuppies. Unless you've done it you just don't get it – the amount of flack you get from customers.

The head chef is pretty old-school. He'll have a shout in the kitchen if things aren't going right, but it's water under the bridge when the shift ends. It's high-pressure work; it's fast-paced and if things go wrong it can get pretty bad. If it's busy you burn yourself and cut yourself, so sometimes you just get really pissed off. It's just the way that kitchens work. You need things done, and there's pressure and you've got to get things done quick. Everything is done on a critical path. You just take a breather and then carry on.

*“You can’t be super neurotic and work in a kitchen. It would all just get too far ahead of you.”*

Alex thinks of his work as part of an ancient tradition – one of the oldest jobs. Tudor banquets and feeding armies; it’s all the same, he says. As long as whatever heads out of the kitchen is alright, whatever happens inside the kitchen doesn’t matter. He tells me about a head chef that would just slam cocaine as a coping mechanism – he didn’t last long. Drinking on shift is really common too. But it’s a function of the spatial segregation of the kitchen and front of house. The customers don’t see the process so it doesn’t matter so much. Open kitchens, in sushi bars or pizza places – they’re just *assembling* food really. Someone’s cooked and prepped and chopped, but you never see that part.

Time is always less important to him than the task. With every job he’s had, it’s always *get the job done - you finish when you finish*. Not because anyone forced him to stay, but because it seems to be his natural way of operating. Alex seems to be an instinctively hard worker – he wants to get the job done. But, no, Alex reckons he couldn’t work in an office. He likes the instant gratification of cheffing: something needs to be done, made or cleaned; so you *do it*. There are no long project deadlines – every day has constant deadlines. Every order is a deadline.

The work is stressful when you’re rushed off your feet, but just as challenging when there’s nothing to do. Boredom for Alex is *waiting for something to happen*. Waiting for an order, waiting to have something to do. Doing nothing, just waiting for a ticket to come through doesn’t sit easily with him. He would rather clean the deep fat fryer than just do nothing (and that’s no easy task – there’s oil splattered up the walls, and you’re cleaning it all with soap and water and rubber gloves). It’s a bit of a pain, but it’s satisfying to have a clean kitchen. There are obviously days when you just can’t be arsed – days where you come across a dead moth on the floor and just think... ‘Same. I feel you mate.’

Once you’ve cleaned the walls, the windows, swept under all the counters, swept outside by the bins, moved everything around, prepped the veg, chopped the onions, made the batter for the fish; once you’ve done everything you can possibly do... you just wait. Some days, if there’s just no customers in, he’ll go and sit out front and practice latte art with the bar staff. He likes socialising with the front of house staff, because otherwise on quiet days it’s just him in the kitchen, waiting.

Every day is different. Quiet one day, just tidying and twiddling your thumbs; manic the next. But even that’s something because it gives you variety. Rolling up 200 mini meatballs – it’s tedious, but it’s something that has to be done, so he’ll do it. He doesn’t feel particularly negative

about it, because the only thing he really dislikes is doing nothing at all. It's just satisfying to get stuff done. Perhaps that's why he always wants it to be busy – because the time goes faster when you have stuff to do. And once the shift ends, it's good to defuse. Just sit and have a drink and a chat with everyone – it's all water under the bridge, what happens in the kitchen. As long as the food goes out ok, it's all good.

**There's This Sense of What's the Fucking Point**



**VIII. Liam, Cycle Courier**

## The Logistics of Moving a Milkshake

jobs come in & you have no ability to say no

you're taken further & further & further away  
getting later & darker & colder & you just want  
to know when you finish you're going home

sometimes you get lucky  
some days you don't

in the end  
uncertainty  
reaches  
a point  
of acceptance

*I had an accident & I messaged The Company. I came off my bike & was going to be late. They said  
get the package there safely. They didn't ask how I was. If there was anything they could do to help.  
They didn't even ask.*

in this job  
you're on your own  
cycling through the city

& you have to take a little bit  
of pleasure in that  
otherwise

it just becomes too...

*In The Restaurant they're prioritising The Customers that are there. Not me. On the road  
everyone hates cyclists. You go to The Office & you're not allowed in the front entrance. I got kicked  
out of three lobbies today. It was raining. I stood in revolving doors.*

I don't want  
to be like you  
in the pub with the suit  
the briefcase chatting shit  
about million-pound budgets

it feels good  
to be actively resisting

while seeming invisible

*You order one milkshake to your house or The Office. The decadence of ordering a fucking milkshake.  
The grim wheels of capitalism. Stay in The Office. Work more. Your heart sinks. Every time.*

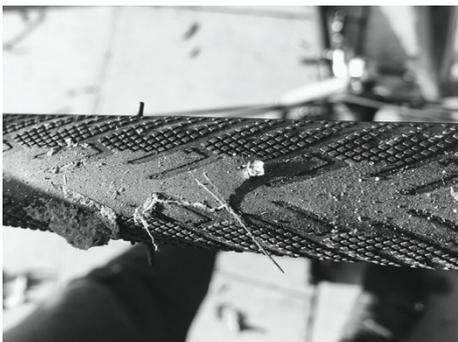
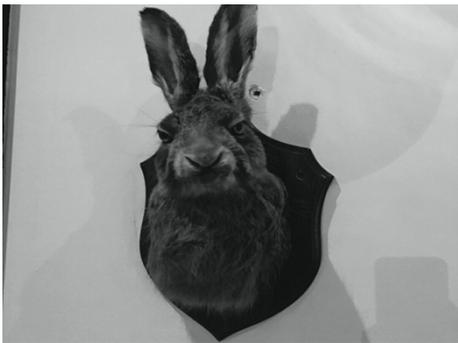
## My Jobs via an App

the whole work rhythm takes over  
with no time  
to stop    pause  
or    you're stuck  
in time  
against a deadline  
sat not getting paid  
waiting    itching for a job  
I'm sick  
of waiting    here  
just becoming    hours  
like someone's lunch  
I'm sat not getting work  
I'm not getting paid  
I have to move  
I have to try  
waiting    between  
peak periods  
there's no opportunity  
to slack off  
or rest  
or any of that  
in the restaurant  
the food  
is never there  
then again  
if someone's KFC  
doesn't get delivered  
who cares

## When There Are No Jobs I...

you have to concentrate so hard      on essentially *staying alive*      you haven't got time  
to think      about money      or the argument      you've had      with somebody  
*you've just got to think about the road*      the freedom      of riding      around the city

nomadic      you know the city      better      than you ever have      tuning in  
to its workings      the veneer of London      passed by      in the early hours  
watching      the sun      set over Millbank



## Liam's Story

*"There's a great sense of being nomadic and having lots of freedom... sometimes you feel really in tune with how the City's working, and that feels really good"*

Liam is a colourful character who works as a cycle courier for a bit of additional income. The content of the work itself is great, he tells me. He thinks of the city as this huge canvas, with layers and layers of meaning. He loves cycling around the city but hates the system that it's in. The actual activity of the job – riding – is almost meditative, he tells me with a self-conscious laugh. Because you have to focus so hard on not getting hit by a car, you don't really have time to think about anything else... which can be kind of relaxing.

*"I've chosen this job at the minute because I don't want to be like you. You, in the pub with the suit and the briefcase"*

Liam is hyper-tuned in to how unequal society is, and this is a job where he is repeatedly made aware of that fact. He tells me how he's treated like a second-class citizen; in the restaurants, you have to wait outside and not get in the way of the customers; in offices, they want you to use the service entrance; when it rains you take shelter in alleyways because no one wants you and your bike inside a fancy lobby; and when you finish a shift and go to the pub in your uniform people look at you, wondering why you're there.

Being managed by algorithms and impersonal chat interfaces also grates. He tells me about an incident where he was hit by a car and came off the bike whilst doing a flower delivery. He messaged the platform's help desk to let them know, and all they said was 'make sure the package gets there'. He got back on his bike, cycled to the drop off, handed the flowers to the customer, apologised to them in case they were damaged (because he had been hit by a car, he explained) – and the customer just said 'they look fine' and shut the door in his face. The app makes the work invisible to the people ordering the food, or flowers, or whatever needs delivering. It's like you're there but people don't *see* you. You're invisible... disposable. Replaceable.

If he's not getting any jobs, he's not getting paid. When there's no work, he's not slacking off, he's cycling around looking for the jobs. When he's expecting there to be no work, he expects to be a bit bored, so it's actually less painful... but when you're not expecting it, you're not mentally prepared for having to do nothing so it's worse. But still, that can be one of the most boring parts of the job – just waiting for peak time to start, cycling around. Or waiting at a restaurant to

collect the food... you get agitated and bored pretty quickly, because you're on the clock and you're waiting and your delivery metrics will look bad, and it's not your fault.

Liam's description of the physicality of the work took me by surprise - the sheer amount of physical and emotional energy it takes to cycle around one of the busiest cities in the world. You wake up at 7am, your muscles hurt and you're usually dehydrated. One of the things that nobody tells you about this work is that when you cycle 70 miles you burn about 3000 calories – so you have to put about 5500 or 6000 calories back in which is a huge amount of effort in itself, and means you often have to have pasta or rice for breakfast.

*“It becomes less stressful when you just accept that you're gonna have to do it.”*

There's moment-by-moment uncertainty in this job. When you get assigned an order, you don't know where the drop off is until you pick the food up. You're fed the information piece by piece, and sometimes your heart sinks when you have to cycle a burger for 5 miles. You get penalised for turning jobs down – and once you've got the food you can't just choose not to deliver it. Sometimes it's getting later and darker and colder and you're getting dragged further and further away from where you want to finish your shift – but you just feel like you have no ability to say no.

Add to that the fact that it's the *restaurant* that sets the delivery radius, so sometimes you have no chance in hell of getting a meal to someone and it still being even lukewarm... and it's *just not your fault*. Each delivery you're being reviewed and rated – so you can't be blunt with people. When customers complain about food being late, cold or messy, he's often thinking – you ordered food from the other side of London... what did you expect?! And do these people ever think about the logistics of delivering *one* milkshake? On a bike?! There's a certain decadence to ordering a *single* milkshake that Liam just hates – never mind the fact that restaurants never pack them properly so usually you end up with a bag full of milkshake and an empty cup.

*“There's this sense of what's the fucking point, essentially, when you cycle someone's Burger King for 5 miles, and it arrives cold, and it's been on your back so it arrives in a mess...”*

There are two main things that define a good or bad day: weather and time. Bad weather makes a bad day; good weather makes a good day. And when you're in that kind of 'flow state', sailing through the traffic, in tune with the city's rhythms, you don't notice time passing. The day can just go like that. But the tight deadlines on people's food deliveries... it's bullshit. Liam laughs. It's not like he's delivering blood or emergency medical supplies. If your KFC arrives late... who

cares. He only cares about getting it there on time because otherwise he loses out on pay – he couldn't care less about the actual deliveries.

*"I enjoy my work, but I don't wake up every day excited to do it"*

There's an uneasy contrast between the freedom of cycling and the restrictiveness of low pay and tight time constraints. And it's hard to reconcile the feeling of ownership and *knowing* the City - with the exclusion and judgement you feel in restaurants, offices, and pubs. It's not the City that treats you badly, it's the people. Liam is jovially cynical and seems to view it as a game – a game where the odds are stacked against you, but a game nonetheless. In this line of work you get a really privileged front seat view of London and you find some really special places. His favourite thing, when he clocks off, is to go and sit and watch the sun set over Millbank.

**The Marking and the Data Entry... Just All of That Bores Me**



**IX: George, Teacher**

## Added Value

Lesson planning, delivering, and marking. That's the cycle. Monotonous. *we have a lesson plan formula and you have to do that exact formula every single lesson.* Really dull. I'd rather get them talking. Instead I mark pointless exercise books. I've got over 300 students and so I can't pay much attention to their work. Ticking the book so I can tick a box. I don't have time to read them. we don't have enough. Time. It becomes unreasonable. My interest in marking is so little. I don't care if you've underlined your date and title. I'm not helping. It adds no value to the kids. Just time spent doing irrelevant things.

I really like the job. I get a lot of value out of it. I put a lot into it. As a teacher. You're invested emotionally in the pupils. I want to make sure the people I care about are happy. I'll pick up if a kid is having a miserable day and just ask them how they're doing. That's why I do it. To make a difference. That's the value my job is perceived to have. I complain about marking because I'm not marking to help the kids. I'm marking to tick a box. Life doesn't have a text book. Context is important. It's exactly the same thing but it means something different.

History KS 3 targets		History KS 4 targets	
1	Use evidence and examples to support your argument.	1	Remember to PEEL your paragraphs.
2	Answer the question and ensure that all of the information is relevant.	2	Answer the question and ensure that all of the information is relevant.
3	Explain your answers more fully, making greater use of phrases like 'this meant that' because of this...'	3	Explain your answers in detail and more fully, making greater use of phrases like 'this meant that because of this...'
4	Make sure that all of the information is presented in your own words.	4	Identify a range of reasons for an historical event and try to explain and link them.
5	Ensure that you look at both sides of the argument and reach a balanced conclusion based on the evidence.	5	Make sure that you use the main/understand before and after writing your answer to ensure that you explained the requirements of the question when you're writing your answer.
6	Remember to use relative ('before', 'after' when and who) and purpose ('why') when explaining events.	6	Ensure that you look at both sides of the argument and reach a balanced conclusion based on the evidence.
7	Always ensure that you write in full sentences and when required paragraphs.	7	Remember to use relative ('before', 'after' when and who) and purpose ('why') when explaining events.
8	Always read through your work to check grammar, punctuation and spelling.	8	Always read through your work to check grammar, punctuation and spelling.
9	Always ensure that your work is well presented. This includes understanding your size and line, using all the pages of your book, neat handwriting and making up all workbooks neatly.	9	Always ensure that your work is well presented. This includes checking your size and line, using all the pages of your book, neat handwriting and making up all workbooks neatly.
10	Ensure that all classroom and homework has been completed fully and to the best of your ability.	10	Ensure that all classroom and homework has been completed fully and to the best of your ability.

**Why did Henry VIII break with Rome?**

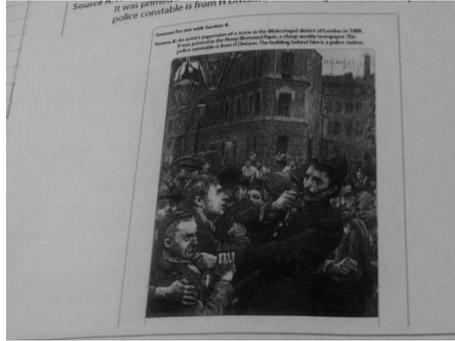
**Interpretation 1 - 'England 1485-1603' Mary Dicken and Nicholas Fellows**

'A more convincing argument that Henry wanted the wealth of the Church can be made. The Church was a very wealthy institution. Henry could easily obtain money from the Church. Moreover, Cromwell had promised to make Henry 'the richest man in Christendom'.

**Interpretation 2 - 'The Tudor Monarchy 1485-1603' John McGurk**

Henry's failure to get the Pope to agree to divorce marked the beginning of the Reformation... Henry became much more powerful but there was no change in religion (the religion didn't really change). He hoped to persuade the Pope to agree...

	INSET		INDUCTION DAY			Assembly 7	Assembly 9
September	Year 10	Year 8	Year 11		Year 9	Year 7	
September	Year 10	Year 8	Year 11		Year 9	Year 7	
September			Year 10	Year 8 Women in Tech	Year 11	Year 9	Year 7
October	Tour guides	Year 8	Year 10	Set-Up	Year 11	Year 9	Year 7
October	World Mental Health assembly	Year 10	Year 7	assembly	Year 9	assembly	Year 7
October	Year 10	Year 8	Year 11		Year 9	Year 7	



## George's Story

George is a History and Politics teacher at a comprehensive secondary school and sixth form college in South London. From a young age he had always worked on bars, at festivals – the casual front-of-house kind of stuff that so many people cut their teeth on. He wasn't always sure that he wanted to go into teaching, so after getting a degree in History he spent a year working as a Teaching Assistant. Then he did the PGCE, and then got the job he has now. George tells me that anyone can go and make £60k in a bank somewhere. For him, it wouldn't be a challenge – he knows he is more than capable (and anyway, he was lucky enough to go to a really good selective state school and he has the connections). The challenge, for him, lies in actually doing something to *improve* the world.

He enjoyed working the festivals as he'd often be on shift with friends, but admits that his current job is actually way more fun... when it is fun. Being a teacher has a lot of highs and lows; a lot more extremes than any other job he's had. You have high-energy days and low-energy days; days when you make a breakthrough with a student and it's a wonderful feeling – or days stuck doing marking or having to meet with parents to discuss behavioural problems in class. Because he cares about the work he does, it can sometimes really affect him.

*"I'm usually very stressed and tired after work. I stay as late as I can in school. I'm usually there until 6:00 or 6:30 just because of marking admin or pastoral stuff"*

George's parents divorced when he was young, and he lived with his mum, who worked cash-in-hand cleaning jobs and had to claim benefits to provide for him and his brother. He tells me that this shaped his attitude to work, because he watched her have a very difficult and unrewarding working life. Growing up, he'd had a couple of issues, he tells me. At his school, most of his teachers didn't care – but there was one teacher who made a difference, and he wants to be like that guy.

When he first started teaching, he fell into the trap a lot of new teachers fall into, he says. He cared *too* much – he took every failure as a personal failure, and the stress and worry really affected his personal life. Now, he realises that whilst he will do the best he can for the kids, he can't take it all home with him or be too emotionally involved because he can't do his job if he's stressed, anxious and nervous. That said, he will always go the extra mile for the students. The Senior Leadership Team have noted this, and put him up for an additional pastoral role. His greatest success, he tells me, is the fact that he forms really strong positive relationships with the

kids. He's also got great exam results year on year, which makes him happy, but it's not the thing he cares about the most.

*"I'd much rather look after them as a person than teach them history. At the end of the day they're probably not going to use the history that much, but being a well-adjusted human being – that's important"*

George is one of the few teachers that asks his students to send him mock papers to mark over the Easter holidays. That's when the GCSE's are right around the corner – and he reasons that he can't ask *them* to work over the holiday if he's not willing to do the same. Most holidays he's working. Catching up on admin. On the weekdays he looks forward to a cup of tea and going to bed... on weekends though he does look forward to going out and drinking and partying. He's still learning where he should spend his energy in ways that are most beneficial to the students and himself – that's a really crucial skill, because you literally *cannot do everything*.

Pragmatically speaking, the day to day follows a cycle: lesson planning, delivering, marking and data entry. When he wakes up to go to work, he laughs and tells me he either feels 'existential dread' or that he's 'kinda looking forward to it'. It completely depends what classes he has that day; and how prepared he is for those lessons. He actually really enjoys Mondays, because he has great classes that day; Friday is actually his worst day. Fridays he teaches all 5 periods, and often doesn't get a break because there tends to be pastoral stuff going on. School is a safe space for the kids so they tend to wobble before they go home for the weekend – if there's some kind of problem and they're scared or worried about going home they'll come and see him.

*"I hate just marking pointless exercise books"*

Really, it's just the marking that annoys him. Sometimes he has to go through students' books just to check that they have actually done the work he's set. He has over 300 students – he doesn't even have time to read half the stuff. That's one of the big complaints in teaching... that teachers just *don't have enough time*. He laughs and tells me that some parents seem to be under the impression that he's just there for their child and that no one else matters. He's got a lot better at just telling people that something hasn't been done and that he needs more time. That is one of the biggest challenges – having so much to do that it becomes completely unreasonable. He already dislikes marking; but the sheer *volume* of it makes it so much worse. There's frustration if he has to spend loads of time on admin tasks that have no added value for the kids – like having to fill out lengthy personal development review documents. Teachers wouldn't complain as much if they actually saw these kind of admin tasks as having direct benefits for the kids, he says.

George has a pragmatic approach to boredom, perhaps because of the time pressure of the job. He focuses on the value of the tasks he does in the longer term, rather than the in-the-moment sensations. He complains about marking because although he admits that it has a function – keeping tabs on students’ progress; helping the people at the top to see how everyone is doing – a lot of it is box-ticking marking, rather than being able to give detailed feedback and improve students’ learning. Marking exam papers is more interesting than other marking because he gets a real sense of how they’re getting on so he can give really targeted feedback to help them understand how to be better. It’s technically still marking – but it means something different. Context is important, he says.

*“My interest in marking is so little that even if my housemate is watching something I’m not interested in, I’ll watch that instead”*

George, despite his complaints, is engaged and motivated in his work... perhaps because he puts off the things he doesn’t want to do. He tends to save up all the admin and then spend 2 weeks blitzing through it trying to get it all off his plate. That way, work is great for four weeks or so, then shit for two, and so on. He wishes the ratio was a bit different. He has to spend a lot of time on things he considers unhelpful, unimportant or irrelevant, but he gets a lot out of his job and puts a lot in. He laughs and says: “I think it’s worthwhile and so I get a lot out of it, even if I’m knackered at the end of every week and just need to have a beer and a cry and a sleep...”

**It's The Breakthrough Moments That Are Most Satisfying**



**X: Rory, Software Developer**

## Software Developer

Through school, I used to feel like  
I was mildly employable  
in really boring or stressful...

///

A straight line into  
bar work,  
products on the website,  
the user service  
and coding,  
front end and back end,  
an agile workflow...

I figured out that music had parallels  
in software development,  
in that it's creative,  
you have a lot of agency,  
breakthrough moments...

///

I get out of bed and  
I don't want to be like my Dad.  
I like to finish things.

The commute is long.  
The commute is long.  
I have to leave 1000 people on the train  
and that makes things interesting.  
I get into central London –

this is the tech industry.

I had lots of code dreams,

But I don't these days.

I have worked on sleep managing

because I used to have nightmares.

Upset in the office:

I find the amount of cake really annoying.

Because it's around so often it becomes a chore.

Not because I hate it.

I probably love it.

///

Process-based admin gets us incrementally closer

towards doing the thing, getting it done.

It's not on the table.

At one stage, the next thing is pretty close.

A change of scene imminently.

The structuring of a team

and the CEO and the CFO and the CTO

do a little talk about finances,

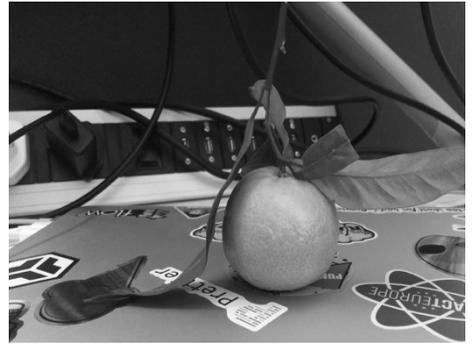
targets and that kind of shit.

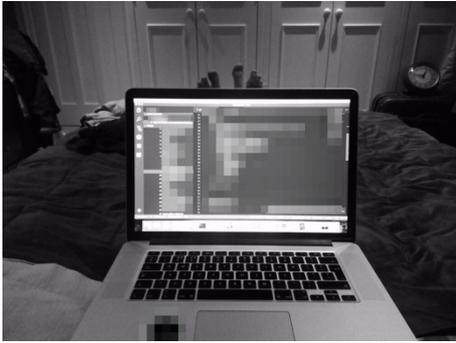
It's not the company that motivates me.

It's my affiliation to the company,

that nice feeling, that...

sunset at the train station on the way home...





## Rory's Story

Rory is a Software Developer at a company in East London. He came to this career after getting a degree in English Literature and a couple of years of marketing internships bar work, and ad hoc jobs. It wasn't a good time for him, he says. He was underpaid, overworked and lost; and had the feeling that there wasn't a place for him in the workforce. Any work he was able to get was either really stressful or really boring. He eventually saved up and did an intensive coding course... and the rest is history.

Rory described himself as very dogged – he doesn't quit, and he likes to finish things. He's charismatic too. He also likes solving problems, but says that his attitude to work and his self-image changed a lot after finding this job. It gave him a lot of confidence, to find something he enjoys, something he's good at – something that pays decent money. And the cynicism he felt about getting a degree and still being unable to find good work... having to do endless unpaid internships... it soured his entire perspective on 'work'.

*"I'm happy that I have somewhere to go for a start – because being unemployed and not having anywhere to go is... so demoralising"*

Rory says that most mornings he wakes up and is grateful for his job – the commute is an hour and a half door to door, which is a bit of a pain, but he makes the most of it by listening to podcasts or meditating. He has a very glass-half-full approach to the commute and rather than viewing it as repetitive, says that there is actually a lot of variation within it. Sometimes it takes one hour if he's lucky; sometimes the trains are packed; sometimes he gets a seat. Sometimes it's stressful, but either way, as soon as he arrives in London, that's its own reward. It's big and bustling and dynamic. Rory thrives on that kind of energy. He's creative, and has always written music and been in bands on the side. That's one of the reasons he loves coding – he finds that it has a lot of parallels with writing music.

*"I do better with structure... It's kind of a cool environment"*

The working day is structured, but the structure is set by the team themselves which gives them a sense of ownership. On a normal day, they'll begin with a stand-up meeting at 9:30, followed by a couple of hours of problem-solving in pairs. Then, lunch... and a couple of hours of solo work. They also have an hour at the end of each day to work on their own projects; anything to do with self-development. It doesn't have to be part of the job, but the idea is to spend 20% of your time on your own learning; anything that will make you a better developer. He also likes

that there is no obligation to stay in the office after 5:30pm, and nobody judges anyone. And if you do start to get bored... well there's always a change of scene imminently, because of how they've structured the day.

Rory tells me that there's nothing worse than going into work and just sitting there wondering what you're meant to be doing – which is how he's felt in other jobs. Or, on the other end of the spectrum, going into work and knowing what you're meant to be doing, but only because you're doing exactly the same thing every day. With this job, every day, you get a series of challenges and rewards. When you're coding, you get a problem to solve, you work through it, and you fix it – you break things into small chunks and you get an emotional reward from taking something that doesn't work and fixing it.

Any frustration he feels at work comes from difficult colleagues, or being told to work on something that he doesn't feel is the most important thing. Those moments where he becomes aware of the limits on his agency annoy him a bit – but they're not too frequent. Usually the day goes pretty quickly, with the exception of the monthly all-company meeting. Listening to the CEO and CFO talk through the company finances and targets. That shit is boring. But the company listened to feedback from the staff and they're making them bi-monthly instead of monthly.

He tells me that management have recently decided to make the office more open plan, and it's caused a lot of upset in the team. They took away some dividers, and it's made their workstations less enclosed so there's a lot more ambient noise. He laughs, and says he doesn't really care, but then reflects that he's probably one of the louder people in the office. It's not necessarily a practical choice that they've made, but one based on how the company want to *appear*, he says.

*“I just don't get why emails are still a thing... I spend most of my time doing work that feels useful rather than work that feels restraining”*

He emphatically tells me that he isn't ever really bored at work – because he just really enjoys coding, and finds it fun, so often it doesn't really feel that much like work to him. Boredom isn't really on the table, he tells me, partly because 'you're encouraged to *make* it fun'. There's not much 'busy work' either. He doesn't spend any time on emails, because his department just don't really use them. As a result, the time is spent actually working on stuff, rather than keeping up with admin trails. Any admin that he does is what he calls 'process-based admin' – stuff that actually gets you incrementally closer to *getting the thing done*.

I get the sense that Rory is somebody who has found his place in the workforce, having struggled with it for years. It's not an uncommon story, but the way he tells it makes it clear that he feels lucky to have this job, and he really does enjoy it. He's never been motivated by money really. At school, he always found that he'd rather spend his time writing music or doing nothing than trying to earn money. He's always been pretty frugal, and never really felt the urge to acquire masses of wealth. The money is a nice by product... but he likes the work regardless.

# EXPERIENCES

*As Gardiner and Haladyn write, moments of boredom can be recognised as “a reflective moment on the nature of subjective experience” (2017: 4). With this in mind, it is notable that all the participants I spoke to seemed – very easily – to be able to recall jobs they had found boring in the past. It was interesting to me that boredom was so memorable; so easily called to mind. The management consultant recalled boring research work in a lab; the sound engineer recalled being bored in a call centre; the cycle courier - SEO content writing; the software engineer – an unpaid marketing internship; the civil servant – babysitting. The gallery assistant is the one exception, whose current role, she said, was the most boring job she had ever had.*

*This chapter discusses the implications of the participants’ testimonies for an understanding of boredom and work which goes beyond a consideration of ‘job design’, also addressing humans’ innate desire for meaningfulness. In particular, I discuss how the fieldwork data speaks to different understandings or senses of boredom; and also how it connects to, and differs from, the ways in which boredom has been addressed in contemporary conceptual art as considered in the previous chapter, ‘Artists’. Compositionally, this chapter is split into three parts: ‘Boredom and Time’ considers boredom in its temporal dimensions; ‘Boredom and Meaning’ considers boredom’s implications for meaning(lessness); and ‘After Boredom’ reflects on those materials to consider how people have responded to boredom and its effects.*

## I. Boredom and Time

*“No, the time does not go quickly when I’m at work.”* (Poppy, Interview 4.2)

One of the most fascinating elements of boredom, or ‘bored time-spaces’, is that our own sense of experiential, subjective temporality comes to the fore, in opposition to linear clock-time. That is to say, we become alive to what Henri Bergson saw as the true nature of time: that it is characterised by an interpenetration of past and present, shaped and made malleable by the quality of our experience and perception. This section considers the ways in which time and boredom were interrelated experiences for the participants, with a specific focus on subjective senses of time, paying attention to time, rhythms, routines and waiting.

### **Subjective senses of time: experiential time, attention and interest**

*“Yeab [laughs] there is no distraction here... guess I’ll go and sit at my desk and look at the bloody clock again... ugh!”*

(Anika, Interview 1.3)

What might be considered the classic motif of time dragging – the clock that seems to be crawling through the seconds, minutes and hours – featured heavily in one of the participant’s stories. Anika, the civil servant, describes how she took photos of the clock in the corner of her computer screen because she “was constantly looking at the time and waiting to go home” (Anika, Interview 1.3, see fig 6.1). Emma, the barista, also discusses time dragging, saying: “sometimes it feels like every second is like a horrible, dragging crawl towards a finish line... but, but, most of the time we’re quite busy” (Emma, Interview 5.2). This hints at one of the key components of experiencing bored time-spaces at work; namely, that we tend to feel most bored when we *aren’t* busy or don’t have anything to do.

Anika also describes time dragging as a result of time pressure: “I’m usually quite stressed on the Tube because I’m running late and I’m... like timing every minute” (Anika, Interview 1.1). This act of ‘timing every minute’ is a way of paying attention to time which can cause it to drag. This also shows that time drags when you feel trapped in a situation. The most exaggerated version of this is described by Theo, when he says that the most frustrating form of boredom he experiences is: “when you have like 14-hour drives or something, so you’re stuck on the [tour]

bus... for 14 hours” (Theo, Interview 6.2). This kind of long-duration boredom is unique to Theo in my dataset. The amount of travel he undertakes as part of his job brings up a really interesting duality – the excitement of travel, seeing new places, meeting new people; set against the monotony of being trapped on coaches and in airport lounges. Again, we see here that a lack of engagement, a lack of something to capture our interest or attract our attention, and our *will* for time to pass more quickly, causes us to focus on the passing of time itself. Liam, the cycle courier, likewise describes waiting to collect an order in Nando’s and finding it agitating – unless he can find something to *interest* him and capture his *attention* while he waits. If experience itself is – at least in part - a form of *attention*, then it follows that paying attention to time is part of what forms the subjective sense of time that we experience in bored moments. Although boredom can occur in any job, Poppy’s work as a gallery assistant is particularly risky since “conditions that do not absorb an individual’s attention or that leave one vulnerable to distraction [or boredom] such as inspection or vigilance tasks are particularly problematic” (Skowronski, 2012: 144).

It is apparent, then, that noticing time passing is a matter of *attention*. In one of Emma’s anecdotes, where she describes frequently ‘not realising how much time had passed’ when it is busy in the café, she is describing paying attention to something *other* than the passage of time itself. And so - time slips away *unnoticed*. Conversely, as discussed, time seems to slow down when our awareness and attention is focussed on every second crawling by. This is one way in which the quality of our experience is defined by what we choose to pay attention to, and reflects Cynthia Fisher’s diagnosis that boredom is “an unpleasant, transient affective state in which the individual feels a pervasive lack of interest in and difficulty concentrating on the current activity” (Fisher, 1993: 396). In fact, many psychologists have suggested that attentional difficulties are at the root of the experience of boredom, with Damrad-Frye and Laird stating that “the essential behavioural component of boredom” is exactly “the struggle to maintain attention” (1989: 316).

### ***Attempts to control time***

*“I’m always like... god that first two hours has gone really quickly!” [...] because there was loads to do. There’s always loads to do in the morning. [...] When time goes quickly, sometimes it’s nice, but also, like... there’s so many deadlines. Like by 3:30 I need to have the food list done... It is pleasing when it goes fast, but then sometimes there are so many jobs that I need to get done and it starts stressing me out.”*

(Emma, Interview 5.2)

Boredom also featured in the field data through a sense of frustration with the passage of time. This was figured through irritation at the rate that time seems to pass, whether this was experienced as ‘too fast’ or ‘too slow’. Particularly in Emma’s case, she expresses frustration when time drags, and exasperation when it passes too quickly – when she is running out of time to complete tasks. It is not surprising that it is Emma who most personifies this idea of wanting to mould, shape or control time, since her job is one which has a constant series of deadlines. Her and Alex have a lot in common here, since they both make food and serve customers. As Alex puts it, every order is a deadline and “you’re constantly playing a game of catch up, sort of, being a chef” (Alex, Interview 7.2).

Time passing quickly, in common parlance, is a mark of enjoyment – as the saying goes: ‘time flies when you’re having fun’. At work, it is generally assumed that the most advantageous relation between time and our perception is that of time passing quickly, so that we may soon *not* be at work. Rory, who was probably the ‘least bored’ of the ten participants in this study, was very vocal not just about the *lack* of boredom, but about how much he actively enjoys his work. He even goes as far as to say that it doesn’t really feel like work to him. It is not surprising, then, that when I ask about whether the day goes quickly, he responds: “Yeah, yeah - it generally does pass pretty quickly” (Rory, Interview 10.2). Enjoyment and engagement with a task go hand in hand. Connor tells me that when he’s “actually in the thick of it, doing shit, yeah. I tend to forget me breaks, I work through my breaks. I have to be told to stop” (Connor, Interview 3.2). Similarly, George tells me, snapping his fingers, that when he’s “feeling really engaged in the lesson, it can go like that” (George, Interview 9.1).

I ask Alex, the chef, if he always wants it to be busy. He says yes – “Yeah; because time seems to go faster... so, so you always have something to do. [...] obviously it being rammed busy is stressful, but it’s... it does go very, very quickly” (Alex, Interview 7.2). Liam, the cycle courier, communicates something similar when he says that sometimes when you’re cycling through the city “it’s a flow state [...] time flies by and you don’t notice it when you’re in that...” (Liam, Interview 8.1). Anika echoes this sentiment, saying: “when I’m really busy and enjoy what I’m doing it goes really quickly and I’m happy to like do longer hours” (Anika, Interview 1.1). This reinforces the relationship between subjective temporality, enjoyment and being busy; but also suggests that often it is not the amount of time at work that matters most to people but the *content* of that time. Anika is willing to do more hours if she’s enjoying her work. Conversely, when there’s little to do, she often sits, staring at the clock *willing* the time to go faster.

Time passing quickly is not always the more advantageous relation between time and perception, however. One exception to this general rule is when you are up against a deadline or running out of time. Poppy, the gallery assistant, tells me: “I remember feeling, like really rushed, which is why I took the photo of my watch, and.. um, just, that feeling of never having enough time to do anything, [...] having to radio someone when you want to go to the loo... and like, trying to rush that...” (Poppy, Interview 4.2). In this context she explains that time seems to go faster – because it’s running in opposition to her desire, which is to have *more time*; for time to *slow down*. In both cases where participants submitted photos of clocks, there was a desire to control or mould time – for it to speed up in Anika’s case (see fig. 6.1) or slow down, in Poppy’s case (see fig. 6.2).

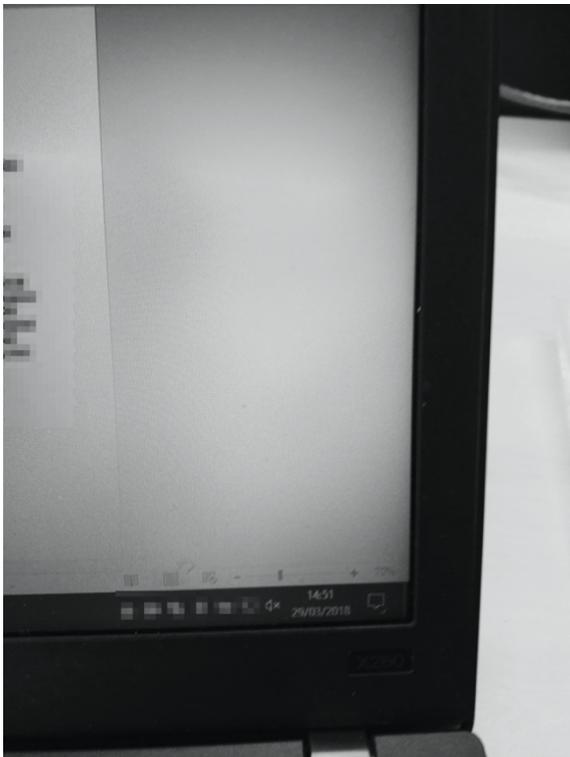


Figure 6.41 Participant photo showing clock in the corner of Anika's laptop. (Fieldwork photo 1.2.11)



Figure 6.42 Participant photo showing Poppy's wristwatch. (Fieldwork photo A4.8)

What is clear is that there is a very strong connection between time’s subjective quality and three things: interest, enjoyment and being busy. Anika summarises this: “some days I’ll have loads to do and the day goes really quickly... or if I have quite a lot of meetings often the day goes really quickly and I really like that” (Anika, Interview 1.2). Melissa Gregg in her book *Counterproductive* highlights productivity as just one type of attempt to ‘control’ time, writing that the *idea* of productivity provides a kind of “pleasure [...] in the fantasy that time can be *managed*” (Gregg, 2018: i, emphasis added). She argues that this fantasy is more emotional than rational, with

productivity being a moral issue that is tied to our identity and self-expression as working, productive subjects.

Although we live in a culture dominated by productivity, it is not always the case that we seek to be *efficient* with our time in this sense. Sometimes we simply seek to speed it up or slow it down so that we may experience the happiness of an enjoyable moment for longer; or shorten the discomfort of a boring or unpleasant moment. That we will our experience of time to speed up or slowdown is a function of our natural propensity to inadvertently do this with our *attention*; but strangely, when willing time to go faster, our focus on it tends to lengthen our experience of it – a fascinating contradiction. George, the teacher, says of marking: “it is what I spend a lot of my time doing... erm... which... to be honest I probably actually spend less time doing it, but it *feels* like I spend lots of time on it....” (George, Interview 9.2). This again reinforces a reflexive, self-aware subjective relationship to time, and ties it to issues of attention, where George is having to actively drag his attention back to the task whilst he is marking, making it feel arduous and lengthy.

### **Rhythms and Routines**

*“The hourly routine of your own or any man’s life, the shop, the yard,  
store or factory,  
These shows all near you, by day and night – workman! Whoever  
you are, your daily life!*

[...]

*I do not affirm that what you see beyond is futile, I do not advise  
you to stop,  
I do not say leadings you thought great are not great,  
But I say that none lead to greater than these lead to.”*

Walt Whitman, A Song for Occupations (1881 [1999])

It is particularly appropriate that Walt Whitman, often termed ‘the poet of the working man’, discusses the hourly routine of working life as a route to meaning and identity. In this passage he seems to affirm the value of labour as a route to great things – reinforcing the work ethic. Yet, he also - perhaps more radically - suggests that there is life outside of work: ‘I do not affirm that what you see beyond is futile’. Nonetheless, hard work yields the greatest gains; and how is this

hard work carried out and structured and expressed? Through the hourly routine; in the shop, the store or the factory. These routines and their rhythms are another way in which time and boredom are implicated in each other.

### *The oscillation between activity / inactivity*

*“I’m pretty much either working or waiting... and that’s probably the boring bit is probably the waiting around.”*  
(Theo, Interview 6.2)

This is just one way of thinking through the concept of routine; as an oscillation between periods of activity and inactivity. The most stark example of this kind of work pattern comes through in Theo’s account of being a live sound technician. In his interview, he set up a fascinating duality in his working life: working vs. waiting. His job is one which swings between two extremes – really high energy, intense moments (like packing down after a gig; the ‘load out’) and very low-energy moments of tedium. In the case of the latter, these moments are sometimes found in unexpected places. Theo describes how during the gigs, in stadiums of thousands and thousands of people, he sometimes has a nap in his hammock under the stage or walks around the venue because he has done his job, the sound equipment is all set up, and he has seen the gig many times already. A job that seems (from the outside) to be about energy and hype is in reality defined by long periods of waiting around in airport lounges, on tour buses or in the venues, waiting for an artist to turn up. There is also a huge focus on safety and precision in the work, and the party culture is tempered by these long periods of waiting. Interestingly this oscillation between long periods of boredom and shorter periods of incredibly intense activity is something noted by Bard Maeland and Paul Otto Brunstad as a significant occupational challenge for soldiers in their book *Enduring Military Boredom: From 1750 to the Present*, where they call boredom “the enduring inner enemy of soldiers at all times” (2009: 1). The theme of ‘waiting’ will be elaborated in a later section, but for now it is useful to consider this *movement*, the rhythm of moving between these two states and how it is expressed across the different case studies with varying intensities.

### *Inactivity*

Turning first to inactivity as a theme, we might return to Hsieh’s explanation of how he ‘passed the time’ during his cage piece, where he lived in a cage for one year and forbade himself to read, write, watch TV, speak or listen to the radio. He says: “it was difficult to pass time. I scratched 365 marks on the wall, one for each day. [...] In such a condition, I had no work to do, so I had more work to do” (quoted in Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015a: 327). This reflects how difficult

doing *nothing* actually is, which is perhaps why ‘true’ boredom for most of the participants meant ‘doing nothing at all’ rather than ‘doing something boring’. Additionally, inactivity, or nothingness, was at odds with productivity in all the narratives I gathered from participants, which is perhaps why ‘doing nothing’ at work tended to come with feelings of guilt or stress. The pervasiveness of the productivity impulse - that we should always be producing something or *doing* - is so deeply rooted that having nothing to do is experienced as painful or uncomfortable. Anika, for example, tells me: “I think like the worst thing I have is when I’m not doing anything at all and just looking at, um, looking at the clock basically...” (Anika, Interview 1.3). She means this in the sense that it is the least enjoyable experience available to her; but then explains that it is also ‘the worst’ in the sense that she feels guilt about it. The moral dimensions of inactivity are elaborated in a later section on boredom and guilt, but for now suffice it to say that it is fascinating that we relate doing nothing at work to a feeling of discomfort, as it is not what we *should* be doing.

It was also evident that many of the participants found that doing nothing saps your energy, whilst feeling productive and busy tends to give you more energy – provided you are able to enjoy what you’re doing. Connor gives a wonderful illustration of this, saying: “I feel more tired going home of a Tuesday after doing fuck all than I do from being flat out all day - like, it’s actually frustrating! [...] Yeah, I can change an engine and not be tired!” (Connor, Interview 3.1). Being busy is energizing, whereas on Tuesday – test day – the engineers show their buses and effectively perform a show-and-tell for an examiner. This demonstrably isn’t ‘doing nothing’, but in Connor’s eyes, it’s not proper engineer’s work – it’s just show and tell. The implications of this are two-fold: firstly, that the value you ascribe to a task defines whether it is classified as ‘doing nothing’ or ‘doing something’; and, secondly, that energy we gather from achieving things, completing tasks and feeling productive can give us a sense of motivation, wellbeing and pride. No matter how flawed the value-system is that underpins this compulsion to ‘do’ and ‘achieve’, it makes us feel good.

Evidence for this can also be found in Poppy’s narrative. Doing nothing is what comprises the vast majority of her job. She explains her gallery assistant role like this: “it’s pretty task-low. I have to sit or stand in a room, by myself... and not fall asleep” (Poppy, Interview 4.1). This is something that Poppy struggles with, saying: “when people are bored and they're working in admin, or in those jobs, you know, at least they’re still, like, doing *something*? When I’m bored I’m like, *searching* for something to do...” (Poppy, Interview 4.2). The lack of ‘tasks’ is something that Poppy highlights repeatedly and is certainly the most challenging element of her work. It appears

that her job, in fact, is largely a list of things you *can't* do. You can't fall asleep, you can't leave the room, you can't drink water on shift (except in one particularly hot gallery space, and even then you have to be *on your chair* when you drink it), you can't go on your phone, you can't touch the art when it needs adjusting. It's a job defined by restriction; and a job which also involves imposing restrictions on other people – don't touch the art, don't run in the gallery, don't take photos, don't speak too loud.

That the job is defined chiefly by what you *can't* do and what it's *not* gives the role a kind of 'emptiness'. The thing Poppy finds most challenging about the job is also the reason she values it – the fact that her role is so 'task-low' and requires such limited cognitive engagement means that it leaves space for the other things in her life. At the time of the interview, she was starting an immersive yoga venture with her partner, volunteering for a mental health crisis line and teaching yoga a couple of days a week. This is a job, as she puts it, that people do when they have other things they're pursuing. A lot of the gallery assistants are artists, freelancers and creatives – the job suits this lifestyle because it acts as a 'vessel' which provides time to think through your other ventures. Poppy specifically describes how she uses the morning before a shift to “get my thoughts organised - decide what I'm going to think about during the day - which really helps, if you have a plan before you go” (Poppy, Interview 4.1).

Performing her gallery assistant role whilst simultaneously working on other projects in her mind -- and indeed deliberately seeking a job that is task low, undemanding and insubstantial *for this very reason* -- once again showcases a desire to *productively use time*, to make it meaningful in some way, even when this meaning doesn't come from the thing you are doing at the present moment. This is not unique to Poppy. Theo, in his role, gets a lot of 'down time'. The fact that he's paid a day rate means that he is often at the venue, waiting on the artist to arrive, or having finished setting up, or waiting for the gig to end, or waiting for the equipment to turn up. During these times, he says he hates just sitting there doing nothing and will go skateboarding or running, otherwise he feels “it's a waste of time” (Theo, Interview 6.2). And yet, whether or not we have tasks to do, our mental life at work is – on the whole – our own. The tasks we carry out can require a certain amount of our mental effort, but there is always something held back, something we keep for ourselves. And when we are 'doing nothing' or don't have tasks to do – what we could call 'taskless work' - that is precisely the moment at which we are able to take *more* for ourselves, to colonise the workday for our own interests. This is why Jackson and Carter propose that:

*“There is some potential utility in boredom for workers, as a way to resist the ever-increasing demands that are made on them [...] Rather than trying to make work appealing to the senses and to last as long as can be borne, it should bore workers to the extent that they demand as little as possible of it.”* (Jackson and Carter, 2011: 402).

In exactly this sense, Poppy, the gallery assistant, has more freedom than any of the other people I interviewed; because she doesn't feel that she *wants* to work any more hours or give any more of herself to the role. She isn't defined by her work, and she spends most of her time at work *not* thinking about work. But in fact, this is a difficult route. People don't necessarily want to be left to their own thoughts at work – they tend to want to be occupied, interested and involved in something.

### ***Being busy***

*“It's a different kind of boredom”*

(Emma, Interview 5.1)

*“Tedium is more oppressive when there's not the excuse of idleness. The tedium of those who strive hard is worst of all.”*

(Svendsen, 2012: 34)

The qualitative opposite of inactivity – frenetic activity – can also cause boredom. Emma's narrative is the polar opposite of Poppy's. She says of her days in the café: “there's never a time when I'm not doing anything” (Emma, Interview 5.1). It's a flurry of activity, and so for Emma the boredom comes from the repetition. If you are rushed off your feet, but doing the same thing over and over again, then naturally it can become routine, predictable and dull. Emma adds: “there's not much that catches me off guard” (Emma, Interview 5.1). This is unsurprising since she has worked at the cafe on and off for seven years. This sense of predictable busy-ness is reflected in Emma's description of the day, where she tells me that she knows exactly where she needs to be at any given moment:

*“If it's a really busy day, I'm thinking - it takes me ten seconds to get my gloves for washing up on, ten seconds to get them off... and, I've got 8 minutes 8 minutes until my sausage rolls are done, so I'm like right 8 minutes, ok what can I, can I get done, what can I get through in 8 minutes - but then I can't have that tray on the side here, because then I'm gonna have to open the oven and put the sausage rolls there...”* (Emma, Interview 5.2)

There's a real sense of the temporality of the role in this extract, particularly in the precision required in terms of ordering and carrying out each task. She explains that the café is tiny, so the

staff have to squeeze around each other and have particular places for everything, and a strict system for washing up, keeping meat separate from vegetarian products, and preparing each dish. The need for this kind of precision is another reason why there is boredom in being busy: there is a strict way everything is done so there is very little room to innovate, and certainly no room for error. In fact, she explains how irritated she gets when the order and the logic of everything gets disrupted by people *not* following the way things are done – for example when a colleague puts washing up in the wrong place or messes up the sausage roll display by taking one from the front. Alex, the chef, also talks about being busy:

*“I mean, working in the kitchen if it's busy, the best thing to do if it's getting too much is just to take a 2 minute break, and then come back and try again. You have to be relaxed whilst you're doing it. Otherwise, you get too tense and you start burning stuff and start, start, burning yourself or... [...] the head chef, he'll start picking it up and having a go, and like, it'll be stressful, but it's like: take a breather [...] and then we carry on.”* (Alex, Interview 7.2)

Here, being busy is interspersed with moments of pause. The frantic rhythm of a busy kitchen (which is not dissimilar to Emma's description of her role in the café) has to be interrupted sometimes when the stress level increases. In this passage, Alex's stoicism is apparent; he's very accepting of stress, of working longer shifts, of just getting the job done and taking responsibility. We can also see that one way of dealing with busy-ness is to slow down. This is interesting because of the way that we can use time, or moments of pause, to enable us to continue. Much like a conceptualisation of sleep that casts it as a reproductive moment for the worker's labour capacity, rather than being a 'stepping out' of work, this break or pause can be conceptualised as a movement back towards realising your full productivity. As Andy Warhol famously said: “I think that being alive is so much work at something you don't always want to do. [...] People are working every minute. The machinery is always going. Even when you sleep” (in Parker, 2012: 1). Rather than a point about boredom explicitly, this section has discussed the ways in which busy-ness and pause are always in relationship with one another.

### ***Daily rhythms / structured time***

*“After lunch it's like there's just nothing, there's just an expanse of time... and I'm just sitting in it, staring at the clock, and it keeps not moving very far, and I... I just am feeling really.... And it winds me up loads”* (Anika, Interview 1.2)

*“Sometimes I have been doing stuff, but it’s not really like – I haven’t planned out that time, that time has just happened to me.”*

(Anika, Interview 1.2)

Working rhythms can be expressed through intentional time-structuring or by the unintentional drifting between different states, tasks or experiences. From the field data, intentionality seems to be a key link between time and meaning. All participants acknowledged that time drags occasionally – but those who reported being less bored tended to have more structure to their day. Anika, as demonstrated in the quotes above, is able to delineate moments where she is ‘just sitting’ in ‘an expanse of time’ or where the time ‘happens’ to her. The presumption that time exists and we fill it with activities, productivity, meaning, experience and structure is called into question here. The colloquialism ‘what are you going to do with your time’ would suggest that time rarely is seen as happening to us; we do stuff with it – it is after all seen as a resource. Moments where we lack temporal structure then, are moments where we become aware of the fallacy of our own agency. Time, in the rational, scientific sense is always happening to us – it goes on without us, exists without us – but it doesn’t feel that way as we perceive it.

So, what happens when we have an intentional way of structuring our time? Rory, the software engineer, told me that he is never bored at work; and yet, he is familiar with the afternoon lull. In response to my suggestion that the lull might produce boredom, he says: “no but we... I’d say that we definitely make an attempt to like segment our time in a useful way” (Interview 10.2). Segmenting time is therefore a way of avoiding or negating boredom that might come about because of drifting through the day. In his role, the team discuss and suggest ways to structure their own time. He feels he has a lot of agency in his job, and this is certainly true, up to a point. The darker side of this arrangement is suggested when Rory tells me that discussing boredom isn’t on the agenda in his job: “it’s not so much on the table I don’t think, because... you’re encouraged to just find... I don’t know, I think you’re encouraged to make it fun” (Rory, Interview 10.2).

Rory is encouraged to make his work not-boring; to make the time not-drag. If time drags, you’ve structured your day wrong, or failed to make it into something that feels meaningful. This is another moralising force that places blame on the individual rather than the organisation for any failure of meaning; for although meaning is subjective and therefore constructed by individuals, the sealing-off of what we might call the ‘structural’ or ‘objective’ realities of a job, from the employee’s experience of that job, is problematic here. As in Fleming’s conceptualisation of biopower, we can see that there is in fact a more complex deferral of power

occurring. The decline of direct managerial control - for instance by allowing employees to set their own timetable - cannot be uncritically accepted as the decline of the exercise of power, but instead signifies its transmutation into other forms, such as self-regulation and self-discipline (Fleming, 2013). In Rory's case, we can see that this extends from his experience of the job to the structure of the day, to the emotional and affective ways he expresses himself at work. Boredom 'is not on the table' – it has been removed, denied, designed-out, planned out of the day.

Popular management theorists like Deal and Key argue that 'sober productiveness' – and the associated rigidity of time management, which is the cornerstone of classic accounts of bureaucratic efficiency – can in fact undermine productivity because of the boredom it engenders (1998). Newer management discourses about being authentic, free, flexible and vibrant are most obviously expressed in Rory's testimony – the company ethos of 'being encouraged to make it fun' shown by the company installing balloons in the office (see fig. 6.4). This attitude has clearly 'caught on', with co-workers leaving homemade brownies on each other's desks adorned with smiley-face Post It notes (see fig. 6.3). Rory explains: "I work in a cool place! [...] the balloons in there are kind of a thing... er, if there's something the company achieves, so it's kind of them reminding us that it's happening, and it's quite nice..." (Interview 10.2). This is exactly Deal and Key talk about in their discussion of 'playful celebrations' at work which "provide social support for being yourself and believing that you matter" (Deal and Key, 1998: 16). If employees are able simply to express themselves freely or, if the "Fun Quotient" is high, employees and employers will allegedly both benefit (Deal and Kennedy, 1999: 234).

If, as Fleming and Sturdy contend, the "mundane rhythms of technological control lead to boredom and alienation" then the freedom of setting your own timetable, combined with this sense of fun, play, freedom and authenticity can be introduced in order to counteract this (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011: 193). However, critical accounts suggest that this impulse to 'deny boredom' has come about partly because "of the reflexive potential in boredom [...] boredom at work has some utility for resisting managerialist attempts to colonise the emotional, psychological and spiritual life of employees" (Jackson and Carter, 2011: 387). In Rory's case, whether Jackson and Carter are correct or not, the introduction of fun and the ability to organise their own schedules; and the demand to 'have fun!' seems to have genuinely positively contributed to Rory's working life, albeit at the cost of making the avoidance of boredom a responsibility that he must shoulder.



Figure 6.43 Participant photo showing a homemade brownie left on Rory's desk by a co-worker. (Fieldwork photo 10.2)

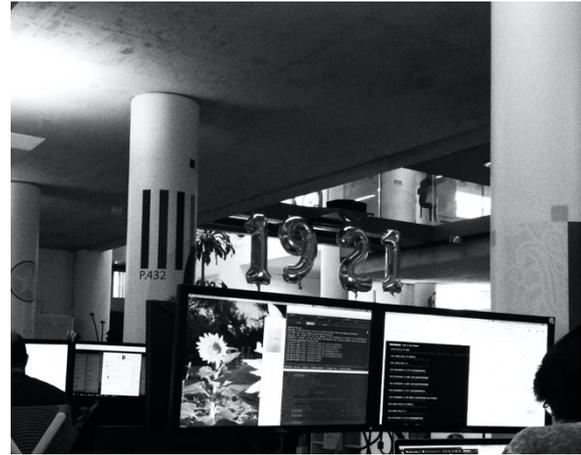


Figure 6.44 Participant photo showing balloons in Rory's office. (Fieldwork photo 10.11)

There is, however, a more positive understanding of Rory's working rhythms. The fact that he acknowledges the lulls in the day and the potential for boredom, whilst managing to avoid them or augment his own experience into something that he sees as being more positive, shows that we *can* do things to alter our experience. Whether it's 'company policy' to design boredom out of our day, or it's something we do for ourselves, it shows that it can, in theory, be done. As Rory says, segmenting time "kind of.... it keeps things moving... [...] If you've gotten bored at one stage, you know that the next thing is like pretty close, you know, so there'll be a change of scene, like, imminently" (Rory, Interview 10.2). If we think back to Anika's recollection of 'sitting in an expanse of time', Rory's approach seems to be the antidote. Here, structure and rhythm gives meaning to time.

The outlier in this theory of temporal structure and meaning strengthening each other is Poppy. When considered with time-structuring practices, we can see that it matters *who* structures the time, and to what extent. To put this another way, whether there is room for *personal agency* in structuring time, and also whether the time structure is too rigid. Poppy, in her gallery assistant role, is subject to an incredibly rigid temporal rhythm. Thirty minutes in each space, then rotate. Half an hour for lunch, and radio for cover if you need a toilet break. In this case, the structuring of time strips away meaning because of the lack of freedom and the way that it is so precisely and excessively regulated.

It is certainly true that in every role you'll have certain constraints, but Poppy's job is one case in which the job itself seems defined *by* constraints – as she put it, rather bleakly: "you just have *no control* in this job" (Poppy, Interview 4.2). We might think back to Tehching Hsieh's Time Clock

Piece – where the artwork itself is defined by rigid rules and governed by an incessant temporal routine, and consider the ways in which Poppy’s experience and Hsieh’s performances are connected. Hsieh, in placing restraints on his own agency, is enacting a similar labour relation with a strict sense of limitation. In *Cage Piece*, he put in place strict restrictions on the activities he could do, not allowing himself to read, write, speak or watch TV throughout the year-long performance piece – something that Poppy, when at work, is also exactly subject to. We can see that the routine itself – the movement from one task to the next, the structuring of the day – is a continuum, with both extremes causing boredom. The content of the working day and the balance of power is also important, and so moving from one empty room to another provides little respite: “you move every half an hour, and so the first five minutes are ok, and the last five minutes are ok” (Poppy, Interview 4.2).

The coexistence of states like inactivity and activity, when considered in terms of their relationship to boredom, is complex. As Svendsen writes: “hard work is often just as boring as idleness” (2012: 35). Boredom can exist at both ends of the scale, but for different reasons. Additionally, the movement between these states can exist at various scales – as a moment to moment adjustment, or as a daily or weekly rhythm. Routine, too – figured here as a sense of structured temporality – can be seen as both boredom-inducing and boredom-reducing, something that can *create* meaning or *limit* meaning, reflecting the ambiguity of boredom more generally.

## Waiting

*“Although waiting is practiced, endured or suffered in many different ways and contexts, the apparent universal agreement [is] that nobody likes to wait.”*

(Schweizer, 2008: 777)

*“That is the boring bit. The boring bit is, like [...] most days we get in about midday, and then were there until like 2 in the morning... and sometimes he [the music artist] doesn’t even show up so we just sit there waiting for him to come. Yeah. [laughs] Exactly. We’re just there in case he wants to show up... which is boring.”*

(Theo, Interview 6.2)

There are varied accounts of what it is to wait. As Bissell reminds us, the etymology of the verb to wait is from the French meaning ‘to watch’ and the German ‘to guard’, both of which suggest a sense of “a lying-in-wait-for.” (Bissell, 2007: 282). Waiting has much in common with boredom

– both are seen as moments “alive with the potential of being other than this” (Bissell, 2007: 277). However, waiting is more precisely defined by its relation to the future - by the promise of an event - in that it more explicitly addresses this promise of anticipation. If we understand *why* we are waiting, what we are waiting *for*, and how *long* we might be waiting, we may still be bored, but we are more likely to exhibit patience and therefore should experience a less unpleasant *form* of boredom. As Walter Benjamin wrote: “we are bored when we do not know what we are waiting for” (in Salzani, 2009: 142). Boredom, in this understanding, is waiting without an object. One example of this might be Anika’s description of “sitting there waiting for the day to go...” (Anika, Interview 1.3). Contra Benjamin, Jackson and Carter “define boredom at work as knowing precisely what we are waiting for: Finishing-time!” (2011: 402). Instead of voicing an explicit desire for ‘finishing time’, Anika expresses this as a kind of vacant longing for time itself to just *pass*, placing her some way between these two perspectives: boredom as waiting *without* a defined goal or future event, and workplace boredom as a will for the working day to end.

Theo’s account of rehearsals for a huge stadium tour is perhaps the most extreme account of waiting and work in the fieldwork data. In the extract above, he describes waiting for up to 14 hours for the artist to arrive – but sometimes he just doesn’t turn up. Aside from the obvious parallels with *Waiting for Godot* and futility, this example also speaks to the lack of agency implicit in the practice of waiting. When waiting, you are doing so because you have come up against a limit to your agency – something you cannot speed up, make happen, or change. Theo’s attitude is resigned precisely because of this: there’s nothing he can do about it.

Waiting, as discussed previously, can be conceptualised as a form of inactivity. This may be true in the sense that – even when waiting *is* a part of your job – it is often thought of as inactive, or a kind of ‘not-doing’. This is apparent in Theo’s earlier account of waiting, and the way he juxtaposes it with working, when he says, “I’m pretty much either working or waiting” (Theo, Interview 6.2). This is despite him acknowledging that these periods of waiting are “just part, it’s just part of the job. [...] just waiting around” (Theo, Interview 6.2). He gets paid a day rate, so the travel, and the waiting are part and parcel of the work; and yet he still positions it in opposition to working. Waiting seems, in this narrative, not a valid mode of experience at work. Alex, the chef also sees waiting in a similar way: “if I’ve sort of done 8 hours of waiting around for somebody to order something... that’s a bit of a pain” (Alex, Interview 7.2). Like Theo, Alex is paid the same for his time whether he’s rushed off his feet or sat in the kitchen waiting for an order. Both of them seem to separate working from waiting, and both of them also engage in what we might see as ‘active waiting’. Alex cleans walls, windows and deep fat fryers and makes

coffee with the front of house staff. Theo skateboards around the arena, goes running or reads a book. It's a very particular kind of waiting that they experience - a kind of suspension – waiting for something to happen, but being on call, ready to act at any moment – what Bissell calls “anticipatory preparedness” (2007: 282). For Bissell, then, this is precisely what defines waiting: “it is this promise of the event-to-come that necessitates and brings about this experience of waiting” (Bissell, 2007: 282). To take this a step further, waiting also implies two temporalities: mechanical clock time and subjective experiential time. When these are in conflict – when we feel that we have stayed longer than needed, or time is dragging because we are being prevented from making progress, for example - negative experiences of waiting arise. Schweizer suggests that unpleasant forms of waiting come “from [an] inability to reconcile the two temporalities [...] they grate and jar” (Schweizer, 2008: 781).

### ***Patience / Impatience / Productivity***

*“Economic, business and more generally competitive neo-liberal rationales of productivity [have] a concern that time needs to be utilised more productively in order to be more profitable. [...] Heeding this rationale, chronological time as a container waiting to be filled with this profitable activity must be used wisely.”*  
(Bissell, 2007: 280)

*“You go to take your toast out, and your toast which has had exactly the same amount of time in the toaster as the last 24 orders that have been fine, but this one time it has decided to fuck up and burn everything, so you're like: right, my eggs are coming out in 30 seconds, they're going to cook on their own while I'm waiting another 3 minutes to cook some fucking toast. It's a nightmare.”*  
(Emma, Interview 5.2)

Patience and impatience, conceived of as a combination of urgency and delay, are important in thinking about the lived experience of waiting. Patience is perhaps the only way to experience waiting in a wholly positive way, but this is difficult when the urgency of a task is high – as in Emma's extract above. A three minute delay means three minutes more until she can move onto the next order, three minutes more until someone's coffee gets delivered. In addition, as Bissell suggests, “patience or impatience may be mediated by the degree of certainty or uncertainty about the length of the wait” (2007: 290). Liam, the cycle courier, gives another illustration of this when he tells me that often he'll cycle to the restaurant as fast as he can to pick up an order, only to get there and find that it's not ready yet. He ends up just waiting, and the clock's ticking, and he is thinking ‘this is gonna look bad on my metrics and it's not even my fault’. He explains: “you're like... your conceptualisation of time when you're against a deadline and stuck [...] is

shit. Like it just becomes hours” (Liam, Interview 8.2). As Schweizer asserts, both patience and impatience are forms of “temporal consciousness” or attitudes towards time, which shape our experience (2008: 781). Liam expresses how unpleasant this can be: ‘your conceptualisation of time is just shit’ and ‘it becomes hours’.

The distaste for waiting, for slowing down, or pausing has its roots in the neo-liberal, productivist understanding of time as a resource to be carefully engineered for maximum profit, maximum output, maximum impact. Indeed the ever-expanding literature around time management is a huge part of the ‘self-optimisation’ narrative that Carl Cederström and Andre Spicer – both organisation and management scholars - discuss in their book *Desperately Seeking Self-Improvement: A Year Inside the Optimization Movement* (Cederström and Spicer, 2017). There is the assumption – particularly in working life, but also in life in general now - “that there is therefore an optimum configuration in which activity and events can be engineered” (Bissell, 2007: 280). Productivity – or indeed our own self-optimisation - is difficult to quantify and manage in traditional ways is exactly why we are now expected to *self*-perfect our productivity capabilities (Gregg, 2018).

All of my participants seemed to have internalised this productivist logic in some way. Their discomfort with waiting is indicative of this deeply-engrained urge towards action. Connor, in particular, when asked about boring moments in his day, recalls various moments of waiting which are described as moments of agitation. To give one example: “waiting on someone else to finish before you can start what you’re doing - that’s where it’s like... fuck, you know, what do I do now... that’s where you sit down, go smoke a cigarette, or... go make a drink” (Connor, Interview 3.1). Connor frames this as an irritating part of the job, although this excerpt also suggests the other side of waiting; that it can be restorative. For Connor, however, it feels irritating because, on the surface at least, he just wants to be busy, to get on with the job and get it done. On deeper inspection, it is clear that this is tied in with masculine identity politics in the garage, where speed, stamina and knowledge seem to be the marks of a successful mechanic. In this context, impatience might be seen as a mark of commitment. Indeed, the literature on ‘action bias’ suggests that there is a need – particularly in the workplace, although we also see it in politics – to do *something* rather than *nothing*, even if the thing we do is premature or uninformed (Spicer, 2018). We tend to be criticised more for doing nothing than for doing the wrong thing; so it is reasonable to assume that Connor might feel social pressure to *display* agitation and impatience in response to having to wait.

It is certainly true that “the qualitative experiences of patience and impatience serve to haunt the event of waiting with a residual productivism” (Bissell, 2007: 279). In impatience, there is an urgency to *do* something – to *complete* a task or take action in some way. Without the urgency, we might experience waiting less negatively, and with more patience. Instead, at work, we are nervous that we will look inefficient; worried that we aren’t doing enough, producing enough. As Anika explains of the Civil Service: “it reflects quite badly on you [...] when you just need one small thing where you need to pass it on to someone else. Quite often there’s a whole chain of people waiting... but you have to wait for sign off from people before anything can go to the next level” (Anika, Interview 1.2). The negative feelings expressed by Anika here are not only self-directed, in terms of her reputation with others, but suggest too an annoyance with other people and relations that leave her waiting. As Harju and Hakanen found, “employees experienced job boredom when problems occurred in co-operation with colleagues or clients [...] hindrances to planned work performance that thereby disrupted the rhythm of work” and resulted in a feeling of *inefficiency* which reduced feelings of control and increased feelings of stress (2016: 383). Waiting at work, then, tends to be experienced as agitating and stressful, rather than the kind of meditative state that Vannini describes.

## II. Boredom and Meaning

*“Boredom is not a question of work or freedom but of meaning.”* (Svendsen, 2012: 35)

As I have noted before, Terkel, in the introduction to his seminal book *Working*, writes that work is “a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread” (Terkel, 2004: xi). Here, Terkel is referring both the everyday senses of meaningfulness that we seek, but also our sense of identity and existential concerns over what it means to live a meaningful life. In other words, work is, in part, a search for meaning; and boredom at work is, in part, a crisis of meaning. And, concurrently, “contemporary work is increasingly marked by discourses of meaningfulness, self-expression and personal fulfilment” (Torraldo, Islam and Mangia, 2019: 618). Whilst Elton Mayo introduced the need for a more humanist concern with employees’ existential dimensions back in the 1930s (Mayo 1933), in work studies this has now developed into a strand of literature concerned with the ways in which this can become a kind of “holistic and existential” mode of organising working which is invasive or manipulative rather than genuinely meaningful (Ekman, 2013).

To return to the Svendsen quote above, in saying that boredom is not a question of work or freedom but *meaning* he is suggesting that neither work nor non-work is necessarily more boring or freeing than the other, in broad philosophical terms. Both leisure time and work time involve the same search for meaning and neither has more *inherent* meaning than the other. As Hsieh put it, when discussing his *Cage Piece*: “I am as free in the cage as outside” (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015a: 327). Work, however, is one of the ways in which we are supposed to discover ourselves and our sense of meaning and purpose. When I asked Richard, the freelance management consultant, what job he would do if money was not an issue he told me he wouldn’t work anymore, saying ‘isn’t that the point?’. His desire *not* to work anymore is perhaps symptomatic of the assumption that freedom can only exist *outside* of work. And yet, Svendsen asks: “are we freer in our free time than during our time at work? [...] one is not necessarily more free in one role than the other, and the one role is not necessarily more meaningful than the other” (2012: 35).

Meaning can arise and subside moment-by-moment but is also part of a wider sense of meaningfulness which operates over longer timescales. This section is concerned with the macro-level sense of meaning that the participants derived from their work (existential), and also

more everyday senses of meaning, through a focus on meaning and work in relation to the following themes: agency, identity, repetition, proliferation, novelty, order and disorder.

### **Existential / day-to-day meaning**

*“Research has indeed found that most people attach great importance to the meaningfulness of work – i.e., the feeling that work activities are worthwhile, useful, and valuable, judged in relation to personal ideals or standards.”*

(Boeck, Dries and Tierens, 2019: 529)

Work’s function exceeds its economic purpose and is tangled up with existential questions like identity and meaning. My conversations with participants reflected this existential sense of meaning, particularly since nearly everyone touched on the idea of wanting to do something *meaningful*. When meaning was considered on an expansive scale (i.e. not the day-to-day), this was, more often than not, framed in the context of collective social meaning, rather than individual meaning, suggesting that personal meaning in this context is produced *by* social meaning. As shown in the interview discussion below, in which Richard reflects on his career, he explains that he finds little personal value or meaning in what he has done, because he feels his work has been devoid of social value:

*“Oh, I’d like to do something that makes a difference to people’s lives and is positive. So, in fact, the opposite of what I do. Not only do I work in pharmaceutical companies, chemical companies, big banks, weapons companies... I, also, make sure they outsource it and people lose their jobs. [...] As I get older, and doing it more and more, I feel guilty.”* (Richard, Interview 2.2)

The other theme evident in this excerpt is that of morality. Richard in fact had a strong sense of his own morals, describing how in his first jobs he was ‘being sold as something he wasn’t’ and feeling that it was dishonest. The conflict between his own values and the moral (or amoral) dimensions of his work create this chasm of meaning between his identity and his working life. Although the tone of the interview was often jokey and light-hearted, the words speak for themselves – and this shows the psychological importance of finding work that is in line with your values. It also hints at why Richard’s story doesn’t focus so much on *boredom* in relation to a lack of meaning, but even stronger emotional currents like guilt, regret and sadness. In many ways we can read this as the ‘end result’ of many years of performing work that feels meaningless or lacks value. When I ask him to recall his proudest moments at work, he does list some

prestige buildings he has worked in and huge projects that he has worked on – so it seems that although he says these things don't matter to him now, there was a time when they did, when “it was a good time in the City” (Richard, interview 2.1).

The desire to perform work with a high social value was also a theme in many of the other participants' narratives (although to a less extreme extent). Anika explains that she feels guilty for working in the Civil Service rather than on the front line, describing her job as ‘cushty’. George, the teacher, tells me that he always wanted “to make a real difference, in the world... somehow” (Interview 9.1). He also tells me that “I got the impression from both my parents that they didn't have any value in what they were doing” and that this was something that spurred him to do something socially useful rather than get a City job (Interview 9.1). This reinforces the importance of shared value systems in defining the meaning of our work – or as Svendsen frames it, in society as a “conveyor of meaning” (2012: 22).

Evidence from studying non-profit organizations “shows that many people place a high value on working in a job with a pro-social mission and alter their work effort accordingly”, even reporting their ideal working week as having more hours than in other sectors (Cassar and Meier, 2018: 218). This is why *meaning* has become an engineerable management problem in other sectors too, because it has a strong correlation with work effort. Socially useful work provides a ready-made purpose that helps people to make sense of their daily life; it's “more likely to fulfil workers' drive for sense-making in their actions as part of a bigger social context [...] this act of sense-making and the connection to others are important ingredients of meaning” (Cassar and Meier, 2018: 218). However, the imagined promise of doing something ‘socially useful’ is often more complex, with slower pay-offs than imagined, and over time people can still fall prey to the same workplace boredom as in any other job. Anika, for example, joined the Civil Service because she wanted to help people, having completed a social enterprise course and a year working with an educational charity, but she says that the initiatives they try to put into action as civil servants often get caught up or delayed because of funding issues or political manoeuvres.

Where existential meaning was concerned less with the collective social meaning of their work, and more with employees' own self-perception, there was evidence of what Boeck, Dries and Tierens identified: that “decreases in the perceived amount of untapped potential over time were related to increases in perceived work meaningfulness” (2019: 529). Poppy, for example, describes the gallery assistants at her place of work as ‘the most overqualified workforce’, since most of them have a degree, if not a Masters. This seems to breed resentment, because the tasks they are given are so menial, so simple, so unengaging. Poppy is all too aware of the knowledge

and capacities she possesses which are left entirely unused. A study by Susanne Ekman, based on her own interview data, showed that this idea that people should aspire to realise their full potential – what she calls ‘the fantasy of limitless potential’ - featured prominently in employees’ current perceptions of work meaningfulness, and that where there was too much untapped potential, people were at risk of finding work meaningless (Ekman, 2013).

People’s life experiences and the trajectory of their working life can also heavily shape their attitude towards finding meaning in their work over the longer term. By way of demonstration, consider that Connor and Rory’s stories share a stark similarity: they had both faced significant hardships on the road to getting their current job. This is not to say that the other participants hadn’t, but that in Connor and Rory’s interviews these were openly discussed as being a formative part of their working life stories. Connor, the apprentice bus engineer, is dyslexic, which he feels held him back significantly in school. He also emigrated from Ireland to do the job and invested a huge amount of his own time and money in the lengthy process of interviews, visas, flights, rent and so on. There’s a real sense in his narrative that he’s made it into what he wants to do, with the odds stacked against him, and he is proud of that. On the other hand, Rory, the software developer, initially followed a more ‘conveyor-belt’ route into his working life, having got a 2:1 from a ‘good university’, but then found he wasn’t able to identify work that he found fulfilling, falling into bar work and unpaid internships, suffering from poor mental health for a number of years, before doing a coding course and finding his current job:

*“Even after University there was a feeling of... er, that there wasn’t a place for me [...] I didn’t feel like I had any natural route, um, and... I, the work that I found I was mildly employable in - which I found pretty hard to find anyway - um, I found really boring or stressful...”* (Rory, Interview 10.1)

Their uncertain career paths, and finding work that they both experience as *interesting* after a period of struggle, has meant that both Connor and Rory seem to derive more meaning in what they are doing. Their path hasn’t been easy and so they are less likely to take the positive elements of work for granted. Connor tells me: “there’s nowhere I’d rather be than the garage. In the thick of it, like” (Connor, Interview 3.1).

### ***Work and identity***

*“Identity research indicates that people typically seek to see themselves in a positive light, and this positive sense of self is largely grounded in socially important and salient roles – including occupations – and how these roles are perceived by others.”*

(Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999: 413)

The value ascribed to your work by *others* has an impact on your own ability to find meaning in your work. Similarly, judgements about *other* jobs featured in many of the interviews, particularly in relation to well-paid, non-manual jobs. Frequently, people invoked the idea of amorality in high-paid work as a reason for judgement, or the idea of vacuousness. George, the teacher, criticises work that doesn't "add anything" to society, like "*soulless* marketing jobs" for example (George, Interview 9.1, emphasis added). Research on the non-profit Arts sector also reveals a similar discourse, with a "spiritual framework of calling, service, sacrifice" being used to explain their career choices, in opposition to the popular conception of career success as a kind of extrinsically motivated linear progression (Mize Smith *et al.*, 2006: 25). Although socially useful or 'pro-social' jobs are portrayed as having intrinsic meaning, there is a darker side to the "compelling vision of meaningful work centred on solving pressing social problems [...] they also celebrate a troubling account of work/life balance centred on self-sacrifice, underpaid and unpaid labour and the privileging of organizational commitment at the expense of health, family and other aspects" (Dempsey and Sanders, 2010: 437). Teaching may in fact fall under this category: as George told me, "in my first year, it really affected my personal life [...] I really struggled" because he cared *too* much about the job; and although he has a healthier balance now, he admits "I will always go the extra mile extra mile for the kids" (interview 9.1).

Of course, social judgements of occupations are complex, ambivalent, and shaped by many conflicting cultural discourses. Beyond those "direct pro-social impact" occupations, "including the jobs of health professionals, therapists, nurses, midwives, teachers, lecturers, and social workers" (Cassar and Meier, 2018: 217), there are many jobs that are essential but *not* necessarily valued in the same way (for example - refuse collector, butcher, mortuary technician). One element of the way a job is socially valued is informed by the material nature of work, in the sense that where the embodied experience of the work might be seen as 'physical' or 'dirty' it becomes less highly valued. We see this in Hughes' definition of undesirable work being that which is "physically, socially or morally" tainted (Hughes, 1958: 122). It would follow that those employed in 'dirty' work – or, equally, meaningless or vacuous work - might find it difficult to construct a positive sense of self. Research on working identities, however, suggests the opposite; that "the stigma of 'dirty work' fosters development of a strong occupational or workgroup culture" which involves a process of ideological reframing and identity-building (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999: 413). This itself is part of the impulse towards *meaning* that we all possess; when confronted with work which is not seen to be 'good' we 'get to work' reframing the narrative in order to foster a positive sense of self (Yeoman, 2015). Simpson *et al.*'s study of butchers found that they justified the value in their work by drawing attention to the self-denial

and sacrifices they had to endure in order to provide for their families, rather than highlighting the social worth of their labours (Simpson *et al.*, 2014). So, “if work tasks alone do not create an opportunity for self-respect, other sources of judgment are applied” (Bailey *et al.*, 2019: 493). Richard’s story represents a failure of these reframing impulses. He sees his job as amoral and struggles to find meaning in his work, even though he too understands it as a way of supporting his family.

This kind of self-judgement about one’s occupation is also seen in Emma’s evaluation of her current job in relation to a previous role. She tells me how she had worked on a makeup counter for a luxury brand, and that she enjoyed looking the part: doing her makeup perfectly, having her hair styled and her nails done. In contrast, the physicality of the café work was vividly described in her testimony: the smell of sausage fat, the sweat, and the grit of the coffee grounds. It’s clear that there’s a very different materiality to this job, and that this impacts on how she feels about the work. She seems to suggest that she feels a different sense of identity in this job because it lacks the shine and prestige of the makeup counter. As she sees it, this is largely figured through her appearance: “I enjoyed doing make up, so I enjoyed doing my face and, erm, yeah. But whereas, I can’t have my nails done...I can’t...My physical appearance when I’m at work now...well it doesn’t mean anything really” (Emma, Interview 5.1). At the time when I interviewed her, she had just gained a degree in Art History so felt overqualified for her café work, but framed it in terms of ‘a social service’, helping to make a place where people could come to ‘treat themselves’ to a nice coffee and have a chat. This shows an effort towards reframing her job - which is not culturally coded as particularly high-status - as Ashforth and Kreiner identified (1999). However, in Emma’s case this impulse is overwhelmed by a value system which makes this job feel less meaningful to her because of its ‘dirtiness’, social status and physicality; as well as the fact that some customers are condescending and patronising.

### ***Finding meaning day to day***

*“I find a lot of like policy and just the workplace generally is like, people saying things that I don’t fully understand what they’re saying, or what they’re asking each other to do, or like, what the outcome of anything actually is...”*

(Anika, Interview 1.1)

*“It’s just sitting at a laptop, it’s emails, it’s conference calls, lots of conference calls, then meetings, and I spend time working on contracts, developing strategies, negotiating with suppliers...”*

(Richard, Interview 2.2)

We can see in Richard's quote above that he diminishes his work by saying that it's '*just sitting at a laptop*'. Completing daily work tasks, whilst self-labelling those tasks as lacking meaning, presents an interesting experiential dilemma. Both Liam and Richard use the word 'bullshit' to describe aspects of their work. For Liam, the cycle courier, it's the pretence that the delivery deadline on someone's KFC actually has any intrinsic urgency or meaning. You're pressured and pushed to meet tight deadlines over and over again, whilst feeling that they represent a fabricated urgency that you are forced to go along with. He says:

*"When I'm delivering someone's lunch, they put like a really tight deadline on it, which is bullshit, man, like it's not actually urgent, ultimately [...] having deadlines isn't always a problem. It's deadlines around things that are bullshit."* (Liam, Interview 8.2)

We can observe that the context of a task is important. Liam says more than once that if he was a blood courier then he wouldn't mind the deadlines – and "in my head it would feel like a better thing [...] but if somebody's KFC doesn't get delivered... who cares?!" (Liam, Interview 8.2). Research by Chandler and Kapelner (2014) elaborates on Liam's train of thought. They hired workers from MTurk (Amazon's Mechanical Turk, a gig-economy digital labour platform) to label medical images, but manipulated the way the task was communicated. Some of the subjects were told that they were labelling tumour cells in order to assist medical researchers; some were not told the purpose of the task. When the task was framed in terms of its wider purpose, workers were more likely to take up the task and also actively chose to label more images, even at a declining rate of pay (Chandler and Kapelner, 2014).

This idea of context defining the meaning of a task is something that George addresses when he says that a boring task might be a necessary part of achieving something interesting and important; for example, marking test papers and giving detailed feedback to students to improve their understanding. For George, a truly boring task is one that is both tedious *and* doesn't produce anything of note, or 'add value' as he phrases it. Reflecting on pointless labour more generally, Ariely, Kamenica and Prelec (2008) conducted an experiment in which they manipulated the meaningfulness of a task (in this case, assembling a Bionicle Lego) by telling the participants, in half the cases, that the finished Lego would be destroyed straight after completion. The others were not told this. They found that when the output of their labour was destroyed and they knew this, subjects had a 40% higher reservation wage than when they did not know that the output would be destroyed (the reservation wage being the lowest wage rate at which a worker is prepared to accept a job). In short, people are less willing to take on work that they think is pointless, and if they do, they want to be paid almost double for it (Ariely,

Kamenica and Prelec, 2008). Conversely, meaningful pro-social jobs or “non-profit careers characterized by low pay, long hours, and limited career advancement” are defined as being personally rewarding and meaningful *instead* of financially rewarding in the conventional sense (Mize Smith *et al.*, 2006: 26). It seems people will trade substance for security, or money for meaning; but not sacrifice both.

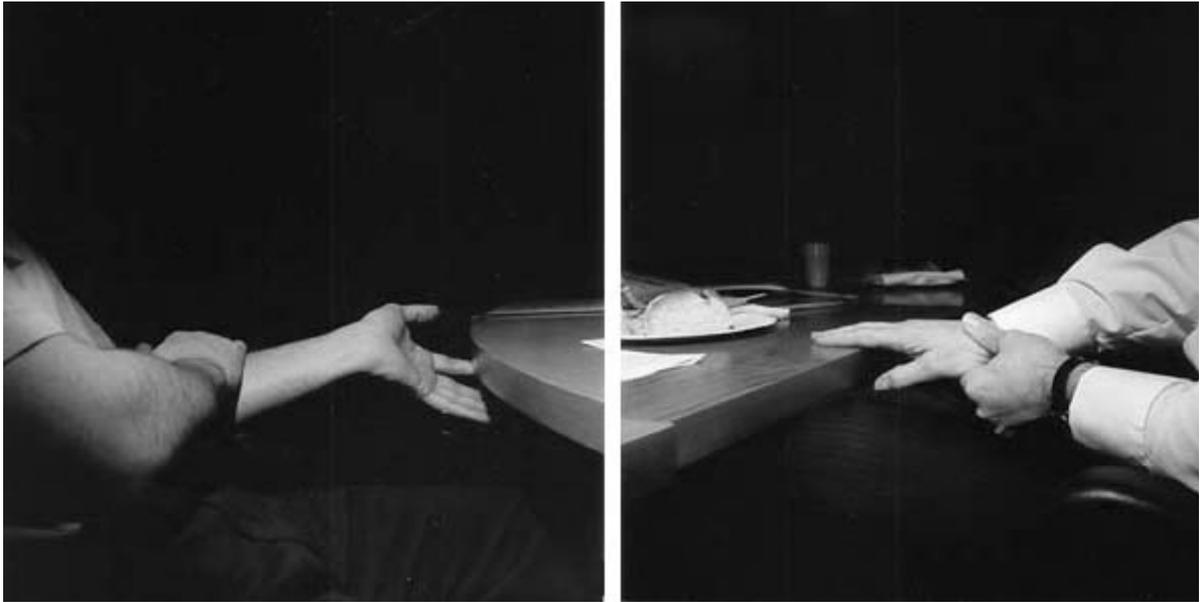
For Richard, the example par excellence of a meaningless workplace context comes from the artifice around corporate mission statements. The fact that these statements exist at all reflect an awareness on the part of the employer that “the mission of an organisation, or the lack of a mission, can affect how employees perceive their own purpose” (Cassar and Meier, 2018: 218). However, these attempts to create an authentic sense of meaning and purpose in employees often create the opposite effect, as Richard demonstrates:

*“It’s a standard kind of, corporate bullshit statement stuck in massive, massive letters on a wall for everybody to see. And that’s the environment I tend to work in. It’s just plastered all over the place [...] the senior management level and board level... these are the people that have to live and breathe these words, but I know that they don’t believe them themselves.”* (Richard, Interview 2.2)

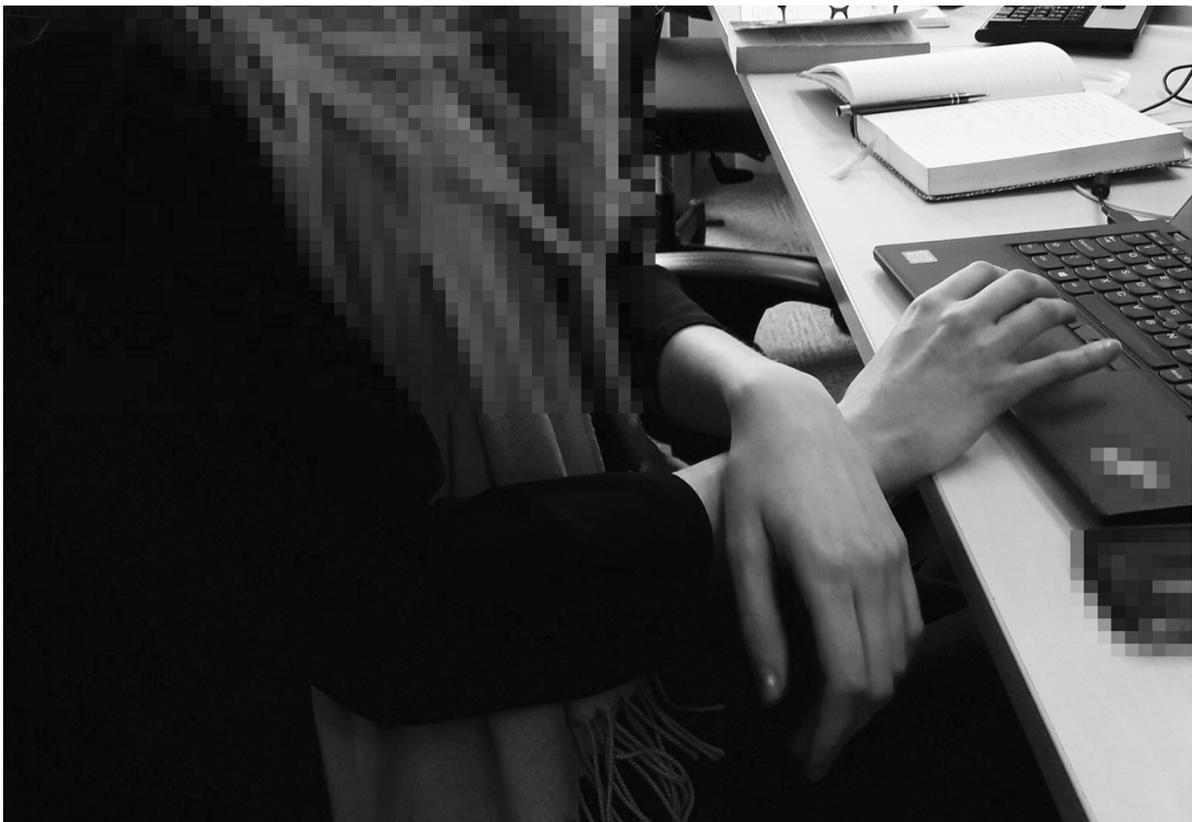
In the responses of both Liam and Richard, we can see that there is a vacuum of real meaning behind the thing itself – the urgency of the KFC delivery deadline; the pointlessness of a corporate mission statement that no one believes in or adheres to. This kind of ‘flimsiness’ makes the work feel less meaningful, since “where employees experience organizational efforts as inauthentic and/or mis-aligned with what they themselves find meaningful, then [...] workers often respond to such organizational efforts with mistrust, using irony, cynicism and guile”, responses that can be seen as a form of what Bailey *et al.* call ‘existential labour’ (2017: 421). Their notion of existential labour builds on Hochschild’s idea of emotional labour as set forth in *The Managed Heart* (1986), likewise suggesting that there are two types: *deep* existential labour, in which the individual displays and internalizes the meaningfulness mandated by their employer; and *surface* existential labour “when the individual acts in accordance with perceived organizational expectations around meaningfulness displays even if their true values and beliefs are inconsistent” (Bailey *et al.*, 2017: 422). It is therefore entirely possible that there are “committed employees who do not believe in the corporation”, and through this existential labour, perform their roles in an exemplary manner (Fleming & Spicer 2005: 182).

Anika, too, hints at the strange sense of dislocation in her experience of work – *‘I don’t fully understand what they’re saying or what they’re asking each other to do...’*. Consider figures 6.5 and 6.6

below. The visual similarity between David Moore's *Office Series* and the photo Anika submitted is striking. Moore's other works in this series show a gaze averted from a computer screen or a hand holding a half-eaten sandwich above a keyboard. The dominant aesthetic register in both cases is one of dislocation, fragmentation, and a "distinct lack of meaningful context [...] signifiers appear as isolated objects with little holding them together", reflecting a lack of cohesive understanding around what it all *means* (Cohen & Tyler 2004: 623). In another sense, Anika's phrasing – '*I don't fully understand what they're saying [...] or what the outcome of anything actually is...*' is eerily evocative of Adrian Heathfield's description of Tehching Hsieh's long duration artworks, where he writes that "the locus of these works, the crucible of their meaning, appears to be resolutely elsewhere" (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2015: 16). The philosophical implication of this claim is that Hsieh's artwork is not really about the artwork – it describes something else, something bigger. Similarly, work is never really about work; it is about much larger questions – and this which is why productivity rhetoric is so at odds with any kind of substantial sense of graspable, cohesive meaning. Melissa Gregg diagnoses that the productivity impulse "avoids difficult questions of meaning and purpose by emphasizing activity *in and of itself*" (2018: 5, emphasis added). This approximates Ivor Southwood's account of work as having a quality of 'non-stop inertia' and describes one of the key ways in which meaning can fail to arise, or feel fragmented, dislocated or displaced from our day-to-day tasks (2011).



*Figure 6.45 David Moore, Office Series 2 (1997 - 2000)*  
*Image taken from <https://davidmoore.uk.com/projects/office-2?imagenum=4> [accessed 16.02.2021]*



*Figure 46.6 Participant photo from Anika. Fieldwork photo 1.2.7*

### ***Productive boring vs. boring-boring tasks***

*“It was... a pain... and even though I was busy, it was still boring to have to roll up over 200 little meatballs, and just sit there for an hour, doing the same motions over and over again. But although it is for something, and it is being proactive, it is still tedious.”*

(Alex, Interview 7.2)

All the participants, in some form, had a way of thinking that delineated between ‘useful boring’ tasks and ‘boring-boring’ tasks, which speaks to this idea of a task being performed seemingly for the sake of being performed, rather than having a wider purpose. George complains about marking, but his perspective on the boring parts of his teaching job was very similar to what Bailey and Madden found when they interviewed lecturers about how they found meaning in their work (2015). Bailey and Madden’s respondent states: “I am pretty good with tedious work as long as it’s got a larger meaning, a proper significance in that I am doing it because it’s helping students to develop ...” (in Bailey and Madden, 2015: 11). Similarly, George tells me that he doesn’t enjoy marking, but he understands that it is necessary for the pupils’ future progress: “it can be boring, but I saw a lot of value in it. So... I saw it as ‘productive-boring’ [...] I mean, it wasn’t interesting in and of itself, but it led to something that was interesting” (George, Interview 9.2). Bailey and Madden (2015) particularly emphasise the way in which this process of tying our present actions (however boring) to a narrative about the *future* is what tends to give work meaning; and concurrently how a defining feature of *profound* boredom is precisely this inability to make this connection *beyond* the present moment. Experiences of meaninglessness then, involve inhabiting a futureless temporality: “moments temporally bound in the present” (Bailey and Madden, 2015: 13). This also reveals that meaningful/meaningless moments are temporally ambiguous: they are tied to the past (through our previous experiences), exist in the present, but are also always tied to the future.

Meaningfulness is also tied to the future in another way. De Boeck, Dries and Tierens’ research, for example, showed that “work that allows employees to move beyond the here-and-now by providing opportunities to realize future work selves is experienced as particularly meaningful” (2019: 529). Anika told me: “everything moves so, so incrementally in government that like [...] I’m always like... am I actually doing anything?” (Anika, Interview 1.3). This suggests a sense of inertia, which in her case comes from a feeling of not doing *enough* or not having *accomplished* anything. It is not surprising that the Civil Service, which she describes as being characterised by a bloated kind of bureaucracy (what she refers to at one point as ‘a flurry of pointless activity’) might involve moments of doubt like this. However, later in the interview, Anika tells me that in

policy work it's all about the long game; you just have to appreciate the incremental steps that get you closer to a goal, and *that* is where you'll find the meaning.

In developing his theory of 'bullshit jobs', David Graeber argues that meaningless work involves "a profound psychological violence [...] How can one even begin to speak of dignity in labour when one secretly feels one's job should not exist?" (Graeber, 2013: np). When discussing the photo elicitation task, Richard told me that what he set out to do was to "show the futility – or otherwise – of what I do" (Richard, Interview 2.2). This is interesting because the task was phrased in terms of interest, excitement and boredom – not futility or meaning. And yet, he seemed already to have made the connection between meaning and interest and futility and boredom. If there is one participant who put across the feeling that his job was meaningless, it was certainly Richard, who did convey some sense of this 'psychological violence' that Graeber identifies.

Nonetheless, it is important to remember that there is also evidence that not everyone cares about having a meaningful job. In various studies and experiments, the proportion of individuals who care about meaningful work and exhibit a desire to do work that is socially meaningful varies from 33% to 66% (Cassar and Meier, 2018). Younger people tend to care more about meaning in their work, with one suggested explanation: "as people accumulate life experience, illusions about the meaning of work diminish" with people seeking meaning and fulfilment in their social relationships and non-work activities instead, and having more financial responsibilities which take precedence over the search for meaning (Cassar and Meier, 2018: 223). Richard's story is a sobering reminder that this concern with meaning is perhaps *put aside*, for practical reasons, but can persist and become problematic. In Richard's case these questions come into sharp focus when his career is retrospectively surveyed.

## **Repetition**

*"I've been doing the same stuff for a long time, so... [...] ....and then after a while of course, it's just more of the same."*

(Richard, Interview 2.2)

*"And it's the same on every tour. [...] there have been days where it's like... aaaargh! [...] I mean I like where I am, but sometimes I think... you're just always on the move."*

(Theo, Interview 6.1)

Repetition and newness always, to some extent, co-exist. Theo's work pattern offers a fascinating insight into this. For him, the constant variation – new places, new teams, new hotels, new crews, new schedules – can itself become dull. He tells me that he doesn't want to be touring when he's over 30 because the partying gets tiring and starts to feel like an obligation after a while. This, considered alongside the repetition of doing the same tasks over and over again, means that he is experiencing perhaps the most difficult combination of repetition and newness: high levels of repetition (load the vans, sit on the bus, install the kit, watch the show again, wait for the show to finish, take the kit apart and load it onto the van) but without the consistency of a daily routine that might offer some stability. He describes loading fourteen huge trucks of equipment at 1am in torrential rain; the times where he's had to work until 4am then get up for a plane at 6am. It's gruelling work, and although he enjoys it, he suggests that the repetitive 'newness' of his experience might become a source of exhaustion. He admits: "spending five months away from home is actually pretty lame... and I'm sure at some point it will become quite tiring" (Theo, Interview 6.2).

For Theo, the feeling of boredom can arise when he's watching the same show over and over again on a tour. He can have up to sixty dates in a single tour, which of course means watching the same show sixty times: "you just kind of sit... I've done it a lot of times" (Theo, Interview 6.1). What makes it all-the-duller is the assumption that *other* people have that the job is really exciting because of the affective vitality of the setting in which he works. In fact, even though seeing the audience's excitement is what makes the job worthwhile, when this is contrasted with your own boredom at seeing the same show, it only serves to accentuate your awareness of boredom. As Ben Anderson writes: "sometimes, boredom comes about not when practices are habitual, but, by contrast, when the 'forgetting' intrinsic to habit has been momentarily incapacitated" (Anderson, 2004: 743). Theo is well-versed in how to put the kit together and how to take it apart and load and unload the vans safely, and says that sometimes he does feel like he's on autopilot, but in his testimony there was a real sense of these repeated moments, where he was alive to his own awareness of the 'again-ness' of his work tasks. At other times, the job offers resources to counter the sense of being bored. As he explains, even though the work tasks are similar each day:

*"It can get tough sometimes... but I don't think it's boring because you're in new places [...] it's really nice to go to new cities and new clubs and it's really cool to like new places and meet new people and get drunk and have a good time."* (Theo, Interview 6.2).

Here we can see the interaction of repetition and variation in multiple ways. Theo's job is defined by repetition, but repetition which is carried out in new, geographically dispersed places which offer excitement outside of his work commitments. Like the contrasting nexus of sameness and variation, Theo's narrative was full of contradictions and opposing viewpoints, something that was reflected in the structure of the poem that Emily Foster created from his testimony, with the two-column format that can be read either way. Theo's work is boring but exciting; repetitive but varied. The partying is cool but tiring; you meet new people but you're stuck with the same crew. Watching the excited crowd makes you feel proud and energetic; but the show can be boring. This delicate balance of sameness and repetition is at the heart of all experience, and Theo's narrative shows this complex relationship in action.

### ***Repetition and predictability***

*"I know exactly the sandwiches I'm going to make today, I know exactly the lunch box I'm going to make today, I have a - I'm so aware of everything I'm going to do. I'm going to make loads of coffees, I'm gonna make loads of sandwiches. And I'm gonna do the same thing, I'm gonna listen to the same songs... on the same radio with the same presenters, with the same questions, and the same jokes, and I'm going to get fucked off with the oven... [...] it's that predictability... sort of thing."*

(Emma, Interview 5.2)

This sense of always *knowing* what will happen strips life of its vitality and interest. Just think of Groundhog Day, where the curmudgeonly Phil (Bill Murray) becomes more and more exasperated waking up to find he is living the same day over and over again. In the more darkly comic scenes, he even puts a toaster in the bath, jumps off a building and steps out in front of a truck in order to escape the living hell of repetition. This brings us back to boredom involving a sense of 'futureless temporality', since the future seems – to all intents and purposes – exactly the same as the present. This futureless temporality can exist as part of a lived experience of boredom in-the-moment (an experience 'temporally bound in the present'); but, also, on a more expansive scale, where we cannot cognitively conceive of any immanent variation, unpredictability or newness in our day to day routine over the longer term.

And yet, it is this predictability that allows Emma to do her job so efficiently. We might think of repetition as a kind of practise – as in the case of a ballerina who has to train day after day, practicing the same movements until they are perfected. Emma even says, "me and my manager kind of dance around each other" (Interview 5.2), which reflects the sense of the running of the café as a carefully calibrated, choreographed performance. The chef Alex also suggests this sense

of repetition as a way of perfecting a skill. When I ask him if it's dull doing veg prep for sixty meals, he says: "well we're working with knives and cutting vegetables pretty much every day, it's, it's quite an easy task now" (Alex, Interview 7.1). George, the teacher, also acknowledges the role of repetition in gaining experience and learning how to better help the pupils, saying that he tends to see the same issues again and again in his pastoral role, and that this enables him to respond in a more level-headed way: "It's more like how I can help, more calm, less frantic" (George, Interview 9.1).

Rory, recalling work as an unpaid marketing intern, tells me that he remembers thinking: "I only know what I'm doing because I'm doing the exact same thing as I've done for the last six months" (Rory, Interview 10.1). He used this anecdote to explain why he found it so dull, and told me that it was one of the worst jobs he'd ever had *because* of this lack of variation. There is a delicate balance between experience, challenge, learning and reward. Once we master something, we can do it well; but as soon as that moment arises, we are already looking for the next challenge or something *different*. George also reflects on this, noting how he sees the same pastoral issues over and over again, saying that the older teachers get less emotionally invested when a pupil tells them they feel depressed or anxious, because they've heard it so many times before: "Definitely with the older teachers, there is kind of less engagement with it just because it's not new to them anymore. Even I found that after a few years, the things where I would have been like personally shocked and upset or super invested in... It's like, well. I've kind of had twenty other kids with the same thing, so I'm not going to react in the same way" (George, Interview 9.1). Here we see again the double-edged sword. Repetition might mean that we know how to deal with a situation efficiently and professionally, but that we become less engaged because it's become routine.

### ***Repetition... is never exactly the same***

*"I mean underneath it, you know, the details... there are... things do change, but at the end of the day, yes, I mean I've been doing this kind of work, I specialise in it; I sell myself for it – I've been interviewed a thousand times for it..."*

(Richard, Interview 2.2)

However, repetition is – by definition – never *exactly* the same. As the well-known aphorism attributed to Heraclitus posits: 'no man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man'. An awareness of this fact, however, is of little consolation if you are working on an assembly line, or – like Richard – feeling trapped working

in an industry you dislike for thirty-five years. Even Emma acknowledges that there have been a couple of times she's been caught off guard at work by new experiences – one time the awning fell down outside the shop; and another time she had a group of people come in dressed as Vikings. But other than that – same coffees, same music, same customers, same menu.

We can contrast this with Connor's account of working in the garage. Since he's testing buses and checking that they're maintained in working order, it is quite common that he will have a long list of things to check, but that no work will be needed. Unlike a commercial garage (where you get different vehicles all the time, all with defects that need fixing) Connor's job is more to do with maintenance. However, he doesn't seem to focus on the repetitive nature of checking for faults, and often finding none - "when you're testing something, and it works, it's like fuck! Now I've got nothing to do" (Connor, Interview 3.2). When I ask him if it gets boring, he tells me that "there are certain things that I do that are repetitive" (Connor, Interview 3.1). However, he goes on to say that it isn't boring - because you get different types of buses and sometimes you find a new or faster way of fixing something, or spot a fault that wasn't already on the sheet.

It is no coincidence that the two participants who seemed to enjoy their work the most (i.e. find it meaningful and not be particularly bored) are Connor, the bus engineer, and Rory, the software developer, who both communicated to me the large degree of problem-solving in their roles. This made their jobs engaging, enjoyable and meaningful on a day-to-day basis. For Rory, solving a coding problem and seeing something work out in the real world is what he loved most about his job; and for Connor, he told me that problem solving was the mechanic's 'bread and butter'. In fact, when I asked Rory why he wasn't bored at work he responded: "I think it's because I'm independently solving - or in groups solving problems all the time... so I'm always.... I always have something to turn my focus to" (Rory, Interview 10.2). He elaborates:

*"If I wasn't excited by finding solutions to problems, like, solving a technical problem [...] if that wasn't something that kind of, like, I found really cool when it happens, and when it works... then the process itself could be quite boring you know... but it's because you get that like, attempts / failure / success / reward... kind of thing. Erm, it's, yeah, it staves off the boredom by being rewarding I guess..."* (Rory, Interview 10.2)

Problem solving is engaging because it contains an element of *learning* – you do not initially know quite how to do something, and then you work out a way to do it. To this end, learning was also a key theme in work that the participants deemed interesting. From comparing Emma and Connor's work, we might think that each job could be equally repetitive – perhaps Connor's even more so. But in Connor's narrative, he's looking for interest and variation (or at least is

attuned to it); whereas for Emma, she acknowledges that the work isn't as repetitive as she suggests, but seems more attuned to the *sameness* of it all, because although it's satisfying when your latte art goes *just* right, it just doesn't mean quite as much once you've poured thousands of them and you find it easy.

Similarly, Richard admits that even though he feels like it's 'all more of the same', things *do* change. The industry has moved on over the years, he's worked for hundreds of companies on freelance contracts... so how could it possibly be repetitive when objectively there is so much variation? Similarly, Poppy only spends 30 minutes in each gallery, and tells me that the collections change all the time so there's a new exhibition at least every couple of months. And yet, the boredom persists. It follows that variation exists at different scales and in different ways, and that the implications of variation and sameness have can have somewhat erratic outcomes. To give one positive example, George tells me about a lesson he does every year in which his year 9 class discusses feminism. He works at a girls' school and tells me that often it's one of the first sustained conversations that the students have about it, and that he feels privileged to do that lesson every year. He says: "that lesson always flies by, and it could be very repetitive - but it never is because it's always personal to them" (George, Interview 9.1).

### ***Repetition and desire / proliferation and meaning(lessness)***

*"I'm starting to lose the fascination with Nando's... you see enough Nando's and you just think... I don't want it anymore..."*

(Liam, Interview 8.1)

In Liam's quote above, he demonstrates that repetition and sameness can take the value out of something – even where there was excitement, vitality and desire before. To some extent, repetition is an essential part of the fabric of life. We wake up, we sleep, we eat – and so on and so on. Perhaps this is why food seemed to feature in so many of the participant's narratives around repetition, particularly where they worked in offices. Anika tells me: "probably the thing I hate most about office life is the endless Pret and Benugo that I eat and I am so bored of it" (Anika, Interview 1.2). Rory also expresses similar sentiments, saying:

*"I really love donuts but people bring like cake and biscuits and doughnuts into the office all the time, and it's really annoying [...] every now and then I'll really enjoy it, but because it's so often it becomes a chore."* (Rory, Interview 10.2)

Here we can see that what might be a treat – buying lunch out, or indulging in a donut – when repeated too many times changes the value and meaning of the thing. We might think back to Theo’s account of partying. Anything in excess can become boring and repetitive – even pleasurable or fun things. This process can be described as a loss of desire, where desire had previously existed; for a donut, for a Pret. The act of eating is something that we are obliged to do, and (in offices at least) are obliged to do at a particular time, in a particular place. Employees tend to be limited to a one-hour break so there’s a set radius of places where people can get food – it is no surprise that over the years and months this becomes monotonous. This process, this loss of desire or interest, can also be described as the development of a kind of ‘reflective distance’ – a process of reflecting on your experience and perhaps finding it lacking – which is inherent to the experience of boredom as Elizabeth Goodstein defines it (2005).

This distancing - through repetition - from the original meaning or value of something also represents the erosion of interest because we’ve ‘seen it before’. Poppy’s experience of invigilating the gallery space with the looping video installation shows this process in action:

*“It’s a really great video, and so wonderful, and it’s about activism and art... [...] and over the top, there are voice overs from activists and academics on certain issues that are not related to the things that are going on on the screen. And... there are just like a couple of times when people get really, like, impassioned... and it’s just so grating. Like listening to it again and again and again... and it’s so like... [...] I’m in no position to disagree [with what the video is saying], like, I love how impassioned she is and like at first it was so great! But like I just can’t sit there and have someone shout - not at me, but like, in the same vicinity, like 8 times a day.”* (Poppy, Interview 4.2)

We can see that she begins by saying how wonderful the video piece is, and then goes on to describe this process of going from interest and enjoyment to grating submission, to active irritation at the dialogue. This is despite *agreeing* with the message of the piece and having previously enjoyed it – ‘at first it was so great’. She invigilates the space 8 times per day on her rota and now tries to ‘not pay attention’ to the piece at all because it’s so agitating, knowing *exactly* when the shouting will be, the exact sequence of voices, dialogue, words. During one of the fieldwork interviews she even recited part of the dialogue from the video for me in a precise American drawl. This is an interesting example because there is *no* variation at all in the audio or video content, and although the overall experience might sound a little different each time – since people may be whispering in hushed voices, or trainers might be squeaking as people walk around the room – you could listen to this piece *looking* for variation, but you wouldn’t find any; and so Poppy attempts to disengage by shifting her attention.

Similarly, Richard tells me that “if somebody was to do this kind of work with less experience, you’d be excited perhaps, but you know... er, when 300 billion dollar deals are being signed, and you, you worked on it or something – that kind of thing. [...] But... I’ve seen it all before” (Richard, Interview 2.2). This again reinforces the decay of meaning we experience through repetition. Another way this can be figured – particularly in Richard’s testimony – is through considering the images below. Although this is arguably changing now, the materiality and design of offices has often deployed a rather uniform language. Below we can see a set of images from Alain de Botton’s *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work* (2009) alongside Richard’s auto-photographic testimony (see figs. 6.7 – 6.12). The images are strikingly similar, suggesting perhaps another form of boredom stemming from the repetitive material similarity of the work environment. As Richard tells me, with all his jobs “at the end of the day, you’ll mostly be sitting at a desk for most of the day at some point with a laptop in an office...” (Interview 2.2).



Figure 6.7 Image from 'The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work', 'Accountancy' chapter. Alain de Botton (2009, p226)



Figure 6.8 Participant photo from Richard showing the office. (Fieldwork photo A2.16)

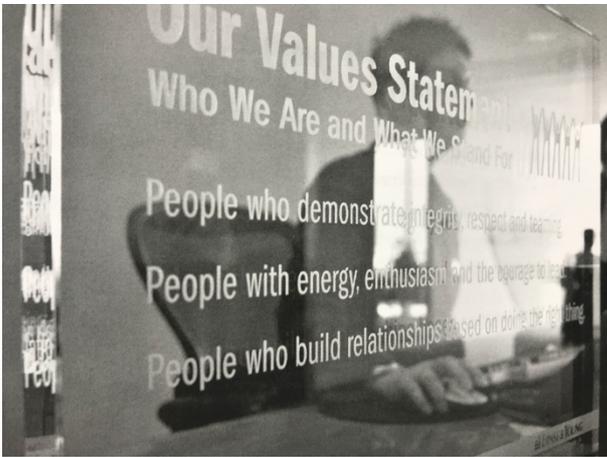


Figure 6.9 Image from 'The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work', 'Accountancy' chapter. Alain de Botton (2009, p247)



Figure 6.10 Participant photo showing corporate mission statement. (Fieldwork photo A2.22)

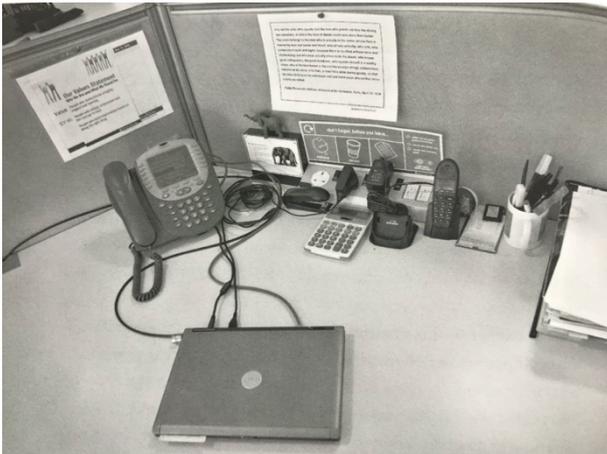


Figure 6.11 Image from 'The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work', 'Accountancy' chapter. Alain de Botton (2009, p250)



Figure 6.12 Participant photo showing Richard's desk. (Fieldwork photo A2.11)

The theme of repetition can also be seen in the context of duplicates, linking to Ignacio Uriarte's artistic practice, which particularly pokes fun at "the multiplication of bureaucratic outputs" (Hutchens, 2011: np). Anika explains this in terms of emailing documents:

*"Emailing documents... That gets really stressful sometimes because people just like... you have the document on your computer, and they send it out to like five people, and then they all comment on separate versions of it. [laughs] there's something I find really hard about dealing with the fact that there are so many versions of one thing..."* (Anika, Interview 1.2)

She describes the stress that she experiences through inefficient admin processes that produce so many versions of the same document. It is amusing to consider that Anika explained to me, after submitting her photo-elicitation photos, "I did include *one* picture of me staring at the clock... just staring at the clock. I have more but I thought I shouldn't include duplicates..." (Anika, Interview 1.3). There is something fascinating about this dislike of duplicates – this demand that things must be *new* and not *repetitive*. Perhaps there was a perceived pressure that her photos be interesting and varied, rather than truthful; or perhaps this dislike of duplicates is a reaction against how many duplicates she has to deal with in her daily working life. Echoing this theme again, there's further visual representations of repetition in many of the photos Richard submitted. His images show all of the briefcases he's amassed (fig. 6.13); the diaries and binders set out and displayed for the photo (fig. 6.14); some of his paperwork laid out on a desk (fig. 6.15) which he describes as "really just an accumulation of many years of having to be organised" (Richard, Interview 2.2).



Figure 6.13 Participant photo showing Richard's briefcases (Fieldwork photo A2.21)



Figure 6.14 Participant photo showing Richard's planners and diaries (Fieldwork photo A2.20)



Figure 6.15 Participant photo showing some of Richard's paperwork for his current job (Fieldwork photo A2.15)

The choice of the word ‘accumulation’ suggests a kind of collection, calcification or depositing of something, without the sense of the thing ever being reduced, processed or cleared. Michael Bracewell’s satirical novel, *Perfect Tense*, holds some interesting linguistic parallels here. *Perfect Tense* tells the story of an unnamed fictional narrator, and his “grinding progress through an unremarkable office day” (Merritt 2001: np). Set in London in the late nineties, the novel contains a passage where the narrator describes his interior life using the metaphor of a landscape: “today, this landscape seemed to stretch as far as the eye can see [...] my accumulated experience: the valleys of dwindling ambition drop down from the mountains of hope, and on the valley floors you will find that the paddy fields of resentment are watered by the streams of wasted time” (Bracewell, 2002: 142). Bracewell’s protagonist then conceives of himself *as* an

office, undertaking his own ‘internal audit’. The narrator sighs - “you suddenly see your life [...] as an accumulation” (Bracewell, 2002: 66). This use of ‘accumulation’ might be a play on the phrase ‘capital accumulation’, but also reflects a sense of place as a collection of stories and flows, expressed as an accumulation of lived experience, connecting an accumulation of *things* with an accumulation of *experiences*, something we also see in Richard’s photographs and his narrated account.

One of Richard’s images (fig. 6.16) was also fascinatingly similar to one of Uriarte’s artworks, *Ring Binder Circle* (2013, see fig. 6.17). Though this is perhaps unsurprising given the shared visual register of the office, it is interesting that they both fix their attention on the ring binder as an object; a tool which is rapidly becoming obsolete “but is still part of our way of thinking and working” (Uriarte in Werner, 2014: np). Uriarte suggests futility by arranging the ring binders in a circular shape; but in another evocation of futility, Richard also reveals that all the ring binders in his photo are empty. He explains that he had the intention of using this filing system, but never got round to using it because he was too busy. In the interview he pointed at the photo (fig. 6.17), laughed, and said: “I mean, this is *completely* pointless. Because... I mean isn’t that going to be one of the conclusions of your PhD?” (Richard, Interview 2.2).

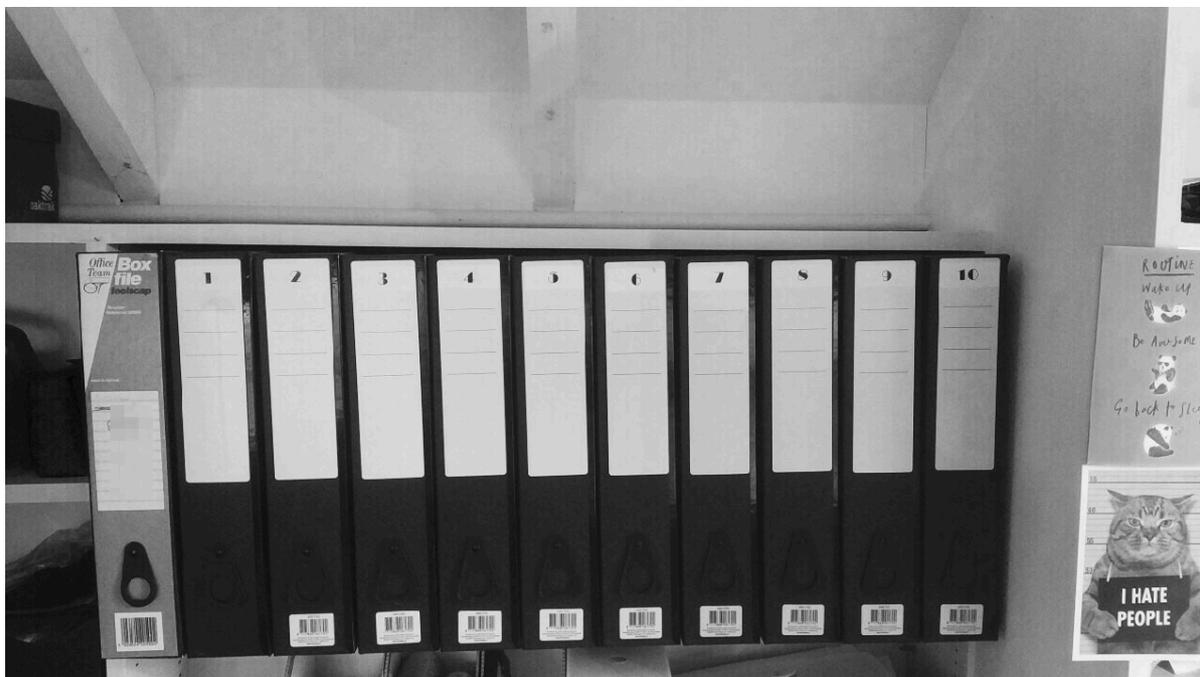


Figure 6.16 Participant photo showing Richard’s files (fieldwork photo A2.19)

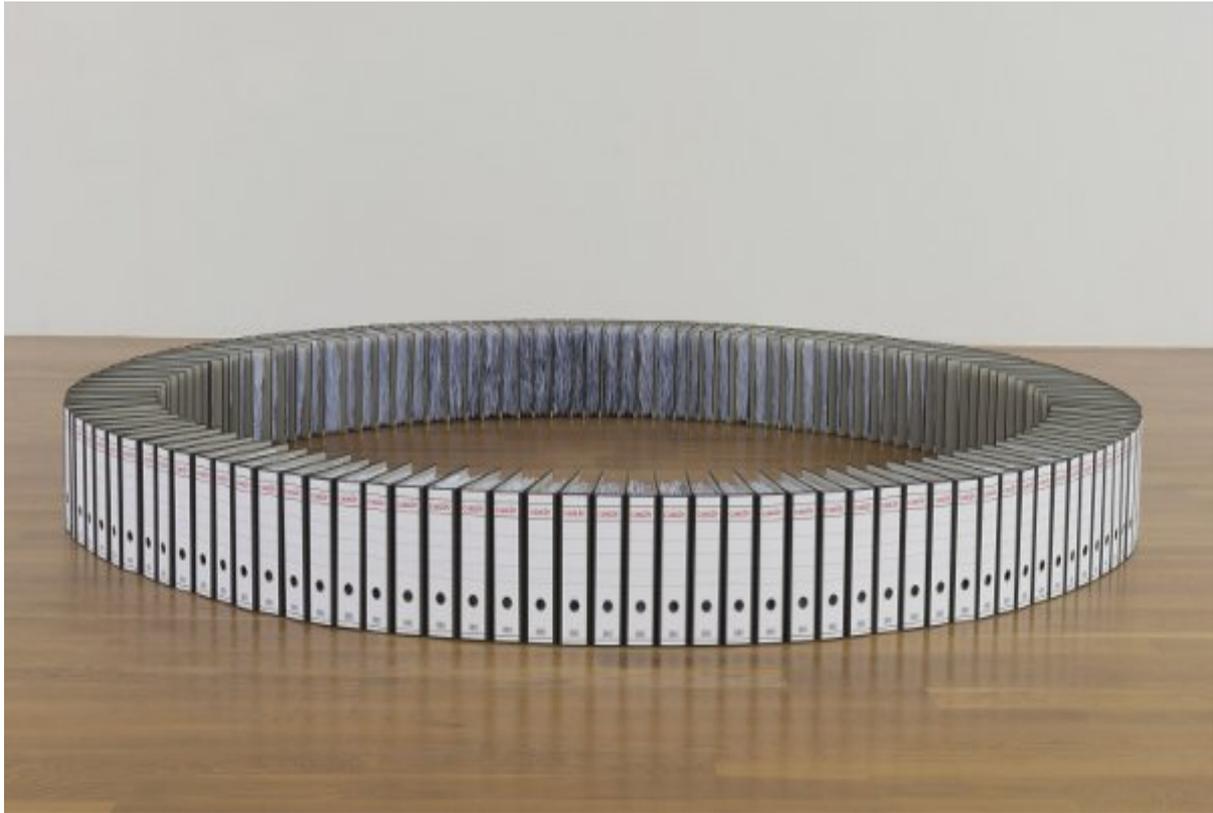


Figure 6.17 Ignacio Uriarte, *Ringbinder Circle* (2013)  
128 ring binder files. Taken from <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/ignacio-uriarte-ringbinder-circle> [accessed 07.02.2021]

### ***Novelty and variation***

*“I’ve done quite a lot of different things, and I generally have a bit of a honeymoon period with all of them, where you’re like ‘wow this is so new and exciting and I have to like, be my best!’ and you know, ‘I’m putting on this new role!’ and ‘let’s see what that is!’ Um, kind of thing. I guess I really like that period where you’re learning new things [...], any new job is a good job!”*

(Poppy, Interview 4.1)

Thinking about Anika’s assumption that she should submit new, interesting images during the interview process, and not *similar* ones or duplicates - even if that accurately reflecting her experience of work - we see an assumption that ‘new’ or ‘different’ is perceived as ‘better’. This has parallels in our working lives too. Poppy, of all the participants, was the most vocal about her *desire* for new experiences and novelty, actively telling me that any new job tends to be her favourite job – which was interesting considering she had been a gallery assistant for over 18 months at the time of interview. At one point she tells me that in life “it’s important to force yourself to stay for longer than you want to” (Interview 4.2). She says this in reference to discussing how short people’s attention spans are, and how easily distracted we are. Given that

Poppy doesn't particularly *need* the job (she has a mortgage-free flat in Clapham that her parents bought her and she collects rent from two friends living with her) perhaps it isn't unreasonable to view this job as part of an exercise in self-discovery. Perhaps in parallel with her yoga and meditation practice, we can suggest that like the hermit, or the ascetic, she forces herself to endure boredom as a way to voyage deeper into herself. If she needed the money, the relationship would be different – but for Poppy:

*“With the gallery assistant job in particular, it sounds really bad but I just I just wouldn't be that bothered if I was asked to leave? [laughs] you know? So, I mean it's not what I want to spend my life doing... erm, and... and it's not worth compromising yourself or your sense of identity or putting up with bullshit for. But that's actually quite an empowering position to be in... where you're like - I don't need you, I can say what I want, what I think... and, like, I don't have to take this really seriously.”* (Poppy, Interview 4.1)

This is a kind of privileged boredom – boredom without job risk, perhaps. In Poppy's case, she seems somehow to delve into boredom (or a boring job) by choice. For her, the choice to continue to do boring work is an expression of agency, and one which is not dissimilar to Hsieh's infliction of boredom on *himself*. But even in this case, where boredom might be viewed as an opportunity for self-discovery, Poppy expresses this experience of boredom as negative on the whole. Since the job is defined by doing very little, and taking no action, it is inherent in the fabric of the work that you *feel* very little agency, and that there is a high level of repetition since you do the same thing – nothing – all day. She strongly suggests that variation, excitement, distraction and novelty are more pleasant experiences, though not necessarily more existentially *valuable*.

Alex, the chef, also views variation as more desirable than sameness. He finds a sense of this variation in the undulating rhythms of the working day. Whilst he finds it difficult when there's nothing to do, and is very open about preferring it to be busy, this oscillation between being bored then rushed off your feet itself provides variety. As he says - “every day is very ‘on the day’ dependent... so yeah it's... it's varied, yeah.” (Interview 7.2). This adds an element of unpredictability to each day, and this can be quite engaging because it allows you to appreciate the ebbs and flows and the different rhythms of the work. In George's case, he sees his working rhythm as cyclical. As has been discussed, novelty and variation can exist within this kind of broader cyclical structure – for example, a weekly routine. For George it's not a weekly routine that defines his work, but the activities themselves: “lesson planning, delivering, and marking... and data entry, that's the cycle” (Interview 9.1). The fact that he conceives of his work as cyclical is fascinating, since he tells me that he loves delivering lessons, doesn't mind planning them - but

doesn't enjoy the marking and data entry. In this sense, his understanding of his work rhythms is defined by a repeated swing from enjoyment to boredom – from lesson planning and delivering to admin – which shapes his experience. He even tells me that he deliberately saves up his admin tasks and blitzes them:

*“I'm engaged and excited. Erm, partly because I just don't do the things that I'm not engaged in - and so I put off the marking and admin for as long as possible... and then so I have like a blitz of two weeks where it's really shit, and then four weeks where it's like - yeah! Nice! - and then shit... and then nice. Um, because that's how I manage that.”* (Interview 9.2)

### **Concluding points**

*“If I was a lawyer and I was living in the same place, I probably would be thinking oh god I wish I was away travelling! And then when you're away travelling and moving around you're like oh god I just wish sometimes I could just have a 9 to 5...”*

(Theo, Interview 6.2)

Craving something *different* to what you have is often a form of longing for something new or different. As Alain de Botton reminds us, we are very good at *imagining* the happiness of other people, in other places, doing other things (de Botton and Day, 2019). A different routine to the one you have holds no inherent guarantee of being better than what we currently have – it just promises to be *different*. And one of the things implicit in an *unrealised* desire for things to be different is the feeling that we can't – or haven't been able to – change something. One of the participants recalled his first job supervising bouncy castles at children's birthday parties, explaining that he repeatedly told “one child to stop hitting another child over the head with a plastic train seven times in the space of fifteen minutes” (Alex, Interview 7.1). Here we see a mixture of repetition and pointlessness, with an acute awareness of *not* having any agency in altering the situation, of things seemingly repeating and repeating. In this case, we can conceptualise unwanted repetition as having a sense of failed or lost agency.

Much like boredom and its opposite, life is always already moving between these two poles of experience – repetition and variety. It is also crucial to recognise that ‘being challenged’ at work is what is seen to offer the opportunity for people to fulfil their potential at work, and that where work is routine and repetitive, this is usually unavailable. Interview research carried out by Susanne Ekman revealed that the opportunity for new challenges was a crucial component of meaningfulness and enjoyment at work *because* of this drive for self-actualisation and the prevalence of what she terms ‘the fantasy of limitless potential’. She summarises: “generally, they

[participants] considered *routine* to be the primary obstacle to challenges. Many employees told me that routine work was a source of downright depressive emotional states, because they felt that they were wasting their life and their potential” (Ekman, 2013: 1168, emphasis added). This is at least in part why routine, repetition and predictability were conceptualised as negative forces by nearly all the participants. As Haladyn reminds us: “as the virtual antithesis of newness, boredom can be seen as a by-product of the constant need for novelty that has come to define modern life” (2015: 135). It is also this cultural value system - which demands newness, novelty and *incessant innovation* and progress - against which boredom arises and becomes even more problematic in terms of our own sense of meaningfulness.

### **Order / disorder**

Order and disorder, too, have a complex and ambivalent relationship with boredom. However, we do tend to traditionally associate *order* – particularly *excessive* order – with boredom. We can see this in the rationale behind linking modernity with a rise in boredom through considering the rise of rationalisation through mechanisation and clock time and the connection between boredom and modernity (Woodcock, 1944; Goodstein, 2005; Gardiner and Haladyn, 2017). Max Weber’s account of the ‘disenchantment of the world’ - in which everyday things and experiences no longer had distinct, certain meanings - was made possible by the Enlightenment’s cultivation of a sort of ‘sceptical intellectual distance’, which undermined the perspectives that had previously provided a kind of certitude in understanding the world. At the other end of the spectrum, we also see another kind of boredom in the form of Simmel’s ‘blasé attitude’. This is an attitude characterised by disengagement and a retreat from experience – arising due to the over-stimulation, chaos and disorder of the modern experience, particularly in cities (Simmel, 1997). Gardiner summarises Simmel’s diagnosis, writing that “all the usual anchors of personal identity and meaning are swept away in a maelstrom of sensory bombardments and activities” (Gardiner, 2012: 42). Siegfried Kracauer writes that: “these 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” (1995: 331).

We therefore see opposing forces at work in theories of modernity, particularly in the way that they characterise order and disorder as constitutive of modern subjectivities. This section

considers how these contradictory theories are connected to different instances of boredom in the stories the participants shared.

### *Order as restricting / Disorder as freeing*

The sense of the city that permeated Liam's narrative about his cycle courier work was one that might speak to Simmel's theorisation. Liam's work involved being deeply embedded in London's rhythms and he describes the different dispositions of the city – from a kind of ordered chaos with rhythms that he can understand, exploit and enjoy, through to the kind of chaos that feels unmanageable or out of sync:

*“Sometimes you feel really in tune with the way that the city's working, and that feels really good [...] and then other times you feel so out of time with everything else... and that's when it gets stressful [...] I guess it ebbs and flows”* (Liam, Interview 8.1)

The changeability of the city is beautifully described in Liam's narrative, with this sense of the ebb and flow of different rhythms and the fluctuating balance between order and disorder. But even when the city is perceived as unmanageable or chaotic, Liam doesn't convey a desire to try to 'put things in order'. This is likely because of the impossibility of imposing order, but it also speaks to the fact that the work itself – in contrast to his experience of the city – is so structured, with the deadlines and pick up points and drop off points and metrics. It is a stark contrast between the environment in which the work takes place and the work itself, which is so tightly regulated, with algorithmic precision. It is also true that Liam appears to be the kind of person who thrives off chaos – and usually wakes up ready to dive in and feed off the buzz of the urban rhythms. As he puts it, “I love cycling around the city - I just hate the system that it's in” (Liam, Interview 8.2). In fact, his narrative is more about *escaping* order or *resisting* order and orderliness – by falling in step with the chaos of the city and using his knowledge of it to his own advantage; by seeing Soho in the early hours of the morning with all the shutters down and the detritus from the night before littering the pavements; by watching the sunset over Millbank. He views the city with a kind of poetic eye, which feeds into his understanding of cycling as being freeing and nomadic.

Liam also seems to view the deliveries as a kind of game. You're fed the information about where to pick up and drop off piece by piece, and he says it's like 'getting to the next level' in a video game. Again, the sense of playfulness and the impulse to 'beat the system' comes through, where he tells me that you can hide on the edge of a zone just to rest your legs, or try and chat to other cycle couriers at traffic lights. Liam's response to the 'orderliness' and 'overregulation' of

his work then, is not so much boredom, but irritation – and this expresses itself in his attempts to escape the restrictions of the system. This is just one example of where a participant set up a distinction between what felt constraining or freeing in their work, through the lens of order / disorder. On balance, however, the work itself – with its timed deadlines, GPS surveillance, and the demand to accept any job regardless of distance or direction of travel – reduces his work to something that ultimately felt very constraining and excessively ordered, both spatially and temporally.

Poppy's highly structured and ordered day is also an example of this kind of excessive regulation producing irritation (at best) and deep boredom (at worst). The photos she submitted showed a workday defined *by* restrictive order. In fact, there was no sense at all that order was a positive factor in her working day. The photos that she rated as the most negative all involved moments where she was restricted by time: for example, having to radio someone to go to the loo (see fig 6.2). In the case of this photo showing her watch, it is a fascinating visual depiction of what we might call 'the tyranny of the clock' – this relentlessly overregulated, standardised way of managing time. As Van Erp and Verstricht assert: "such a pragmatic world does not reflect the inner world of the individual" so this enforced pragmatism "calls forth the will to escape" (2008: 8).

### ***Order as freeing / disorder as restricting***

In contrast, a lot of the photos that Anika submitted showed documents, notes, or her email inbox which was reflective of the volume of admin involved in her role. This is interesting because administration (just think back to Uriarte's artwork) is perhaps the first motif we might imagine for boring work – the white-collar counterpart to the assembly line. Traditionally associated with bureaucracy and wasted time, the photos that she rated most positively seemed to – on the whole – relate to a sense of having 'put things in order'. Figure 6.18 shows a tick-list she had made where she was checking a huge, unwieldy document to make sure that there were responses to every policy recommendation in the report. She explained: "I guess it could be boring laying it all out like that, but it was, it was a very, er, copy-and-paste job, but um... I don't know, I just find it interesting to like lay out what we'd written and it made the whole thing make a lot more sense in my mind" (Anika, Interview 1.2).

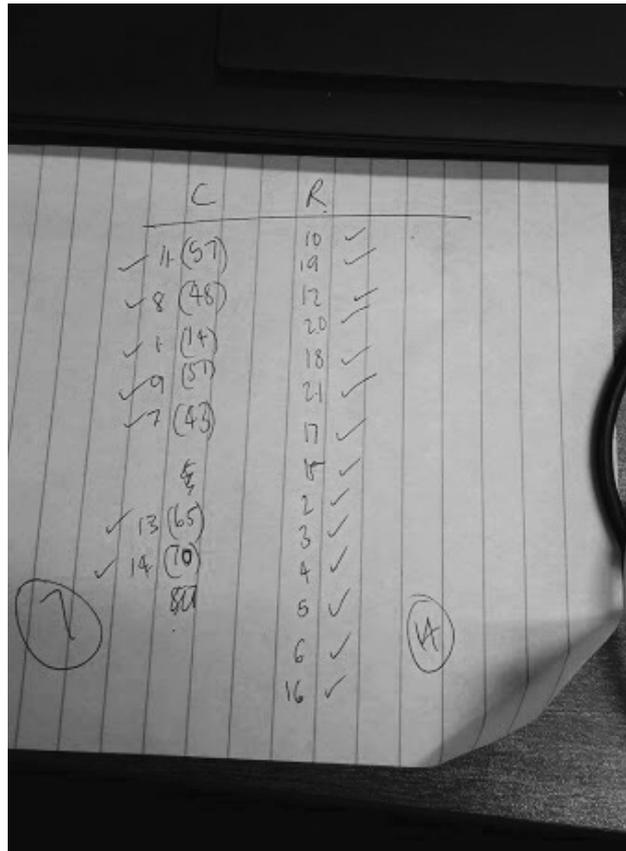


Figure 6.18 Participant photo showing one of Anika's tick-lists. Fieldwork photo 1.1.2

This *desire* for order is part of the reason that order can be viewed positively. Anika also tells me that as a person, she is quite scatty and disorganised, so this craving for order could be seen as a balm to the chaos she perceives in other areas of her life. However, there are elements of the Civil Service – what she calls the ‘big machine’ – that sit less well with her. For example, the fact that the structure of it is so wide, and that there are so many layers, means that she often feels anxiety over whether she has copied in all the correct people on email chains, or is working on the correct version of the document, or has filed things correctly:

*“There are so many like, processes to follow... [...] it’s really easy to do something slightly wrong and then like sometimes people just care about it a lot. And that really doesn’t go with my personality.”* (Anika, Interview 1.2)

In this extract we get a sense of the rigidity of ‘the way things are done’ being potentially inefficient, as well as limiting and contradictory to Anika’s naturally more ‘laissez faire’ attitude. Martin Creed, in an interview, was asked whether his art work was all about finding order in a chaotic world. Creed responded: “yeah, it’s something to hang on to. [...] but then out of that

order, the strictness, you actually get this kind of complete release and joy” (in Tovey and Diamant, 2019, 12 mins 36). This is the sense of order that Anika enjoys. The crucial distinction to draw between the two examples provided – Anika’s voluntary ordering versus her trying to navigate complex bureaucratic processes - is a question of agency. In the first example – as when she described reorganising the online file storage system for her department – she was engaging in ordering tasks voluntarily. In the second example, she is talking about being bound by complex bureaucratic rules, some of which are obscured or unclear. It is also a question of clarity and understanding. In the first case, Anika gains clarity through order; in the second case it is a different form of order - bureaucracy - which can have a tendency to *complicate* or *obscure*, especially for those newer members of staff not yet initiated into each workplace’s complex rules or bureaucratic quirks.

Order can also have other positive affects, in particular through association with a sense of fascination. When talking to Liam about highly regulated and ordered spaces, he came up with the example of airport security, saying: “In terms of boredom - have you ever been excited in airport security?!” (Liam, Interview 8.2). In response I mentioned that Andy Warhol reportedly loved airports, and used to go through airport security multiple times because he said he found it fascinating and inspiring. If part of Warhol’s task as an artist was to get us to see the beauty in the mundane, then this fascination with airport security is emblematic of his overall project. Similar themes are evident in Uriarte’s work, where he celebrates the excessive regulation and duplication made possible by the bureaucratic order, creating artworks that are at once soothing and agitating, attending to the ambivalence of order and disorder.

### ***Order and Disorder: concluding comments***

Order can be restrictive or liberating. One crucial distinction is to delineate between order that is imposed externally vs. order that is imposed internally. Order tends to be seen as restrictive in the first case; but when we impose order on ourselves of our own free will, it’s less likely to produce boredom – or at least to produce the same *kind* of boredom - because the ordering of our own experience is an expression of agency. At the same time, as Erich Fromm reminds us in his book *The Fear of Freedom*, we need a certain amount of restriction in order to function (Fromm, 2001). In his estimation, there is such a thing as too much freedom, and our individualist society which so *values* individual freedom has in fact become so individualistic as to isolate the modern subject, making us feel a deeply rooted sense of anxiety and powerlessness.

There has also been a complete retreat, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, from ideas of objective meaning, which provided an order or structure to subjective experience. As Michael Gardiner posits: “nihilism is at the heart of modern scientific rationality, because it [scientific rationalism] grasps the world as a collection of inert ‘facts’ devoid of life or intrinsic meaning, positing a universe that is profoundly indifferent to human existence” (Gardiner, 2012: 42). In this frame, boredom can be a response to a fundamentally disinterested universe, one in which we are painfully aware of our insignificance, whilst also engaged in a search for ways to prove otherwise. Ordering things can in fact be a form of comfort (as the existence of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder attests). In a more general sense, excessive order can also become something else – strangely freeing, as Martin Creed put it. Tehching Hsieh would likely agree.

### III. After Boredom

*“I have lots of ways out of being bored.” (Anika, Interview 1.3)*

The desire to escape boredom can be an incredibly strong compulsion. Boredom-coping strategies (as they are often called in psychological literature) are just one way in which boredom can be conceptualised as a generative force. This section considers what to *do* with boredom by firstly summarising the different emotional currents that relate to different types of boredom; followed by a discussion of the different ways that the participants dealt with or responded to boredom.

#### **How does boredom feel?**

There are, of course, many varieties of boredom – and so many ways it can be experienced, felt and sensed. As part of the emotional texture of lived experience, it converges with other states like frustration, tiredness, irritation, anxiety, sadness, loss, fatigue and anger. Various different bodies of literature from psychology to philosophy and organisation studies have made attempts at identifying typologies of boredom, but one thing they all seem to agree on is that it is incredibly varied and diverse, which is why psychoanalyst Adam Phillips suggests we speak of the ‘boredoms’ rather than ‘boredom’ (1993). Similarly, here, I offer a consideration of the *feelings* of these boredoms – not in terms of whether boredom is ‘simple’ or ‘profound’, ‘vulgar’ or ‘elevated’ (Richmond, 2015) but rather in terms how it was described and experienced by the people who told me their stories, highlighting common themes and experiences. As discussed, a common experience of boredom was an association with impatience or irritation; the agitation that comes from dragging your attention to something you don’t want to be doing, something that is not in line with your desires or wants:

*“It’s just the feeling of like, god I can’t be bothered... I really want to be somewhere else. Sometimes I really like when I can go home, just watch loads of Netflix in a row, because I just don’t need to think or do anything... and I guess I kind of feel in that mindset, but I’m not allowed to be in that mindset. So it’s just like, I don’t know, you feel a bit trapped, or... and it’s kind of stressful in a way, feeling like that.” (Anika, Interview 1.3)*

For Connor, too, one of the most boring moments in his day is simply having to walk from one end of the garage to the other. It’s a huge, cavernous space, and often he has to go and get his

papers for the day, and then go and find his bus somewhere at the other end of the garage: “long fucking walk [...] boring as fuck” (Connor, Interview 3.2). This reflects the theme across Connor’s boredom more generally, which is that of impatience – of something happening too slowly, or having to wait before he can start a task, something that causes him to feel irritated. Poppy also experiences a high degree of irritation because there are simple tasks that she is not allowed to do in the gallery.. That her work is prohibitive rather than enabling also makes her feel more frustrated at work, because of the way that it unsatisfactorily makes use of her skills and capabilities - the feeling of wasted potential (Ekman, 2013; Harju and Hakanen, 2016).

On the other hand, boredom can be soothing. Anika speaks about the soothing effects of mundane tasks like filing, telling me: “I kind of use tasks like that, that are kind of a bit dull or mindless to like... I guess distract myself or fill time... erm, and I think that does work for me. Like I tend to, in a weird way, enjoy it...” (Anika, Interview 1.2). Her use of the word ‘distract’ is interesting; the implication being that she is distracting herself from not having anything else to do. Thus that her actions represent the transmutation of what *could* be an agitated form of boredom into a positive, calming one – through an active choice to undertake a ‘dull’ or ‘mindless’ task. This also has parallels with Uriarte’s ethos around office gestures and finding the meditative, calming quality in the mundane; and Martin Creed’s artistic approach of order being ‘something to hold on to’ in an uncertain world (in Tovey and Diament, 2019). All of these examples specifically point to administration as a soothing kind of boredom, perhaps *because* of this rationalisation and putting-in-order.

Feelings *of* boredom varied to the extent that for some, at times, it produced irritation, whilst for other people or at other times it could deliver a calming quality. Crucially, this variation was apparent too in feelings *about* boredom, in how it was translated into cultural systems of judgement and valuation. One such feeling about boredom was to question its significance, or at least to rationalise its existence. Richard, who told me that he is rarely ever bored because of the pressure of his work, did admit to occasionally getting bored. He assured me, though, that “it’s in terms of what I would call normal boredom, sort of, working through a document that’s not very interesting or whatever” (Richard, Interview 2.2). Here Richard rationalises ‘normal boredom’ as a linear relationship between a boring *thing* (a long contract document, for example) and what he sees as a rational response, much like the first of Heidegger’s three conceptions of boredom put forward in *The Fundamentals of Metaphysics* - being bored *by* something (Heidegger, 1983). So, despite his melancholic reflections on the overall significance of his working life, on a day to day scale Richard does not find boredom problematic: partly because he does not

experience it too often; partly because when it does occur the stimulus is rationalised as external and unavoidable; “um, it’s my personality – I get engrossed in things” (Richard, Interview 2.2).

But what place does this leave for boredom that is *irrational*? For being bored when you’re supposed to be interested? When less easily rationalised, the moral associations of boredom permeated its discussion, including association with guilt. Connor says that the younger apprentices would never admit to being bored because “they don’t want extra work!” (Connor, Interview 3.1). In other words, Connor, like Alex, Theo, and many of the other interviewees, frames boredom as an expression of not having *enough* work to do. This again reinforces this commonly held (but reductionist) idea of boredom as arising when you have nothing to do - rather than having nothing *of meaning* to do. And yet, Connor’s quote also hints at the punitive nature of being vocal about boredom in the workplace. As Connor implies, if someone is bored, they should just be given *more* work. But if the work itself - or the arrangement of work - is causing the boredom then a proliferation of tasks will be of no use in remedying it.

Poppy’s relationship to her guilt around boredom is rather different. She has a particularly sharp-edged self-criticism about her failure to evade, escape or deny boredom. She tells me how some of the exhibitions just leave her with a feeling of “I’m just still getting nothing” (Interview 4.2), even describing it as feeling like “I’m reading a book in Japanese when I haven’t learnt the language” (Poppy, Interview 4.2). The fact that she uses the metaphor of contemporary art as an unknown language, and that she implies later in the transcript that it is *her* fault for not researching the artists and trying to understand the art – ‘learning Japanese’ as she metaphorically puts it - completely evades the fact that she is in an *objectively* very boring situation. She is all too aware of the ways in which she could try and increase her level of engagement and interest, but once you get past a certain point - “a level of boredom where I can’t even engage with the art around me” – it’s hard to do (Poppy, Interview 4.2).

When Poppy tells me that ‘sometimes it’s important to force yourself to stay for longer than you want to’ she makes a profound point. As Stafford and Gregory write, following Heidegger: “our ordinary tendency is to shake off and drive away boredom [...] Letting boredom be as it is involves dispelling attitudes and breaking away from traditional theories” (2006: 156). Just two of the traditional theories we must break away from include the idea that our experiences must always be interesting; and that we must always be productive. In Poppy’s case, because she doesn’t materially *need* the job that she is doing, continuing with the gallery assistant role is exactly this process of ‘forcing herself to stay longer than she wants to’. Her philosophically-tinged perspective on the boredom of the job, the way she views it almost as a kind of training in

mental fortitude, ties to her experience in mindfulness, meditation and yoga. But this is precisely the reason that she is also so harsh on herself and her ‘failure’ to make things interesting or, indeed, *not* to be annoyed by the boredom: because she has made a choice to put herself through the experience, and because it’s viewed as a kind of attempt at self-mastery, she feels that she’s falling short in her mastery of herself.

This self-directed guilt about experiences of boredom also exists at other levels. Particularly common amongst the participants was the feeling that we are ‘wasting time’ when we’re bored. Anika’s narrative is saturated with this perspective, and has a particular flavour of guilt because she does care about the job: “I feel really guilty that I’m wasting time... and then there’s always lying in the back of my mind, like, it’s not just that I’m wasting my time, I’m wasting taxpayers’ money” (Anika, Interview 1.3). Again, the structural conditions of her job are not considered here, and not being engaged is seen as a personal failure. She says:

*“I spend a lot of time Googling house plants as I said... or like, puppy training... [laughs] which is nothing to do with work. And that, I feel bad when I’m doing that. And then it’s a bit of a cycle because I feel worse because I’m... I feel like... um, I feel worse because I’m like, I know that I’m doing something bad.”* (Anika, Interview 1.3)

And yet, looking at Anika’s transcript as a whole, she says on multiple occasions that her line manager doesn’t give her enough work to do; that the team is inefficient; that there are too many people in the department as it is. She spends time re-organising her department’s online filing system. She’s part of a mental health and diversity taskforce. She cares about her job, and she *wants* to contribute, and displays a great many organisational citizenship behaviours (Skowronski, 2012) or what other psychologists might call positive boredom-coping behaviours (Vodanovich, 2003; Game, 2007). We can see, again, that the structural conditions of the work are pushed aside in favour of personal guilt. We also see this in the case of Rory’, the software developer’s account of his workplace – where it is *demand*ed that each employee *makes* the work interesting and fun in an authentic way. Again, the onus is put on the individual rather than the collective conditions under which people are performing their work, making the problem of boredom an interior battle which is entangled with the kinds of biopolitical issues that Peter Fleming addresses in his work. Building on ideas from Foucault and Hardt and Negri, Fleming identifies *biocracy* as “the use of biopower in work settings” (Fleming 2014: 885). Biopower, unlike other forms of power – for example disciplinary power – emphasises the *exploitation* (rather than the control and limitation) of our ‘life abilities’. Bios (‘life itself’) is thereby harnessed, rather than constrained or altered in a process which “captures what the subject of power already is, rather

than composing or reconstructing him or her into a desired image” (Fleming 2013: 876). This call for authentic fun in the workplace can have positive impacts, as Rory’s testimony demonstrated; but it does also further moralise the issue of *not* enjoying work, when enjoying it becomes part of your job. It is worth quoting Murtola and Fleming at length here, where they explain the way that we are now called on to be ‘ourselves’ and authentically create a positive experience at work, regardless of the structural conditions we are working under:

*“One of the more bizarre aspects of the development of contemporary capitalism has been to prescribe to workers existential palliatives for problems that the regime of work itself has created. Business firms today are in the vanguard of attempting to re-establish the lost connection between self and experience so colourfully depicted by Benjamin, through a peculiar evocation of authenticity.”* (Murtola and Fleming, 2011: 2)

### **Responding to boredom / after boredom**

*“Boredom is there to motivate you, to prevent you from indulging in laziness and inertia [...] It is the thing that releases your potential, like the starting gun of a sprint, it inspires motion and action.”*

(Crute, 2019: np)

The understanding of boredom as a generative force, as reflected by Crute, has varied implications in the context of work. ‘Boredom coping’ as a psychological construct was first described in literature around personality by Hamilton et al., who defined boredom coping as the ability to “maximise the opportunities for intrinsic enjoyment” and/or “restructure one’s perceptions and participation in potentially boring activities so as to decrease boredom” (Hamilton, Haier and Buchsbaum, 1984: 183). Here, we see a division between *behavioural* and *cognitive* coping strategies, which this section draws on. Skowronski elaborates on this division, defining behavioural coping as attempts to seek stimulation, whereas cognitive coping consists of “attempts to make boredom tolerable rather than increasing stimulation” (Skowronski, 2012: 148).

Behavioural coping, for example, may involve drinking at work, or helping a co-worker with a task; creating a wellbeing committee; or by starting to skive off work: and all of these can be seen as ‘interest enhancing strategies’. Cognitive coping could involve reminding oneself of the importance of a task, or the consequences of not performing a task. Particularly in relation to cognitive coping, an emphasis on the role of attention and perception in boredom coping is consistent with the literature reviewed earlier showing that boredom is associated with

attentional difficulties, and its occurrence often depends on individual perception, rather than objective reality.

Nonetheless, Lesley Kenny found in her research that “to talk about your day meant talking about what you did to avoid boredom everyday”, which reflects the quality of absence inherent in boredom; a quality that makes it a difficult experience, but also difficult to write about and analyse (Kenny, 2009: 194). In this section I consider some behavioural and cognitive responses to boredom - the after-effects of boredom; it’s epiphenomena.

### *Denial*

In the interview discussions it was clear that there were many, many cases in which boredom at work was being denied or repressed, which supports Sandi Mann’s finding that boredom is the second most commonly suppressed emotion in the workplace, after anger (Mann, 2007). This connects to the way in which we personally relate to boredom – whether we see it as a personal failure (as Poppy and Richard especially suggested); or as something that happens *to* us as a result of not having enough to do. In both cases, there was an element of guilt; although some of the participants communicated that they felt boredom was pointless. Poppy describes boredom as a ‘cul-de-sac’, saying ‘it doesn’t lead anywhere’. Richard told me he doesn’t really have time for boredom “because I’ve always got work to do and I always feel under pressure” (Richard, Interview 2.2). He positions boredom in opposition to productivity – assuming that if you are busy you can’t be bored – and also assumes that being under pressure and boredom are mutually exclusive. To him, boredom is understood as a kind of relaxed state in which you while away the hours - and therefore he doesn’t identify with it. Arguably, however, he *denies* boredom whilst experiencing the kind of existential fatigue and vacuum of meaning characteristic of more profound types of boredom over longer time periods.

Returning to the theme of the expression of masculine identities at work, it’s clear that boredom is also repressed through a masculine kind of stoicism. In Connor’s case, he very much suggests that there is no use complaining – the ‘old school’ mechanics have no time for that. He also seems to suggest that you don’t get emotional at the garage unless it involves anger, aggression, cynicism or a joke. Even an expression of overt pride in one’s work is denied: “I didn’t prance around about it - I just dropped the bus down, let down the suspension and thought, yeah. That was done by me” (Connor, Interview 3.2). Similarly, Theo explains how stress is expressed as anger or aggression, and that the boredom of waiting around for A-listers who sometimes don’t even show up for a rehearsal is just part of the job, and there is no use complaining.

Addressing this theme of emotional repression in the workplace, Anika laughs and tells me: “I feel like so much of work is, like, containing the small child in you that has a really instant reaction to things” (Anika, Interview 1.1). If the classic child’s outburst is ‘I’m bored!’ then it is fascinating that she talks about containing your inner child and trying to be measured and mature in your responses. She was largely talking in reference to criticism from colleagues, but also in managing your emotional life at work in a more general sense because not all emotions are permissible. This is not dissimilar to Poppy’s response to boredom, where she tells me that you can say ‘I’m bored!’ or you can just ignore it: “you either have the people who just like complain about it all the time, or there are the people who just try to put it to one side” (Poppy, Interview 4.2). This is the difference between what is perceived as a child-like or an adult response. In the workplace, in particular, one of the ways in which we can express our ‘maturity’ is to be ‘an adult’ and simply brush boredom aside, not talk about it, and simply deny our experience.

### ***Distractions / doing something else***

Seeking distractions was also a popular form of boredom-avoidance. Cynthia Fisher writes that boredom is characterised by “a pervasive lack of interest in and difficulty concentrating on the current activity” (Fisher, 1993: 396). It is no surprise, then, that when something fails to capture our interest, we try to find this interest elsewhere. Evading boredom, here, is usually characterised by a decision to do something *else* at the moment when boredom hits. This might be in the form of chatting to co-workers, as Anika explains – with colleagues she’s not that close with, she admits “we were just talking out of me being bored” (Anika, Interview 1.2). Similarly, Alex enjoys practicing latte art with the front of house staff when there’s nothing to do. In both cases, the participants described these as moments of positive boredom, because they led to an enjoyable distraction.

Anika is adept at enjoyable distractions. Her narrative involves not having much to do, and then doing something enjoyable to pass the time at work: “I was bored... but I kind of did some interesting procrastination I guess, so it’s kind of ambivalent... it was procrastination but I liked what I was doing” (Anika, Interview 1.2). Her list of enjoyable distractions includes making notes on Economist magazine articles that are unrelated to her job, googling puppy training and house plant care. It’s a kind of ‘productive boredom’ in that she is always learning, gaining knowledge, even if it’s not directly relevant to her job role. She also seems to enjoy herself when she is distracting herself, although she does feel guilty. Yet, these enjoyable distractions mean that the experience of boredom can be somewhat evaded or altered. Alfie Bown argues that

enjoyable distractions in fact reinforce the illusion of our work being intrinsically worthwhile or more important, writing:

*“Viewed by almost everyone as a tempting distraction from ‘real stuff’ [...] we partly enjoy doing so on the level that the associated guilt actually reinforces our sense of being very important people with ‘much more important things to do’. The distraction supplements that mundane but supposed-to-be serious reality from which we secretly want to be distracted, allowing us to feel that what we ‘should’ be doing (usually working) is truly ‘worthwhile’.”*  
(Bown, 2015: 22)

In this interpretation, the culture of ‘busy-ness’ – whether we are productively busy or busy with an enjoyable distraction - serves to “snatch any moments of potential boredom or indeed reflection, leaving us in a constant state of entertainment” (Bown, 2015: 21). We therefore exist in what Ivor Southwood diagnoses as a state of “mindless drudgery and equally mindless leisure”, with ‘enjoyable distractions’ in fact serving to support the importance of *work* (Southwood, 2011: 45). Richard says that in his job he could very easily engage in such distractions at any time: “if I want to, I can just do something else for a while” (Richard, Interview 2.2). However, he chooses not to because of the intense pressure of the work. We can see then that Anika’s job security, when contrasted with Richard’s precarity as a freelancer, influences the extent to which we exercise this ability to ‘do something else’ at work. We might also think of Damien Hirst’s piece *The Acquired Inability to Escape* which suggests the sense of self-entrapment that Richard discusses (see fig 6.19). The office chair positions the potential sitter in a place where they can see through the glass to the world beyond, but are unable to escape because of the comically large desk and the reinforced glass and steel cage. The title suggests exactly this sense of self-entrapment.

Connor has a similar attitude in terms of using distractions as a response to feeling bored. He describes how he is disappointed when he checks a part on the bus and it works fine, because there’s no work for him. As he says, “what do I do now? That’s where you sit down, go smoke a cigarette, or... go make a drink” (Connor, Interview 3.2). These moments of rest could be conceptualised as ‘destructive’ – since literature shows that boredom and smoking go hand in hand (Mann, 2007) - or restorative.



*Figure 6.19 Damien Hirst, “The Acquired Inability to Escape” (installation, 1991)  
Glass, steel, silicone, rubber, Formica, fibreboard, chair, ashtray, lighter and cigarettes. 2134 × 3048 × 2134mm. Image taken from  
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hirst-the-acquired-inability-to-escape-t12748> [accessed 16.02.2021]*

There are also examples of failed attempts to evade boredom through distraction – for instance, when Anika prowls the rows of desks for stray biscuits and finds that there are “not many biscuits... there is no distraction here...” (Anika, Interview 1.2). Similarly, Poppy has limited ‘other things’ she can do in her role. Nonetheless, “sometimes I have to turn to using my phone or doing a sudoku, or I just pace very restlessly a lot of the time... or, like, count up to large numbers...” (Poppy, Interview 4.2).

*“Personally, I just use it as a place to not pay any attention, because there’s no, there’s no real work that can get damaged in there, it’s just this video that plays on a loop...”* (Poppy, Interview 4.2)

Poppy's description of her decision *not* to pay attention, in this case, is another kind of distraction – a withdrawal from the immediate experiences presented to her in that moment. The repetition of the experience presents a challenge for Poppy, and so we can also see the desire 'not to pay attention' as an attempt to mould her own experience. It is therefore an expression of agency, but one that is performed within the restrictions of having to stay in the room. The final frontier, then, is to divert your attention elsewhere, to distract yourself from the boredom-inducing experience and to retreat inward. We see this in Poppy's narrative, where she disengages:

*"I get to a level of boredom where I can't even engage with the art around me [...] at the moment it's a lot of video work and artists that I don't know, and things I don't have as much context for, and I think... that, that... ignorance means that I don't engage as much."* (Poppy, Interview 4.2)

Poppy's framing of her boredom being accentuated by not understanding an exhibition as reading 'Japanese without having learnt the language' is something that causes her to disengage from her surroundings. Here, she describes a deeper form of boredom that produces inertia and a desire to withdraw from the object of her boredom. Poppy is one of the people who, when bored, will "just try to put it to one side" (Poppy, Interview 4.2). And yet it lingers, like a film, over her experience because you are neither dispelling it, nor addressing it, nor indulging in it, nor denying it. This is just one coping strategy which attempts "to alleviate boredom using emotion-focused methods including daydreaming [...] or withdrawal from work" rather than attempting to change the external experience itself (Skowronski, 2012: 146).

### ***Doing something else... related to your job***

It is worth noting that many instances where the participants decided to 'do something else' related to re-organising tasks or doing a task the respondent felt more interested in first and so on. In this sense, it is perhaps not accurate to class this as a distraction – but there are instances of 'distracting' activities which are incredibly helpful to the employer. As Mike Skowronski writes, these can be conceptualised as Organisational Citizenship Behaviours (OCBs) or 'engaged coping mechanisms' (Skowronski, 2012). These might include: taking on additional responsibilities, helping other employees or seeking out training opportunities. Anika is a great example of this:

*"We set up an engagement group... again, there's just loads of things that like [...] quite a few of us felt like there were loads of things that were a bit annoying about the way we work... so we just basically made this group*

*to try and change some of that. [...] we just felt like there were loads of people interested in doing something to make things, to change things... and we wanted to like make that happen basically.”* (Anika, Interview 1.3)

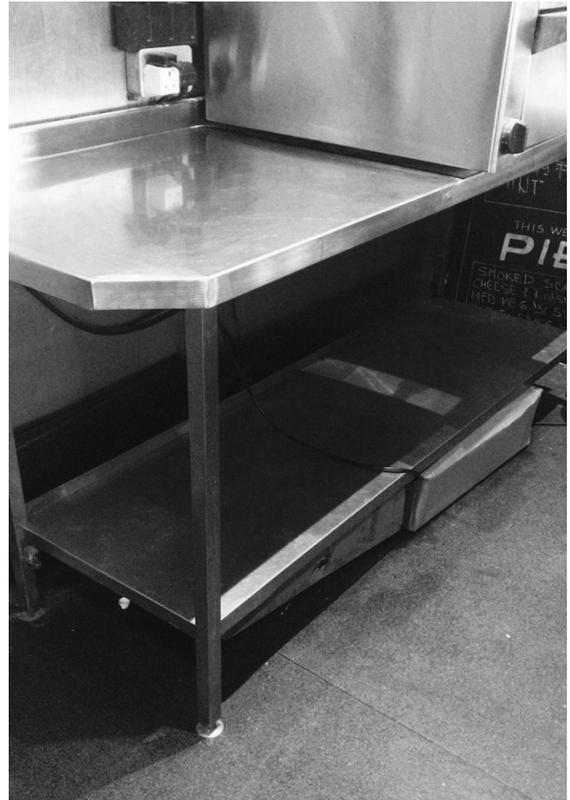
Anika has chosen to take on additional responsibility, forming a central part of a taskforce to tackle mental health and diversity in her department. We might also think back to her choosing to re-organise that department’s online file storage system – “I made some beautiful folders and I was very pleased with myself... all so systematic, you know? So organised!” (Anika, Interview 1.2) Although she also admits spending time googling houseplants and prowling for biscuits, she also seems to have a real desire, when it comes down to it, to be useful to her employers and to do meaningful things. For this reason “boredom may catalyse helpful acts consistent with the organization’s goals” and so may be a unique emotion in workplace terms since it holds the potential to elicit both helpful and unhelpful behaviours (Skowronski, 2012: 147). Alex, too, describes many instances of ‘finding more work to do’ in his narrative. He describes how, when there is nothing much going on, he cleans everything:

*“It was so quiet in the kitchen and I had to, because we had nothing... nothing to do... And because I’d cleaned everything in there, I went out and started clearing up the bar a little bit, and the bit under the pizza oven... [...]... it still wasn’t super necessary to need to clean the walls mid-service, or clean outside where the bins are..... [...] it was good and proactive, but it is something that feels satisfying afterwards.”* (Alex, Interview 7.2)

He even describes the feeling of “relief from boredom” that came after “I cleaned the wall... having nothing to do all day, and then finding something to do” (Alex, Interview 7.2, see figs. 6.20, 6.21 and 6.22). The use of the word ‘relief’ highlights the discomfort that comes from *really* having nothing to do. Similarly, Theo, when he gets bored watching the show says: “I walk around and make sure that it sounds good everywhere - not that I have to” (Interview 6.1). He does this partly because he cares about learning more and advancing in his career, but also partly because otherwise “you just kind of sit...” (Interview 6.1).



*Figure 6.20 Participant photo showing cleaning the outside bin area. Alex, fieldwork image 7.1*



*Figure 6.21 Participant photo showing cleaning the pizza oven area. Alex, fieldwork image 7.2*



*Figure 6.22 Participant photo showing kitchen wall that needed cleaning. Alex, fieldwork image photo 7.7a*

### *Altering your experience: behavioural*

When we are bored (for example with a repetitive work task) we often don't have the luxury of avoiding it or not doing it. Many of the participants described different ways of altering their experience in small ways, which enabled them to continue with the experience which was causing boredom, but to make it more bearable. Skowronski labels this 'behavioural coping', in opposition to 'cognitive coping' which will be elaborated on later (Skowronski, 2012). These behavioural adjustments include, for example, George listening to music whilst marking. He says, however, that he cannot have anything else going on, because he gets too easily distracted:

*"I listen to music - I can't watch anything because I just don't mark! I just... my, my interest in marking is so little that even if my housemate is watching something I'm not interested in, I'll watch that rather than pay attention... so, for example, if he decides to binge watch Naruto, er, which is an anime... and I'm like, not interested in this at all and it's really boring, and then as soon as I was marking I just watched four episodes."* (George, Interview 9.2)

This is a familiar feeling for most people: when you have to 'drag' yourself to a task, but your mind is desperate to go elsewhere. We also get an interesting sense of a conscious 'hierarchy of interest' that George has created, and how low down marking sits on this list for George. He even describes going into school during the holidays to mark so as not to have any distractions, and yet "it still took me three hours to mark a set of books coz I was faffing about - I spent about twenty minutes trying to book a haircut for no reason... [laughs] I took three hours to do it for no reason" (George, Interview 9.2). In a slightly different alteration of experience in a bored moment, Connor, when waiting for the bus to lift, allows his mind to wander:

*"The task that is most boring to me is... the lifting the bus up. [...] I'm just holding this one button for 3 minutes. [...] I was holding the button, and I was trying to remember whether I had 2 or 4 fish fingers left in the freezer..."* (Connor, Interview 3.2)

Of course, what 'alterations' are available to people during a boring task are dependent on the type of task. For Connor, he is able to mentally 'check out' because holding the button doesn't require any cognitive engagement. For George, he *has* to be engaged in the marking to get it done properly – so when he allows his mind to wander, he isn't progressing, and it takes 'three hours for no reason'. Poppy even tells me that when invigilating a gallery with a looping video: "I sing along to it sometimes" (Poppy, Interview 4.2). These kinds of alterations don't necessarily involve 'seeing the task differently' or escaping boredom, but simply make it more palatable in the moment.

### *Altering your experience: cognitive*

*“Cognitive coping mechanisms [...] find ways to tolerate boredom without increasing external stimulation by, for example, using a variety of cognitive tricks.”*

(Skowronski, 2012: 146)

I noticed that Rory seems to be adept at *creating* meaning and value out of the less satisfactory, more boring parts of his job: in other words, in changing his perspective. Mike Skowronski calls this ‘cognitive, engaged coping’ and this could include: refocusing attention on a task, setting personal performance goals, reframing the importance of the task, or thinking of improvements in the way you perform a task (Skowronski, 2012). He applies this labour to his commute, for example. He tells me that he uses the time to meditate or listen to podcasts it; and whilst it sometimes takes one hour to get to work, sometimes an hour and forty-five minutes, he says: “it makes things interesting” that the trains are so unreliable and he never knows if he’ll get a seat or not (Rory, Interview 10.1). Similarly, when I ask if time ever drags at work, he says yes – but quickly follows this with an explanation of how they *fix* this problem by structuring the day in a particular way.

This problem-solving approach to boredom is perhaps unsurprising since he says of his work “you’re encouraged to just find... I don’t know, I think you’re encouraged to *make* it fun” (Rory, Interview 10.2). His positive attitude is at best a voluntary disposition of optimism – either innate in his personality or a learned behaviour borne of his life experience and the knowledge that it is beneficial to him. At worst, it is a symptom of an attitude *demand*ed of him by his work, where he is required to repress any feelings of negativity. It is hard to say which it is, although the denial of negative emotions (or any emotional experience seen as ‘unhelpful’ or ‘unproductive’) is common in “today’s heady narratives of passion exercised through work” (Gregg, 2018: 2). Anika, too, reflects this style of cognitive coping - “I definitely do try and focus on the good bits. And I get really excited about the good bits, which makes me not really mind the boring bits so much” (Anika, Interview 1.3). As Svendsen reminds us, “work is often onerous, often without the potential to provide any meaning in life” which necessitates exactly these kinds of cognitive manoeuvres (2012: 34).

Your experiences, upbringing and life story (your route into work) also have a huge impact on your attitude to work more generally and how you cognitively frame your work experiences in terms of meaning(lessness). In considering the fact that Connor faced difficulties in getting to where he is now, we might see that he is more willing to view his work positively, despite it

containing elements of what we might see as objectively quite boring tasks. Similarly, Theo, in telling me about his past jobs as a food delivery driver, a call centre employee and ride attendant at a theme park, is aware of how ‘good he has it’ *because* he’s had to do these jobs which he didn’t enjoy and he wasn’t valued in. Whilst this in itself doesn’t totally shape an attitude to boredom, there was a sense of gratitude from these participants – they felt lucky to have the work, and to find meaning in the work. This sentiment is not shared by Poppy, who seemed to view her job far more cynically. In Poppy’s case, her flippancy about her gallery assistant role is made possible by the economic privileges she enjoys.

In considering these differences in participant’s life stories, we can see that there are different framings and narratives which impact the ways in which people naturally frame their relationship to boredom at work, and the way that they are more open to finding meaning in boredom. Rory, at the beginning of the first interview, admitted that as a result of one too many unpaid internships and false starts: “my attitude towards work was pretty cynical for a long time...” (Rory, Interview 10.1). His is a rare story of conversion – from cynicism to enjoyment, fulfilment and gratitude *through* finding good work.

### ***Give Up / Accept***

*“I just end up being like ‘I give up’ - yeah, all I’m gonna do is look at the clock and I’m not gonna even try and not be bored... I’m just gonna sit here and not bother”*

(Anika, Interview 1.3)

Another form of disengagement is to ‘give up’ or ‘give in’ to boredom. Anika describes this as one of her many responses to boredom at work; involving a disengagement with the continual effort we are always making in order *not* to be bored. This is a kind of leaning *in* to boredom – just allowing it to *be*, ceasing to try and create interest or stimulation and accepting the experience as it is. This relates to Heidegger’s approach to boredom, in which he states that we should “let this attunement be as it is” (Heidegger, 1983: 65) and make it “a matter of seeing boredom as it bores us” thereby preserving and maintaining the immediacy of our everyday experience (Heidegger, 1983: 95). Perhaps it was these moments of pause and resignation that enabled Anika to consider how she could improve things in her department through the engagement committee she was a founding member of, or to think about how she could have more impact. It is certainly true that she is unlikely to have taken part in forming the committee if she was overloaded with work. Interestingly, this kind of *acceptance* of boredom and *indulgence* in it is exactly what is advocated by Haladyn as providing a critical space to begin to imagine other

potentialities (2017). Boredom perhaps does not *need* to always be remedied or evaded, but so often we try to. There were no other instances of participants actively saying that they would get bored and entirely give in to the experience in this way, largely because of boredom being an “*unpleasant*, transient affective state” (Fisher 1993: 396, *emphasis added*).

### ***So... what should we do with boredom?***

The points raised here - around how boredom feels, why we might feel it and what we can do with it - are all implicated in the concept of ‘productivity’, and the moralising discourse around boredom, as well as the way in which we tend to *prefer* other types of emotions or experiences. That “boredom uses discomfort to make us act” means that it is usually an unwanted experience; one which people do, in practice, seek to avoid (Crute, 2019: np). Anika, for example, telling me that she has ‘so many ways out of being bored’ is partly revealing her own ingenuity, but is also highlighting that she is in a job where she is not given enough to do and so needs to call upon these coping mechanisms each day. What is clear is that there was very little evidence of the participants ‘leaning in’ to boredom with the kind of playful curiosity or serious philosophical intent as detailed by the artists discussed in Chapter Four. There are hints of this in Poppy’s narrative but, on the whole, the participants didn’t see a place for boredom (at least, not profound, contemplative boredom) in the working day. Their responses to boredom varied, but for the most part demonstrated strategies for eradicating or evading moment-by-moment instances of boredom through the behavioural and cognitive strategies discussed.

Finding meaning in job roles more generally (rather than in specific tasks) was where the participants, particularly Richard, Liam and Poppy, had more difficulty. Liam, all too aware of the limited social value of delivering a single milkshake to someone in an office, laments ‘there’s this sense of what’s the fucking point’; Richard says, ‘I would like to do something socially useful’ and says his work is ‘completely pointless’; Poppy says she’s treated like she can’t do anything, and that she ‘just has no control’ in her job. Redefining meaning in this wider sense – applying a cognitive coping mechanism - is more difficult, and so the more ‘profound’ form of boredom that seeps in leaves a trace, even where the moment-by-moment instances of ‘simple’ boredom are addressed. And yet, psychological studies demonstrate over and over again that “when given a compelling reason to perform an uninteresting task, individuals use various strategies to maintain persistence”; if the ‘compelling reason’ is financial gain or providing for our families, then there are proven behavioural and cognitive coping strategies that are available, even when work induces boredom or is perceived to lack meaning (Skowronski, 2012: 145). But, as demonstrated by Richard, Liam and Poppy, we are sometimes all-too-aware of the effort we

are having to make to *find* or *fabricate* this meaning, if we do manage to, which only serves to underline our own awareness of its fallacy.

## IV. Conclusions

*“Boredom, fact of life!”*

(Connor, Interview 3.2)

*“Nature [...] gives us only what we need and not what we want, which produces a hard kind of miracle. The human experience did not emerge to entertain us”*

(Crute, 2019: np)

Boredom’s defining feature, other than its ambiguity, is its inevitability. As Haladyn writes: “behind the glitter [...] lays the ever-looming spectre of boredom” (2015: 135). Even Rory, the least bored participant in this study, acknowledges this ‘spectre’. He told me that his work “staves off the boredom by being rewarding” – a turn of phrase which suggests this sense of boredom always being immanently possible (Rory, Interview 10.2). The inevitability of boredom is also reflected in the way that Poppy describes her experience of watching other people all day. She explains that from observing visitors in the galleries: “a lot of the time, when people forget to put on any kind of pretence or facial expression, it just... you just look bored” (Poppy, Interview 4.1). This again reveals boredom as the-absence-of-anything-else, the kind of neutral backdrop against which interest, excitement and engagement arise. It is fascinating that we read *boredom* from people’s natural expressions, in the absence of any other observable emotional display. Boredom, perhaps, is the ever-present background to our experience - our *natural state*.

Boredom as the background to experience – ever present, but just faded or pushed aside when we experience other states such as excitement or interest - is beautifully expressed by Raposa. He writes that boredom is: “an experience [...] of the emptiness that lurks at the heart of human existence, an emptiness into which each moment fades, into which all finite things pass away” (Raposa, 1999: 60).

Boredom also contains a critique – a *demand* for things to be otherwise. But this radical potential is not always realised. In fact, the revolutionary potential of boredom, for some theorists, is not to be found in the normal daily instances of boredom, which we might call ‘simple boredom’. Siegfried Kracauer writes: “the vulgar boredom of daily drudgery [...] 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” (1995: 331). For him, the true revolutionary potential lies in more existential forms of boredom, where changing an activity or shifting attention will not fill the void of meaning – what Heidegger called *profound boredom*. Richard inadvertently touches on this idea of existential

boredom coming from a deep-rooted disillusionment with the vacuous inauthenticity of experience in his discussion of corporate mission statements. In Richard's case, his *awareness* of the lack of meaning is itself part of this continual search for meaning – though his search for meaning has failed. This *could* be a moment with the potential for other meanings to arise, but in practice, this does not seem to be the case for Richard.

Richard even says, “see, work *stops* me being bored!” (Richard, Interview 2.2). In this moment, he was being sarcastic, but it is fascinating to put this in dialogue with Svendsen's contention that “the person who advocates work as a cure for boredom is confusing a temporary removal of the symptoms with curing a disease” (Svendsen, 2012: 34). Similarly, the ideology of authenticity, excitement and vitality at work – itself a response to the lack of authenticity, excitement and vitality at work - can be seen as “a suspicious corporate response to a structural crisis of experience precipitated by capitalism itself” (Murtola and Fleming, 2011: 3).

The idea of looking at your own daily life through the lens of boredom, to go *looking* for boredom, almost certainly feels uncomfortable, especially in a world where work is increasingly aestheticized and seen as a central part of who we *are*. This is perhaps why so few reported instances of ‘resting’ or ‘indulging’ in boredom were communicated by the participants. Anika confided that when I first asked if she would take part in the project she felt some resistance, laughing and telling me: “if I'm completely honest, when you first mentioned it I was like, I don't want to do that, it's going to make me hate my job and my life” (Anika, Interview 1.3). As Zygmunt Bauman writes: “like everything else which may reasonably hope to become the target of desire and an object of free consumer choice [...] jobs must be ‘interesting’ – varied, exciting, allowing for adventure [...] and giving occasion to ever new sensations” (1998: 33).

To summarise the arguments put forward in this chapter, I turned firstly to the theme of boredom and time. This section argued that experiences of boredom are characterised by paying attention to *time*, this being the fundamental way in which a subjective perception of ‘time slowing down’ is figured – supporting what Game diagnoses, namely that “boredom is associated with altered time-perception and attentional difficulties” (2007: 704). This relationship between temporality and boredom is similar to the way in which the artists discussed in Chapter Four are able to evoke boredom and bored time-spaces: by making explicit the passage of time itself and excessively paying attention to nothing *but* the passing of time – time without experience, variety, interest. Leslie Kenny discusses this, writing: “the discomfort increases as we become increasingly aware of the passage of time. Without purpose, meaning and desire, time is empty and yet weighs heavily upon us” (Kenny, 2009: 195).

In considering further this relationship between boredom and (the absence of) meaning, I began by considering that literature on the role of meaningfulness at work has traditionally focussed on how meaningfulness can be engineered through job design (e.g. Hackman and Oldham, 1975) but that “this managerial approach has been critiqued for disregarding humans’ *intrinsic* need for meaningfulness” (Boeck, Dries and Tierens, 2019: 530). Svendsen, discussing F.H. Jacobi’s work on nihilism, writes that “man has chosen between God and nothingness, and by choosing nothingness man makes himself a god” (Svendsen, 2012: 33). What this suggests is that in the wake of the decline of religious belief, humans have therefore had to assume the role of the ‘gravitational centre of meaning’ in our own lives. Svendsen argues that we are ill-equipped for this role and require exterior structures to aid us in producing meaning in our own lives, with work being one such ordering principle. In analysing my research participants’ experience, I put forward the argument that workplace boredom is connected to meaninglessness, and that an inability to find meaning at work – in a task or in your job role more generally – is strongly reflected in the instances of boredom shown in the field data. As Raposa writes: “boredom itself represents the death of *meaning*, of interest” (Raposa, 1999: 60, emphasis added).

Finally, in the third part of the chapter, I summarised the range of emotions implicated in bored moments at work, with respect to both feelings of boredom and feelings about boredom. I also reflected on the responses to boredom apparent in my respondents’ testimonies. These tended to be ways of discovering or creating meaning, interest or stimulation where they were found to be lacking. We may also call these the ‘epiphenomena’ of boredom, since boredom prompts the reframing, rethinking or changing of our actions or attitudes. Boredom, conceptualised as a prompt to do *something* or something *else*, can indeed be a generative force. But, “regardless of this imagined possibility, boredom itself, the in-the-moment experience of boredom, is one of absence: we are not interested; we lack a sense of meaning; we lack desire; we are not purposively motivated” (Kenny, 2009: 195). Responding to boredom – at least as demonstrated in the field data discussed here – is usually a matter of resisting, denying, repressing or reframing boredom, so that we can ‘make it go away’. The discomfort that boredom breeds makes this something of a default reaction, and so there are few instances in lived work experiences of the kind of modernist, profound, elevated boredom which characterised much of the artists’ work discussed in Chapter Four. The productivity impulse which characterised work and workplaces precludes any sense that we should indulge in boredom, which is precisely why modernist conceptual art uses this as an aesthetic approach.

Boredom is an emotional experience that is just one part of the rich tapestry of emotional experience available to us. The ambivalence of boredom is a continuous thread that runs through the transcripts, images and stories presented here, and indeed through the thesis itself. A lot of the participants displayed a sense of the inherent contradictions implied in the experience of boredom as well as responses to boredom. For example: this is boring, but it has value so I'll do it; if I get bored I'll stop and do something else; this could be boring but we arrange our day so that there's always something new on the horizon; this was boring, but then I started doing it in a different way; I'm irritated by restrictions, but I bend the rules sometimes; I feel like I'm doing the same thing every day, but I know it's never *really* the same.

However, boredom's rehabilitation as a radical act of dissent and critique has, for the most part, not yet made it into our everyday experiences, particularly not in lived experiences of the workplace. Its negative and moralistic associations persist, with boredom still being conceptualised as a symptom of a personal failure to find meaning. Consider again the reluctance Anika expressed about taking part in a project that specifically asked her to go *looking* for boredom. Putting this in dialogue with Bailey et al.'s claim that "the absence of work that is meaningful exposes the individual to harms, since they are unable to satisfy their inescapable need for meaning and to live a flourishing life" we see why there is a risk of harm in paying *too* much attention to boredom – especially when we know we still have to go to work the next day (2019: 403). To further illustrate this, consider Poppy's perspective when I asked her whether she has had many conversations around boredom, given that it is such a huge feature of her working life:

*"I think that is not one of the things that we're used to talking about, because it's a bit of a... cul-de-sac. It doesn't necessarily lead anywhere? You know, you can say 'I'm bored' but, no.. I mean, I... until this, I've never really had any big conversations around that."* (Poppy, Interview 4.1)

Poppy conveys the idea that thinking about or discussing boredom is tinged with – or perhaps even defined by – futility. This mirrors Lesley Kenny's point that in seeking to talk about boredom, or pay attention to it, it seems to slip through our fingers (2009). Whilst the experience of boredom might engulf you and render *other* types of experience – like excitement or interest – impossible in that moment, it also simultaneously holds the possibility of things being otherwise. Nonetheless, this possibility – boredom as potentially revolutionary – is not something that Poppy – or any of the other participants - have a strong sense of when they consider boredom at work.

## CONCLUSIONS

*Given that “work fundamentally shapes our lives and establishes its basic rhythms” and that boredom is such a common register of experience at work, it is fair to say that boredom, too, fundamentally shapes our lives (Bailey and Madden, 2015: 3). Indeed, Farnworth, responding to Patricia Spacks’ book ‘Boredom: The literary history of a state of mind’ asks: “perhaps today all human endeavour takes place in the context of impending boredom, or boredom repudiated, and can be understood as impelled by the effort to withstand boredom’s threat” (Farnworth, 1998: 145).*

*In this conclusion, I focus on the connections between the different tonalities of boredom as discussed in the ‘Artists’ and ‘Experiences’ chapters, with a particular emphasis on thinking through how boredom’s rehabilitation as a key site of resistance and possibility runs counter to the everyday lived experiences of boredom that people reported in their working lives. This is figured through a consideration of ‘simple’ vs. ‘profound’ boredom. I also reflect on the ways in which creativity and art practice – as deployed in fine art, as well as in the use of creative research methods – carves a space from which we can explore these lived experiences of boredom, which are so often resisted, pushed away and deliberately overlooked. And yet, at the same time, I also propose that the fieldwork data shows that humans’ innate desire for meaningfulness gifts us with resources with which we can generate meaning for ourselves; and that evading or escaping everyday boredom in this way is not always the missed opportunity that much boredom literature would propose it to be.*

## Simple and profound boredom / art and working life

*“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.”*

(Kracauer, 2017: 34)

*“Profound boredom allows us to detach from the here-now so that we might engage in acts of criticism and interpretation – or, in a more philosophical articulation, we depart from our ordinary to engage in the radical activity of philosophy [...] Meanwhile, vulgar boredom merely allows us to detach from the here-now enough to be with ourselves in what I only really know how to call an ordinary way.”*

(Richmond, 2015: 32)

Boredom’s more quotidian incarnation – often called ‘simple’ or ‘vulgar’ boredom – sits in contrast to its more metaphysical, theoretical counterpart – ‘profound’ or ‘existential’ boredom. Though perhaps a rather crude simplification of something evidently far more complex, this distinction between ‘simple’ and ‘profound’ boredom is analytically useful in revealing the ways in which the participants understood boredom. It is therefore instrumental in understanding the different tonalities and typologies of boredom discussed in the thesis, and in considering this we must return to Heidegger’s conceptualisation of boredom.

As discussed in earlier chapters, Heidegger distinguishes between three different types of boredom: being bored *by* something; being bored *with* something; and, finally, *profound boredom*. In the first case, you are bored by something boring – for example waiting for a train or queuing at the Post Office counter. In the second case, it is a more retrospective boredom. You may go to an event, find it pleasant, but then realise that it did not fulfil something within you that remains unfulfilled. When bored *by* or bored *with*, Heidegger argues, we are not authentically attuned to the existential realities of life; rather, we are using these forms of boredom as way of evading deeper questions over meaning. *Profound* boredom, however, denotes an acute awareness of more existential questions: it doesn’t present us with a given meaning, but “rather exposes us as being faced with the problem of the meaning of our transient being” (Goodstein 2005: 325).

Scott Richmond, in discussing ‘vulgar’ vs. ‘profound’ boredom, uses a comparative analysis of Candy Crush set against Andy Warhol’s ‘stillies’. One is related to popular culture and everyday life – vulgar, simple boredom – and the other is set up as fine art – a cerebral kind of boredom that he calls “modernist profound boredom [...] a kind of meta-boredom” (Richmond, 2015: 21-

22). In making this comparison he exposes the problematic political implications of these two types of boredom. He writes:

*“Profound boredom may even rely on critical procedures to make it profound: intellect is often the solution which dissolves our initial disinterest. Part of the allure of profound boredom is that it requires its spectator to have successfully received enough of an aesthetic education to recognize the glint of interesting behind the veil of boredom. [...] It is a decisive break from the ordinary, or a rupture within it. It allows the viewer to feel the pride of the initiate.”* (Richmond, 2015: 28-29)

In contrast to these claims of profound boredom’s elevation and rewards, simple boredom – everyday boredom – which was most often discussed by the participants, was attended with guilt, feelings of shame, irritation, anger. There was certainly no pride, and nothing positive seen to come from ‘sitting with’ feelings of boredom. It is perhaps unsurprising that the participants did not relay a sense of positive profound boredom, since profound boredom certainly requires you to ‘stay longer than you want to’ as Poppy so wonderfully put it. It requires you to sit with an ugly, uncomfortable feeling in order to realise its potential: “you have to have faith that you’ll discover that the thing isn’t boring at all – eventually. [...] the spectator must pass through boredom to amorous fascination” (Richmond, 2015: 28). Here, Richmond also makes a salient point – that these types of boredom are fluid, and you can move from one to the other.

Simple boredom in the sense that Heidegger lays out, is being bored *by* or *with* something - but, with “exacerbated duration [it] becomes meditative, a rapt attentiveness to details that ordinarily fall below the threshold of awareness” (Richmond, 2015: 22). Given that “the experience of boredom is often associated with ideas of victimization and entrapment” (Farnworth, 1998: 140), profound boredom offers the promise of liberation from within – it involves finding the freedom in restriction, the interest in boredom. This is the ‘critical procedure’ Richmond identifies, and the one which transmutes simple boredom into profound. And yet, this movement from simple to profound boredom requires *time*, for boredom to be ‘paid attention to’ to the extent that it becomes interesting. As EP Thompson argued, the conflicted ownership of *time* is at stake in the working relation (Thompson, 1967). This is precisely what complicates the availability of profound boredom in everyday working experiences. Boredom involves a relation to time, but as paid workers that *time* is not our own: we are in an exchange relation, rendering our relationship and ownership of time as belonging to someone else. Though the world of work has changed significantly, the symbolism of time as a “currency of control” persists, in the visual arts and in the participants’ understandings of their working life (Bailey and Madden, 2015: 5).

Perhaps precisely because of this lack of ownership over our time when we are at work, it was abundantly clear that profound boredom rarely featured in the participants' narrated experiences. The everyday accounts of boredom were, in a sense, quite disappointing when set against the grand philosophical claims of profound boredom's richness and radicality. Where profound boredom *did* feature was in Richard's story. His existential weariness and the sense of futility he found in his work spoke to these issues directly, and yet he was the only participant to claim that he was never really bored, except in what he called a 'normal' sense. This suggests a disconnect in terms of understandings of boredom. 'Simple' boredom was the principal way in which the participants understood boredom as a category, surely because the labour relation makes any 'profound' sense of boredom harder to access. After all, it is harder to indulge in boredom when we have the feeling that we 'should' be doing something else, with the knowledge that productivity is culturally encoded as successful and 'good'.

Thinking more about occasions of 'simple boredom' in the fieldwork data, though the participants do occasionally describe soothing forms of boredom – i.e. sometimes when doing a boring task – there was far more evidence of boredom creating a kind of agitation, often coupled with a feeling of guilt or regret. It also tended to still be aligned with feelings of guilt *particularly* if it was experienced as an enjoyable kind of boredom. It follows: at work we might endure boredom for a moment before we seek to eradicate it – but we certainly mustn't dwell on it; and the one thing we really mustn't do is to *enjoy it*. In contrast, neither enduring boredom or eradicating it fit with the concerns of the artists' modernist profound boredom. Instead, they *dwell* on it, *focus* on it, excessively *interrogate* it. Uriarte, in particular, *enjoys* it. This is how they "use boredom in the context of the aesthetic, demanding you find the other side of boredom" (Richmond, 2015: 22). This is radical precisely because of the culturally-embedded reluctance to pay attention to boredom, as apparent in the participants' testimonies. There was a kind of fear around going looking for boredom, with Anika telling me that she was worried that taking part in the research "would make me hate my life and my job" (Interview 1.3).

On the whole, the participants very much resisted all forms of boredom, casting it as 'bad'. Chiefly, it was seen as a kind of personal failure to measure up to your work responsibilities, and so was connected to laziness and time wasting. Because of this, it was also seen as risky, something which might make them 'feel bad' about their work. In the case of Connor, the bus engineer, for him boredom was just something that signified that you needed to be given more work to do - he *wanted* to be doing his job, and liked being busy because he found it rewarding. Similarly, Rory's workday is designed to 'stave off boredom'. Poppy was trying to endure

boredom, but found herself hiding Sudokus in her lanyard and becoming reckless with her work. Through resisting boredom in this way, we preclude any sense of profound boredom since, as outlined, it requires time and reflection to transmute from simple to profound boredom.

Nonetheless, the question of what happens when you engage with everyday stories of simple boredom and engage with them creatively is one which I hope to have provided one answer to. The fact that moments of boredom at work are so urgently closed down and ushered away by the participants in this study merits them as a key site of study, and in engaging creatively with these ‘undesirable’ or ‘uncomfortable’ moments we can allow them to breathe and to open up in new ways. The poems produced in this thesis offer evidence of this. Of particular note is Sian Ephgrave’s poem based on Poppy’s testimony, titled *Time Does Not Go Quickly*. In it, Sian used repetition and circularity in the structure of the text in order to evoke the routines, cycles and repetitions of the participant’s work, making boredom part of the formal composition of the work as well as the thematic contents.

And yet, I wonder whether the participants’ reluctance to dwell in boredom at work is really a failure. Evading boredom may admittedly prevent the reflective distance required for an experience of profound boredom that allows you to ‘wake up’ to the radical possibility of ‘things being otherwise’. However, although there is value in the conceptualisation of profound boredom as a philosophically generative force, I propose that evading boredom is not always a missed opportunity. Rather, I argue that any comprehensive account of boredom must also take account of, and value, the resources that people have and mobilize in order to energise themselves and find meaning, enjoyment, interest or distraction when faced with boredom – whether this is radically philosophical or not. One of the most resounding impressions I had when conducting the fieldwork – a reflection that kept coming back to me time and time again – was just how resourceful the participants were, how resilient they were in the face of these everyday challenges. Further, the testimonies struck home with how *important* this resilience is - because not everyone can have their ‘dream job’, not everyone will be able to find fulfilling work, and even people with meaningful jobs will have boring tasks to do, and bad days at work.

It is true that boredom has much to offer in contesting the logics of capitalism and the internalised productivity impulse; the impulse which “fully exploits our admirable quality of desiring accomplishment, fanning a quest for victories that will never be satisfied or exhausted” (Gregg, 2018: 7). This is the focus of “emotional engineering” in the workplace, where it is now recognised that where work is meaningful and enjoyable, we will willingly do more of it, and do it better (Weeks, 2011: 71). Resisting this impulse is a vital part of any critique of modernity, and

so the value in profound boredom is that it “dissolves itself into various forms of critical and aesthetic reflection” (Richmond, 2015: 27). I am entirely convinced by this argument, which at root proposes that when confronted with meaninglessness we are prompted to discover meaning. And yet, is this not the same process at work when employees are confronted with ‘simple boredom’? The difference is that profound boredom, as Heidegger theorises it, is *authentic* and simple boredom is *not* (Heidegger, 1983) – but what use is authenticity if we are authentically *unhappy*? Further to this, the valuation of profound boredom over other more everyday incarnations feels very much like a return of the “intellectual elitism” that defined earlier forms of profound boredom, where it was seen as an existential pose reserved for those with the means to indulge in it (Kenny 2009: 109). Boredom, then, can be radical or enjoyable – but only if you don’t *depend* on the money or the work. By way of demonstration, consider that the participant who was most consciously willing to try and access a more ‘profound’ sense of boredom was Poppy, the gallery assistant – who didn’t really *need* the job she was doing because she had a rent-free flat in Clapham that her parents had bought for her. In contrast, Richard spoke about a kind of profound boredom, but didn’t identify with it or think of it in this way because he *really needed the work* and had to try to think of it in terms which made it possible for him to continue to do the work.

In this thesis boredom has largely been figured through its relationship to meaningfulness and meaninglessness at work, tying this to its experiential temporal qualities. This is complicated by the fact that both meaning and boredom are “experienced as transient moments in time rather than a sustained state of being” and so ebb and flow, always in negotiation (Bailey and Madden, 2015: 4). The political problem of boredom, perhaps, is more around the way humans’ innate desire for meaningfulness is *used* and co-opted. If it is *demand*ed of us that we repress boredom and feign interest, this is entirely different from recognising our own boredom and seeking to infuse our lives with meaning. The *demand* for work to be interesting in itself often manifests as an attack on the expression of genuine emotion, which is why so many studies of the workplace (and offices in particular) address the idea of inauthenticity (Fleming, 2009; Gregg, 2010).

### **Final thoughts**

For Svendsen, high boredom levels in a population denote “a serious fault in society as a conveyor of meaning” (2012: 22). We might similarly suggest that high levels of boredom in a workplace denote a serious fault in *work* as a conveyor of meaning, making these conversations all the more urgent, particularly since boredom is “intimately linked to human occupation and meaning” (Farnworth, 1998: 140).

To return finally to the broader ethical agenda in which this project is grounded, consider the fact that there is such sustained interest in studies of work and working experience. Terkel's *Working* was an instant bestseller when it was published in 1974, and continues to sell remarkably well. It was even made into a popular musical in the seventies, though the European premiere of the musical didn't take place until it was performed at the Southwark Playhouse in London in the summer of 2017 (something I can personally attest to, having - a little obsessively, perhaps - gone to see it twice in the space of two weeks). There have been subsequent iterations of books about everyday working life – especially Alain de Botton's *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work* (de 2009), a personal favourite of mine – which also speak to this enduring public interest. Films about work, poems about work, art about work. Ronald Fraser astutely detects that this “widespread interest [...] points to the lack of occasion under monopoly capitalism for serious individual expression on the meaning and purpose of work” (Fraser, 1969a: np). Considering this diagnosis alongside critical accounts of contemporary work, with the insidious forms of power and control; the demand to *really* be authentic; to use who you *are* in your job; to have freedom at work; to genuinely enjoy work – we see a complex picture emerging.

On the one hand, there are conversations around what work really means and how we do it – flexible working, home working, unlimited holiday, four day working weeks, co-working spaces and flexible contracts and so on – which make the world of work look, superficially at least, very different to how it was in the past. However, it is also abundantly clear that these ‘occasions for expression around the meaning and purpose of work’ are perhaps becoming all the fainter precisely *because* work is starting to look less like work and more like ‘life itself’, making the need to address this issue more timely than ever. To this end, I would like to finish by quoting the afterword to Ronald Fraser's second edited collection, *Work 2*, written by Welsh writer, novelist, academic and critic, Raymond Williams:

*“We can see the final importance of these essays: that we have got in touch, with ourselves and others, in new ways; that we have started to talk, on our own behalf, about these crucial experiences; that work is not only the bus, the computer, the print-shop, the hospital, the signal box, the assembly line, the office, but through these very particulars is an experience we are sharing, valuing, trying to clarify. We have come this far that we are talking about work: our own work and yet not just our own work; a social fact made out of our personal accounts. It is an important step forward, and it is clear that we must go on talking and listening.”* (Raymond Williams in Fraser, 1968: 298)

## Appendix

*Figure 47 Table of interviewees showing role, age, gender, interview numbers, dates and locations*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Job Role</b>		<b>Interview no.</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Location</b>
<b>Anika</b>	Civil Servant – junior policy officer	F / 25	Interview 1.1	12/02/2018	Anika’s flat, Brixton
			Interview 1.2	12/02/2018	Anika’s flat, Brixton
			Interview 1.3	28/06/2018	Anika’s flat, Brixton
<b>Richard</b>	Freelance Management Consultant	M / 54	Interview 2.1	02/04/2018	Richard’s house, KT1
			Interview 2.2	18/04/2018	Skype, Reykjavik
<b>Connor</b>	Apprentice Bus Engineer	M / 28	Interview 3.1	25/05/2018	Pub, Surrey
			Interview 3.2	15/06/2018	Pub, Surrey
<b>Poppy</b>	Gallery Assistant	F / 25	Interview 4.1	29/06/2018	Poppy’s flat, Clapham
			Interview 4.2	14/08/2018	Café, Brixton
<b>Emma</b>	Barista	F / 26	Interview 5.1	26/08/2018	Emma’s house, RH5
			Interview 5.2	17/10/2018	Café, Wimbledon
<b>Theo</b>	Live Sound Engineer	M / 28	Interview 6.1	16/06/2018	Theo’s house, Surrey
			Interview 6.2	05/08/2018	Skype, Toronto
<b>Alex</b>	Chef	M / 24	Interview 7.1	15/08/2018	Pub, Surrey
			Interview 7.2	16/10/2018	Alex’s place of work
<b>Liam</b>	Cycle Courier	M / 22	Interview 8.1	02/10/2018	Café, Warren Street
			Interview 8.2	07/11/2018	Pub, Bloomsbury
<b>George</b>	Teacher	M / 25	Interview 9.1	31/08/2018	Pub, Surrey
			Interview 9.2	24/10/2018	Pub, Clapham
<b>Rory</b>	Software Developer	M / 26	Interview 10.1	25/10/2018	Park, Old Street
			Interview 10.2	15/11/2018	Café, Old Street

Figure 48 Participant letter explaining the research (January 2018)



**Re: participation in project ‘Working: How does boredom feature in everyday experiences of work?’**

Dear [Participant],

Many thanks for agreeing to participate in the research for my ESRC funded project on lived experiences of working life.

I look forward to talking with you about your experiences of work. The research process will involve two interviews, one of which will involve you discussing some photos that you will have taken. In order that you are fully aware of what how and where the photos and interview data might be used, I ask that you read the attached documents in advance of the first interview.

I should stress that the research will be entirely anonymous. The interview transcript will be anonymised by the researcher, and no third party will ever see the unedited transcript. There will be no names used in write ups and no company names. Any images you provide for the study that might identify you or your place of work will either not be used (unless express permission is given by you). They also may be edited / cropped in order to anonymise them if that is possible.

Please look over the attached forms in advance of our first meeting. There is no need to sign them now, as I will bring a hard copy of this document with me to the interview for us both to sign.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you are having difficulty understanding the (rather complicated!) form or if you have any questions.

I am more than happy to talk this through in person when we meet if that's helpful.

Thanks again for agreeing to take part in the project.

Kind Regards,

**Katy Lawn**

[Katy.lawn.2015@live.rhul.ac.uk](mailto:Katy.lawn.2015@live.rhul.ac.uk)  
07931318438

# WORKING: HOW DOES BOREDOM FEATURE IN EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES OF WORK?

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS



ROYAL  
HOLLOWAY  
UNIVERSITY  
OF LONDON

E · S · R · C  
ECONOMIC  
& SOCIAL  
RESEARCH  
COUNCIL

# WORKING: HOW DOES BOREDOM FEATURE IN EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES OF WORK?

## WHAT IS THE PROJECT?

This study forms part of a project called: 'Working: how does boredom feature in everyday experiences of work'. The research explores what our everyday experiences of employment are, in terms of boredom vs. excitement, interest and fulfilment. Key questions are: how do we feel about what we do? Does boredom feature in our everyday lives? If so, how? If not, why? This is a small scale qualitative research project which uses interviews and creative methods to explore stories of working life in a range of careers.

## WHAT IS THE TIME COMMITMENT?

- Ability to take 15 photos of moments in your working day, over a 1 week period
- 2 x 30 - 50 minute interviews (in person)
- potentially 1 x 20 min follow-up interview (in person, skype or phone call)

## IS IT CONFIDENTIAL?

Yes. Your anonymity and confidentiality will be upheld at all times. The interview transcripts will be anonymised and no identifying details used.

## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

In taking part, you will be helping to produce innovative new research. The information gathered from the interviews will be used to understand wider cultural currents regarding the nature of work and how it impacts our emotional wellbeing, opportunities and lives.

## WHAT ARE THE OUTPUTS?

The results of the study will be published in academic papers, books and at academic conferences. A secondary aim is to engage the general public with research into the valuable everyday experiences of working life, so the findings *may* also be shared on public platforms such as a research blog or public engagement events.



## FUNDING BODY

This research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, the largest funder of social sciences research in the UK.

## ETHICS

This project has received ethical approval from the RHUL Ethics Committee



## ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

Katy Lawn is a PhD researcher based at Royal Holloway, part of the University of London. She has a background in cultural studies and qualitative social research, understanding the way we live our everyday lives and the importance of this. To date, much of her work has focussed on the everyday experiences of different types of work, with a focus on cultural ideas around employment and the role of emotions and self-narrated experiences in everyday life.

Katy is supervised by Phil Crang, a professor of Human Geography at Royal Holloway, University of London.

# RESEARCH PROCESS: WHAT IS THE COMMITMENT FOR YOU?

## STAGE 1: FIRST INTERVIEW

In this first interview, which will last between 20-40 minutes I will:

1. Talk you through the project and answer any questions you might have.
2. Ask general questions about your current job, work history, feelings about work in general (this part will be recorded)
3. explain the task of collecting photos for your second interview. Simply put, I will ask you to take photos of moments, things and places at work which you associate with either: boredom, excitement, or contentment. These photos can be of anything just as long as they say something about your experience at that moment. You should not be interested in your skills as a photographer; just keep in mind that the photographs should describe your emotional experiences of work. These photos will serve as prompts for the discussion in the second interview.

## STAGE 2: PHOTO INTERVIEW

Once you have collected your photos, I will ask you to send them to me in advance of this second interview. This second interview will last for between 40 and 50 minutes and will primarily focus on discussing the photos you have collected. These will be used as prompts for discussion, so I might ask why they were taken, how they make you feel and so on. This interview will be recorded in full, and after the interview you can indicate which photos may be used in the outputs from the research, which ones cannot be used, and which ones you would like to be edited for anonymisation purposes.

## STAGE 3: COLLABORATION WITH A POET

An anonymised version of your interview transcript will be handed over to a professional poet, who will use it as the basis for a poem or series of poems of any form, length and style. This poem will reflect your narrated experiences of work in terms of the significance of boredom, excitement and contentment. This poem will then be passed back to the you, so that you can review, comment on and revise the poem.

## STAGE 4: OUTPUT AND REFLECTION

This process will result in a set of visual and textual research 'stories', where each participant's experiences will be represented by the poem created out of your individual interview transcripts, set alongside a selection of the photos provided for the interview. These 'research stories' will be approved by you prior to inclusion in the PhD thesis, and will form the heart of this research project. A short follow-up interview (30 mins) may be conducted to reflect on the process.

## ANY QUESTIONS?

Please don't hesitate to get in contact.

**Email:** [Katy.Lawn.2015@live.rhul.ac.uk](mailto:Katy.Lawn.2015@live.rhul.ac.uk)

**Phone:** 07931318438

## PARTICIPATION DISCLAIMER

You are under no obligation to take part in this research. You can withdraw at any time without giving a reason and there will be no adverse consequences if you do so.



Figure 50 Consent form and photo release form – participants (3 pages, January 2018)

 		<h1>Research Consent Form</h1> <p>Project title: <b>'Working: How does boredom feature in everyday experiences of work'</b></p> <p><i>Please initial in the column below</i></p>
1.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I understand what this study involves.</li> <li>• I understand that if I decide at any time that I no longer wish to take part in this project I can notify the researcher and withdraw immediately.</li> <li>• I understand that I do not need to give any personal information, and that any information I do give, will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998.</li> <li>• I understand that the information I give will be published as a report and in academic journal writing. It also may be potentially used in blog posts, non-academic outlets, and in research presentations. Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me from any publications.</li> <li>• I understand that my identity will be kept confidential throughout the full research process, and that pseudonyms will be used in every stage of research, from note taking to final write-up to protect my identity.</li> <li>• I understand that no personal information will be shared with other participants in the study, and my participation will be kept entirely confidential. As such, the interview transcript will be anonymised (identifying details removed and pseudonym's used) before being passed to the poet, who will use the transcript as the basis for a poem.</li> <li>• I understand that the photos I provide to the researcher will only be published in accordance with my permission (see photo release form)</li> </ul>	
2.	<p><b>Data</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I understand that signed consent forms, images and original audio recordings will be retained on the researcher's laptop in password protected folders accessible only to the researcher until January 2025 (any backed-up copies of the data will also be deleted on this date).</li> <li>• I understand that under the Data Protection Act 2018 I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.</li> <li>• I understand that the poet will retain copyright in the poem that they create using my interview data, and as such may freely use the work outside of this research context, but that I will be unidentifiable and will receive a copy of the poem for approval to ensure this.</li> </ul>	
3.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I agree that the research named above has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree to take part in the study</li> </ul>	

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

When completed, 1 copy for participant; 1 copy for researcher file.



## Photo Release Form

Project title: 'Working: How does boredom feature in everyday experiences of work'

Please complete **PART 1** and **PART 2** of this form

### PART 1

1.	<p>I, _____ [Name] give permission for the photos provided to the researcher to be reproduced for educational and/or noncommercial purposes in the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the PhD thesis</li> <li>• conference presentations</li> <li>• published academic papers</li> <li>• online and magazine publications</li> <li>• blog posts</li> </ul>	
2.	<p>I understand that real names will not be used with any of the photos, and that photos which identify people or places of work will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• not be used in the above publications OR</li> <li>• be edited or cropped so as to anonymise them OR</li> <li>• may be used <i>only</i> with the express permission of the participant</li> </ul> <p>as set out in PART 2 of this form.</p>	
3.	<p>I understand that the photos I provide to the researcher may be edited, enhanced, cropped or altered for stylistic purposes.</p>	
4.	<p>I understand that I may request for certain images not to be used at any time with no adverse consequences.</p>	
5.	<p>I understand that the photos will be stored on a separate storage drive and kept in the office of the researcher. They will not be made available to any person until I grant permission for their use as outlined in part 2.</p>	
6.	<p>I understand the above conditions and give my informed consent for the use of photos as set out above.</p>	

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

When completed, 1 copy for participant; 1 copy for researcher file.

**PART 2**

Please TICK/COMMENT as appropriate	Yes, you can use this photo	You can use this photo, but only with the following adjustments (please add specific comment here e.g. cropping, blurring)	No, do not use this photo
1. <b>each photo submitted for the research will be pasted into each row here to identify the different levels of consent appropriate to each photo</b>			
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Thank you for participating in this project. If you have any queries about this form or about the project or your participation in it, please do not hesitate to contact Katy Lawn: 07931318438 or [katy.lawn.2015@live.ruhl.ac.uk](mailto:katy.lawn.2015@live.ruhl.ac.uk)

# WORKING: HOW DOES BOREDOM FEATURE IN EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES OF WORK?

INFORMATION SHEET FOR POETS



# WORKING: HOW DOES BOREDOM FEATURE IN EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES OF WORK?

## WHAT IS THE PROJECT?

This study forms part of a project called: 'Working: how does boredom feature in everyday experiences of work'. The research explores what our everyday experiences of employment are, in terms of boredom vs. excitement, interest and fulfilment. Key questions are: how do we feel about what we do? Does boredom feature in our everyday lives? If so, how? If not, why? This is a small scale qualitative research project which uses interviews and creative methods to explore stories of working life in a range of careers.

## WHAT IS THE TIME COMMITMENT?

- Ability to meet for 30 mins (skype or in person) to discuss project
- Time to read up to 5,000 words of an interview transcript and to use the data to create a poem of any form, length and style.
- potentially 1 x 30 min follow-up interview (in person, skype or phone call)

## WHAT'S IN IT FOR YOU?

You may choose to undertake between 1 and 10 poems, depending on your own availability. For each poem, you will receive £50 on completion.

## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

In taking part, you will be helping to produce innovative new research. The information gathered from the interviews will be used to understand wider cultural currents regarding the nature of work and how it impacts our emotional wellbeing, opportunities and lives.

## WHAT ARE THE OUTPUTS?

The results of the study will be published in academic papers, books and at academic conferences. A secondary aim is to engage the general public with research into the valuable everyday experiences of working life, so the findings *may* also be shared on public platforms such as a research blog or public engagement events.



## FUNDING BODY

This research is funded by the Economic and Social research council, the largest funder of social sciences research in the UK.

## ETHICS

This study has been reviewed and received a favourable opinion from Royal Holloway's ethics committee.



## ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

Katy Lawn is a PhD researcher based at Royal Holloway, part of the University of London. She has a background in cultural studies and qualitative social research, understanding the way we live our everyday lives and the importance of this. To date, much of her work has focussed on the everyday experiences of different types of work, with a focus on cultural ideas around employment and the role of emotions and cognition in everyday life. Katy is supervised by Phil Crang, a professor of Human Geography at Royal Holloway, University of London.

## RESEARCH PROCESS: START TO FINISH

### STAGE 1: FIRST INTERVIEW WITH PARTICIPANTS

In this first interview, which will last up to 1 hour I will:

1. Talk interviewees through the project and answer any questions they might have.
2. Ask general questions about their current job, work history, feelings about work in general
3. explain the task of collecting photos (which represent their daily emotional experiences at work) in preparation for their second interview.

### STAGE 2: PHOTO INTERVIEW WITH PARTICIPANTS

Once participants have collected their photos, they will be used as prompts for discussion in the second interview which will focus more directly on experiences of boredom, interest, excitement and contentment in terms of the prevalence of each, the way they feel and the impacts.



The transcripts of these interviews will be cut down, anonymised and arranged thematically before being passed onto you. This is where you come in...

### STAGE 3: COLLABORATION WITH A POET

An anonymised version of your interview transcript will be handed over to a professional poet (you!) who will use it as the basis for a poem of any form, length and style. This poem will reflect the participants' narrated experiences of work in terms of the significance of boredom, excitement and contentment. This poem will then be passed back to the participant, so that they can review, comment on and revise the poem if needed.

### STAGE 4: OUTPUT AND REFLECTION

This four-step process will result in a set of visual and textual research 'stories', where each participant's experiences will be represented by a poem created out of each individual's interview transcripts, set alongside a selection of the photos which they provided for the interview. These 'research stories' will form the heart of this research project. A short recorded follow-up interview (30 mins) with you may be conducted to reflect on the process. **You will retain all rights to the poems that you create for this project and are free to use and publish them however you see fit.**

## ANY QUESTIONS?

Please don't hesitate to get in contact.

**Email:** [Katy.Lawn.2015@live.rhul.ac.uk](mailto:Katy.Lawn.2015@live.rhul.ac.uk)

**Phone:** 07931318438

## PARTICIPATION DISCLAIMER

You are under no obligation to take part in this research. You can withdraw at any time without giving a reason and there will be no adverse consequences if you do so.







## Poetry Release Form

Project title: 'Working: Lifeworlds and Everyday Experience'

1.	<p>I, _____ [Name] give permission for the poetry produced for the purposes of the project to be reproduced for educational and/or noncommercial purposes in the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the PhD thesis</li> <li>• conference presentations</li> <li>• published academic papers</li> <li>• online and magazine publications</li> <li>• blog posts</li> </ul>	
2.	<p>I understand that the copyright in the poems will remain my own, and that after submission of the PhD thesis I may use the poems commissioned for the project in any way I see fit.</p>	
3.	<p>I understand that my full name and any other information I request will <i>a/ways</i> accompany any instance where the poem is reproduced in the formats listed in section 1 above.</p>	
4.	<p>I understand the above conditions and give my informed consent for the use of the poetry produced for this research as set out above.</p>	

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Thank you for participating in this project. If you have any queries about this form or about the project or your participation in it, please do not hesitate to contact Katy Lawn: 07931318438 or [katy.lawn.2015@live.ruhl.ac.uk](mailto:katy.lawn.2015@live.ruhl.ac.uk)**

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