



MODERN ART OXFORD KALEIDOSCOPE *The Indivisible Present*

A STUDY IN TENSES

by Sally O'Reilly

She was bored with everything. She was bored by people, by pursuits, by pleasure, by all attempts to pass the time. And worse: her boredom was not of the transcendental type; neither was it the sort that is filled with potential. It was a moribund boredom that soaked her bones.

'What you need,' said a friend, 'is to be surprised.'

'You don't say,' she said.

He suggested she visit a gallery. He upheld a belief in the potential of art to produce unexpected experiences, and went regularly himself. She was sceptical, but desperate, so she took a bus to the nearest reputable gallery with as much haste as her ennui could afford her.

'I want to view some art,' she said to the young man at the reception desk. 'I'm bored and need distraction.'

The young man was offended by the implication that art was merely a distraction, but he was paid not to display his offence.

'Being a viewer can be really boring,' he said. 'Art isn't supposed to be entertaining. You might find that you're no more distracted in the gallery than you are anywhere else.'

The woman considered this, and decided that, since it was her first gallery visit, even entering the place could be eventful enough to rupture her boredom. She had entered many other communal places – train stations, hotel lobbies, airport lounges, discos – but never a gallery. She foresaw that

a gallery would be quite different to these other places, which bored her with their impersonal functionality, because if there was one thing she did know about art, it was that it excelled at producing subjectivities and refraining from utility.

She thanked the young man for his warning, skirted the bookshop and its attractive displays of books, multiples and posters, and purposely took the stairs furthest from the café, impervious to its aromatic and melodious allure. She had sat in cafés before. In fact, they were where she had been cultivating her boredom these last few months. They were full of bores.

She walked up the stairs, one after the other. She knew steps too well. They were increasingly boring to her. This was useful. She could prepare a state of flawless and utter boredom for exposure to whatever might be in the gallery. She imagined her boredom shattering on impact with the art. How delicious it would be to feel the boredom not melting gradually, but blinking violently out of existence.

But what she had neglected to realise was that anticipation had already partly displaced her boredom. Her expectations had distracted her from the present and, before she knew it, she was thinking not so much about what she saw, but how she might be changed by what she was about to see.

A man, leaving by the stairs she had just come up, executed a brief, non-committal smile. The meagre communication clouded her horizon of anticipation; the near future disappeared with an audible pop, depositing her in a self-conscious present. She couldn't remember the last time she had been so absolutely in the present. She seemed to recall that currently this was a very fashionable state to be in. She was very 'now', very *au courant*, being so in the present.

Before her was a large black-and-white projection of the back of a woman's head. A

projection into an already occurring future of an already completed past. Was this already boring? She wasn't sure yet. The woman in the film moved. Or the camera had moved. Or the white tiled room. Or all three. Then all was still again. Then another pulse of movement. Then another. Incrementally, the woman shrugged off her dressing gown to reveal bare shoulders as she ticked across the frame, right to left. She, the real woman, watched this other abstracted woman being mechanically guided through this other place. She could empathise with her, caught up in an epic car crash of banality for what looked like forever.

Other films she had seen had aroused expectations that were disappointingly fulfilled to the letter – expectations which were not strictly her own, but which had been mysteriously implanted during childhood. But this film did not provoke expectation so much as require remembering. Each new image was sustained so long as to obliterate any memory of the previous. What had changed? Why was this significant? She forgot. Had she ever known? History had always been such a bore. She moved on.

She entered the next room, this time as briskly and as unthinking as possible. Colours tugged at her peripheral vision.

'Look at me, look at me!' they sang.
'Shall I look?' she wondered.

She had just tried looking, and it had only compounded her boredom. Perhaps she should try the opposite. It could be exciting to resist. When feeling overlooked, visual information resorts to insinuation. It flirts with the imagination. When addressed directly, its reality is so much more boring. She would not look.

She strode through the gallery, ringing with tension as she reached the threshold of the next gallery. The information made one final, fatal effort.

'If you go on now, you'll never know,' it whispered.

Her head turned. Her eyes fell on the nearest photograph. She saw a red square engaged in an eternal flexing, doomed to pitch its geometric wit against gravity until relieved by the fading effect of light, some hundreds of years hence. Constant effort for no change. Zero sum. There were myths about this. Staring not at the photograph, not at the red square of card, but at endurance itself, she shuddered and struggled back into the fluid, changing current of the gallery.

'Life's too short to stare at a photograph,' she muttered to herself, although the brevity of life was not something she had ever suffered from. She had often wished for a shorter life so that she would be less bored. No one who hears death approaching can ever feel bored. Every second would be filled with content, albeit the content of dread. It had been proven that no human would enjoy immortality. Without mortality there is no urgency, no point, no content. Immortality is abstraction. *Content. Content.* Language is often unwittingly sage. She would be content if only she had content.

Books and sleep offered temporary refuge. Their narratives became her own for their duration. She knew how to bore into a text and make a place for herself within it. Her fingers reached out to touch the words. They absorbed her into their reverie. Voices around her were urgent.

'Don't touch.'
'I was just reading...'

Just slipping into the text, breathing at its commas, clambering its upper cases, navigating its clauses. Somnambulant, moving without exertion, the dreaming already done for her. On standby, beside herself, like machine sleep. Insensible until needed. Until someone moves her.

She sank down, down into her lower layers. It was interesting to feel herself

lengthen in time. Geology developed in and around her over aeons. Her boredom shrank to insignificance next to forever after and forever before. Books yellowed and crumbled. A green square yellowed, reddened and wilted. Time fossilised. She had always wished for something to wish for, for content, but now, as all expanded about and within her, she wished for nothing, for no distraction, no utility, no here and now, no there or then. Somewhere, a woman blinked. It took several minutes. Another woman died. It took several lifetimes.

She sank into the silt, into the amber, into the insect-blown past. She considered dying, but that would be predictable. Boring. If there was one thing she had learned in the gallery, it was that anticipation has nothing to do with the expected. Anticipating the unexpected would become predictable before long, so right now she was enjoying the sensation of anticipating nothing. This was an altogether different style of boredom. She would go for a coffee, a long, tall one, and immerse herself in contemplation, in measuring the depth and width of that nothing for a while.

Sally O'Reilly is KALEIDOSCOPE's Writer in Residence at Modern Art Oxford for 2016. O'Reilly will be producing texts and performances throughout the year.

EVENTS

KALEIDOSCOPE Live:
Sally O'Reilly
Live Illuminated Manuscript

Thursday 25 February, 7pm
Free entry, booking essential

Please see website for full list of events.

FURTHER READING

If you are interested in the subject of time in contemporary art, here is some recommended further reading.

Bachelard, Gaston (2000), *The Dialectics of Duration*, Manchester: Clinamen Press.

Blom, Ina, 'Boredom and Oblivion' in Friedman (ed.) (1998), *The Fluxus Reader*, Chichester: Academy Editions.

Crary, Jonathan (1999), *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Groys, Boris (2014), *On the New*, London: Verso.

Osborne, Peter (2013), *Anywhere or not at all: the philosophy of contemporary art*, London: Verso.