ART, BOREDOM …
For the thinker and for all inventive spirits ennui is the unpleasant 'calm' of the soul which precedes the happy voyage and the dancing breezes; he must endure it, he must wait. The effect has on him ... it is common to scare away ennui in every way — it perhaps distinguishes the Asiatics above the Europeans, that they are capable of a longer and profounder repose; even their narcotics operate slowly and require patience, in contrast to the obnoxious suddenness of the European poison, alcohol. [Friedrich Nietzsche, 1882]

Many months have passed, more than a year. Persisting still are the vague memories of the space (Denny's pillows, Macdonald's shoe rack, the videos of Thater, Tribe and Nauman), but those precipitous moments that make us choose one path over another have disappeared — those illuminating flashes, which are a confusion of gravitational pulls (the curator's will) and intuition that direct us around an installation space. At the apogee of the flux, before its fleeting potential quickly fades, we are faced with alternative ways and the possibility for multiple moments. But this is now lost. Over time, the curator's ebbing and shifting desires and the subtle manoeuvres of the artists, as well as the spontaneous reactions of the audience are forgotten. Fashioned from the once shocking luminosence of the present are memories that are coarser and less colourful: for distance coats events with an indiscriminate grey mist, dissolving details, and producing different effects and sensations. Precious moments are rich but slippery. We have to notice them and savour them; we have to rescue them from time's indiscriminate continuum before they disappear forever (perhaps this is the source of nostalgia, those vague yet nagging memories of frivolously abandoned moments). Distance, on the other hand, creates a duller, dustier blurry effect, haunted but never enlivened by the vibrant weight of the present. Distance, and its correlate grey, produces thoughts not readily visible in the midst of the event or in the glare of the present. Moment Making was a demanding show, and this has not been dulled by distance, but greyish blur has settled over the event has produced a quite different challenge ... I begin to wonder what the dulling affects of the now distant moment might expose? Might there be something found in the correlation between these effects and a quite different concept, a concept in which greyness and ennui are aligned? I am thinking of boredom ... but I'm also mindful of the risk of conflating two vastly different concepts, seemingly at odds, and each with its own contingency: ignoring, for instance, the intricacies of boredom's ontological repercussions, or the specificity that is produced from contemporary art's nexus of social, political, historical and economic influences, as well as its place in debates about aesthetics: to end up by saying nothing more, perhaps, than art is an exploratory practice that connects most powerfully when it resonates with the concerns of the world it inhabits. Is it enough to say this again — to end up by concluding that boredom has become the dominant mood of the modern world and that art does no more than thrust it back at the spectator in a different form?

I've been contemplating suicide/But it really doesn't suit my style/So I think I'll just act bored instead/And contain the blood I would've shed [Boys Next Door, Shivers, 1979]

None of the works in the show examined boredom explicitly, and yet Moment Making seemed to produce a way of being in the world that connected with boredom as a condition of being? This is not the same as saying that boredom is the same as ennui, but because many critics did in the 1960s and '70s when they eschewed complexity for formalist aesthetics. Quite the opposite, in many of the works in Moment Making there was a complex inter-weaving of space and duration, with a type of aesthetics that was itself challenging in its banality and 'greyness'. There was the aesthetic paucity of Gaeleen Macdonald's shoeless shoe rack (2007), with its hollow echo through commodity fetishism's ultimate melancholy, and the scattering of Denny's mundane objects that spark momentary associations, only to quickly collapse back into singular and commonplace origins (Petty Mortar, 2007). This is a source of what makes many contemporary works both difficult and interesting I believe, to evince a mood, in its dogged refusal to distract or fascinate, that is ill-defined but resoundingly empty in its immediate and pressing affect.

He liked the fragility of those moments suspended in time. Those memories whose only function it being to leave behind nothing but memories. He wrote: I've been round the world several times and now only banality still interests me [Chris Marker, Sans Soleil, 1983]

Blurriness, greyness, banality, each produces the effect of a drifting, flurry-like cloud, similar perhaps to dust, and perceptible only from certain perspectives and in certain lights, but nonetheless offering rewards of another kind. In Charles Dickens' final work, A Mutual Friend (1864-65), dust is a central theme of the novel: it's the signifier for the grubby reality of dirt and greed in mid-19th century London at the peak of its industrial era, but also the means by which the dustmen, whose new wealth had been built on the City's growing piles of waste, collect, hoardishly and mid-worldly conditions. Dust is the metaphorical cloud that clings to the modern city and gives the novel its mood and texture. Winding its watery way through the novel is London's dark, polluted spine, the Thames. Atop the river, in their small boats, tossed around by the dangerous and murky tides, are the despised collectors of the floating dead whose labours are as much about waiting as they are of collecting. They wait for the dead to float to the surface of the river so they can steal their valuables. Waiting is another theme of the novel. The newly rich dustman, Nicodemous Boffin, also waits. He waits to restore the order of things that the river has upset. Boredom is a form of waiting too.

1839: "France is bored" [Lamartine].

Associated with worldly disenchantment, boredom is considered to be a modern 'affliction'. According to etymologists, the word didn't appear in print until the mid-19th Century. The French ennui, with its existential quality, and its tiredness with life, and the German langeweile, which carries the sense of extended, dull time, were in much earlier use, as was the English "to bore", which appeared around 1750: but none of these earlier terms encapsulated both the temporal and the psychological senses of the later English derivation. Boredom's surfacing was a sign of the democratisation of a mood previously belonging only to leisured aristocrats and disenchanted monks, those who having lost their spiritual way, had fallen into a state of acedia. It is we who suffer from boredom, we moderns. But what does it mean to be a modern we?

The individual — as opposed to the mass — does not have a position. A transformation has occurred. Indeed, if there is to be a conception of the individual, then it will have to be reworked after having taken up this new position. In other words, if the individual is to emerge, it will only do so in relation to this reworked conception of the "mass".

Andrew Benjamin has offered an invaluable explication of the way Walter Benjamin constituted the modern man. The 'we' characterised as the unidentifiable and undifferentiated or undefined mass, which then becomes the formless backdrop for the individual, who emerges in opposition to it, and who, through his or her individual contemplation of art, keeps tradition alive. Rather, the mass individual is embedded in...
what Walter Benjamin pictures as a matrix, an image intricate enough to account for modernity’s complex operations of differing and competing desires and forces of power. Along with modernity’s restructuring of the subject, art and the art object are redefined in relation to the organisation of the individual. New forms of production and reception also force a re-thinking of the object and subject, while facilitating the possibility for the ‘new’ to emerge. Crucially, though Benjamin’s new cannot be conceived as just another image or another re-fashioned object or both—which leaves tradition fundamentally unchanged. For Benjamin, “the masses are a matrix from which all customary behaviour towards works of art” may emerge “newborn.” One way Walter Benjamin envisaged this was in his well-known example of mechanical reproduction and its potential to shatter tradition, as long as new forms of reception via the mass spectator were channelled into critical opposition: or, more precisely, this promise is realised only upon the cleavages wrought in conventional or habitual modes of reception being re-filled by new habits with critical promise. However, since Benjamin concluded that “the audience is an examiner but a distracted one”, this promise is never assured. Habit and distraction, therefore, were important themes for Benjamin’s structuring of the new spectatorial practices of the mass.

Distraction and concentration [Zerstreuung und Sammlung] form an antithesis, which may be formulated as follows. A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it; he enters into the work—by contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves. In the most fundamental way, art, as with Nietzsche’s narcotism, is a distraction. Traditionally, the contemplative viewer (the individual) is absorbed by the content and form of the work of art and is thereby distracted by it. But with modernity comes the advent of new modes of production and dissemination, new habits and new forms of distraction. No longer concentrating, the mass individual receives art in a mood of distracted spectatorship, absorbing the work of art in an environment filled with interruptions and diversions. Distraction for Benjamin, therefore, was not just that which diverts the mass spectator from political action, such as the passive Debordian spectator who is rendered powerless by the spectacle, or in Benjamin’s own concerns, of the inveigling of the masses without the promise of changed property relations by fascism: it is also a distancing mechanism as the mass individual absorbs the work of art and is changed by it. But, since the mass individual might as easily slip into the former as the latter—distracted by art rather than being critically altered by it—the highly fragile and thereby unreliable nature of distraction is brought into light. This is its ambivalence, as Andrew Benjamin has emphasised. Under these terms, distraction would be no more than a placebo for boredom, for it is too fragile a condition to expunge in significant or enduring ways, boredom’s existential hold over the subject. It is too ambivalent. It is important to underscore here as well, the role distraction plays as a seductive mechanism in consumerism, its effects similarly ‘incomplete’ or superficial. None of the works in Moment Making are a work of art meant to engage viewers. And perhaps this is one way in which the various legacies of what were once avant-garde art practices, position themselves today in relation to commodity relations: they resist using conspicuous distraction or seductive lures to entice viewers into the work. They make the viewer’s path to the work more seductive or less, thus opening Dasein out to the nothingness of being or the abyss of non-being; remembering, though, that Dasein is also “its own groundlessness, or its own abyss, its own being as being open onto the abyss or the nothingness of being.” Boredom resides on a plane of seemingly infinite emptiness: but since it exists through time, boredom is therefore a materiality with a slow movement of grey clouds, re-enacted its own form of boredom. Set within this dull aesthetic was the video’s sense of duration, which resounded with Benjamin’s concerns about the weather. Time and boredom. Benjamin wondered about the two meanings of temp in French—weather and time. We wait. 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 at the threshold to great deeds. Now, it would be important to know: What is the dialectical antithesis to boredom?

What becomes obscured in the dullness of waiting is expectation, the potentiality of another mood that stands out to the nothingness of being as another mood, in its expansive sameness is an organising mood of modernity, modernity’s horizon of utopianism also structures experience around the suspense of messianic resolution. In Benjamin’s reckoning, each time we pass the time (to kill time, expel it): the gambler. Time spills from his every pore. To store time as a battery stores energy: the flâneur. Finally, the third type: he who waits. He takes in the time and renders it up in altered form—that of expectation.
Awaiting and expectation, as Andrew Benjamin foregrounds, entails the transformation of time, not just as "a series of empty moments awaiting a future", but where "the future becomes a condition of the present," thereby linking different moods (boredom, expectation) "to a possibility and thus to a form of potentiality." Similarly, Benjamin wrote a lot about colour. Colour holds the child's view, all the possibility for future dreaming, and the chance to break the dull momentum of the dialectic. Wrapped in its own grey sheath, Moment Making offered the same dialectical promise.

Boredom is a warm grey fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous colourful of silks. In this fabric we wrap ourselves when we dream... but the sleeper looks bored and grey within his sheath. And when he later wakes and wants to tell of what he dreamed, he communicates by and large only this boredom.28

Walter Benjamin carried out a sustained examination of boredom in one of the Convolute of his Arcades Project, which he named, "Boredom, Eternal Return."29 In it he collected 'found' quotations and aphorisms about the weather, about dust, about colour, greyness, time, and so on, interweaving these fragments with personal observations. By not synthesising them by leaving one to play off the other, he produced an open space for strangers to form new connections with each re-reading. Entering Benjamin's Convolute is not unlike, therefore, the experience of entering Moment Making. The works, singular and multiple, became the many in the one, for the singular spoke obliquely and for itself, while the multiple made other demands on the viewer. There were aesthetic inter-connections motivating movement through the total space, but across all the works fell something like a net in which the singular — as with the individual spectator now transformed as a distracted mass individual — found itself caught. It was as though this net covered the works with a greyness, a blankness, which accentuated what was already implicit in some, as in the case of Nauman's empty studio or Macdonald's empty shoe rack (a tautological move), or, in others, it revealed associations that were more circuitous and less overt, as in the affect of emptiness (the affect of boredom), which seemed to issue from Denny's installation and Thater's video. Through the prism of a now distant moment, what prevails for me is the deftness with which Moment Making transmitted this profound mood of modernity, this pervasive and obstinate mood, which unfolds through Heidegger as an intrinsic part of contemporary Being (our repeated brush with nothingness), and through Benjamin as a threshold to great deeds (modernity's utopian dimension). This was for me Moment Making's greatest offering.

2. Boys Next Door, Shivers, recorded in 1979, written by Roland S. Howard.
3. For an overview of these arguments, see Frances Colpitt, The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, vol. 45, no. 4 (Summer, 1985), pp 359-365.
12. Walter Benjamin uses the word matrix to describe the new mass in his 'Work of Art...', essay, ibid. p 267.
15. Walter Benjamin, ibid. p 268.
16. The argument about distraction is particularly apposite today when one considers that a 'viewer-spectator', now at home, fronts multiple screens emitting simultaneously different and competing images and information.
17. "The masses have a right to changed property relations; fascism seeks to give them expression in keeping these relations unchanged. The logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticising of political life." [Italics in the original], Walter Benjamin ibid. p 269.
19. The opposite of this tactic would be something like Carsten Höller's Test Site, consisting of five giant slides, the largest being 55m long, which were installed in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern between October 2006 and April 2007. The Tate Modern curator, Jessica Morgan, described experiencing the work as 'a thrill that you can relate to sex or drugs. You can't control it, yet everybody smiles. It gives you a fear that is very pleasant' Quoted in 'New Twist has Slides Winding Through Tate Modern', CBC News.ca, www.cbc.ca/arts/story/2006/10/10/slide-show.html accessed March 9, 2008.
20. Walter Benjamin, Convolute [D2,7], 'Boredom, Eternal Return', Arcades Project, p 105.
24. Walter Benjamin, Arcades Project, [D2a,3]. p 106.
25. Ibid, [D2,7]. p 105.
27. Andrew Benjamin, p 167.
28. Walter Benjamin, Arcades Project, [D-2a1]. pp 105-06.
29. Walter Benjamin's reading of Nietzsche's eternal return misses the importance of repetition as the return of difference, argued for convincingly by Deleuze in his reading of Nietzsche, and which will become central to Deleuzian philosophy. Benjamin notes, "Life within the magic circle of eternal return makes for an existence that never emerges from the auralistic." [D10a,1]. p 119.