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## Yes, Art Is Boring Sometimes, But Maybe That's A Good Thing

“Most of the interesting art of our time is boring.” - Susan Sontag

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Gaze upon a painting by Mark Rothko, color field king, and you can experience myriad emotions. The lush blocks of orange and yellow might awaken your physical senses, causing your body to recall feelings of warmth and comfort. The smooth appearance of rectangular shapes could slow your thought process, evoking feelings of tranquility. Alone -- just you and Rothko's handiwork -- you may also become aware of your own isolation.

Or ... you could just feel bored.

Boring. It's an adjective we use haphazardly to describe subjectively tedious and uninteresting things -- golf tournaments, *Grapes of Wrath*, your grandmother's weekly

bridge group. The word has certainly been deployed to describe art, by someone, somewhere. Probably more than once.

But, does calling a painting "boring" necessarily mean we don't like it? If it is tedious, does it mean it's bad? According to one philosopher, the answer is a hopeful "no" to both.

"Works of art, in all their variety ... *afford* us the opportunity for boredom," Alva Noë, a philosophy professor at the University of California, Berkeley, [wrote in a column for NPR this week](#). "And they do so when everything in our lives mitigates against boredom."

We live in a constantly connected world, encouraged by everything from "Netflix and Chill" mantras to wearable technology. So, in essence, we're almost never truly idle. Maybe boredom is one of the benefits of art, Noë surmises.

"Could it be that the power to bore us to tears is a clue to what art is and why it is so important?"

Historical male thinkers, like Kierkegaard and Fromm, have pondered what it means to be bored, categorizing it as a state that must be defeated or an unwanted symptom of feeling alienated and industrialized or even privileged. Women authors have also explored the less-than-happy consequences of boredom; just read Virginia Woolf.

But there *are* upsides to boredom, outlined in these writers' works and Noë's, too. Upsides that make it OK to feel bored while gazing at a Georgia O'Keeffe or watching a Marina Abramovic performance or analyzing a Robert Frank photograph. In fact, maybe you *should* feel bored. Let's explore.

### **Boredom as Protest**

Noë accurately points out that many artists mean to be boring. Take, for example, John Baldessari's "I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art," which consists of the title phrase written over and over again as a lithograph. He's hardly being subtle.

But more than meaning to be boring, some artists use "boring" art to make a statement. Consider UK critic Charlie Lyne's film "Paint Drying," which he launched in protest of the British Board of Film Classification, an organization that functions similarly to the Motion Picture Association of America.

UK Law states that every film released in British cinemas requires a BBFC certificate; however, filmmakers must pay a fee of around £1000 before the BBFC will even watch a feature film vying for certificate. This policy places a particular burden on the indie filmmakers who don't have big studio financing to begin with.

So, in response to what Lyne deems an unfair practice, he is currently Kickstarting a film that, as the title hints, consists entirely of paint drying. "While filmmakers are required to pay the BBFC to certify their work, the BBFC are also required to sit through whatever we pay them to watch," he writes on his campaign site. "That's why I'm Kickstarting a BBFC certificate for my new film 'Paint Drying' -- a single, unbroken shot of white paint drying on a brick wall."

In this case, Lyne wants the certifiers to feel boredom. His form of boredom is protest.

### **Boredom as Meditation**

"Profound boredom," Martin Heidegger wrote, "drifting here and there in the abysses of our existence like a muffling fog, removes all things and men and oneself along with it into a remarkable indifference. This boredom reveals being as a whole."

Heidegger's characterization of boredom -- taken out of context -- sounds like something 21st century CEOs and yoga enthusiasts are both familiar with: meditation. He's effectively outlining the process of meditating, the goal of which wikiHow states is "to focus and quiet your mind, eventually reaching a higher level of awareness and inner calm."

Think back on that potentially boring Rothko painting. As you sit and wonder why a swath of simple hues should capture your attention, as you focus on what makes the seemingly infinite depth of a shade of pink worthy of your gaze, questions of both personal and professional nature fade away. You're captivated, even in a so-called state of boredom, by this one work.

Noë deems this state a "temporary illiteracy or, even more, a temporary blindness." And this temporary state can illuminate facets of ourselves, or as Heidegger says, our being as a whole. Sounds an awful lot like meditation, no?

### **Boredom as, well, Boredom**

At the end of the day, it's hard not to think of Susan Sontag's famous quip: "We should not expect art to entertain or divert anymore."

Be bored, one might defiantly conclude. Relish boredom. Artists have no responsibility to shock or excite you. As Noë remarked, there is "the more radical possibility that all art points toward boredom, not exactly as its goal, but as its foreseeable consequence."

Why? Because all art causes you to think, and if we configure our perception of boredom as a state of unhindered thought, we can enjoy the state of boredom. In fact, we can purposefully move from feeling bored to feeling inspired.

"If we become bored, we should ask if we are operating in the right frame of attention," Sontag added. Instead of concluding with boredom, sink into it and expand your thoughts. Eventually, you could have a sense-opening experience.

**Tl;dr: Boring art isn't necessarily bad and bad art isn't necessarily boring.**

So just as you should think twice before muttering "I could do that" whilst eyeing a Basquiat, and maybe hold off on decrying "This isn't art!" after checking out a Louise Bourgeois exhibition, perhaps "this is boring" isn't as effective a statement as you thought. The Oxford Dictionary definition of the word boring isn't as nuanced as the bored feelings flitting about in your head.

Just remember: boring art isn't necessarily bad. "Art's boredom," Noë reckons, "is a valuable boredom."