

COLLECTIVE UNKNOWING

by Marie Catalano

ON DAMON ZUCCONI'S

Boredom is Deep and Mysterious (2019)

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Does your spirit live after you die?

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If an object is traveling at close to the speed of light, will it be unobservable due to time dilation?

Why do DJs talk over the music?

What video game developer do you wish would release more games?

What is the best site where I can watch movies for free but not get any viruses?

Damon Zucconi, *Boredom is Deep and Mysterious*, 2019, web application.
Courtesy of the artist and JTT, New York.

BIG WINDOW

It isn't a compromise to view Damon Zucconi's works online. Rather, as websites or applications, they are meant to be viewed from your bed or your couch, or anywhere with a cellular data connection, for as long or as little as you want. If Zucconi's practice challenges our understanding of the way artwork is to be experienced, his programs also deviate radically from what we expect from websites. In his work, texts, jpegs, or abstract graphics flicker across spare environments according to a cryptic logic. Drawn to processes of experimentation driven by new and ancient technologies, Zucconi often applies a series of parameters to found data sets before redistributing them anew, profoundly altering the way we perceive them. In *Boredom is Deep and Mysterious* (2019), Zucconi fractures the familiar experience of wandering through an indefinite landscape of hyperlinks, in an exploration of the potential of query, ambience and randomness.

In this work, an automated cursor scrolls through a list of questions in white text on a black background, selecting one at random. Once clicked, it appears isolated on the screen in yellow for only a few seconds before disappearing into a new list as the process begins again. These questions are sourced from Quora.com, where Zucconi set up a web spider to crawl the site and collect user-generated inquiries posted since the site's inception in 2009. While the questions are randomly selected, Zucconi's programming enables certain topics to linger for several rounds, much in the same way that casual internet browsing can spiral outward from a single topic, eventually leading to an entirely different subject. Answers are never offered, just a moment of pause too brief to allow for thoughtful reflection before more content cycles in. As we watch this disembodied cursor materialize text that then quickly fades away, it is as if we are watching ourselves clicking on autopilot, in the monotonous act of information consumption, in pursuit of something often undefined. Each question becomes our own.

Since the dawn of philosophical thinking, inquiry has been the foundation for progressive ideation. But what are questions without answers? Here, their subjects span in nature from strangely specific to broadly conceptual, and appear to arise from a wide range of positions within a state of boredom—a curiosity about the world, tedious apathy, a practical need for instruction, feelings of insecurity or frustration. They are addressed to no one in particular. This persistent coming and going of texts, similar to the structure of today's media, becomes less about the questions themselves and more about a space of questioning. As Zucconi's site reminds us, inquiry is reflective of a need or desire for something beyond one's own resources, an admission of one's limits. This space of not-knowing becomes an embodiment of collective outreach. Without answers, the crowd-sourced texts come and go unmet, leaving in their wake a lingering sense of potential and the capacity for imaginative thought.

Boredom is Deep and Mysterious takes its title from a 1994 record compilation of ambient music, fitting for a piece that easily falls under Brian Eno's definition of the term: "as ignorable as it is interesting." Personally invested in this concept, Zucconi put out his own ambient music record the same year as *Boredom*, whose atmospheric quality relies on an ebb and flow of words rather than sound. In 1962, writer Maurice Blanchot reflected on the possibilities of the steady current of mediated speech in our everyday lives: "How many people turn on the radio and leave the room, satisfied with this distant and sufficient noise? Is this absurd? Not in the least." So too does Zucconi's reliable flow of language inhabit the space of the background so

that we can choose to engage or not—it's there, but it doesn't require our attention. According to Blanchot, "what is essential is not that one particular person speak and another hear, but that, with no one in particular speaking and no one in particular listening, there should nonetheless be speech, and a kind of undefined promise to communicate."¹ Blanchot was hopeful of the transformative potential of everyday life as a space without authority or without direction. Full of misspellings and unexpected syntax, Zucconi's authorless voices do not ask of anyone in particular. Instead, they speak among themselves, and among us viewers, as we experience them at home in our own sensuous worlds.

Every time we tune in to *Boredom is Deep and Mysterious*, new questions circulate in new sequences. Random selection has long been a creative tool for artists, from the Surrealists who derived inspiration from the chance encounter, to the Beat Generation who enlisted the cut-up method. But whereas the primary concern of these historical examples was the production of fixed, autonomous art objects, Zucconi uses chance to yield something that is constantly in flux. As such, his work is more akin to the practices of divination, like tarot, in which a querent gains insight from spontaneous output. We can see chance at work again in Zucconi's 2016 series of color-coded websites titled *dictionary.blue/red/black/pink* that list definitions—but not the words they define—at random from an online dictionary. Rather than questions, we are given answers alone. In this way, the sites serve as an imperfect counterpart to *Boredom is Deep and Mysterious*. Each "color" in the series features a different part of speech: verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs. As the list of brief definitions scrolls slowly upward, we are met with a poetic and deeply evocative stream of signifiers devoid of their referents. Meaning is no longer derived from its relationship to a word, but from what the viewer brings to the materializing text. Both works generate something infinitely variable and wholly unexpected.

Throughout Zucconi's collective works, our expectations are often thwarted. His process of fragmenting our seemingly known environment reveals how heavily our perception is influenced by what we think we already know. In an ongoing series, Zucconi reprints books verbatim, but scrambles the interior letters of every word. The resulting text is unrecognizable, and yet we are still able to read it. Similarly, in a body of work comprising color photographs of red roses, Zucconi overlays a grid of inverted hues so that we perceive the flowers in grayscale when viewed at a distance. In each instance, the work literally changes before our eyes: what Zucconi presents to us is at odds with our expectations. Expectations have everything to do with boredom, argued Blanchot, for whom boredom resulted from everyday life losing its "trait of being unperceived." In other words, we are bored when we become aware of our surroundings and expect things to repeat themselves without change in our daily lives. In Zucconi's *Boredom is Deep and Mysterious*, the desultory meandering of questions without answers precludes passive consumption of information and offers the possibility of distraction without spectacle. Rather than learn the meaning of the work, the viewer makes it for themselves. In this ambient stream of collective thought, the unknown is on repeat.

1 Maurice Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," trans. Susan Hanson, *Yale French Studies*, no. 73 (1987): 14.