Artistic Inactivism: With Some Remarks on the Importance of Doing Nothing and Discussing Everything

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Resum

Probablement, un dels impulsos centrals de l'art modern i de l'avantguarda del segle XX, va ser abandonar el seu caràcter contemplatiu i alinear-se amb el paradigma productivista de les societats industrials. En aquest article, argumentaré que afirmant el treball, la producció i l'activitat social com l'horitzó alliberador de la modernitat, l'art oculta i naturalitza el fet que aquests conceptes s'insereixen en les relacions socials capitalistes. A continuació, em centraré en els gestos artístics d'inactivitat i no producció per examinar el seu potencial crític en el marc de la pràctica artística conceptual i postconceptual. Els exemples que considero registren les contradiccions i els canvis en les

tecnologies socials contemporànies i les ideologies del treball i, en fer-ho, ajuden a establir la (in)activitat com una categoria crítica i problemàtica. A través de la temporalitat de la inactivitat, aquests gestos poden servir de models crítics per a una lògica diferent de la producció social.

Paraules clau: inactivisme artístic; no-productivitat; treball; temporalitat; Eichhorn; Voss i Iwakura.

Abstract

Arguably, one of the core impulses of modern art and of the 20th century avantgarde, was to abandon its contemplative nature and align itself with the productivist paradigm of industrial societies. In this paper, I will argue that by affirming work, production and social activity as the liberatory horizon of modernity, art conceals and naturalizes the fact that these concepts are themselves embedded in capitalist social relations. I will then turn to artistic gestures of inactivity and non-production to examine their critical potential within the framework of conceptual and postconceptual art practice. The examples I consider register the contradictions and shifts in contemporary social technologies and ideologies of labor and, in doing so, help establish (in)activity as a critical and problematic category. Through the temporality of inactivity, these gestures can serve as critical models for a different rationale of social production.

Key words: Artistic inactivism; non-productivity; labor; temporality; Eichhorn; Voss and Iwakura.

Ars activa

Arguably, one of the core impulses of modern art, and of the 20th century avantgarde in particular, was to get rid of its contemplative nature and align itself with the productivist paradigm of industrial society. Movements like Italian Futurism, Soviet Productivism or the German Bauhaus sought, in different ways, to overcome art's seclusion as a form of private bourgeois leisure and to bring it in synchronicity with labor, progress, productivity and public politicized life. The great emphasis that was put on the modern artist as a laborer or engineer—a maker of things, rather than an intellectual—testifies to this will to establish the artistic sphere as a sphere of activity: to aestheticize production and to publicize art. This view has its complications, since it not only overlooks important ideological differences between, say, bolshevist productivism, fascist futurism and more or less liberal-democratic movements like the Bauhaus despite their many continuities and overlaps. It also tends to overstate the generalized importance of a vanguardist self-understanding of artists or confuse the idealist overtones of their declarations with the material reality of their practices. The total socialization of art—its total subsumption under the productivist imperative of industrial society—was never realized. Despite being mediated by capitalist market relations, the relations of production which govern the art system are, until this day, essentially relations of individual producers owning their means of production (Beech, 2015).

The extreme idealism of the avantgardes, however, reveals productivism as a much more general ideological feature of modern art. We may even say that art manifests the modern ideology of productivity in its purest form. Stripped of any substantial relationship to practical use, the modern artwork signifies work as such. To pick one example, as art historian Gottfried Boehm argues, the painter of industrial life, Fernand Léger, epitomized not only the idea of the modern artist as *homo faber*, but more so, *the* exemplary worker. Boehm (1994) writes:

> The power of creation, the anti-natural and poietic trait of modern civilization is condensed in the work of the artists. Painting builds and invents a reality out of pure elements: as much as it is

> connected to the spirit of technical modernity, it stays out of its contradictions and failures. (p. 30-31) [1]

According to this view, Léger's constructive, non-naturalistic painting of industrial shapes distinctively expresses the ideal core of modern production. As Boehm (1994) states, "The modernity imagined by Léger features the idea of an ongoing self-liberation of mankind. The medium of this liberation is *work*" (p. 30-31). The statement attests to the productive impulse of modernity and its ideological inflation through art. In art, it is less the instrumental rationality of modern production which is expressed than its idealist meaning as the self-realization of the human subject. From this perspective, art appears as the subjective representation of the productive paradigm of modernity. Modern art is seen as an exemplary form of work or of social activity. In this paper, I will argue that by affirming work, production and social activity as the liberatory horizon of modernity, art conceals and naturalizes the fact that these concepts are themselves embedded in capitalist social relations. I will then turn to artistic gestures of inactivity and non-production in order to examine their critical potential within the framework of conceptual and postconceptual art practice.

Conceptual Activity

Conceptual Art maintains an ambivalent relationship to the modern productivist paradigm, both economically and politically. In a sense, it practically revokes the modern prioritization of action over theory, *via activa* over *via contemplativa,* by identifying art with theory, language or discourse, as exemplified, for instance, through the activities of the Anglo-American group Art&Language (Atikinson et al., 1972). In prioritizing *semiosis* over *poiesis*, and in often not really *doing* that much, let alone *producing* durable material objects, many artists associated with the international Concept Art movement from the 1960s onwards were in fact significantly loosening the strong ties modernity had

[1] Author's translation.

established between art and productive activity. The picture gets slightly more complicated, however, when we consider—as many scholars have—the historically shifting relationship between manual and intellectual labor and its significance for the restructuring of capitalist production at precisely the moment when Conceptual Art entered the scene. Two consecutive developments seem to be key here: the emergence of digital technologies and advancement of technological automation enthusiastically accompanied by cybernetics and systems theory, as well as the increasing relevance of intellectual, communicational, affective and managerial tasks in the labor process at the onset of the deindustrialization of Western economies. On of the key terms for this alignment of communication technologies and new forms of labor was information. In the US-context, its relevance for the conceptual art scene has been marked by two seminal exhibitions, both taking place in Summer/Autumn 1970 in New York City: *Information* at the Museum of Modern Art and *Software: Information Technology – Its New Meaning for Art* at the Jewish Museum.[2]

In his 1968 essay on *System Aesthetics*, the critic and curator of the *Software* show, Jack Burnham, had already established a direct link between the conceptualist paradigm of art and the productivist paradigm of industrial modernity, by notably introducing the early Soviet Avantgarde as a point of mediation. Arguing against the craft- and object-fetishism of traditional painting and sculpture, Burnham (1968) writes:

> *In an advanced technological culture the most important artist best succeeds by liquidating his position as artist vis-à-vis society* […] the significant artist strives to reduce the technical and psychical distance between his artistic output and the productive means of society. (p. 31)

Drawing on the position of supposedly "radical Marxists, led by Vladimir Tatlin" (p. 35), Burnham (1968) understands the process-oriented, cognitive and techno-scientifically mediated work of the 1960s-

[2] Many of the leading conceptual artists (mostly male, white US-Americans) like Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Robert Barry, John Giorno, Hans Haacke, Douglas Hueber, Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner and others participated in both shows.

generation as a continuation of the avant-garde's attempt to transform artists into "constructivist technician[s]" (p. 35), now against the backdrop of post-industrial labor. Borrowing from Systems Engineering and Cybernetic Theory, Burnham claims that *Homo Arbiter Formae* supersedes *Homo Faber*. The artist's "prime role becomes that of man the maker of esthetic decisions. These decisions -whether they are made concertedly or not- control the quality of all future life on the Earth" (Burnham, 1968, p. 35).

In the guise of a techno-social utopia, the aesthetic ideology of productivism is renewed. Any connections between modern productive technologies and the social reproduction of capitalist systems, their dependence on a gendered division of labor and the military-industrial-complex –a decisive factor in the context of Cold War US-Imperialism– are sidelined. Instead, an aesthetics of what Werner Hamacher (2020) has called the "sheer auto-performance" (p. 165) of modern work comes to exemplify the vision of a seamless fusion of artistic and social activity under the banner of informational management as a means of production. I do not wish to claim that this type of technoscientific optimism represented by Burnham is in any way representative of Conceptualism as such, which, as a multi-layered historical phenomenon, involves many countertendencies, notably feminist critiques of gendered norms of productivity. Neither do I wish to one-sidedly and uncritically identify the discourses of cybernetics and automation with capitalist relations of production and control.[3] Rather, I would like to emphasize the profound imbrication of modern art with general social productive technologies and claim that the Conceptualist turn of the 1960s and 1970s registers the shifts in these technologies on a deeper ontological level. This, in turn, also conditions the forms of criticality associated with conceptual art making.

Connected to this problem is the self-misunderstanding of conceptual art as a form of de-commodification. The prevailing notion that capitalism

[3] For recent scholarly work which has engaged with the emancipatory potentials of cybernetics, especially in the context of Black and feminist political movements and radical countercultures, see for instance Mercedes Bunz (2020).

corrupts art through commodification, understood as the objectification of artistic labor as it is embodied in the material art object, overlooks the problem that aesthetic productivism is not limited to the production of objects, but always entails the autoproduction of the subject.[4] By identifying commodification with objectification, subjectivation is obfuscated as the core of modern productivism, and thereby rescued. Unsurprisingly, critiques of commodification often tend to fetishize subjective activity as such and attribute romantic and vitalist notions of aesthetic freedom to artistic labor as a conceptual, performative and social practice. With the discourse around process-based, relational or participatory forms of artmaking, activity is pitted against the objectified *dead labor* of the work form and conceptualized as decommodification, as these practices seem to exhibit living artistic labor as such. Even though it appears critical of the link between art and capitalist commodity production, the discourse of decommodification repeats a core element of the modern ideology of productivism: the subject's self-realization through work and activity.

From various forms of actionist neo-avantgardes (*Action Painting*, Allan Kaprow's *Happenings* and *Actions*, *Vienna actionism*) until the recent proliferation of activism as a signifier of political art within mainstream art institutions,[5] there seems to persist a hidden and disavowed link between modernity's productive paradigm and art practices which are overtly critical of capitalism. The fact that political and social activism has been incorporated into the discursive frameworks of mainstream art institutions is a case in point.[6] Here, the desire to transform the museum

[4] The widespread view that conceptual art serves a form of decommodification was first and most prominently articulated by Lucy Lippard (1973) in her well-known essay *Six Years. The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*.

[5] To cite just some of the seminal publications that index the *social* or *activist* turn in art: Nicolas Bourriaud (2001), *Esthétique Relationnelle*; Grant H. Kester (2004), *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*; Claire Bishop (2012), *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*; T J Demos (2013), *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis*; Oliver Marchart (2019), *Conflictual Aesthetics: Artistic Activism and the Public Sphere*. For a critique of Bishop and Kester, see also Louis Hartnoll (2022), The Road to Artificial Hells: Revisiting the Theory of Socially Engaged Art.

[6] In the European context, curators such as Manuel J. Borja-Villel, Nicolas Bourriaud or Okwui Enwezor, and public institutions such as MACBA, Palais de Tokyo or Documenta can be considered leading in this development from the late 1990s onwards.

from a mausoleum of dead labor into a living space of social action ironically follows from the pressures on public institutions to legitimize themselves in the face of economic crisis, that is, ultimately, from the capitalist imperative of productivity. Artistic activism is a double-edged sword: not despite, but because of its radical politics, the incorporation of activist practices into institutions polishes their public image by reinforcing their self-conception as radically democratic. Even more subtly, the aesthetic activation of the subject also aligns the institution's intrinsic capitalist-productivist logic with artistic practices that claim to make art a vehicle of social change.

Conceptual Inactivity

In contrast to the current institutional trends of artistic activism, I propose exploring the potential of gestures of non-activity within the framework of conceptual and post-conceptual art. Can these instances — which evolve out of modes of withdrawal, refusal or suspension of work, idleness, non-production and inactivity— provide us with an alternative understanding of conceptual art, one that eschews the productivist ideology and offers resources for its critique? I argue that the rehearsal of gestures of inactivity in conceptual and postconceptual art is reflexive of the problems sketched out above that follow from the historical shift of capitalist productive technologies and their concomitant forms of labor. Rather than framing non-activity as a liberatory escape from ideologies of labor and productivity, akin to bohemianism or situationist anti-work politics, the examples I consider register the contradictions and shifts in contemporary social technologies and ideologies of labor and, in doing so, help establish inactivity as a critical and problematic category. Focusing on questions of temporality, I will argue that when gestures of inactivity are not merely perceived as passivity or leisure—the simple inverse of activism and productivity—they can function as critical models for a different rationale of social production.

Artistic gestures of inactivity emerge in a discursive spectrum delimited by, on the one side, bohemian dandyism and individualist-anarchist

refusal, and on the other, workerist notions of political strike. Other discursive and ideological parameters might include Zen-Buddhism, bodily and spiritual recreation, contemplative experience, German or French phenomenologies of *Seinlassen* or *desœuvrement*, social relations, procedures of chance etc. Closer to inactivity as a means of politics, many examples of artists' self-organization can be cited —from the Art Worker Coalition to W.A.G.E— that are modeled after the political and legal form of the unionist strike. As a politics centered on the recognition of artistic labor as waged labor, this approach poses several problems. Firstly, it faces the issue of transposing a form of struggle which emerged in the context of mass production of commodities to the highly individualized project-based structures in the art sector. Secondly, a politics of wages at least risks reproducing a gendered division of labor, for the wage form is historically tied to the exclusion of feminized reproductive work. Thirdly, reformist anti-capitalist politics continued to uphold the modern ideal of productivity by focusing on just and equal wages, instead of abolishing their social form. Crucially, in the context of political strikes, inactivity becomes a mere means for continuing productive activity under better conditions. Regardless of whether it is employed to raise wages or is simply a form of civil protest, like the Art Worker's Coalition's 1969 strike against the Vietnam War, the strike assumes a conventional political form as an *instrument* to achieve a specific goal.

Commenting on Walter Benjamin's critique of the political (i.e. reformist) strike in the name of the proletarian general (i.e. revolutionary) strike, Werner Hamacher (1991) writes: "the strike is the social, economic, and political event in which nothing happens, no work is done, nothing is produced, and nothing is planned or projected" (p. 1147–1148). In the art world, this more radical version of a strike as inactivity is structurally limited to individualistic or small-scale endeavors. It lacks the universal social ground for the mobilization of a *mass strike*, as articulated by Rosa Luxemburg and adopted by Benjamin in his critique of reformism. Therefore, what logically stands on the other side of the spectrum of conceptual inactivism are individualist strategies of refusal and opting out. For some, these strategies still seem compatible with a politicized aesthetics. One can cite here the post- or anti-workerist appreciation of Marcel Duchamp's aristocratic disdain for work (Lazzarato, 2014), or –worse– Gerald Raunig's (2009) Stirnerian politics of a *positive dropping*

out from art institutions, a stance he holds against what he perceives as the conservativism of the sociological framework of Second-Generation Institutional Critique.[7] In any case, under conditions of severe social precarity, artistic *inactivity* loses as much of its political power as of its bohemian glamour. In Hari Kunzru's novel *Blue Ruin* (2024), a conceptual artist who heroically stages his dropout of the artworld as his last conceptual piece (a reference to historical figures such as Lee Lozano or Jan Bas Ader) ends up as a homeless delivery driver. The supposedly liberatory act of withdrawal turns into the nightmare of precarious labor (Hunter, 2024). This points to hardened social circumstances but also to a structural double-bind which conditions the artistic negation of activity. The negation of activity only becomes intelligible *as* activity. Activity is understood here as the most general forms of sociality, for example through the self-externalizing practice of work, or through the democratic public sphere, which Hannah Arendt (1998) considered to be the highest form of *Vita activa* that underpins the reception and communication of art as a discursive practice. Artistic inactivity thus is reliant on both the work-form and the form of public discourse.

Dust, as an index of non-production and non-maintenance, of the temporality of *desœuvrement*, is reliant on the plate of glass, the minimal action of taking a photograph, but first and foremost on the social action of designating it as an object which circulates in the social, legal and symbolic space of art system. Dust must be *bred* to be recognizable as dust (Marcel Duchamp, *Élevage de poussière*, 1920). Sleep, or chatter, must be recorded and fed into the circuits of commercial culture and literary meaning (Andy Warhol, *Sleep*, 1964; Andy Warhol, *A: A Novel*, 1968). The act of closing a gallery must circulate in the art world as an invitation card (Robert Barry, *Closed Gallery Piece*, 1969). Sleep, again, must be witnessed in a gallery to become a gesture (Mladen Stilinović, *Artist at Work*, 1978). "Dumb time – total amnesia […], indifference, staring at nothing, non-activity, impotence […], sheer stupidity, a time of

[7] For a detailed overview on the debate of Institutional Critique in the 2000s, see the commented anthology Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (2009), *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*.

pain, futile concentration" do not, as such, make a work of art (Stilinović, 1993, p. 25-26). They need to be performed.

In addition to this ontological double-bind, a more recent historical shift within the temporal structures of social life complicates such gestures of refusal or laziness. The profound alterations within the relation between working time and leisure in post-Fordist economies, the eroding of the boundaries between work and life subjects every non-activity to the totalizing imperative of productivity.[8] The neoliberal fantasy of a complete symbiosis of labor and leisure only scarcely conceals the experienced reality of an ever more precarious –and eventually superfluous– organization of social time, but it is still fed by the myths of the artist as bohemian socialite and creative social networker.

Accordingly, the increasing economization of life renders the very concept of inactivity problematic. Under the neoliberal regime of labor-time management and its psychosocial effects, activity and inactivity, production and non-production, become increasingly indiscernible. Anti-work politics or bohemian lifestyles, once libidinally invested as liberatory alternatives to the homogenous time and conservative work ethics of the Fordist factory, become powerless gestures when pitted against the capitalist imperatives of enjoyment[9] and the fragmented temporalities of self-employment, or worse, they turn into modes of valorization themselves. As artist Josef Strau (2006) retrospectively observed, the substitution of the artist-as-producer with the sheer behavior of the artist-bohemian, which prevailed in project-oriented spaces like Friesenwall 120 in Cologne's late 1980s to early 1990s art scene, was easily adapted into a managerial capacity for valorizing social networks. The *non-productive attitude* has long since become a means of production.

[8] See for example Jonathan Crary (2014), *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2014).
[9] See Samo Tomšič (2017), *Toward a Critique of Libidinal Economy*.

Disposable Time

Maria Eichhorn's exhibition *5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours* (Chisenhale Gallery, London, 2016) might well be considered a reaction to the ubiquitous ambience of activity and activism within the art institutions at that time, an example of artistic *inactivism*, but one that could not be further removed from inactivity as a bohemian attitude or an artistic lifestyle. In her work, inactivity is framed as the result of a precisely defined and authoritative conceptual proposition. Whereas spontaneous attitudes tend to become co-opted by being turned into something definite and exploitable, a squarely defined proposition can generate an indeterminate space of possibility.

Responding to the commission for a solo show in the framework of Chisenhale's program *How to work together* (a title maybe itself symptomatic of a certain imperative of productivity), Eichhorn proposed a single gesture which, in its very simplicity, harbors many complexities. For the fixed duration of the exhibition, the gallery was closed to the public and the staff were made to leave while they nevertheless continued to receive their wages. The work's mode of existence involved minimal devices of public presentation: a sign on the closed gate and the gallery website's information about the content of the work, a small publication containing an interview with the artist, a recorded discussion with the gallery staff as well as essays by Isabelle Lorey and Stewart Martin which were also presented during a public symposium on the eve of the closing. Otherwise, the only visible form the work took was the closed gallery building itself. As Eichhorn (2016) stated, the latter "should also calm down and have time off, not work" (p. 65).

While being at odds with the bohemianism inherent to the artistic imaginary of non-productive subjectivities, Eichhorn's work is also in tension with the more austere heritage of minimalist conceptualism. It repeats the simplicity, linguistic clarity, austerity and authorial decisiveness which defined the 'genre' of the closed-gallery piece in its

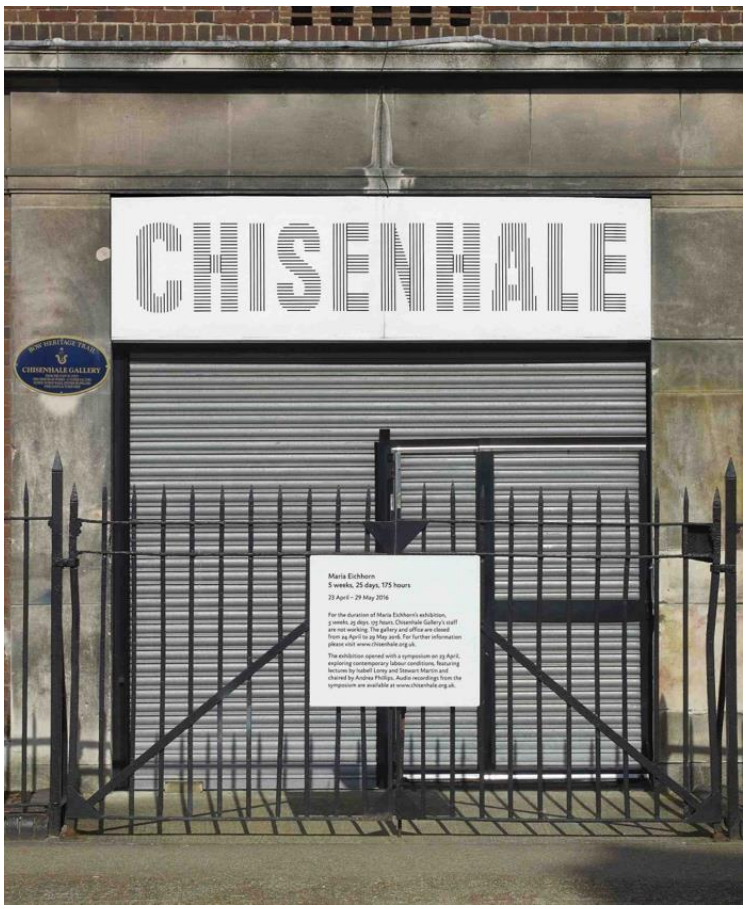
classical formulations;[10] but in contradistinction to her predecessors, Eichhorn's proposition focusses specifically on the labor conditions, not so much her own but of the workers of the art economy more broadly. As an integral part of the work, the artist conducted interviews with the gallery employees about their working conditions and about the public, yet private-economy-depending funding structure of Chisenhale, continuing her ongoing interest in the financial, legal and sociological structures of art institutions.

While clearly a political gesture, Eichhorn's *imposed* strike lacks almost all the tropes and signifiers we usually attach to political art: the rhetoric of radicalness, the expressive spontaneity of protests or occupations or, in the context of the theorization of artistic activism, *agonistic* or *antagonistic* forms of political critique (Mouffe, 2007). Instead, her gesture is characterized by a sense of negativity, of a lack of positive determination. No *program* or image of *life*, *work* or *production* is involved other than the speculative question –left to us, the spectators– what the gallery staff will do with their free time, which is brought to public attention, but at the same time left completely undetermined by the instructions of the artist. In Eichhorn's (2016) words, "they should do nothing other than not work for Chisenhale Gallery. […] The only specification is that there is no specification" (p. 62). It is this indeterminacy, negativity, or radical openness, I suggest, that also informs the conception of temporality which, in Eichhorn's work, stands polemically opposed to the capitalist imperative of productivity.

Time manifests as form and as content of the work. Its title, *5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours* indicates not only the duration of the exhibition but also the form of the work as a durational piece. It is not physical time that is indicated, but social time, not the phenomenological duration of a John Cage piece –say 4 minutes, 33 seconds– but a social norm of measurement, the working day. Applying the theoretical framework of

[10] The canonical closed-gallery shows are Daniel Buren's *Papiers collés blanc et vert* (1968) in Milan and Robert Barry's Closed-Gallery Piece (1969) in Amsterdam, Turin and Los Angeles. That closing a gallery has become a micro-genre of conceptual art was registered in Mathieu Copeland's *A Retrospective of Closed Exhibitions*, which run in Fall 2016 at Fri Art Kunsthalle Fribourg and in which Eichhorn's proposition from earlier that year was already included.

Marx's critique of political economy, time is both the general form of capitalist accumulation (abstract time as measure of value) and the general content of social wealth (disposable time as substance of the freedom of individuals). Capitalism can in fact be understood as a machine that annihilates time –the lifetime of individuals, which is finite. As Peter Osborne (2008) notes: "At its limit, time is valuable because it (that is, 'your' time) *runs out*" (p. 20). By expropriating the lifetime of individuals as the source of monetary wealth, the productivism of capital effectively destroys time as a condition and resource of social, and thus individual, freedom.



[Fig. 1]. Maria Eichhorn (2016*). 5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours*. Exhibition view. Chisenhale Gallery, London.

As a social norm, time is not a constant value but a variable. 5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours denote the equivalence of different units, according to the UK's legally standardized 7-hour working day or 35-hour working week. The title thus refers to a determinate context-specific and objective social meaning –contractually waged labor and the formal worker in capitalist economies. By naming this temporal framework of the working day, it refers to a social as well as legal form, but also to a fiction, for this norm is increasingly hollowed out by precarization, by the rise of unemployment, surplus populations and informal economies. The positivistic factual title therefore also displays the incongruity of this abstract equation, one that points to the time it excludes, such as the private hours of recreation and labor in the household, or the hours of overtime, etc.

The conceptional logic of Eichhorn's intervention consists in a dialectic between what it exposes and what it conceals, what it determines and what it leaves undetermined. In an interview published alongside the exhibition, the artist explains that:

> work is suspended [ausgesetzt], temporarily interrupted, thus becoming the focus of attention. It becomes exposed [ausgesetzt] to the gaze, to attentiveness. The term aussetzen [to suspend, to expose, to abandon, to find fault with, or to strike] becomes active, operative and effective in its multiple meanings. Work is abandoned [ausgesetzt]: given away, brought to a different place and left to itself there, surrendered to the influence of somebody or something. To find fault with [aussetzen] work under these conditions means to question, or to critique it. Aussetzen can also mean 'to strike'. When a passer-by comes by the closed door of Chisenhale Gallery and reads the sign on the fence, it could occur to them that a strike is taking place here. But this strike is not chosen, rather, I have imposed it. (Eichhorn, 2016, p. 62-63)[11]

Only through its objectivized mode of existence as an artwork–its aesthetic distance from the social realm– and not through its direct intervention into social life can Eichhorn's conceptual proposition acquire social significance. The staff of the gallery are the recipients of a

[11] Eichhorn, *5 Weeks, 25 Days, 175 Hours*, 62–63.

"gift" of time, but also the performers or executors of the durational work that is hidden from view. Eichhorn's work attempts to expose the temporal norms of capitalist labor, while also symbolically suspending those norms by suspending their determination as productive time. In order to expose time, it cannot be represented (through activity) but it must be interrupted.

In contrast to activist art's representations of concrete activities as a politically lauded aesthetic of use value derived from the mere fact that artists do something in and for society rather than passively contemplating it, Eichhorn's approach arrests the time of activity, transforming it into an indeterminate object of theoretical contemplation and thus allowing it to become an object of social renegotiation. By bringing the indeterminacy of time into existence — and not *producing* it— in a conceptually precise and socially controlled way, *5 Weeks, 25 Days, 175 Hours* declares disposable time as content of social freedom. Disposable time is not productive or unproductive per se, but by definition, indeterminate, and therefore freely determinable. Through its characteristic mixture of a rigid conceptual framework and a radical indeterminacy of its outcomes, Eichhorn's work reminds us that all economy is essentially an economy of time, in which the imperative of productivity need not have the final word.

Revolution as Suspension of Activity

The interruption of capitalist temporal orders is also at the center of Jeronimo Voss and Lain Iwakura's recent project *ATC Against The Clock*, which started as an audiovisual installation and performance program at the small non-profit space Klingental in Basel in Spring 2024. Diverging from the conceptualist purism exemplified by the likes of Eichhorn's work, visual artist Voss and sound artist Iwakura pose the question of temporalities of inactivity by means of a speculative fiction which includes images, narrative and, importantly, sound. The work takes its conceptual starting point from the anarchist strikes by female clock manufacturing workers in the Swiss Jura region in the 1870s –a

historical subject which had already attracted some attention through Cyril Schäublin's 2022 feature film *Unruhe* (Unrest).[12]

Using AI visual technologies and polytemporal electronic musical composition, Voss and Iwakura imagine an alternative present shaped by radically new ways to inhabit time beyond the modern capitalist nexus of clock time, productivity, rationalization of labor and linear conceptions of historical progress. They imagine a world where the 1870s clock factory occupations resulted in the collective self-organization of the workers, and ask how would these spaces look today and, more importantly, what forms of temporality would emerge to (de)regulate social life, production and subjectivity? This *Uchronia* –as the artists prefer to name their speculative imagination of a future society in terms of its temporal forms of organization rather than the spatial, topological focus of Utopias– is employed as a generative framework of a multimedia installation in the exhibition space as well as a program of conversations and performances, extending the question of temporality to the durational form of the exhibition.

Mediated by the more general interest of contemporary artists in the Science-Fiction-Genre,[13] the audiovisual installation of *ATC – Against the Clock* evokes what Arthur Rimbaud (1871) called a *deregulation of the senses* (*derèglement de tous les sens*) or, more generally, an affective state of unrest. Sounds of desynchronized and polyrhythmic ticking clocks, realized with a 3-D installation of specifically constructed speakers–electroacoustic exciters, mounted on round acrylic glass panels–vibrate as a sonic web throughout the space which defies any immediately perceivable rhythmical order. On the walls, archival photographs of women working in the Jura factories are hung in tondo frames. Through AI prompted visual software, Voss extends these spaces into a fictive present: large round wallpaper prints surround the framed photographic documents, indicating how the historical spaces could look today, had the strike of the clock manufacturers been continued and

[12] Both Schäublin's film and Voss' and Iwakura's exhibition project were in part informed by Florian Eitel (2018), *Anarchistische Uhrmacher in der Schweiz: Mikrohistorische Globalgeschichte zu den Anfängen der anarchistischen Bewegung im 19. Jahrhundert*.
[13] See Dan Byrne-Smith, (ed.) (2020), *Science Fiction: Documents of Contemporary Art*.

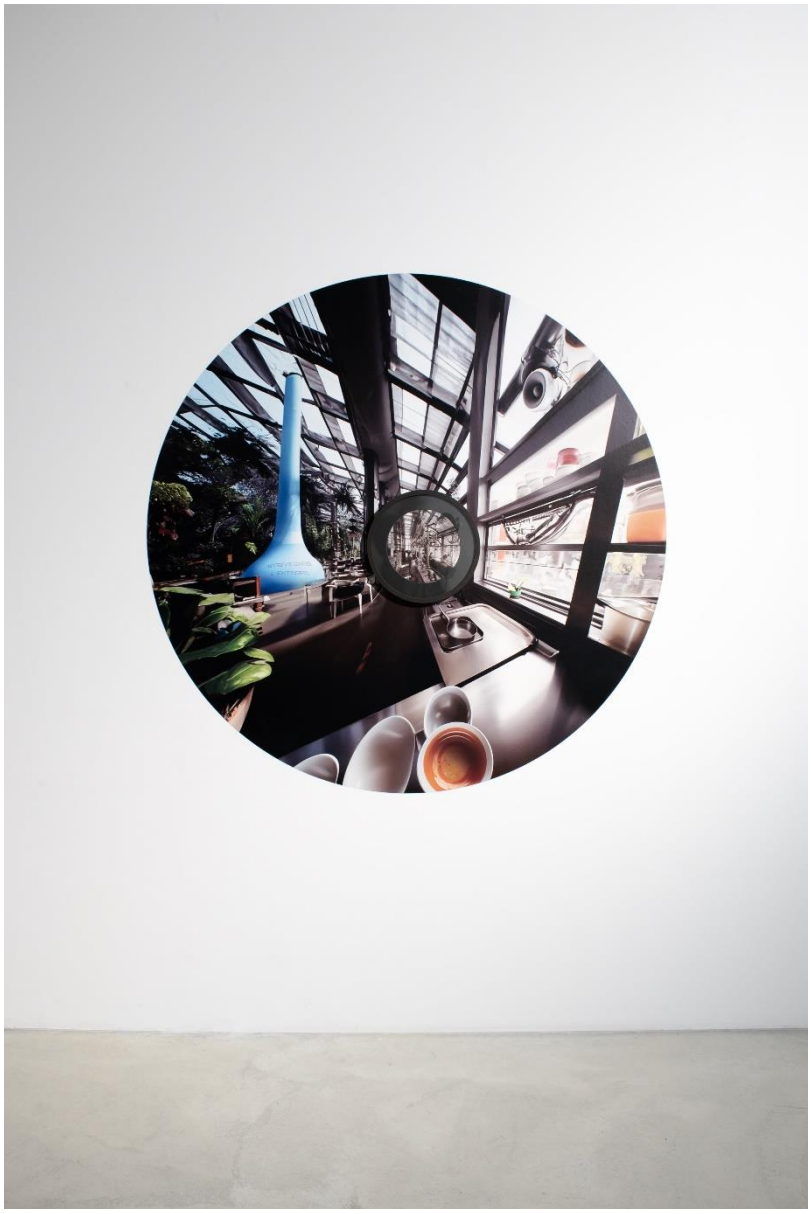
sustained. The images suggest the historical transformation of these spaces. As the means of production have been seized and the valorization of capital is no longer their primary and only end, automated technology would no longer dominate but liberate human time.

[Fig. 2]. Jeronimo Voss and Lain Iwakura (2024). *ATC Against the Clock*. Installation view. Klingental, Basel.

In one of the images, the manufacturing room of the clockmakers transforms into an automated control room; in another, into a collective industrial kitchen, reminiscent of the feminist, communist and anarchist demand to socialize and technologically revolutionize reproductive labor.[14] Noting that these futurist computer-generated spaces are empty of people we can draw a parallel to Eichhorn's gesture of closing a gallery: disposable time is liberated, but not represented through any particular activity. It is not a gesture of determining what meaningful time is, but rather of inactivating time, suspending its linear, rationalized

[14] See Lu Märten (1903/1982), Die Zentralisation der Hauswirtschaft.

form, and embodying its indeterminacy. The content to be liberated is not natural time, but rather social time itself. Therefore, technology assumes a critical role in this liberation.



[Fig. 3]. Jeronimo Voss and Lain Iwakura (2024.). *ATC Against the Clock*, detail. Klingental, Basel.

Both Voss' and Iwakura's artistic practice is situated within a technology-oriented leftist aesthetics: Voss' visual works often deal with attempts to actualize the revolutionary media aesthetics of the early 20th century and Iwakura (together with Achim Szepanski until the latter's recent death) runs the *Mille Plateaux* label which promotes experimental electronic music with links to dissident Marxist subcultures. In their collaboration, Voss and Iwakura use the exhibition space as an experiential design for a technologically mediated sensorium of non-aligned temporalities.

In the center of the room, a circular domed installation of screens with irregularly flickering animated versions of the same spaces suggests a sort of automated plenum, especially if we listen to the synthetic voices engaged in a discussion about the social use of time as a measuring device to coordinate labor in communist society. How can the negativity of revolution —the arrest of historical time and the break with its bad infinity, epitomized in the clockmakers stopping production[15]— be transformed into sustainable technological and social systems of collective coordination? If it is to be radically conceived, the proletarian general strike, Werner Hamacher (1991) notes in his reading of Benjamin's *Critique of Violence*, mustn't be about "forming and transforming action" but about "abstention from action" (p. 1155). How does this pure temporal inactivity of the strike, the revolutionary suspension of time and history, translate into politics and social production? In the discussion –perceived by the listeners as a looped plenum of automated voices– the problems of such a radically *uchronian* communism are highlighted more than promises. The flexibilization of temporal orders is a neoliberal principle as is the nightmare of real existing automation and the prospect of its fascist acceleration. Given that in terms of arresting the ecological catastrophe of capitalist progress, any revolution will most likely be too late, economic planning beyond the temporal norms of capitalist productivity won't be about a golden socialist future but about "mitigating catastrophic development" (Voss and Iwakura, 2024). Seen in this light, the futurism of *Uchronia*

[15] Thinking revolution as arresting linear historical time is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's (1972 [1940]).

becomes highly ambiguous, an ambiguity that is perceptible in the eerie sonic and visual spaces presented in Voss' and Iwakura's installation.

Artistic inactivism

At a time in which artistic activism has become a common currency in the art world, an aesthetic politics of inactivity might be considered an alternative. As I have argued in this article, the notion of activity itself, as pitted by proponents of art's *social turn* against the contemplative stance of modern aesthetics,[16] is disconcertingly linked to ideologies of work and production in capitalist societies. Historical forms of artistic inactivism are numerous, from conceptualism's rejection of material production to anarchist and bohemian anti-work attitudes via the politization of artistic labor through the instrument of the artist strike. However, once considered a promising alternative to the capitalist temporal organization of social life, artistic modes of inactivity become increasingly troubled by the neoliberal restructuring of capitalist temporality itself.

Against this backdrop, Eichhorn's *5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours* and Voss and Iwakura's *Against the Clock* might be considered different actualizations of a politics of inactivity which, while problematizing the productive imperative of capitalist modernity, also articulate some of the challenges that come with its negation. Whereas Eichhorn's sparse, iconoclastic gesture holds the radical indeterminacy of disposable time against its representation, Voss and Iwakura use sonic, visual, and fictional forms –inactivist imaginaries– to envision how this temporal indeterminacy might be applied socially. From divergent positions – conceptualist iconoclasm on the one hand and sensuous imagination on the other– both art works suggest possible ways out of the capitalist imperative of productivity, toward an aesthetic politics of inactivity.

[16] It might be no coincidence that proponents of the *social turn* or *activist art* like Grant Kester or Oliver Marchart seem to reiterate the modern opposition of *action* against *contemplation* when they criticize theorists like Theodor W. Adorno or Jacques Rancière who remain both skeptical of art's dissolution into social practice and defend classically *contemplative values* (inactivity as aesthetic resistance in the case of Rancière; the relative autonomy of art and theory in the case of Adorno), see Marchart (2019) and Wilson, (2007).

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