Inactivity (Berlin, 11-12 Jul 24)

ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry, Jul 11–12, 2024
Deadline: Apr 7, 2024

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Inactivity: Between Aesthetic Practice and Sociopolitical Challenge.

Organized by Oliver Aas, Hana Gründler, Antje Kempe, and Barbara Kristina Murovec

A workshop of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institute, Research Group 'Ethico-Aesthetics of the Visual' and University Greifswald, Interdisciplinary Centre for Baltic Sea Region Research, in cooperation with the ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry.

At least since the Enlightenment, Western culture has been in the echo chambers of autonomy and its ethos of a rational, active, and ultimately self-creating and self-serving individual subject. Unlike in antiquity, when the fragile relation between otium and negotium was thought fundamental for the well-being of the (free) individual and society, today inactivity has become an increasingly problematic and, to a certain extent, morally and politically destabilizing category. Not too surprisingly, the French socialist Paul Lafargue's claim that, next to the right to work, there should be a 'right to be lazy' (1883) was harshly criticized. His position, inspired by ancient philosophy, was reproached by socialist and capitalist perspectives. Significantly, in today's age of hyperactivity, 24/7 accessibility, and accelerationism, one hears of the need to slow down, to do less (or indeed nothing at all), and to contemplate. The interest in (in)action — slow cinema, and even slow food and other so-called practices of 'self-care' — becomes steadily more important to artistic practices and in academic discourses. But what are the narratives behind this development? Are there different forms of inaction, some perceived as 'productive', and others as 'destructive'? Can inaction be a progressive gesture 'of doing' at a moment when classical 'actions' have exhausted themselves? Would that also apply to a hypercapitalized and accelerated art market and exhibition system?

This workshop aims to critically examine artistic, literary, philosophical, and political strategies and practices of inaction. It looks at how these practices, on one hand, work against dominant cultural and political narratives and, on the other, are absorbed by capitalism and ultimately become neoliberal adjuncts to prevailing economic and political systems. The focus of the workshop will be on artistic and aesthetic practices from the early twentieth century until today, since they offer a particularly fertile testing ground for thinking through strategies of action and inaction. One example might be found with so-called unofficial artists, writers, and intellectuals in totalitarian or post-totalitarian systems. They could not afford to protest in plain sight and thus often chose non-assuming and perhaps counter-intuitive strategies like leisure, ambivalence, and irony for staging their resistance. Also, Eastern European performance art, for example, has long demonstrated

that inaction can structure the artist's presence as much as (if not more eloquently than) action. Here, the typical action, which with its Western connotations is often imagined to lead to a romanticized version of revolution, is subverted.

At the same time, conceptualizing inaction as an agent of change — also in the sense of contemplation as basis of creativity — comes with its pitfalls. When does inaction simply become a willful act of ignorance? As Hannah Arendt has elucidated, we have been witnesses to mass atrocities that we have refused to acknowledge, which alerts us to exercise caution when it comes to doing nothing. In this light, individual positions like 'opting out' and departing from sociopolitical life (e.g., abstaining from voting) become highly problematic. After all, who is free to 'opt out' and who remains helplessly stuck?

Also of interest are cultural and artistic practices that thematize inactivity as forms of resistance, resilience, or counter-movement in the broader field of heritage discourses, conservation, and art history, as well as within the museum context. The aim is to discuss, on the one hand, whether decay is understood as a kind of inactivity that causes a revaluation of objects, sites, and practices in terms of negation or negotiation. On the other hand, the aim is to interrogate how to interpret inactivity regarding questioned monuments, events, and places without sticking to the binarity of 'productive' or 'destructive' discourses. Does decay as process — and/or doing nothing as practice in the above-mentioned fields — also become an agent of change or, referring to the Aristotelian philosophy, counter-energeia in times of political and ecological crises?

The historical longue durée — starting with vita contemplativa and its contemporary relevance and adaptability — and the conceptual complexity of 'inactivity' require further analysis. Many of inactivity's manifestations in artistic and aesthetic practices, in political actions, and in everyday life forms remain undertheorized. The interest of the workshop is therefore in concrete, historically-grounded case studies and broader systematic-methodological approaches that help us conceptualize and re-vise well-known narratives of inactivity, mostly in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries but also in accounts that tackle the longue durée. The organizers thus invite scholars from art history, philosophy, sociology, literature, and related fields, and those who work in different geographical areas, to present a short talk of about 25 minutes (followed by a discussion).

Please send an abstract of max. 2,000 characters and a short bio (in one pdf) in English by email to oliver.aas@khi.fi.it

The submission deadline is 7 April 2024.

Feedback on workshop participation as well as information on lodging and travel reimbursement will be provided by 22 April 2024.

Venue:
ICI Berlin
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https://www.ici-berlin.org/call-for-papers-inactivity/

Reference:
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