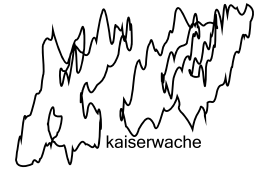


# Michael Mönnich

## *Passive Income*

### June 06 - July 07, 2024



Kaiserwache is pleased to present the solo exhibition *PASSIVE INCOME* by Michael Mönnich from June 6 to July 7, 2024. We warmly invite you to the opening on June 6 at 7 PM.

Michael Mönnich's artistic practice engages deeply with the intersections of technology, labor, and image production. His recent exhibitions examine how technical systems leveraging artificial intelligence rely on extensive datasets generated, transferred, and traded globally through digital photography and the internet. Mönnich's works shed critical light on these processes and illuminate the social and economic conditions under which these images are produced. Exemplifying these inquiries is the series *Work, Comfort, Home*. His exhibitions consistently operate at the interface of aesthetic experience and social analysis, inviting viewers to question the mechanisms and impacts of a digitized achievement-oriented society.

His previous works have approached the theme of labor in diverse ways. In *PASSIVE INCOME*, Mönnich turns to the flip side of the coin. If *vita activa* is defined by labor as an externally determined and utilitarian use of time, Mönnich is not merely interested in the leisure that follows work. Instead, this leisure can be just as regimented, serving primarily as recuperation to ensure the continuation of labor. In this interplay of work and leisure, the latter is subordinated to the absolute value of productivity and its enhancement, thus remaining a „false“ leisure. What Mönnich finds compelling lies outside this structure; hence, this „veritable“ leisure bears no relation to everyday work. To truly be „unproductive“ in a life directed necessarily by employment, this non-work must lose orientation and in a sense, fall out of time, tearing apart the calendar. The incuse of this side of the coin is marked by the absence of duties and self-determined time management that transcends temporal constraints. In the overall picture, this incuse appears as idleness, *vita contemplativa*, which allows for unhurried and free reflection, dedicated to the unproductive and playful. It is in this relaxation of purpose and functionality that true aesthetic experience becomes possible. A move towards idleness heralds a discontinuity for daily life but constitutes a continuity within itself, alleviating the sharp pain in our conscience that reminds us when the next (work) day begins. As the imposed priorities of productivity constraints diminish, a horizon beyond the established (work) order opens up. As we traverse *PASSIVE INCOME*, we catch glimpses of this horizon, if only in sporadic flashes of light.

In Mönnich's approach, idleness and artistic production unite in a way that enables a paradoxical but fruitful dialogue between passive attention and productive creation. Perhaps not so paradoxical when we detach from the neoliberal structures that tightly link productivity with indicators of economic performance and equate leisure with lost motion. What the exhibition title suggests is that passive income in idleness differs from what we usually associate with it. Passive income denotes earnings without active work; a highly charged concept in our society, tied to the myth of the independent individual who manages to generate income passively from rents and dividends. But as Bertrand Russell notes in his well-regarded essay "In Praise of Idleness," this financial freedom is not praiseworthy because in the workings of capitalism it is "[...] possible only by the industry of others; indeed their desire for comfortable idleness is historically the source of the whole gospel of work." The contextual dependency and site-specificity of his exhibition mark a significant shift in his artistic approach. Mönnich does not start with a concrete concept directly related to KW (Kaiserwache), but rather approaches the process somewhat blindly, one might say, casually. Through the study of the spaces, the sauntering, and the circling and roving gaze, he first establishes a correspondence with the site. The artist subjects himself to an experimental setup that transforms unpreparedness into a potent serum. This serum places aesthetic observation and discovery at the center and allows the banal to be perceived in its quiet, often overlooked complexity.

*Insights I* and *Insights II* are the manifestations of the potent serum at work. The photographs document fragmentary situations that the artist discovered while perusing the space of KW, like a book. *Insights I* highlights a blade of grass and a wood chip suspended together on a spider thread. The duo is illuminated by a beam of light that appears on the left edge of the image, likely from a wall in the exhibition space. The rest of the background is enveloped in deep black, leaving us unable to guess in which corner of KW Mönnich took the shot. The image appears almost theatrical, yet not staged, even though it is. If we were to search for this situation ourselves, the question arises whether a gust of wind might have already carried it away. In the further course, it will become clear that what interests Mönnich is truly hanging by a thread – fleeting, briefly present, and quickly gone. A similar transience meets us in *Insights II*, where we find blurred shadows of foliage as well as the soft but clearly recognizable shadow of a camera tripod on a white wall. Presumably, we are witnessing the camera belonging to the tripod in action. The photographed objects are not directly in the image, but we can infer that the wall and trees must be in close proximity. The sensual atmosphere reminds us that the photographic capture records the changing shadows throughout the day; only in idleness do we become aware of how the shadows slowly shift.

While the title suggests some in-depth look or realizations, these seem largely denied to us. The insights likely meant are directly connected to an experience of idle time that cannot be represented and are only accessible to the camera and its handler at the moment of exposure. *Insights I-II* attempt to capture what cannot be captured – the flow, the stroll, and the singular moment that characterize idleness. Yet, something flashes if we look long enough, a glimmer that guides us. If we follow its steps leading to nowhere and begin to explore the area aimlessly, we might succeed in entering the flow. Never the same one, but perhaps a similar one. In this way, Mönnich's approach cultivates the wandering gaze. His camera demonstrates not just what is seen, but also the free process that precedes his results.

*Constellations I-III* bring together various elements and layers of meaning, including historical remnants, fragile ceramic models, and intimate video recordings of caterpillars. Particularly striking are the elongated metal boxes serving as bases here, contrasting with previous presentations of this series on conventional white pedestals. We see remnants here from a time when Kaiserwache still served its designated function. The artist discovered these time-worn boxes in the basement of KW, where they had been stored and forgotten after becoming redundant. They are likely protective cases and collection containers for coins pocketed half a century ago from restroom users. Inside *Constellation III (Shoulder)*, we find a mechanical visitor counter frozen at its last count, now forever unchanged. Mönnich awakens these dormant artifacts from their slumber, granting them a new life as monuments of transience and change.

His use of these boxes could be seen as defunctionalization or repurposing. They no longer serve their original purpose as coin containers but now form part of an aesthetic and reflective practice. However, the term „repurposing“ falls short here since the boxes do not simply serve another purpose in their new context. As bases for artworks, they fulfill a new functional role, yet this functionality is of an unproductive nature in conventional terms: it does not arise from utilitarian efficiency but from their premature presence and history relating to the site. Their way of being in the world (In-der-Welt-Sein) does away with their original utility and unfolds in this simultaneity of functionality as a base and a kind of purposeless presence, turning the passive object into a subject that carries its own memories and capable of passing them.

Chipboards atop the boxes form platforms for the titular *constellations*. We observe simple structures composed mostly of handmade clay tiles, creating miniature projection surfaces and model-like cross-sections of spaces. The unglazed ceramics of the miniature rooms reflect the architecture of the exhibition space, drawing attention to its structural design. Viewing the ceramics as reflections of their environment, as mirrors made of clay, reveals the fragility of the *White Cube* itself. Its supposedly neutral emptiness, meant solely for the perception of the artwork, reflects a society obsessed with efficiency that designs its workspaces accordingly. Also noteworthy is the manner of projection onto ceramics, where all three diverge from the expected precision of image alignment to the clay screens, despite the potential for such alignment. Narrow strips of videos flash on the walls in the background, and in *Constellation II (Tree)*, the image is even projected onto a corner of the ceramic, distorting the depiction and fragmenting it into multiple image spaces. All these apparent flaws seem to highlight the materiality of the ceramics and emphasize the playful variety of interactions between ceramic, wall, and projection – a diversity explored by the artist in idle times.

The sovereignty of the ceramics, nurtured and asserted, is exemplified by displaying a standalone ceramic on the windowsill in the main room, simply named *Structure I*. The constellations are characterized by the animated presentation of mini projectors and external batteries, which ostentatiously take their place on the ceramic pedestals as if they were spectators of their own show. To ensure their stability, coins are inserted between the chipboard and the ceramics, as well as between the ceramics and the projectors, lending the miniature cinema setup a delicate balance. Among the change is a ten-pfennig coin discovered in one of the boxes. The remaining change comes from the donation box of KW, emphasizing the financial challenges faced by any artistic endeavor, often marked by limited budgets and irregular incomes.

All three constellations invite us to approach them, not least to closely examine the projected video works. We are asked to shrink and take a seat, though this can only remain a gesture. Instead, we must bend, position ourselves, move around the works, and make our physical and perceptual presence an integral part of the exhibition. There is a specific vantage point in the room from which all projections can be viewed simultaneously. At this point, we become watchtowers, as the subject's gaze objectifies.

The video works are all one-shot smartphone recordings of various caterpillars, lasting under a minute on average and playing in a continuous loop. One caterpillar sits on the artist's shoulder, another crawls along a tree trunk, with the camera so close to its movement that it creates an illusion of extreme speed. In a third recording, a caterpillar hangs from a silk thread in front of a static camera, writhing and dangling while a body of water is visible in the unfocused background.

Do the caterpillars sense that they are being filmed? It is quite possible that the question makes no sense, but it might lead us in the right direction. Once again, we are moving beyond conventional categories. The encounter between human and non-human consciousness raises questions about the relationship between humans and animals: the human who sees and the animal that is seen creates a subject-object relationship, as Derrida discusses in "The Animal That Therefore I Am." The positions are reversible, yet the observer can in some way usurp the observed, surreptitiously, because they are playing a different game. This very circumstance enables the concept of livestock. Thus, another fact is revealed. The human sees and works, the animal that is seen and knows no work can still be integrated into this value-oriented order. Can we understand the caterpillars as actors, even if they cannot play a role but simply embody themselves? It remains open how this dimension is handled in *Constellations I-III*. The works initialize a reflection on how idleness can be defined not only as the absence of work but as a state closer to the non-human and its immediate existence.

<sup>1</sup> Bertrand Russell, *In Praise of Idleness and Other Essays* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1935), 13.

#### About the Artist:

Michael Mönnich (\*1992) completed his diploma in Fine Arts in the sculpture class under Prof. Nicole Wermers in 2024. Prior to this, he studied photography with stays abroad at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague and ECAL in Lausanne. Mönnich has participated in numerous exhibitions, including venues such as Produzentengalerie in Hamburg, Lothringer 13 Halle in Munich, Art Au Centre in Liège, The Balcony in The Hague, and Stadtgalerie Schwaz. He was awarded the debutant prize for his diploma exhibition at the AdBK in Munich and received a studio residency at the Amira Ateliers. He lives and works in Freiburg and Munich.

#### About Kaiserwache:

The former public restroom, known to Freiburg residents as „Kaiserwache,“ was well-frequented due to its central location in the city and proximity to the banks of the Dreisam. However, with its original purpose decommissioned, the question of finding an alternative use for the heritage-protected building has arisen. This question has become increasingly relevant, especially given the growing lack of space in Freiburg, despite many buildings remaining vacant. With this in mind, KW positions itself as an offspace that is concerned with its own temporality, interested in suggesting alternatives beyond its interim use. The space at KW acts as a catalyst for the presentation of site-specific works and the facilitation of discourse surrounding the institution of the public toilet. By showcasing site-specific works, KW offers a unique platform for artists to reflect on and engage with the space's heritage and temporality.

Curated by Christina Sperling, Lena Reckord and Ilja Zaharov.

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