

Mladen Stilinović

Since the year 2001 Platform Garanti has been a regionally active institution. We have organized the Balkan Middle-East Conference in 2003, a first in the field. Between 2004 and 2006, Platform's residency program hosted artists from Bosnia, Egypt and Slovenia through a grant awarded by the American Center Foundation. In 2006-2007, we operated a three-institution Balkan Artist Exchange program along with [kuda.org](#) [Novi Sad] and the vector association [Iasi] to provide residencies for artists living in the region with funds from the Nordic Council of Ministers. We started a new initiative in 2007 for artists from West Asia through a start-up grant funded by the Open Society Institute, and provided relief residency support to artists from Beirut.

Being located in the most developed city of the region with an important biennial and a burgeoning institutional scene, Platform observes its responsibility towards the Balkans and the Middle East, and pays careful attention to the situations in these regions. With this aim in mind, Platform is now organizing an exhibition of Mladen Stilinović. The exhibition will be reconfigured in the beginning of 2008 for Van AbbeMuseum in Eindhoven.

Platform will produce a publication in collaboration with Van AbbeMuseum focusing on Stilinović's practice with artist books. It will be the final in the series of Stilinović publications that have explored different themes within the practice of the artist. Dejan Krsic from the Croatian Collective WHW will design the book. The publication will include a comprehensive interview on the work of the artist published to DVD by WHW's Sabina Sabolovic.

The books published in the series are: *Cynicism of the Poor*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb 2001; *Pain*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb 2003; *Artist at Work*, Galerija Skuc, Ljubljana 2005, and *Exploitation of Death* [Documenta 12], Kassel 2007.

Stilinović was born in 1947 in Belgrade, Serbia. He lives and works in Zagreb, Croatia, and has been exhibiting since 1975. One of the most important proponents of present-day conceptual art, Stilinović is an outstanding polemicist. He gained notoriety as a member of the "Group of Six", a Croatian artist collective from the 1970s known for its films and renegade street performances. The artist questioned "ideology in-itself" through his own idiosyncratic readings of socialist ideology. In 1977 Stilinović wrote the following phrase, in red on pink silk: "An Attack On My Art Is An Attack on

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Socialism And Progress." In his earliest works, Stilinović explored the relationship between the visual sign and colloquial speech by decoding verbal and visual clichés and trying to detach language from political commonplaces and imposed connotations. As the artist himself commented, "if language is the property of ideology, I too want to become the owner of such language; I want to think in it, with all the consequences that entails." Stilinović further developed his critique by cleverly exploiting extinct visual codes that involved the recycling of the visual and ideological sign systems of Constructivism, Suprematism, and Socialist Realism, as well as the colors red and the black, and the symbols of the star and the cross. Stilinović's work is the result of a post-Socialist conceptual strategy involving poverty and kitsch. One of the projects by the artist, realized in 1994-95, consisted of the vivisection of the evolving position of post-Socialist art as it became a part of the new market, a position that appears in condensed form in one of Stilinović's statements in English: "An Artist Who Cannot Speak English Is No Artist." Stilinović knows very well that stepping out of ideology is the very precondition for our enslavement to it. This position is far from a position of cynical distance, laughter, or irony as the underlying premises of contemporary society, democratic or totalitarian. The greatest dangers for totalitarianism are people who take its ideology literally, and for Stilinović this literalism has the status of an ethical stance. Avoiding simple metaphors of unmasking and discarding the veils that are supposed to hide raw reality, Stilinović has succeeded in developing a different critique of Socialist and post-Socialist ideology. The artist succeeded in subverting and twisting totalitarian ideology by literally repeating it. Researching the interactions between visual and verbal signs and intervening on inexpensive and found material, his projects have assumed a variety of forms: installations, collages, artist books, video, and performance. In the recent years, Stilinović participated in exhibitions at the Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum in Graz, Essl Collection in Vienna, Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, Tate Modern, Apex Art, the 2003 Venice and 2006 Sydney Biennials.

The exhibition at Platform Garanti will pivot around the issue of economy with reference to the previous use of our building as a bank in the 1980s. The works planned for exhibition are: *Bag people; Justice – Injustice, Subtraction of Zeroes; Potatoes;* and *Treasury*. In addition, a recent video showing a frog jumping around on the floor of a pristine exhibition space assisted by the digitized and soulless voice of a person repeating the words annoyingly "great

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show, great show" will be projected on the facade window of the space.
Finally, a selection from Stilinović's production of over 70 artist books, from the 1970s to today, will be exhibited in the library.

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Further Information on works exhibited:

Justice-injustice:



"Everyone is used to pictures in such a space, and the only thing that can still surprise are cakes. That is why one should seek, in this procedure, the simple components of the effect a joke has on the viewers' mental systems of making judgments, which are not in the least comical."

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Justice- injustice consists of two sets of plates in geometric segments in bright colors, with proverbs inscribed on them. The counterweight, or counterclaim, to each proverb is a word inscribed on the opposite side of the round shape, and this word is death. The plates are exhibited on a vertical wall along with geometric abstract pictures in small formats, each of which is equipped with a console shelf with a cake on it.

The cakes appear frequently in series of works by Stilinović. They assume the role of the pebbles in a mosaic, as particulars not of different types, but of the same type, but still helping the put together a whole out of separate units. The fact that their recurrence is surprising in a visual context is another part of the author's strategy. Stilinovic uses cake as a kind of micro-architecture, highly subject to the time factor, while his personal act is the selection of the kind of cakes and their arrangement in a certain space. When he uses a cake to attack the surface of a picture, thus making concrete the metaphor of "throwing a cake into the face of the picture", he attributes to it a mediating role.

BS: Why does the word "death" often appear on the plates along with the proverbs?

MS: The proverbs "no work no food", "time is money", "those who don't work have no fear of hunger" hint at death. I didn't add "death" to all the proverbs, only to those that seemed to contain death as consequence. They sound

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ominous. These are old proverbs, similar in all countries, and they don't interest me as ethnography but because even today politicians all over the world use them. In the current election campaign in Croatia the same slogans are being repeated: work, order and peace.

From an interview by Blanka Stipančić

Bag People:



"I go; before me people with bags. I can see it only from the rear. They go home. Their isolation, its bags, absence, became. Silence, which body speaks. I go into the other direction. The noise of the newspapers - the headline of the yearly 2001, among them many unimportant daily reports, and an event of importance for the whole world: the destruction of the World Trade Center. Where meet everyday life and history, which is its relationship, privately as public?"

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In Mladen Stilinović's installation "Bag People", everyday life and history find themselves in a non-relationship, similarly to those who are photographed: everyone goes along by themselves, and yet at the same time they are linked by a shared life situation. Stilinović photographed the "Bag People" in Jakuseva – a suburb of Zagreb, which is equated for him with poverty. Here people sell everything possible, down to their "last shirt", in a large black market. Goods are offered on newspapers, whose daily news plays no role in the form of a sales display. At the same time, though, the news is relevant to the "Bag People", whose poverty is not a "given" one, but is instead the consequence of political conjunctions. Since the downfall of socialism after

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1989 due to economic and political developments, many people find themselves forced to find new forms of survival: from informal economies all the way to migration. This juxtaposition of meaning and meaninglessness, change and resignation, is recreated in this installation by Stilinović', who has repeatedly addressed the theme of poverty under changing political conditions in his work since the 1970s. It is always a matter of a rejected or impossible counterpart: "Bag People" and newspapers; the perpetual sameness of everyday survival and world news; resignation and event; and not least of all, "Bag People" and the viewers of the installation, on whom the former turn their backs. In response to a question from an interviewer about whether the photographs merely depict "another world" and thus make use of a certain exoticism, Stilinović replied: "That is not another world; these are only simple people trying to sell something. ... It is not exotic, only sad." The newspaper clippings remind us that the people photographed and the people viewing them are all a part of, and participants in, the same political (world) conditions, even if their everyday stories do not intersect.

Treasury:



"Money is the only language everybody understands. It's a great subject. Money and bread are symbols of power. I worked with money as power, money as impotence. I've always used genuine banknotes although I think every country has a law that bans destruction of money. It's always been an offence."

Mladen Stilinović

Since 1975 Stilinović has been making collages, objects, assemblages and environments with money.

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Potatoes!
2001, 4'16"



"How do I like in this capitalism gone amok and how have I survived socialism? Understanding the power of politics and economy, of language and anti-language, analysing it and taking it as serious, I have always thought that these powers are dangerous, boring, eternal - but I can be dangerous, boring and stubborn, too. To me, these powers do not represent any kind of authority...As I have said, I have never respected authorities, either from the East or the West, or streets, or museums; I have created useless and futile art and that was my third way. The sad way. In other words, neither left nor right, neither masses nor elite, neither apples nor oranges. Potatoes, potatoes, or cakes."
Mladen Stilinović

In a bucolic winter setting, a vegetable vendor is heard yelling POTATOES! The culprit is a lone man crouching behind a small wooden crate. Although he is yelling potatoes, on display are individual servings of cake. His deadpan determination makes it hard to discern which is out of context, vendor or forest. Once a small mound of potatoes is revealed behind his back, the discrepancy between what is said and what is initially shown becomes troubling in an almost surreal way. Stilinović remains an outstanding polemicist. He gained notoriety as a member of the "Group of Six," a Croatian artist collective from the 1970s known for its films and renegade street performances. Stilinović thrives on the contradiction between need versus luxury particularly as it would have been suppressed in supposedly classless societies with large poor populations. Stilinović's critique of unacknowledged pain and poverty applies to Croatia as well as to East/West relations in general.

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