

*Nothing Gained with Dice* is the second solo presentation of work by Croatian artist Mladen Stilinović at e-flux. While the 2010 exhibition *Artist's Books* focused on that form, with which Stilinović has continuously been engaged since 1972, the most recent exhibition offers broader insight into the great variety of media and themes that characterize Stilinović's work—with its interweaving of politics, language, art, and daily life—while tracing them back to his earlier and lesser-known experiments in poetry and film. The exhibition, titled after a quote from poet Paul Celan, which Stilinović uses as the opening line of his text "On Money and Zeros," foregrounds the crucial link between his visual work and language and poetry; while the early films, which Stilinović produced in Zagreb's so-called amateur cine-clubs, call forth his passionate dedication to auto-didacticism.

Since the beginning of his career in the 1970s, Stilinović has been opposing social norms, ideology of political and culture canons, always questioning his own human and artistic status. From 1975 he was a member of Group of Six Artists, a group of avant-garde artists in Zagreb, who organized exhibitions-actions in public space, seeking for more autonomous art venues for art production and distribution. Stilinović constantly reaffirms his position of an artist who operates as an artistic corrective to the surrounding reality, from the Yugoslav socialism to the neo liberal global capitalism. From a formal perspective, Stilinović proposes an examination of the aesthetic (and social) heritage of historical avant-gardes, overcoming the intellectual strictness of conceptual art, and opening a space for humor and irony. Stilinović's works are mainly simple in their execution, but meticulously engaged with such subjects as poverty, death, money, economy, and pain, while systematically researching the relations between language and ideology.

Stilinović began producing his films in the so-called amateur cine-clubs in Zagreb. An autodidact in every field, he was able to move from one medium to another with a certain grace and liberty, and to employ various techniques at once. The films in the exhibitions have a revelatory effect, as they disclose his early curiosity and fascination with many different subjects that are also present in the collages and art books he was making at the time: city milieus, handwriting, street signs, drawings, visual poetry, and textual interpolation.

In *Artist at work* the artist is portrayed while sleeping, and in his notorious *Praise of Laziness* he asserts that there is no art without laziness. Stilinović points out the imperative of earning money and being employed in order to be part of society, in both socialist and capitalist production. His critical interest in the social significance of money—in the rituals, conventions, and ideologies that define its functions in society—is displayed in the works dealing with money.

“Just as money is only paper, the gallery is only a room,” claims the artist. Most of the “money works” in the exhibition comprise a new configuration of the *Money Room*, the fifth of a series of eleven rooms that Stilinović has set up in his apartment and displayed since 2003. The works included in the rooms span from the late ’70s to recent years.

“Money is the only language everybody understands,” thus the artist demystifies money as he demystifies party and ideological language. He uses real banknotes and coins—dollars, euros, and Yugoslav dinars— and undermines the authoritarian conventions of money by editing, fragmenting, adding, subtracting, changing texts and numbers, and combining Suprematism with language and food. In *Increased values or Slow destruction of American economy*, he writes on some of the banknotes and hence transforms their aesthetic and symbolic language. After all, money is also merely made of images, material—signs among other signs.

*Money Environment* is the third iteration of the room series. First installed in the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb in 1980, and then at the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven in 2008, viewers attempted to reach for the banknotes from the ceiling and trampled on the coins on the floor.

“Time is money” can be read on one of his plates. In his film *Time 2* (1980), Stilinović films a clock, i.e. clockwise motion. In the meantime, in 1979 he would publish his book *I Have No Time* (1979), and in the ’90s he created a *Clock-Zero*, where he painted an old-fashioned alarm clock completely white, except for the number zero. “Zeroes are sad, absent—money is cheerful and present,” he writes. “If art has realized harmony, rhythm and beauty, then art has realized zero.” In his white paintings *Subtraction of zeros*, he shows a systematic subtraction of zeros values.

The use of colors is very important in Stilinović's art. White in suprematism indicates emptiness and nothingness, pain—in Stilinović's work it becomes a color of pain—black is the color of death, and red is the color of ideology and political power.

“The question is how to manipulate that which manipulates you,” explains Stilinović in relation to his interest in language. His method, if we can talk about method at all, is the de-instrumentalization of language and speech. He assembles, cuts, glues, deletes, and reassembles, taking his verbal and visual material from the street, from the media, and from politics. His statements often imitate the form of political slogans, which are themselves considered a rudimentary poetic form and at the same time a direct mechanism of political and ideological power. In his slogans, Stilinović takes down authority and playfully occupies that space—for example, in *Work is a disease*, a fake quotation

from Karl Marx, or *An Attack on my Art is an Attack on Socialism and Progress*.

His indifference to all authorities is not to be interpreted as a rebellion, or a passive state, but rather an active resistance to the existing states where there are no alternatives besides a bare, fragile, and imperfect humanity—humour, and lightness. Lightness here is to be understood in the sense that Italo Calvino gives it in the homonymous chapter of the *American Lessons*: “My working method has more often than not involved the subtraction of weight. I have tried to remove weight, sometimes from people, sometimes from heavenly bodies, sometimes from cities; above all I have tried to remove weight from the structure of stories and from language.”

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