

PRAISE OF LAZINESS, WHY SHOULD ARTISTS STAY POOR

Mladen Stilinović is one of the most important Croatian (post)conceptual artists, he was born in Belgrade, former Yugoslavia and lives in Zagreb. As a member of the 'Group of Six' he was one of the founders of the so-called New Art Practice which had a significant impact on the development of radical Croatian art in the second half of the seventies. He works in the tradition of avant-garde art by advocating for the social dimension of art - art as a social critique, art as a critique of art itself. In the 1970's he is exhibiting his work only in the outdoors as a critique of the gallery system. His pieces often come in a specific form of irony and cynicism, while the most important characteristic of Stilinović's work is his engagement with absurdity: of the individual, of the artist, and of the world. Money and human suffering are the recurring themes that go along with Stilinović's essential notion that life is inescapably absurd. He sees it as the way in which society operates. In 1976. Stilinović exhibits photographs 'Artist at Work', while lying, sleeping. Stilinović emphasizes the way in which the artists are seen as parasites by the so-called ordinary citizens engaged in "socially useful" work.

His worldview is embodied in a short manifesto 'Praise of Laziness' which the artist writes in 1993. He states that, as an artist, he had an opportunity to learn from both 'Western-capitalist' and 'Eastern-socialist' context and with this experience he states that art doesn't exist anymore in the West. "Artists in the West are not lazy and therefore not artists but rather producers of something... Their involvement with matters of no importance, such as production, promotion, gallery system, museum system, competition system (who is first), their preoccupation with objects, all that drives them away from laziness, from art. Just as money is paper, so a gallery is a room. " (1)

He finds some of the characteristics and virtues of the laziness to be crucial factors in artistic practice. "Laziness is the absence of movement and thought, dumb time - total amnesia. It is also indifference, staring at nothing, non-activity, impotence. It is sheer stupidity, a time of pain, futile concentration." (1)

He explains the artistic practice of the artists from the East by saying that they were lazy and poor because the entire system of insignificant factors didn't exist in their world. They had enough time to produce art while being completely let to the laziness itself. They didn't do it for the money, they knew it was in vain "...it was nothing." (1)

In the manifesto written only 3 years after the fall of the Eastern Block, and 3 years after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the author is uncertain about what will happen to the Eastern artists; will they stay lazy now when they are no longer Eastern artists? "...it remains to be seen." (1)

Almost 20 years later, it can be said that Stilinović's worries were justified. Since their independence, the countries of the former Yugoslavia seem to be following the same art market model as, for example, The Netherlands, a country that considers itself to be the country of the highest appreciation for the art in the world ("The Netherlands is a world leader in the field of art and culture. The arts, in every form, flourish in a country that has

outstanding museums and an impressive variety of classical and innovative music and theatre. Major international arts festivals are held every year.”(2))

Although the ‘art system’ in the countries of former Yugoslavia seem to be the same as in the West (art market, system of galleries and museums, subsidies and the interventions of the governments, big donors and the prestige of financing arts in the world of corporations and banks) it is but inferior in its intensity, relevance, quality and resources. This all results with artists staying poor but not lazy, as they are expected to follow the art market system of museums and galleries, produce, promote and compete, but for very little monetary and non-monetary awards.

If we agree with Stilinović and state that the art market and all that goes with it doesn’t influence the development of the arts in a progressive way and hampers its free nature and autonomy, what measures would need to be done in order to keep the arts going? If we hypothesize that in order to preserve the arts, the artist must remain/become lazy, what kind of implications would that include? What needs to be changed in the status quo to keep the artists away from distraction and closer to genuine artistic practices?

Stilinović identifies artists’ laziness with their poverty, while Hans Abbing writes about this correlation in a book called “Why Are Artists Poor?” in 2002. Although the notion of Stilinović’s poor artist of the East in the 1993 and Abbing’s poor artist of the West in 2002 differs greatly, Abbing’s research gives an interesting model that can help us understand Stilinović’s concerns 10 years later.

Hans Abbing is writing about the economy of arts and its exceptional behaviour that keeps artists poor. The reasons he gives for it, will be (mis)used to explain what needs to be done in order to preserve Stilinović’s notion of genuine art - to keep the artists poor and therefore lazy.

MYTHS & MYTHOLOGY

First of all, art has to nourish the base ground of its existence - the myths and mythology that helps it to preserve the status of something ‘holy’. “... the arts can only maintain their sacred status when people associate the arts with the values of the gift sphere rather than the market sphere. This status entails a denial of the economy.”(3) In this way the arts would preserve their status and value and by that artist would be still be able to gain non-monetary awards) without being exposed to the art market and economy.

GOVERNMENTS INTERVENTIONS INTO THE ART MARKET

The role of the experts (art critiques) is to determine the aesthetic/gift/social value of the art. When this doesn’t correspond to the market value and its laws of demand and supply, the governments intervene with their subsidies and by that increase the market value of the type of art in question, but by doing so, they also distort competition and may hinder innovation (3). In this case the interference of the governments into the art market is enabling the laziness by encouraging and supporting the art market as a system by producing false competition and innovation.

For Stilinović the art market system is the one bringing all the ‘insignificant factors that drive the artists away from the virtues of laziness as “indifference, staring at nothing, non-activity, impotence”.

Abbing offers 3 reasons for why the governments are so generous when it comes to arts. This will prove that the government subsidies have a bad impact on the preservation of the laziness.

The first one is that the government is expected to serve the general interest via subsidization: it is obliged to donate and thus subsidies must be classified as an obligation halfway between gift and duty. When it comes to subsidization, as already mentioned, it brings competition and therefore kills laziness. Abbing also mentions an interesting relation between subsidies and poverty by arguing that poverty in the arts is structural: “Given the inclination of artists to exchange money for other rewards, subsidies do not necessarily lead to higher incomes; in fact, it may just result in more people wanting to become artists. Subsidization increases the number of poor artists per hundred thousand inhabitants and thus increases poverty.” (3) This aspect of art subsidization could seem like a good way to preserve the genuineness of the arts, but it affects it in just the opposite manner. It makes a false promise of comfortable and easy bohemian life to young people and reduces the value of the real genuine motivations of the artistic practice.

In the second reason Abbing is arguing how the art world holds some level of control over the government through so-called rent-seeking, which ultimately implies that the government has to pay its ‘duties’. The phenomenon of special interest groups successfully pressuring governments to pursue policies that are in their own interest. It is not in the nature of the arts to work as an organized pressure because it does not sit well with the perceived individualistic and autonomous spirit of the arts and therefore it is destructive for the kind of art Stilinović advocates for.

The last of the three explanations of government intervention argues that the government is a powerful donor but also dependant on the arts and culture in an international game of prestige where “...large and small nations try to promote their cultural identities abroad hoping to impress others.”(3) In this way the competition, production and promotion gets to be a problem of even bigger, international proportions, and this was already stated as a distraction from the art practice itself.

SECOND JOBS

Second jobs are one of the ways in which artists earn money to survive. “As soon as they have what they perceive as enough money to survive, they lose further interest in earning more money and instead spend more hours making their art.” This aspect seems like an interesting method of keeping artists lazy and poor. It can allow them to earn enough money to survive by doing something else, while they can remain lazy when it comes to the art practice. But if the job is too demanding it can enable artists to do their art. If the second job is arts-related, like teaching art or participating on art subsidy committees it can be an even better opportunity to offer for a monetary support but also artistic careers. Therefore, the artist in his practice can remain lazy and careless.

NON-MONETARY AWARDS

The notion of selfless artist by which artists, more than other professionals, prefer personal satisfaction, recognition, and status to money can also serve as a good approach in keeping the 'virtues of laziness' in the art practices alive. Without the market competition and monetary awards and with stronger orientation towards peer recognition, status and personal satisfaction, artist can avoid being producers, promoters and competitors and find motivation in keep being just artists.

DONATIONS

"Furthermore a large donation means increased prestige, yet another perk for the donor. This is how large powerful donors like royalty, national governments and corporations use art. Because of the fact that art has such a high status, one's mere association with art earns a donor respect."⁽³⁾ If we talk about art byproducts that make art the most distanced from its (non) purpose, this kind of misuse of the arts' aura could be very degrading for the artists and art itself. Royalties, governments and especially corporations come with a certain demands, world views and principles that can influence art in a limiting way by supporting an 'art on demand' practice.

Abbing's examples (although that wasn't their attention) show that there is a way of preserving the 'Eastern artist' by keeping him/her financially poor but rich in non-monetary awards as personal satisfaction, peer recognition and status. By providing a second job, preferably related to the art practice but not too demanding, the artist can be financially taken care of, while his/hers practice would be nourished by those non-monetary awards.

The seriousness of this essayistic review depends on the seriousness of Stilinović's manifesto itself. Was it just one of Stilinović's ironical and cynical remarks on the art world or a serious remark of an artist with many years of experience in both socio-political contexts, it remains to be unsaid.

1) Stilinović, M., 1993., Praise of Laziness

2) <http://www.dutchembassyuk.org/culture/page.php?i=101>

3) Abbing, H., 2002., Why are Artists Poor