

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE SLOTH OF THE AUTHOR: IN DEFENSE OF A  
CALL TO INACTION

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Mladen Stilinović's (1947-2016) text "In Praise of Laziness" (1993) makes seemingly absurd claims about the relationship between art and laziness which are most often interpreted as political commentary in his typically cynical brand of humor. While this humor is indeed a consistent and essential element of his work, such readings fail to critically assess the depth of his notion of "laziness." I conduct a thorough unpacking of his definition in order to reveal "laziness" as a form of constructive passivity with a potentially pacifist dimension. With particular focus on his artist books and works dealing with themes of time and pain, I demonstrate the myriad ways in which Stilinović's notion of "laziness" manifests throughout his oeuvre. Contextualization of "In Praise of Laziness" has been dominated by oversimplified narratives of a global "East/West" divide while Stilinović's particular geopolitical circumstances as a member of the last Yugoslav generation have been overlooked. Following a careful recontextualization of "In Praise of Laziness," I suggest that this work may be considered a critical response to the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

THE SLOTH OF THE AUTHOR: IN DEFENSE OF A CALL TO INACTION

by

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## Introduction

In his 1993 text “In Praise of Laziness” (fig. 1),<sup>1</sup> Mladen Stilinović (1947-2016) makes gross generalizations and seemingly absurd claims about the nature of art and announces its demise amid the dissolution of Cold War-era divisions: 1) “art cannot exist any more in the West,” because 2) “artists in the West are not lazy,” and 3) “there is no art without laziness.”<sup>2</sup> These assertions--none of which are entirely original--form a series of claims in which each one is justified by the next. However, this final claim about the necessity of laziness for art, upon which the others are precariously stacked, are never quite explained. Stilinović also defines laziness, reiterates its alleged necessity, deems it a moral imperative, and issues a call to inaction: “Those virtues of laziness are important factors in art. Knowing about laziness is not enough, it must be practiced and perfected.”<sup>3</sup>

“In Praise of Laziness” represents the culmination of his decades-long engagement with this theme, typically implied by his critical stance toward the topic of “work.” Yet, this text remains somewhat of an anomaly within the context of his oeuvre because it represents a formal break for Stilinović. Contrary to the majority of his works,

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<sup>1</sup> This work has since been retranslated and republished numerous times in a wide variety of print and online sources, resulting in multiple versions with slightly different texts. These differences are few and minor, consisting primarily of grammatical errors and having virtually no impact on its meaning. However, one of the variations involves the title, which has appeared as “*The* Praise of Laziness,” “*In* Praise of Laziness,” and simply “Praise of Laziness.” Stilinović’s original document (one of several copies shown in fig. 1, treated here as an image because it is frequently exhibited as such alongside his other works) uses “*The* Praise of Laziness” and includes many spelling and grammatical errors. After assessing the variety of translations, I have chosen to follow those who refer to it as “In Praise of Laziness” for several reasons, including because translations employing this title tend to be more grammatically correct throughout the text, and it is frequently employed by reputable art historical sources. (The Croatian title, “Pohvala Lijenosti,” does not include “the” as the Croatian language does not have articles.)

<sup>2</sup> Mladen Stilinović, “In Praise of Laziness,” 1993, *Atlas of Transformation* (Tranzit, 2011), <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/1/laziness/in-praise-of-laziness-mladen-stilinovic.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Stilinović, “In Praise of Laziness.”

## THE PRAISE OF LAZINESS

As an artist, I learned from both East (socialism) and West (capitalism). Of course, now when the borders and political systems have changed, such an experience will be no longer possible. But what I have learned from that dialogue, stays with me. My observation and knowledge of Western art has lately led me to a conclusion that art cannot exist any more in the West. This is not to say that there isn't any. Why cannot art exist any more in the West? The answer is simple. Artists in the West are not lazy. Artists from the East are lazy; whether they will stay lazy now when they are no longer Eastern artists, remains to be seen.

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. Those virtues of laziness are important factors in art. Knowing about laziness is not enough, it must be practiced and perfected.

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 is a gallery a room.

Artists from the East were lazy and poor because the entire system of insignificant factors did not exist. Therefore they had time enough to concentrate on art and laziness. Even when they did produce art, they knew it was in vain, it was nothing.

Artists from the West could learn about laziness, but they didn't. Two major 20th century artists treated the question of laziness, in both practical and theoretical terms: Duchamp and Malevich.

Duchamp never really discussed laziness, but rather indifference and non-work. When asked by Pierre Cabanne what had brought him most pleasure in life, Duchamp said: "First, having been lucky. Because basically I've never worked for a living. I consider working for a living slightly imbecilic from an economic point of view. I hope that some day we'll be able to live without being obliged to work. Thanks to my luck, I was able to manage without getting wet".

Malevich wrote a text entitled "Laziness - the real truth of mankind" (1921). In it he criticized capitalism because it enabled only a small number of capitalists to be lazy, but also socialism because the entire movement was based on work instead of laziness. To quote: "People are scared of laziness and persecute those who accept it, and it always happens because no one realizes laziness is the truth; it has been branded as the mother of all vices, but it is in fact the mother of life. Socialism brings liberation in the unconscious, it scorns laziness without realizing it was laziness that gave birth to it; in his folly, the son scorns his mother as a mother of all vices and would not remove the brand; in this brief note I want to remove the brand of shame from laziness and to pronounce it not the mother of all vices, but the mother of perfection".

Finally, to be lazy and conclude: there is no art without laziness.

**WORK IS A DISEASE - KARL MARX**  
Mladen Stilinović

**WORK IS A SHAME**  
Vlado Martek

Mladen Stilinović



Figure 1. Mladen Stilinović, "The Praise of Laziness," 1993, text, variable dimensions. Stilinović presented this text for the first time by reading it aloud at the Opus Operandi Gallery in Ghent as part of the NSK Embassy on May 2, 1993. After his presentation, he ate a piece of cake before the audience. (Source: <http://centrevox.ca/en/exposition/mladen-stilinoVIC>)

its objectives (articulating definitions, analyzing global political developments, and anticipating their cultural consequences) require that it conform to conventional use of language.<sup>4</sup> In his essay “Against Dictionaries: The East as She is Spoke by the West,” Roger Conover reminds us that “all classification systems, whether maps, dictionaries, or exhibitions, are inherently ideological constructions reflecting the social, political, and cultural values of the contexts in which they originate. A map is a polemic first, a locator second.”<sup>5</sup> Stilinović recognizes this and makes language itself one of the main targets in his relentless attempts to dismantle the ideological tools of power. Most often, he works subtractively and at the “micro-level,” isolating individual components (words, symbols, colors, etc.) from their ordinary contexts and employing relentless repetition or absurd juxtaposition in an effort to “de-symbolize” them.<sup>6</sup> As articulated by Alejandra Labastida, Stilinović is not interested in critiquing the content of any particular ideology, but rather in “neutralizing the apparatuses of by [sic] which power is reproduced...[his works] propose the absurd as an antidote to whichever ideology might be lying in wait for us around the next corner.”<sup>7</sup> Boris Groys echoes this interpretation:

Entropic processes permanently undermine every system, dissolving it into material chaos...the modern/contemporary artist is a collaborator in this entropy...From today’s perspective, one can say that only very few artists of the twentieth century resisted the seduction of the ‘new order’ and remained faithful

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<sup>4</sup> While “In Praise of Laziness” is not the only text written by Stilinović, it does maintain a level of logical progression and conventional coherence that others up until that point do not.

<sup>5</sup> Roger Conover, “Against Dictionaries: The East as She is Spoke by the West,” in *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, ed. IRWIN (London: Afterall, 2006), 350.

<sup>6</sup> Igor Zabel, “A Short Walk Through Mladen Stilinović’s Four Rooms,” in *Mladen Stilinović: Artist at Work = Umetnik na delu, 1973-1983*, eds. Alenka Gregorič and Branka Stipančić (Ljubljana: Galerija Škuc, 2005), 15, 19.

<sup>7</sup> Alejandra Labastida, “1+2= or, How To Manipulate That Which Manipulates You,” in *1 + 2 = Mladen Stilinović*, ed. Ekaterina Alvarez Romero (Mexico City: Museo Universitario Arte Contemporaneo, UNAM, 2015), 13, 16.

to their union with the forces of entropy and anarchy. One of these very few artists is undoubtedly Mladen Stilinović.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, Groys situates Stilinović in an ahistorical realm, above the naive majority who fall prey to whatever political agendas populate their time. Such emphasis on his deconstructive tendency and consistent refusal of ideology itself overwhelmingly dominates the scholarly narrative of his career, portraying him as a timeless cynic whose absurdist humor simultaneously exposes and negates dogma. Considering the predominant notion of laziness as a condemnable quality, his unwavering advocacy for its practice exemplifies the nihilist humor that characterizes most of his work. Yet, according to Stilinović, “humour is not a joke” because “through it, the truth can be understood.”<sup>9</sup> While Groys’ interpretation appears applicable to most of his work, the coherent composition and evaluative assertions of “In Praise of Laziness” seem to mark a moment of weakness in resisting the seduction of the system. Despite its fundamentally uncharacteristic diversions, it remains among Stilinović’s most widely celebrated works. What is it about laziness that warrants succumbing to the formal conventions of language he otherwise so ardently resists? This question, as well as those arising from his staunch but baseless claim that “art cannot exist without laziness,” will serve as my main points of departure: What exactly is the relationship between art and laziness?

Stilinović situates “In Praise of Laziness” within the dichotomous narrative of a global ‘East-West’ divide and mourns the “East” as it becomes ‘formerred’ in the wake of

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<sup>8</sup> Boris Groys, “Poetics of Entropy: The Post-Suprematist Art of Mladen Stilinović,” in *1 + 2 = Mladen Stilinović*, 71-72.

<sup>9</sup> Sabina Sabolović and Mladen Stilinović, “Mladen Stilinović in Conversation with Sabina Sabolović: I’ve Got Time,” trans. Graham McMaster, in *Mladen Stilinović: Artist’s Books 1972-2006*, ed. Branka Stipančić (Istanbul: Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Center, 2007), 43.

capitalism's eastward expansion: "As an artist, I learned from both the East (socialism) and the West (capitalism). Of course, now when the borders and political systems have changed, such an experience will no longer be possible... Artists from the East are lazy; whether they will stay lazy now when they are no longer Eastern artists, remains to be seen."<sup>10</sup> Scholars and critics addressing this text tend to follow suit, interpreting his work primarily through the same post-socialist lens broadly applied to Eastern Europe at large. While this is obviously a significant aspect of Stilinović's political context, it fails to address some important particularities of his more immediate geopolitical circumstances as a member of the last Yugoslav generation. Pre-1989, Yugoslavia held a unique position among the formerly socialist countries of Eastern Europe because it did not belong to the Soviet Bloc and was able to implement its own brand of socialism. Later, while the rest of Europe was witnessing the peaceful dissolution of Cold War-era divides, Yugoslavia's internal borders were being violently redrawn through a series of brutal civil wars. In other words, the Yugoslav experience remained unique within Eastern Europe both before and after the major shift in the political world order. Croatia, Stilinović's home within Yugoslavia, was right in the middle of its war for independence when he wrote "In Praise of Laziness." I hope to complicate the dominant narratives surrounding his work by reconsidering it within his local context, and I contend that "In Praise of Laziness" may be read not only as a post-socialist lament for art, but also as a critical response to the violence accompanying Yugoslavia's dissolution in the 1990s. This recontextualization will allow new and more constructive ways of interpreting his

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<sup>10</sup> Stilinović, "In Praise of Laziness."

notion of laziness beyond its significance in art, exposing its positive potential as a pacifist attitude.

I have decided to begin by addressing Stilinović's notion of laziness independently from his political context in order to allow room for new interpretations unbound by his spatiotemporal specificity. While understanding his particular context forms a substantial part of my argument and is crucial to understanding his work and notion of laziness, I am ultimately less interested in what we can learn *about* Stilinović than in what we can learn *from* him. As mentioned earlier, the main ideas expressed by "In Praise of Laziness" are not original--this work joins a long lineage of lazy literature. I will use chapter one to conduct a close reading of the text and thoroughly unpack Stilinović's definition of laziness, exploring its many potential meanings. Then, I will situate it among notions of laziness expressed by other authors, including several who also recognize its relevance to art, and draw comparisons to some other practices and philosophies akin to his notion of laziness. In sum, the first chapter will seek to answer the questions: What are the possible meanings of Stilinović's notion of laziness, and how do they fit into the grand lazy scheme? The next chapter will occupy the landscape of laziness mapped out by the previous chapter to locate manifestations of laziness in Stilinović's other works. Focusing primarily on his textual works and artist books, I will demonstrate the myriad ways in which he employs, performs, and/or imposes laziness with his work: How exactly does Stilinović practice the laziness that he preaches? Finally, the third chapter will zoom in on his particular political context(s) and address the problems with accounts of his work that have ignored these particularities. In light of

this contextualization, I will reconsider his notion of laziness for its positive potential as a way of existence.

## Chapter 1: Coming to Terms with Laziness

Of all the recurring themes in his work, laziness is the only one that Stilinović does not attempt to render meaningless through ceaseless decontextualized repetition. In fact, in a completely uncharacteristic move, he actively articulates his own definition of laziness. Being otherwise opposed to the act of defining and to the ideology inherent in language itself, he makes an exception for laziness. Furthermore, he endows laziness with a fundamental role in art. In his unrelenting, hyper-critical battle against ideological power, laziness becomes an ally rather than an object of critique.

Attempting to define “laziness” in conventional dictionary-terms, i.e. consolidating its meaning within a narrow selection of concrete terms, would result in a semantic goose chase which I do not intend to pursue and which would go against the spirit of Stilinović. It would restrict the meaningful potential of laziness, and the purpose of my endeavor is to do exactly the opposite: to entertain Stilinović’s notions, to discover what laziness can achieve, to exhume laziness from the dictionary and put its positive qualities to use. Though I do not intend to write a definition, I will consult those written by others--I will scrutinize, oppose, and align with them, expand them, extract their enriching potential, and mark them as points of reference for paving Stilinović’s particular lazy path. Rather than define “laziness,” it appears more fruitful to explore the many potential meanings and manifestations denoted by the term as articulated by Stilinović as well as his peers and society at large. Such an understanding will allow us to recognize laziness in all its forms when and where it occurs, and to identify its actual, perhaps even measurable, benefits in reality. Thus, this chapter aims not to define a word,

but to excavate the range of ideas, attitudes, and practices contained within and connected to that word.

Stilinović is far from alone in advocating the practice and necessity of what he terms laziness. He credits two major precedents in his text by quoting Marcel Duchamp and Kazimir Malevich, and likely chooses to cite artists (arguably, two of the twentieth century's most influential artists within their respective geographical spheres) to demonstrate his claim that laziness is a necessity for the existence of art. However, there is an abundance of literature by a diverse array of authors coming from outside of the visual arts praising laziness: French revolutionary Paul Lafargue penned his polemic *The Right to be Lazy* in 1883, in which he critiques the “dogma of work” inherent to capitalism and dreams of a society that will allow its citizens to “practice the virtues of laziness.”<sup>11</sup> Like Stilinović, Lafargue draws a connection between laziness and art: “O, Laziness, have thou mercy upon this eternal misery! O, Laziness, mother of the arts and the noble virtues, be thou balsam for the pains of mankind!”<sup>12</sup>

Other advocates have employed synonyms (such as idleness or leisure) to describe nearly identical notions. British philosopher Bertrand Russell's 1925 essay “In Praise of Idleness” observes that “leisure is essential to civilization, and in former times leisure for the few was rendered possible only by the labors of the many. But their labors were valuable, not because work is good, but because leisure is good.”<sup>13</sup> These alternative terms tend to have a more neutral appeal than “laziness,” which is haunted by decidedly

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Lafargue, *The Right to be Lazy; Being a Refutation of the 'Right to Work' of 1848*, trans. Harriet E. Lothrop (New York: International Publishing Co., 1898), 8, 32.

<sup>12</sup> Lafargue, *The Right to be Lazy*, 41.

<sup>13</sup> Bertrand Russell, “In Praise of Idleness,” *Harper's Magazine*, October, 1932, <https://harpers.org/archive/1932/10/in-praise-of-idleness/>.

negative connotations. In his proposal to use laziness as a method of post-qualitative inquiry in academic research, Ryan Evely Gildersleeve articulates these negative connotations and outlines some of the ongoing debates surrounding laziness:

In contemporary western vernacular, laziness often equates lethargy. It is associated with concepts like idleness, leisureliness, and sloth...it carries a generally negative connotation...in one perspective, laziness is valued as the free time to do nothing. In another, free time should be spent on self-improvement: going to the gym, taking extra classes, pursuing a side job for additional income. Once thought to be the expression of elitism, laziness was reserved as a luxury only for those who could avoid work on the labors of others. Over the history of the emergent and ascendant United States--mirroring the ascendancy of industrialization and capitalism--leisure time has increasingly been seen as an opportunity to self-improve, as additional time to contribute to something via means of production...those who choose to do nothing with their leisure time, any time spent *not working*, have been relegated to the despised status of lazy.<sup>14</sup>

As we shall see, those who champion practices and mindsets that resemble what Stilinović calls laziness often avoid using this term, and sometimes even explicitly deny the “lazy” label in their own defense. This knee-jerk reaction, especially its presence among academics (i.e. those whose careers are based on critical thinking), is one indication of the extent to which the negative implications acquired by laziness have eclipsed its core meaning(s).

While the negative connotations of laziness are secondary to the aims of this chapter, which is primarily concerned with identifying the practices and attitudes encapsulated by the term rather than its cultural evaluation, it is worth acknowledging that Stilinović chose to use “laziness” as shorthand for his philosophy despite all of its baggage. It seems plausible that he deliberately chose to use “laziness” rather than a more neutral term precisely in order to exploit its perceived negativity for provocative

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<sup>14</sup> Ryan Evely Gildersleeve, “Laziness in Postqualitative Inquiry,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 24, no. 9 (2018): 694-5, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800417744579>.

purposes. To suggest praise for a decidedly negative trait fits neatly within Stilinović's brand of humor, which often relies on absurd juxtapositions.

His unapologetic advocacy of laziness might also be seen as indicating a wider social-historical awareness of his own particular and layered peripheral position, not only as a person from Eastern Europe, but also from the Balkans. In her seminal book *Imagining the Balkans*, Maria Todorova traces the development of primarily negative Balkan stereotypes as articulated by western travelers and perpetuated by western journalism, literature, and scholarship over the course of the past few centuries.<sup>15</sup> In the imagination of Western Europe and the United States, the Balkans acquired meaning beyond their objectively defined geographical designation and became associated with a particular kind of societal backwardness. Seen not as a worthy destination in its own right but as a mere liminal space between Europe ("the West") and Asia ("the East"), the Balkans became known as the "'other' of Europe"--importantly distinct from otherness *from* Europe, which would grant the Balkans completeness in their otherness.<sup>16</sup> Instead, as they remain a part of Europe, their perceived otherness renders them an "incomplete self."<sup>17</sup> Among the traits frequently assigned to inhabitants of the region in this discourse of "balkanism" as early as the nineteenth century are "their inability to work hard" and "a curious mixture of industry and thrift with laziness and apathy."<sup>18</sup>

There are abundant examples of Stilinović's peers demonstrating awareness of these negative stereotypes, frequently employing "subversive affirmation" or

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<sup>15</sup> Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 18.

<sup>18</sup> Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 98-99.

overidentification as critical tactics in response.<sup>19</sup> Institutional recognition of artists' tendencies to engage with such discourse was exemplified by an exhibition held in 2004 at the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana titled *Seven Sins: Ljubljana - Moscow*. These "sins" were purportedly applicable to Central and Eastern Europe in its entirety, as the exhibition thematically linked the two capital cities perceived as the opposite poles (in terms of both geographical location and cultural/political policy) within the formerly socialist countries. The "seven (Eastern European) sins" (simultaneously introduced in the exhibition catalogue as "virtues") were identified as: "collectivism, utopianism, masochism, cynicism, *sloth*, unprofessionalism, and love of the West."<sup>20</sup> Arguably, Stilinović is guilty of engaging in all but utopianism and love of the West. However, he affords laziness a unique position, privileging it above all other themes addressed in his work: laziness gets articulately defined, explained, performed, practiced, lauded, defended, mourned, championed. All of his other major themes--language, time, work, pain, money, etc.--get aggressively deconstructed. Laziness emerges as the indisputable protagonist of Stilinović's worldview.

In 2004, Stilinović was invited to speak at the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana on the occasion of Slovenia's entry into the European Union. His assessment of the situation was characteristically and predictably cynical, as Western Europe's economic and political absorption of the westernmost, formerly Yugoslav nation marked one step closer to the end of art he regretfully anticipated nearly a decade earlier with "In Praise of

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<sup>19</sup> Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse, "Subversive Affirmation: On Mimesis as a Strategy of Resistance," in *East Art Map*.

<sup>20</sup> Tamara Soban, ed., *7 Grehov: Ljubljana - Moskva* [*7 Sins: Ljubljana - Moscow*] (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija, 2004). The English translation on the title page, on which the list of "sins/virtues" is introduced, uses the term "sloth," while the following essays employ the term "laziness." However, both are translated from the same Slovenian term "*lenoba*," for which "laziness" appears to be the more appropriate translation.

Laziness.” Acknowledging these negative perceptions pervading western notions of the East, Stilinović complained: “Of all the insults, the worst is the one targeting our laziness because it challenges its authenticity.”<sup>21</sup>

Stilinović is certainly aware of the widely perceived peripheral status assigned to his geographical origin and the historically persistent negative preconceptions associated with it, and he may deliberately lean into those negative associations in order to enhance the provocative nature of his work—but his ardent identification with laziness, as he has stated and as I will demonstrate, is not merely a satirical critique of this patronizing discourse. Rather, it is genuine, and his task is not to dispel the myth that eastern artists are lazy, but to dispel the myth that laziness is bad.

Some aspects of Stilinović’s definition are straightforward, self-explanatory, and in alignment with conventionally accepted notions of laziness; some appear strange and irrelevant. Some are redundant, while some are contradictory. We might infer from these contradictions that he recognizes multiple forms or dimensions of laziness. Without further ado, let us begin to unpack his definition:

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, of futile concentration.<sup>22</sup>

“Absence of movement and thought” means physical and mental stasis, inaction, idleness, total passivity. “Dumb” time, in the sense of being unable or unwilling to speak, implies time spent silently, producing auditory nothingness, vocal passivity. Using “dumb” rather than another term denoting silence produces an important distinction

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<sup>21</sup> Mladen Stilinović, “Entry into (Europe),” in *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Ana Janevski et al., (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 223.

<sup>22</sup> Stilinović, “In Praise of Laziness.”

between merely experiencing silence and *being* silent, “dumb” implying the latter. In other words, “dumb time” does not preclude the lazy from listening. Alternatively, “dumb” can be understood to describe time itself (as opposed to the manner in which one spends time during laziness). In this case, *time* is silenced, ignored, irrelevant--laziness liberates us from the dictates of time. “Total amnesia” is forgetting everything; it abandons not only all memories of the past but also all previously held intentions for the future, forcing a fully immersive experience of the present. “Indifference” lacks opinions, emotions, convictions, even will--and therefore lacks an agenda or direction for the future. It also adds a layer to the absence of action, namely the absence of *reaction*: thoughts and actions, or lack thereof, remain unaffected by external factors. In this sense, indifference can become resistance. On the other hand, it could also mean stability, neutrality, or even a tendency toward agreeability and acceptance as the path of least resistance. Indifference, as a lack of motivation or will to enact change, can mean universally adopting a policy of contentedness. “Staring at nothing” employs the bodily sense of sight--and, notably, employs the verb “to stare” positively (rather than “*not* staring”), suggesting that this is *not* passivity, but an active pursuit of visual nothingness. On the contrary, “non-activity” is passivity. “Impotence,” as the *inability* to act, elaborates on non-activity by implying that it is not achieved by choice--laziness is a state of powerlessness. “Sheer stupidity” means that laziness lacks intelligence, i.e. abandons knowledge and rejects reason. However, this could be spun to mean that laziness is a state of open-mindedness uncorrupted by preconceived notions and learned habits of thought. Laziness as “stupidity” becomes a fertile ground for developing fresh perspectives. As a markedly negative experience that comes in both physical and

psychological forms, “pain” implies vulnerability in those who suffer it. A “time of pain” implies its persistence--enduring discomfort. Contrary to popular opinion which considers it an aversion to (difficult) work, laziness (as endurance of pain) is not easy. “Futile concentration” is fruitless effort: concentration is the devotion of energy to a sole, specific task, object, or in this case, lack thereof (“staring at nothing” is one mode of futile concentration). Its futility relieves laziness of tangible or quantifiable purpose. It is a means to no particular end, it has no goal beyond itself, it results in nothing, it has no predefined intention or direction. Laziness is an endeavor unburdened by expectation, free from the mandate to produce.

Scrutiny of his definition reveals certain fundamental components which I will address briefly here and, as I will argue in the following chapters, manifest in his other work. First, laziness is both a biological and psychological phenomenon: it depends on the senses and bodily experience as well as intellectual function, or suspension thereof. Second, it is centered on concepts related to negation: absence, nothingness, inaction, inability, erasure, etc. Third, it involves multiple forms of deliberate inaction, or active passivity. This oxymoron leads to the fourth point, which exposes some contradictions: certain terms imply inability rather than unwillingness, suggesting that laziness is an involuntary state. This is at odds with Stilinović’s insistence that laziness “must be practiced and perfected.” How can something be at once intentional and involuntary? (Perhaps the occurrence of laziness is not within our control, but something that happens to us, which we can actively decide to either embrace or resist.) Fifth, futility (i.e. unproductiveness) emerges as a crucial defining factor with its implications of accepted aimlessness and subsequent freedom. Stilinović expressed the absence of intention as a

condition of freedom in his approach to artistic activity, shedding some light on his conviction that art relies on laziness:

I have never had any strategy or decided intention when it came to my activity as an artist. I see artistic activity as ‘free shifting.’ It’s about the freedom to move in all the directions that may interest me; the freedom of movement in art and life...Art is also nothing because it is an activity without end, without a goal. It is very important to understand the “nothing” not in a pessimistic way, but rather as a manifestation of freedom.<sup>23</sup>

For Stilinović, embracing the futile nature of his endeavors is liberating. Not having defined goals eliminates the possibility of disappointment due to failure and, at the same time, opens up infinite possibilities. Sixth, and perhaps most importantly, laziness is articulated as a time-based notion. This is also recognized by the curators of the *Seven Sins* exhibition: “[Laziness] is, above all, a different means of structuring time.”<sup>24</sup> This applies to conventional dictionary definitions as well, in that one’s degree of laziness can be measured by the ratio of time spent active versus inactive. However, for Stilinović, it is both a way of spending time and an attitude toward time. Stilinović approximated “total amnesia” when voicing his intention of embodying this temporal aspect: “I try to live in the present. I’m not so much attached to the past, and especially not to the future.”<sup>25</sup> His laziness is a reconfiguration of one’s relationship to and *perception* of time. Finally, I emphasize “perception” because it can be understood as an emergent property of the aforementioned factors of laziness. When we pursue a passive state, we relinquish

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<sup>23</sup> Ariane Daoust and Mladen Stilinović, “Idler // Mladen Stilinović // An Artist Who Invents Nothing,” excerpt from a conversation between Mladen Stilinović and Ariane Daoust, Zagreb, June 2009, *VOX* no. 33 (May 2010). <http://centrevox.ca/en/exposition/mladen-stilinoVIC/>.

<sup>24</sup> Zdenka Badovinac, Viktor Misiano, and Igor Zabel, “Seven Sins: Ljubljana - Moscow,” in *7 Grehovi: Ljubljana - Moskva [7 Sins: Ljubljana - Moscow]*, ed. Tamara Soban (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija, 2004), 9.

<sup>25</sup> Mladen Stilinović and Nataša Vasiljević, “Mladen Stilinović: Work is Disease,” *Flash Art* (January-February 2013): 89.

intentions of affecting our surroundings, which allows an opportunity for our surroundings to affect *us*. We become more adept at perception when we are not preoccupied with our own actions or thoughts. Recall how “dumb time” forbids the lazy from speaking, but not from listening. Laziness as an exercise of perceptive abilities encourages more thorough understanding of, and consequently more harmonious relationships with, our environments and all that they contain.

One important aspect of conventional definitions not explicitly stated in Stilinović’s (but acknowledged in other forms later in his text) is its oppositional relationship to work, which we have already briefly encountered in Lafargue and Russell. A typical dictionary defines “lazy” as “unwilling to work or be active; doing as little as possible.”<sup>26</sup> Classifying laziness as a matter of will disagrees with Stilinović’s implication of its involuntariness, and it is also a key factor in the term’s negative connotations. Being unwilling rather than unable (“impotent”) to work, in a society where work is considered virtuous, becomes a symptom of moral decay. The fact that its negative associations stem from the implication of will is further illustrated by the neutral and/or positive tone with which we apply the term to the nonhuman or inanimate, i.e. things typically believed to lack agency. The lazy Susan, for example, promotes ease of access. The lazy river, named for the slow pace of its flow, is a venue for enjoyment and relaxation. Both are luxurious in nature and are valued precisely because they cater to human laziness. These examples expose the tortured nature of dominant attitudes toward laziness: it is simultaneously condemned and desired. Russell observed the economic implications of this contradiction: “Broadly speaking, it is held that getting money

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<sup>26</sup> “Lazy,” Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries (Oxford University Press, 2020).  
<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/lazy>.

[working] is good and spending money [leisure] is bad. Seeing that they are two sides of one transaction, this is absurd; one might as well maintain that keys are good but keyholes are bad.”<sup>27</sup>

Yet the second half of this definition, “doing as little as possible,” does not present laziness as inherently wrong. In fact, it presents laziness as an economical and resourceful approach to work: laziness does not necessarily prevent the job from getting done, it only eliminates unnecessary expenditures of energy in the working process. In this sense, advocating laziness equates to the common token of advice to “work smarter, not harder.” This line of thought begins to illuminate one of the already well-established links between laziness and creativity, namely that aversion to work prompts innovative solutions to minimize or avoid it, i.e. laziness breeds creativity, innovation, invention, etc. This causality is often summoned to dispute the notion that these things are born from necessity, but these two allegedly conflicting concepts--laziness and necessity--are inseparable for Stilinović.

While Stilinović is obviously aware of the generally accepted opposition between work and laziness, he does not endorse it. Perhaps this is why he makes no explicit mention of “work” in his own definition and chooses instead to acknowledge the paradigm by quoting those who do. In a 2013 interview, Stilinović said: “I think [laziness] is important, and that all those who glorify work are guilty.”<sup>28</sup> This statement does not necessarily condemn work; it condemns work’s glorification at the expense of laziness. A year later he responded to a question about the relationship between work and laziness by explaining that they are not fundamentally opposed but supplementary tasks,

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<sup>27</sup> Russell, “In Praise of Idleness.”

<sup>28</sup> Stilinović and Vasiljević, “Mladen Stilinović: Work is Disease,” 89.

and reiterated his 1993 claim that laziness is a prerequisite for art.<sup>29</sup> In his view, laziness, work, and art appear to form a symbiotic relationship. While it can be argued that laziness is valuable and worthwhile in its own right, Stilinović considers laziness a crucial component of a process which makes work possible and leads to art.

This notion of laziness and work as two sides of the same coin is by no means original. Rainer Maria Rilke shared this view:

I have often wondered whether especially those days when we are forced to remain idle are not precisely the days spent in the most profound activity. Whether our actions themselves, even if they do not take place until later, are nothing more than the last reverberations of a vast movement that occurs within us during idle days...In any case, it is very important to be idle with confidence, with devotion, possibly even with joy.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly to Stilinović, Rilke advocated the deliberate practice of idleness. Kim Brockett echoes Rilke in her analysis of Stilinović's laziness, writing that "laziness becomes the illusion of leisure. It is still a form of work, however: not inert at all, but a robust and fertile site essential to the production of more work."<sup>31</sup>

While these interpretations acknowledge the value of laziness, they still insist on its subordination to work. Accomplishing work remains the end goal and ultimate source of value, while laziness is only a prerequisite. Laziness is demoted to the position of work's assistant. In his 1877 essay "An Apology for Idlers," Robert Louis Stevenson rejected this hierarchy by asserting that "pleasures are more beneficial than duties" and

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<sup>29</sup> Mladen Stilinović, "Abeceda nezavisne kulture: Mladen Stilinović, intervju," interview by Matija Mrakovčić, uploaded by Kulturpunkt.hr on December 15, 2014, Video, 52:03. <https://vimeo.com/114548058>.

<sup>30</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, "On Work: Get up cheerfully on days you have to work," in *Letters on Life: New Prose Translations*, ed. and trans. Ulrich Baer (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 48.

<sup>31</sup> Kim Brockett, "Nothing Doing," *West Space Journal* no. 3 (Autumn 2014). <http://journal.westspace.org.au/article/nothing/>.

deeming extreme busyness “a symptom of deficient vitality,”<sup>32</sup> an idea which has been validated to some degree by medical professionals in more recent times: American physician Larry Dossey coined the term “time-sickness” in 1982 to describe the epidemic belief that “time is getting away, that there isn’t enough of it, and that you must pedal faster and faster to keep up.”<sup>33</sup> Stevenson also proposed that idleness should be classified not as an opposite of or prerequisite for work, but in the same category of activity: “Idleness so called, which does not consist in doing nothing, but in doing a great deal not recognized in the dogmatic formularies of the ruling class, has as good a right to state its position as industry itself.”<sup>34</sup> However, his arguments against busyness seem to indicate that he endorses the outward *appearance* of idleness rather than the full-fledged “absence of movement *and thought*” articulated by Stilinović, complaining for example that “if a man reads very hard...he will have little time for thought.”<sup>35</sup> Nik Wakefield proposes a similar interpretation of laziness resulting from his own reading of Stilinović’s work, with the additional caveat of its futility: “Laziness might include all kinds of effort and thought but it does so for no good external reason.”<sup>36</sup> These perspectives posit laziness not as an undervalued form of nothingness, but as an invisible somethingness misidentified as nothingness.

As quoted in “In Praise of Laziness,” Duchamp boasts about his luck of not having had to work for a living. Adair Rounthwaite notes Stilinović’s “ventriloquistic”

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<sup>32</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, “An Apology for Idlers,” in *An Apology for Idlers and Other Essays*, ed. Matthew Kaiser (San Diego: Cognella Academic Publishing, 2018), 10, 7.

<sup>33</sup> Carl Honoré, *In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 2004), 3.

<sup>34</sup> Stevenson, “An Apology for Idlers,” 1-2.

<sup>35</sup> Stevenson, “An Apology for Idlers,” 3.

<sup>36</sup> Nik Wakefield, “Sleep, Laziness and Making,” *Performance Research* 21, no. 1 (2016): 126.

use of this quote, as his own family's financial circumstances also allowed him to avoid working.<sup>37</sup> Duchamp also expressed the "hope that some day we'll be able to live without being obliged to work."<sup>38</sup> In the same interview, though not quoted by Stilinović, Duchamp admitted: "deep down I'm enormously lazy. I like living, breathing, better than working."<sup>39</sup> This view reverses the hierarchy by considering work an unfortunate but necessary step in achieving the goal of laziness--which, for Duchamp, consists of "living" and "breathing" (aligning with Stilinović's notion of laziness as a biological function), i.e. the most basic maintenance of life itself. Duchamp's notion of laziness is mere existence. Stilinović has also articulated it along these lines, saying that laziness emphasizes the importance of "the right to exist, simply as a being."<sup>40</sup> Lafargue is in agreement that laziness is preferable to work and states that only absolutely necessary work is good or useful: "only when work is regulated according to reason, and is limited to a maximum corresponding to the social needs will it be a spice to the pleasure of idleness, a useful exercise to the human organism."<sup>41</sup> Russell similarly recognizes the necessity of work but condemns its glorification: "immense harm is caused by the belief that work is virtuous...while a certain amount of it is necessary to our existence, it is emphatically not one of the ends of human life."<sup>42</sup> For both Lafargue and Russell, work is neither inherently virtuous nor inherently valuable. It only acquires value as a means to a purposive (and foreseeable) end. Wakefield articulates laziness precisely as a rejection of

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<sup>37</sup> Adair Rounthwaite, "Lazy Objects: Viewing Mladen Stilinović's *Exploitation of the Dead*," *Tate Papers* no. 30 (Autumn 2018). <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/30/rounthwaite-lazy-objects>.

<sup>38</sup> Pierre Cabanne and Marcel Duchamp, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 15. (Also quoted in "In Praise of Laziness.")

<sup>39</sup> Cabanne and Duchamp, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, 72.

<sup>40</sup> Daoust and Stilinović, "Idler // Mladen Stilinović // An Artist Who Invents Nothing."

<sup>41</sup> Lafargue, "The Right to be Lazy," 22.

<sup>42</sup> Russell, "In Praise of Idleness."

the “dogma of work” against which Lafargue and Russell react: “Being lazy is deciding not to participate in a belief in the inherent goodness of work.”<sup>43</sup>

Malevich, whom Stilinović quotes alongside Duchamp in his text, also recognizes work as “a simple necessity connected with nutrition” which “does not appear as the main essence of man’s perfection.”<sup>44</sup> However, his notion of laziness (or “sloth,” as it appears in some translations) is not merely a preferable, more enjoyable way of spending time than work. It is a state of divine perfection, transcendence of not only the material world but also of thought, cast as the ultimate goal to be achieved by humanity. Imagining a distant future when humankind has quenched its thirst for knowledge by solving all mysteries of the universe, exhausted the full potential of the arts, and eradicated the need for physical work by perfecting the machine, Malevich writes:

...the moment of complete inaction will have arrived, action becomes meditation, the world produces itself, the moment of complete ‘Sloth’ is achieved...humanity will liberate itself from work and achieve peace, eternal rest--in sloth-- and will enter the image of the Divinity, and the legend about God as perfection in ‘Sloth’ will be justified.<sup>45</sup>

Despite its centrality to Malevich’s conception of laziness, Stilinović omits this dramatic exaltation from his summary and quotation of Malevich’s text. Perhaps this is done to best serve his own concept of laziness, or perhaps it is simply due to his economy of words--perhaps the omission is the result of laziness. In any case, Malevich’s belief in laziness as a state of total and final transcendence does not align with Stilinović’s

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<sup>43</sup> Wakefield, “Sleep, Laziness and Making,” 126.

<sup>44</sup> K. S. Malevich, “Sloth - the Real Truth of Humanity,” in *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism: Unpublished Writings 1913-33, Vol. IV*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Hoffmann (Borgen, Copenhagen: 1978), 78.

<sup>45</sup> Malevich, “Sloth - the Real Truth of Humanity,” 80-81.

implication of its partial biological basis. Furthermore, Stilinović does not directly lament the loss of laziness alone, but the subsequent loss of art.

Stilinović's final descriptor ("*futile* concentration," i.e. attention spent on something that will not result in any tangible, measurable, reward) indirectly regards the issue of production, a problem that resurfaces later in the text:

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, the gallery system, the museum system, the competition system (who is first), their preoccupation with objects—all that drives them away from laziness, from art. Just as money is but paper, a gallery is but a room.<sup>46</sup>

"Production" is posed in opposition to laziness and art. This echoes sentiments expressed by Lafargue, who blamed the disappearance of "joy, health, and freedom...everything that makes life beautiful, that makes it worth living" on the erection of capitalist factories.<sup>47</sup>

Decrying the prevailing "superfluity of wares," Lafargue observed that "the great problem of capitalist production does not consist in finding producers and in increasing their strength but in discovering consumers, in tickling their appetite and encouraging it by habit."<sup>48</sup> According to Lafargue, this insatiable hunger of the industrial capitalist machine is responsible for the unnecessary overworking of populations and the resulting superfluous production.

Stilinović similarly observes a superfluous production of art in the West as a symptom of the competition inherently imposed by capitalism. He appears to endorse the notion of art for art's sake, or at least for some sake other than the corrupting factors of profit or fame. A system in which an artist's livelihood depends not only on their

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<sup>46</sup> Stilinović, "In Praise of Laziness."

<sup>47</sup> Lafargue, "The Right to be Lazy," 16.

<sup>48</sup> Lafargue, "The Right to be Lazy," 20, 29.

continuous production of marketable art but also on outselling their peers leaves no time for creative processes involving laziness and thereby fundamentally changes the nature of the art produced. In other words, when creative work is subject to the dictates of time, money, and competition, it is reduced to a strategic matter of catering to others' interests and can no longer be primarily seen as an authentic expression of the artist. According to Wakefield, Stilinović recognizes a fundamental “difference in kind between the art that is monetized and the art that has the purity of having no function...Lazy art is free because it is not working for anyone or anything. Art is excused and that is its value.”<sup>49</sup>

If an artist wishes to maintain the uncorrupted nature of their art, they must choose a different profession by which to survive, which leaves them little time to focus on art. Russell also recognized this dilemma and envisioned a solution of limitations on working hours:

In a world where no one is compelled to work more than four hours a day every person possessed of scientific curiosity will be able to indulge it, and every painter will be able to paint without starving, however excellent his pictures may be. Young writers will not be obliged to draw attention to themselves by sensational pot-boilers, with a view to acquiring the economic independence needed for monumental works, for which, when the time at last comes, they will have lost the taste and the capacity.<sup>50</sup>

As becomes evident by consulting the literature, an investigation of the relationship between work and laziness poses a sort of chicken-and-egg problem. However, it is clear that the “dogma of work” deplored by these authors persists today. This understanding of labor (rather than its fruits) as something valuable and desirable in itself is reinforced by the rhetoric of contemporary American politics, in which there is talk of jobs being

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<sup>49</sup> Wakefield, “Sleep, Laziness and Making,” 127.

<sup>50</sup> Russell, “In Praise of Idleness.”

“stolen” and where claims of being able to “create jobs” (without regard for their social or environmental impact, let alone their purpose or necessity) counts as political currency. An entire century has passed since Lafargue, Russell, and even Malevich predicted the eventual obsolescence of human labor with the advancement of technology and eagerly anticipated an age in which we would all spend significantly less time working. Yet, the opposite seems to have happened: most of us continue to work at least forty hours per week, and our most sophisticated technologies have only made our work more portable and harder to escape. David Graeber’s theory of “bullshit jobs” addresses this frustratingly curious phenomenon, maintaining that much of the work performed today is not only unnecessary, but also demoralizing:

Huge swathes of people, in Europe and North America in particular, spend their entire working lives performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed. The moral and spiritual damage that comes from this situation is profound. It is a scar across our collective soul...The ruling class has figured out that a happy and productive population with free time on their hands is a mortal danger...the feeling that work is a moral value in itself, and that anyone not willing to submit themselves to some kind of intense work discipline for most of their waking hours deserves nothing, is extraordinarily convenient for them.<sup>51</sup>

The fact that Graeber’s assessment of the problem with work essentially regurgitates the arguments and complaints put forth by the likes of Lafargue leaves the uniquely bitter aftertaste that follows more than a century of hindsight, appropriately culminating in the year 2020. Considering work’s acquired performative dimension--i.e. that much of the work performed today is not necessary and is therefore not really work, but merely a *performance* of work--Wakefield rearticulates laziness accordingly as “a gesture of resistance to that performance of being busy that is endemic to contemporary

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<sup>51</sup> David Graeber, “On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs: A Work Rant,” *Strike! Magazine* no. 3: *The Summer of...* (August 2013). <https://www.strike.coop/bullshit-jobs/>.

capitalism...Laziness here is not defined as not working but rather as not offering to the world a performed representation of being always at work.”<sup>52</sup> Work itself (i.e. *time spent* performing work) has become its own form of currency--a phenomenon eerily epitomized by the phrase “time is money.”

As an attitude toward time, laziness has garnered a wealth of support in recent decades. Carl Honoré’s book *In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed* chronicles the rise of the “Slow Movement” from its beginnings in 1980s Italy as a sustainable agricultural movement and its subsequent global spread to other aspects of life, spawning philosophies of “slow” food, school, travel, fashion, sex, and more.<sup>53</sup> While they collectively encompass a broad range of ideas and practices, the common goal of all Slow Movement sectors is to combat the phenomenon of “time poverty” (the widely shared feeling that time is always running out and its negative consequences for not only our own mental and physical health but also the health of our planet) by means of a lifestyle revolution. There is no shortage of literature purporting solutions to the perceived shortage of time, but most approaches to solving time poverty fall victim to it by attempting strategies like “time management.” They fail to apprehend what the Slow Movement considers the root of the problem: our perception of and relationship to time itself. This aim is succinctly stated by Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber in their book *The Slow Professor*: “Given that no day will ever have more than twenty-four hours, it is more useful to change our perception of the passing of time.”<sup>54</sup> In the context of academia, Berg and Seeber demonstrate the necessity of time for reflection and open-

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<sup>52</sup> Wakefield, “Sleep, Laziness and Making,” 126.

<sup>53</sup> Honoré, *In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed*.

<sup>54</sup> Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 32.

ended inquiry to produce quality research. They condemn the “publish or perish” culture that plagues academia for creating an abundance of meaningless and mediocre scholarship (much like Lafargue’s condemnation of industrial capitalism’s “superfluity of wares”) and blame the rise of the neoliberal capitalist university system for prioritizing the “customer satisfaction” of students over the well-being and intellectual integrity of faculty.<sup>55</sup> Though they insist that their notion of slowness is *not* a “form of laziness,”<sup>56</sup> it clearly shares affinities with Stilinović’s time-based notion of laziness. Berg and Seeber thus inadvertently offer an explanation for Stilinović’s claim that art cannot exist without laziness: “The time crunch is not just a personal issue. It is detrimental to intellectual work, interfering with our ability to think critically and creatively.”<sup>57</sup>

Unlike Berg and Seeber who are careful to distance themselves from the term “laziness,” fellow academic Gildersleeve seeks to rescue the term from its decidedly negative connotations in order to foster its acceptance as a method of post-qualitative research.<sup>58</sup> Laziness, as an exercise of passivity, may seem more like willful ignorance of than a respectable response to politics. However, as Gildersleeve demonstrates, laziness (as inaction, or avoidance of work) has long been an effective tactic employed by activists of all kinds. One glaring example of this is the worker’s strike: the refusal to work as a means of achieving more favorable working conditions.<sup>59</sup> Gildersleeve also points out the fundamental role played by deliberate passivity in non-violent protest, such as the sit-ins of the civil rights movement. Seen in this way, laziness can encompass a

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<sup>55</sup> Berg and Seeber, *The Slow Professor*, 6.

<sup>56</sup> Berg and Seeber, *The Slow Professor*, 11.

<sup>57</sup> Berg and Seeber, *The Slow Professor*, 17.

<sup>58</sup> Gildersleeve, “Laziness in Postqualitative Inquiry.”

<sup>59</sup> Gildersleeve, “Laziness in Postqualitative Inquiry,” 695.

form of resistance. In Wakefield's view, "conformism is the opposite of laziness."<sup>60</sup> Laziness as nonconformism opens up new possibilities of interpretation regarding Stilinović's use of "stupidity": intelligence, if reduced to nothing more than learned ideologies (as ideology is present in all symbolic systems) is something Stilinović strives to resist. In this context, it is not difficult to understand stupidity (as refusal to conform to conventional knowledge) as another method of de-symbolization. Conover defines ideology as "the opposite of biology."<sup>61</sup> If we accept this definition, the biological basis of laziness suggests yet another form of its potential as a mode of resistance to ideological forces. Consider the example of the sit-in as a point of convergence for several strains of Stilinović's laziness: it is the use of bodies deliberately exhibiting an absence of movement--enacting passivity--as a means of displaying indifference to, and thereby resisting, the dominant, codified ideologies. Its participants knowingly put themselves in vulnerable positions, exposing themselves to potential pain. Its effectiveness relies on its temporal duration and preparedness to endure discomfort. It may prove futile--its desired result is not guaranteed, and those who embark on it must acknowledge this possibility--or, it might turn out to be an effective political tool. Commitment to enacting a potentially futile task is inherently optimistic.

In searching for parallels that provide positive insight into Stilinović's idea of laziness, meditation presents one well-established example of active passivity. Meditation's various methods of practice come into remarkably close alignment with Stilinović's definition, and, as we shall see, can be found materialized throughout his other works. These various methods fall into two main categories: "focused attention,"

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<sup>60</sup> Wakefield, "Sleep, Laziness and Making," 128.

<sup>61</sup> Conover, "Against Dictionaries: The East as She is Spoke by the West," 352.

which involves “bringing attention to a particular object of focus and keeping it there,” (staring at nothing, total amnesia, futile concentration) and “open awareness,” which entails “observing all salient stimuli as they occur without pursuing them in thought (or action)” (absence of movement and thought, dumb time, indifference).<sup>62</sup> Important common factors of all meditative practices, which are also crucial to understanding their connections to Stilinović’s work, include extended temporal duration, honing of perceptive abilities, and engagement of both the mind and body. Examples of focused attention include concentrating on repetitive physiological processes such as breathing, directing attention toward a particular visual object of focus, or repetition of a mantra (i.e. particular word, sound or slogan).<sup>63</sup> Repetition is of particular interest here because it forms one of Stilinović’s main methods. Open awareness is most prominently exemplified by mindfulness meditation, which aims to gain control over and reduce reactivity to one’s own thoughts and emotions by increasing awareness of cognitive processes, and can be defined as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present, and nonjudgmentally...learning to simply rest in a bare awareness of thoughts, feelings, and perceptions as they occur.”<sup>64</sup>

The formal affinities shared between meditative practices and Stilinović’s work acquire their meaning through the purposes and benefits of meditation. Reports from meditative traditions suggest that “meditation practice can dramatically alter one’s

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<sup>62</sup> Kirk Warren Brown, J. David Creswell, and Richard M. Ryan, eds., *Handbook of Mindfulness: Theory, Research, and Practice* (New York: Guilford Publications, 2015), 190, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>63</sup> Nirbhay N. Singh, *Psychology of Meditation* (Hauppauge, New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc, 2014), 2. <http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=681317&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>64</sup> Singh, *Psychology of Meditation*, 5.

perception; it is said to become more vivid, more clear, and more intense.”<sup>65</sup> More recent studies on the effects of mindfulness meditation in particular demonstrate that its potential benefits can include reduced anxiety and depression, improvement in working memory, improved focus, reduction in subjective experience of pain, and shifts toward more receptive and less evaluative cognitive processing.<sup>66</sup> However, the evidence suggests that these benefits rely on sustained practice over time, and that “this proposed shift in cognitive processing is positively correlated with cumulative time spent in meditation practice.”<sup>67</sup> This point appears significant in light of Stilinović’s assertion that “knowing about laziness is not enough, it must be practiced and perfected.” In addition to these benefits, and as a further parallel to Stilinović’s connection between laziness and art, it has been argued that meditation supports creativity:

MM [mindfulness meditation] supports creative thinking (particularly incubation and illumination phases), even in novices, by inducing broad, open awareness in a state of low cortical arousal...enhancing sensitivity, reducing habituation to external (and perhaps internal) stimuli, increasing cognitive performance on complex problems and supporting novelty-seeking...MM promotes cognitive flexibility due to its transcendent, detached witnessing effect. Strong associative thinking habits are suppressed allowing for the generation of new ideas.<sup>68</sup>

While Stilinović does not appear to have explicitly voiced any connection between meditation and laziness or intention to simulate meditative practices through his work, the similarities are undeniable. His rhetoric, too, often seems to describe practices akin to

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<sup>65</sup> Brown, Creswell, and Ryan eds., *Handbook of Mindfulness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 195.

<sup>66</sup> Brown, Creswell, and Ryan eds., *Handbook of Mindfulness: Theory, Research, and Practice*.

<sup>67</sup> Brown, Creswell, and Ryan eds., *Handbook of Mindfulness: Theory, Research, and Practice*. 178.

<sup>68</sup> Roy Horan, “The Neuropsychological Connection Between Creativity and Meditation,” *Creativity Research Journal* 21 no. 2-3 (Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2009): 211.

meditation: “I always wanted to sit down while visiting an exhibition, and look quietly. Sit down, have a look. Sit and look quietly.”<sup>69</sup>

I wish to draw one final comparison between Stilinović’s “In Praise of Laziness” and Japanese writer Jun’ichirō Tanizaki’s 1933 essay “In Praise of Shadows.”<sup>70</sup> Tanizaki’s reflections on the distinctive aesthetic traits of Japanese material culture foreshadow “In Praise of Laziness” in some fundamental ways. Both authors establish their geographical and cultural context within the popularly employed East-West dichotomy. While this framework is not particularly unique, there is a striking similarity between their attitudes. Like Stilinović, Tanizaki laments the cultural consequences of western influence in Japan and speculates about how things might have developed differently in the absence of western imports. He imagines, for example, how Japanese literature, and even thought, would have taken a different course had the western style of writing pens and ink not been introduced.<sup>71</sup> Despite occupying perhaps the two most geographically distant, opposite ends of the “East,” Stilinović and Tanizaki adopt equally polarizing tones when describing their aesthetic distinction from the “West.” Where the West insists on cleanliness, for example, the Japanese admire “the glow of grime.”<sup>72</sup> Tanizaki’s celebration of shadows is posed in direct opposition to the western obsession

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<sup>69</sup> Igor Zabel, “General Equivalent,” in *Mladen Stilinović: Pain*, Tihomir Milovac and Branka Stipančić eds. (Zagreb: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003), 8.

<sup>70</sup> Admittedly, my initial connection between these two texts was limited to the shared format of their titles (also employed by Russell’s more obviously relevant “In Praise of Idleness,” Honore’s *In Praise of Slow*, and others). Further comparison revealed unexpectedly striking similarities, which leads me to wonder if Stilinović had encountered “In Praise of Shadows.” However, I have not been able to determine whether he was aware of or familiar with Tanizaki’s essay.

<sup>71</sup> Jun’ichirō Tanizaki, “In Praise of Shadows,” trans. Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker (Stony Creek: Leete’s Island Books, Inc., 1977), 7-8.

<sup>72</sup> Tanizaki, “In Praise of Shadows,” 11.

with light, exemplified by his description of philosophically different approaches to roofing:

In making for ourselves a place to live, we first spread a parasol to throw a shadow on the earth, and in the pale light of the shadow we put together a house. There are of course roofs on Western houses too, but they are less to keep off the sun than to keep off the wind and dew; even from without it is apparent that they are built to create as few shadows as possible and to expose the interior to as much light as possible. If the roof of a Japanese house is a parasol, the roof of a Western house is no more than a cap, with as small a visor as possible so as to allow the sunlight to penetrate directly beneath the eaves.<sup>73</sup>

Beyond their shared approach to cultural contextualization, a conceptual parallel exists between Tanizaki's shadows and Stilinović's laziness: they are both manifestations of erasure, of absence, of nothingness. Their targets of praise mirror one another in their respective dimensions. Tanizaki's shadows reside on the surfaces of objects, buildings, and earth, while Stilinović's laziness inhabits art in the era of its dematerialization. "In Praise of Laziness" echoes Tanizaki's values but adapts them from the material third dimension for application to the intangible fourth. Tanizaki's shadows embody visually what Stilinović's laziness fosters temporally. Shadows consist of darkness, the absence of light--visual pause. Darkness is an arena of the unknown, the undefined, apparent nothingness; it denies the pursuit of knowledge by concealing visual information. Darkness decorates the wallpaper of sleep. It renders space directionless, navigation futile, and maps useless. It negates light, yet also grants its worth. Just as cast shadows owe their shape to looming illuminations, the outer limits of laziness are laced with active potential.

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<sup>73</sup> Tanizaki, "In Praise of Shadows," 17-18.

## Chapter 2: Locating Lazy Manifestations

Stilinović concluded his definition of laziness by imparting the wisdom that “those virtues of laziness are important factors in art. Knowing about laziness is not enough, it must be practiced and perfected.” This begs two questions: First, what exactly is the role of laziness in art? While this is not a question that can be answered definitively, I have used the previous chapter to suggest some potential explanations of the relationship between laziness and art as a point of departure for the next question. Second, what does practicing laziness actually entail and how does it manifest in art? Answering this question as it applies to Stilinović’s work will be the focus of this chapter. How exactly does Stilinović practice the laziness that he preaches? Laziness can be detected throughout his oeuvre in all aspects of his work, from method and materiality to production and reception. Sometimes its references are overt, but usually it maintains a discreet presence. As Adair Rounthwaite points out, the “rigorously conceptual” nature of Stilinović’s work has “resulted in a tendency among art historians and critics to emphasise concept and downplay materiality in the interpretation of his work.”<sup>74</sup> This tendency overlooks some of his work’s most prominent features of laziness. Just as his notion of laziness is rooted in both physical and mental means of experience, the lazy elements of his work emerge from both material and conceptual roots. Using the varied notions of laziness articulated in the previous chapter as a blueprint, I intend to illuminate Stilinović’s lazy practices as they manifest in all stages and facets of his work.

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<sup>74</sup> Rounthwaite, “Lazy Objects.”

While “In Praise of Laziness” is not Stilinović’s first work dealing with the theme of laziness, it does appear to be the first instance of explicit reference to the term. His earlier works only flirt with or imply the notion of laziness by critiquing its perceived opposite, i.e. “work.” Perhaps the most vivid example (and certainly the most frequently reproduced) is the 1978 series of photographs titled *Umjetnik Radi [Artist at Work]* (fig. 2). This work was created in response to a 1975 work, *Untitled* (fig. 3) by Serbian artist Neša Paripović, consisting of a series of nine photographs depicting the artist sitting at a desk, staring intently at a blank white surface.<sup>75</sup> Paripović performs a perfectly straightforward example of laziness by “staring at nothing.” Stilinović’s response, not only inspired by but also dedicated to Paripović, assumes a similar form: eight photographs taken from a single perspective, each depicting Stilinović lying in bed, closing his eyes and turning his back toward the camera in some frames. However, the most remarkable feature of this work and likely the reason for its popularity is its title (a feature absent in Paripović’s work). The humor of *Artist at Work* resides in its apparent contradiction between the expectations set by the title and the imagery it delivers. This frequently employed tactic of staging paradox might be considered a method of lazy training: by setting certain expectations and then deliberately defying them, Stilinović conditions us to abandon the futility of forming expectations (futile because they are often unfulfilled, resulting in disappointment that could be avoided by discarding expectations) and encourages us to embrace the nonsense and aimlessness that constitutes laziness.

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<sup>75</sup> Armin Medosch, “Cutting the Networks in Former Yugoslavia,” *Third Text* 32, no. 4 (2018): 561. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2018.1528716>.



Figure 2. Mladen Stilinović, *Umjetnik Radi (Artist at Work)*, 1978, series of eight black and white photographs. (Source: <https://mladenstilinovic.com/works/10-2/artist-at-work-01/>)



Figure 3. Neša Paripović, *Untitled*, 1975. Photographic performance.  
 (Source: Amy Bryzgel, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960*.  
 Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017. p. 316.)

*Artist at Work* is perhaps most easily interpreted as a statement about the intellectual nature of artistic labor. Branka Stipančić posits this view, seeing its basis as the unquantifiable nature of an artist’s work: “Is he sleeping, drowsing, perhaps thinking up something new? What can we know at all about the work the artist has put in when we see the final result?”<sup>76</sup> Several scholars foreground the presence of the bed and focus on the images in which his eyes are closed, reading it as a commentary on the role of sleep.<sup>77</sup> For example, Nik Wakefield sees it as a dismantling of the border between art and life through the conflation of art-making with sleeping: “Art-making can be as everyday as

<sup>76</sup> Branka Stipančić, ed. *Mladen Stilinović: Artist’s Books 1972-2006* (Istanbul: Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Center, 2007), 14.

<sup>77</sup> In addition to those directly quoted in the text: Brockett, “Nothing Doing.”; Sandra Križić Roban, “Laughter Protocol: Elements of Humor in Proto- and Conceptual Photography in Croatia,” in *Photography Performing Humor*, ed. Liesbeth Decan and Mieke Bleyen (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019), 191.; Bojana Kunst, “Art and Labour: On Consumption, Laziness and Less Work,” *Performance Research* 17, no. 6 (2012): 120. I find Kunst’s reading of Stilinović as sleeping problematic because the article omits four out of the eight photographs from *Artist at Work*, only including those that show him with eyes closed or back turned toward the camera.

sleep.”<sup>78</sup> Rounthwaite pushes the role of sleep in the opposite direction, locating a “semantic chain between laziness, sleep, and death” in *Artist at Work*: “To sleep is a common euphemism for death, and in those images where Stilinović has his eyes open, staring blankly ahead, he might almost be mistaken for a corpse.”<sup>79</sup> Whether taken as a necessity for life or a metaphor for death, sleep fits into Stilinović’s definition of laziness as a state of impotence.

Here, a brief detour on the theme of death is in order. Death features prominently in Stilinović’s later works and, as we have seen, “In Praise of Laziness” announces the death of art in the West--but there are precedents for this, as his work began anticipating the death of art (and the artist) as early as 1977 with works like *I hear them talk about the death of art...* (fig. 4). Its inscription reads: “I hear them talk about the death of art, the death of art is the death of the artist, someone wants to kill me, help.” Like *Artist at Work*, its humor resides in its title--but the title is essentially its only content. As we shall see, this format is typical. This work is also exemplary in terms of its inexpensive, haphazardly assembled materials and handmade, amateurish aesthetic. The title, painted by hand in red on an unapologetically creased piece of pink silk, rattles off a series of absurd yet somehow logical conclusions, quickly escalating a metaphorical rumor into an imminent murder plot, punctuated by a pathetic plea for “help.” While the title alone is absurd, its juxtaposition with the manner of inscription--mainly the fact that any *time* has been spent inscribing it at all, given the dramatic urgency of its claims--adds another dimension of absurdity. The incompatibility between its apparently time-consuming, somewhat unwieldy form and the dire content of its message begins to show signs of

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<sup>78</sup> Wakefield, “Sleep, Laziness and Making,” 131.

<sup>79</sup> Rounthwaite, “Lazy Objects.”

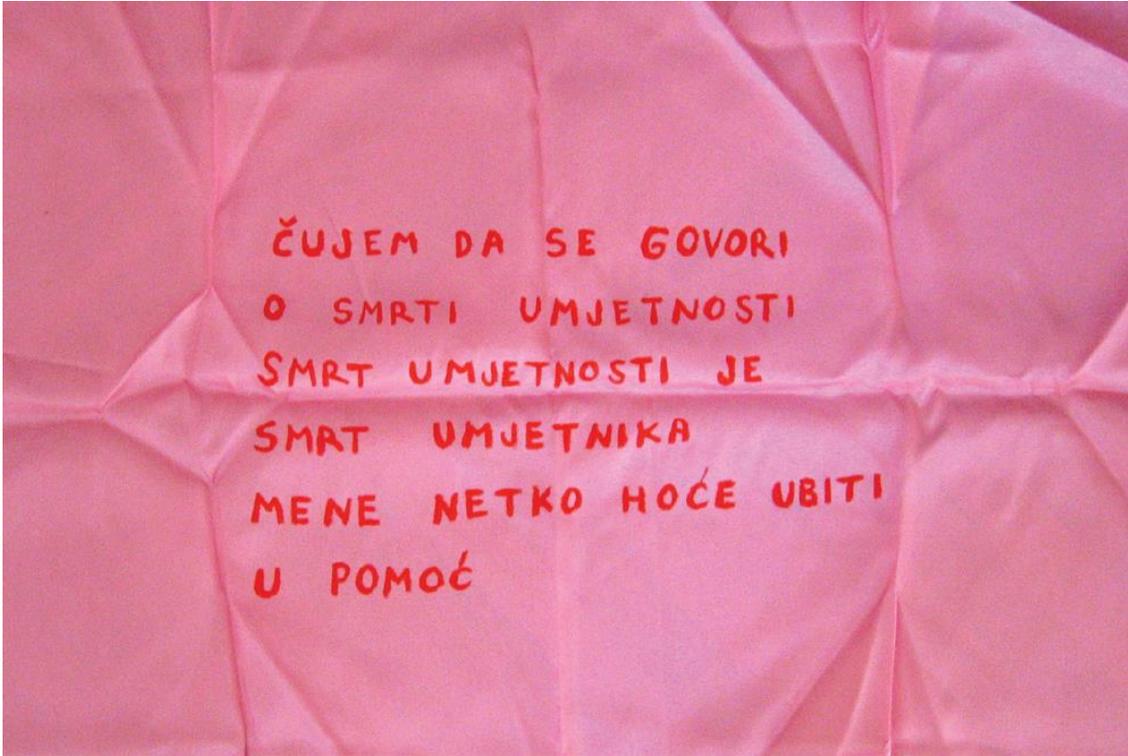


Figure 4. Mladen Stilinović, *I hear them talk about the death of art...*, 1977. Acrylic on silk, 36 x 50 cm. (Source: <https://mladenstilinovic.com/works/6-2/>)

laziness: it reveals the artist's apathy, lack of self-preservation, and *indifference* to threat. This is just one of many examples in which form and materiality emerge as the primary stewards of his laziness.

Returning to *Artist at Work*, this series might also be read as an act of defiance, a refusal to conform to conventions (of “work”) and the expectations based upon them. In this sense, Stilinović alienates his audience by refusing to perform as expected. Armin Medosch posits this interpretation of both *Artist at Work* and Paripović's *Untitled* as “refusal[s] of the ideology of labor,” but also proposes reading them as “carefully staged narratives which turn aspects of the everyday into special moments through making them strange.”<sup>80</sup> This reading scratches the surface of two significant points of tension in *Artist*

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<sup>80</sup> Medosch, “Cutting the Networks in Former Yugoslavia,” 561.

*at Work* which deserve closer attention: first, the fact that it is, in fact, “staged,” and second, its estrangement of the everyday. Estrangement initiates through the same means as humor, i.e. the incongruous pairing of the word “work” with an image of rest, but it is reinforced by repetition. The work would retain its humor even if it consisted of only one photograph. Its strangeness, however, relies on the repeated image because this ensures that its presence persists beyond the punchline. The longer this image of laziness lingers past its comical prime, the stranger it appears, the more it compels us to make sense of its strangeness by questioning our initial evaluation: what exactly is so funny, so strange, about a person in a bed, a person doing nothing? Doing nothing (inaction), upon critical reflection, is not so strange after all. As the default state of being (recall Duchamp’s laziness as mere “living” and “breathing”), we might even call it the epitome of normal. This projected path toward estrangement by persistent exposure ultimately forces a radical reassessment, transforming the strange into the alarmingly familiar. Stilinović employs both formal and conceptual elements of laziness: temporal endurance (necessitated by sequential repetition), insistence on apparent inaction, rejection of conventional knowledge (of the meaning of “work”), refusal to fulfill expectations based on that knowledge--culminating in a work that simultaneously depicts the sloth of its author and induces laziness in its audience. His laziness is not merely a self-indulgent artistic practice, but a practice laboriously imposed on his audience through repetition, refusal, and negation. These are the tools he uses to enforce lazy law. Not unique to *Artist at Work*, they appear incessantly throughout his oeuvre and are especially prominent in his artist books.

However, the *depiction* of laziness in *Artist at Work* is a much less common occurrence. With this point we return to Medosch's observation that *Artist at Work* is staged. The very existence of this work, along with Stilinović's claim to both authorship and subject, indicate its intentional creation (a process which Stilinović recalls took only five minutes to complete<sup>81</sup>). It is therefore not a documented occurrence of laziness, but decidedly a *performance* of it. Stilinović maintained that he considers *Artist at Work* primarily photographic, rather than photographic documentation of a work categorized primarily as performance.<sup>82</sup> By calling this work a "performance" of laziness, I do not mean to disregard his own classification. Rather, I mean that the alleged state of laziness represented in the photographs is inauthentic and that his active *portrayal* of inaction (distinctly superficial in comparison to the genuinely lazy practice of "active inaction") was a necessary step in the process of this work's realization. With this in mind, the title of *Artist at Work* ceases to be a punchline and reveals itself as a self-reflexive and boringly accurate descriptive title: the artist *is* indeed at work, posing for a photograph which will be deemed art.

Other references to "work" appear abundantly in the 1970s and 80s in the form of humorous phrases, absurd juxtapositions, appropriated slogans, and decontextualized repetition. One such work exemplifying his tautological approach consists of the statement *Radim na ovom djelu od 11.VI.1976 [I have been working on this work since June 11, 1976]* (fig. 5) scribbled across a bent sheet of paper with yellowing edges. He

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<sup>81</sup> Mladen Stilinović, "Mladen Stilinović," interview, *Parasite*, March 28, 2013. Video, [https://vimeo.com/62851903?utm\\_campaign=5370367&utm\\_source=affiliate&utm\\_channel=affiliate&cjev ent=9eea3191180011eb83ca004c0a24060f](https://vimeo.com/62851903?utm_campaign=5370367&utm_source=affiliate&utm_channel=affiliate&cjev ent=9eea3191180011eb83ca004c0a24060f).

<sup>82</sup> Stilinović, "Mladen Stilinović" (interview). His explanation for this choice questions the purpose of staging public performance when it will ultimately be documented and preserved in the form of photographs anyway.

simultaneously asserts and rejects the statement *Rad ne može ne postojati [Work cannot not exist]* (fig. 6) with a pair of prints, each containing the same phrase but with one boldly crossed out--which actually contains three times the rejection, as crossing out a double negative makes it a triple. *Plan Rada [Work Plan]* (fig. 7), a numbered but contentless list, displays a playful apathy toward work. Jotted down in red pastel, Stilinović suggests the autonomy of work: *Uvjeti za moj rad nisu u mojim rukama, ali na svu sreću ni u vašim [The conditions for my work are not in my hands but fortunately they are not in yours either]* (fig. 8). Collectively, these aim to strip “work” of its culturally assigned ideological meaning by repeatedly poking at it from all angles. This ultimate reduction of “work” to an empty signifier is epitomized by a piece of cardboard with the painted statement *Rad je riječ* (fig. 9), or “Work is a word.” Despite their preoccupation with words, these works display a strong emphasis on materiality. The diversity of materials used and the resulting variation of textures, amplified by Stilinović’s *indifference* to neatness and the clear trace left by his hand, form a significant contribution to the manifestation of laziness. They oppose the ideological meaning of “work” not only through linguistic means, but also by asserting their physicality. They attempt to kidnap “work” from the conceptual realm and reestablish it as a material presence devoid of inherent meaning in the realm of objects.

This is just one of the ways in which Stilinović’s approach to material and method can be considered a lazy practice. Often making use of small-scale, cheap, easily accessible materials, his work is almost always produced by hand and written in unrefined handwriting. This is a departure from the tendency of (western) conceptual artists to favor a neat, mechanically produced aesthetic. On one hand, his manual

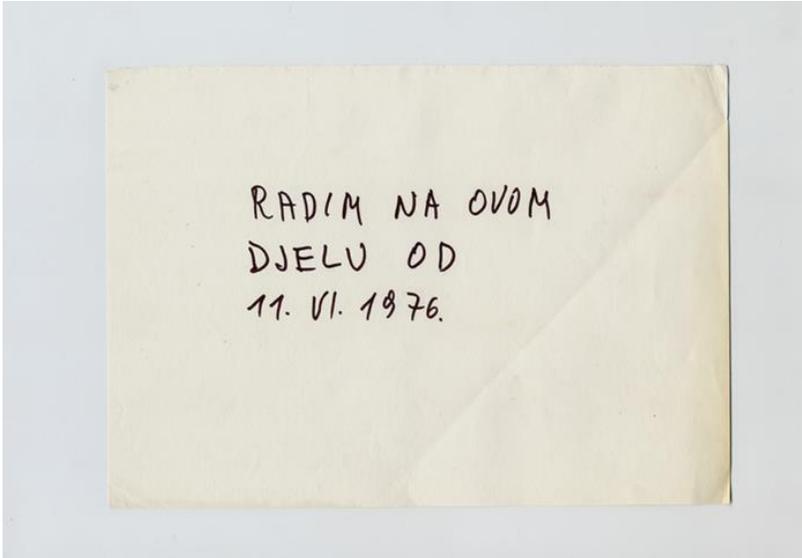


Figure 5. Mladen Stilinović, *I have been working on this work since June 11, 1976, 1976.*  
(Source: <https://mladenstilinovic.com/works/10-2/>)



Figure 6. Mladen Stilinović, *Work cannot not exist, 1976.* Screenprint on paper, (2x) 50 x 70 cm.  
(Source: <https://mladenstilinovic.com/works/10-2/>)

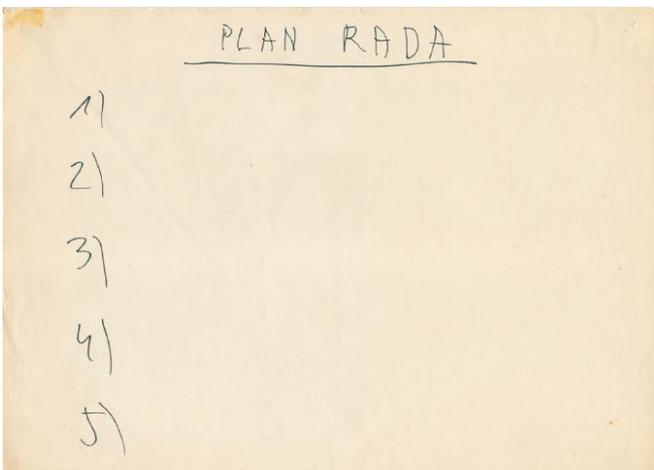


Figure 7. Mladen Stilinović, *Work Plan, 1974.*  
(Source: <https://mladenstilinovic.com/works/early-works/>)

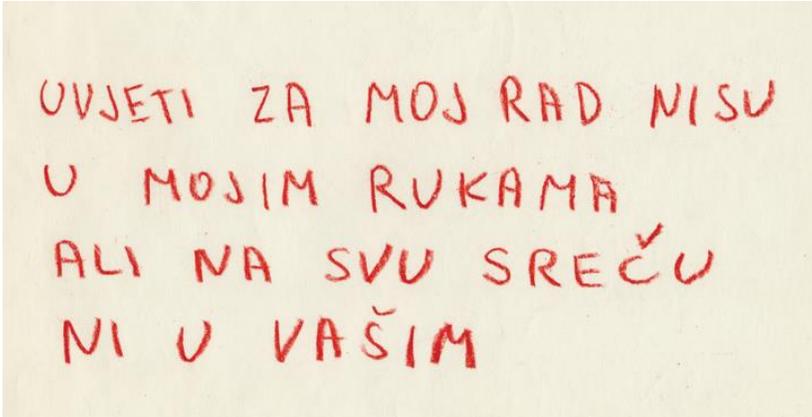


Figure 8. Mladen Stilinović, *The conditions for my work are not in my hands but fortunately they are not in yours either*, 1979. Pastel on paper, 20.8 x 29.5 cm. (Source: <https://mladenstilinovic.com/works/10-2/>)



Figure 9. Mladen Stilinović, *Work is a Word*, 1982. Acrylic on cardboard, 31 x 62 cm. (Source: <https://mladenstilinovic.com/works/10-2/>)

production of works and use of inexpensive materials has been attributed to the relatively low interest in/availability of funding for machine-printing equipment in Eastern European countries.<sup>83</sup> However, using the materials that are most easily accessible also aligns with the resourcefulness inherent in an understanding of laziness as “doing as little as possible.” Creating works manually--particularly when they consist mainly of text and could therefore be easily typed rather than handwritten without omitting any essential content--might seem like an unnecessary amount of work, i.e. the opposite of laziness. Yet, Stilinović explained how working manually actually meant less work for him when

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<sup>83</sup> Stipančić, ed., *Mladen Stilinović: Artist's Books 1972-2006*, 8.

it came to producing his artist books: “I made my books by hand, because I thought that no one would publish them, and even if they did, I would spend more time looking for and persuading some publisher than would be needed for me to make enough of these books. I make just as many individual copies of the book as I sell.”<sup>84</sup> This method is not only easier, but also less wasteful because it avoids superfluous production (one enemy of laziness condemned by Lafargue). Yet there is another important measurement of laziness present in his manual production: time. He may save time on finding a publisher, but he still spends more time on the process of making works. This process becomes extremely repetitive and, as we shall see, subsequently approximates certain types of meditation. His laziness manifests here in *how* he chooses to spend his time, namely his preference for repetitive, solitary, meditative acts over the busy pursuit of art-world networking. In addition to this temporal factor, manual production fosters a level of intimacy and familiarity with (i.e. enhanced *perception* of) the material world that cannot be attained through mechanical production.

While most of Stilinović’s work does not explicitly address the themes of work or laziness, some form of implicit laziness can be identified in nearly all of his work. His tendency to employ lazy tactics can be traced back to his earliest artistic endeavors as a member of the Group of Six Artists (alongside Vlado Martek, Boris Demur, Željko Jerman, Fedor Vučemilović, and Mladen’s younger brother Sven Stilinović) from 1975 to 1979. During this period, they participated together in what they termed “exhibition-actions” by mounting unofficial exhibitions of their work in public places, including city squares, streets, river banks, the seashore, university halls, yards, and private houses in

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<sup>84</sup> Stipančić, ed., *Mladen Stilinović: Artist’s Books 1972-2006*, 9.

locations throughout Yugoslavia and beyond, including Zagreb, Belgrade, Mošćenička Draga, and Venice.<sup>85</sup> While “exhibition-*action*” sounds inhospitable to laziness, this term is somewhat misleading. These events have been remembered by historians as deliberately subversive, embodying a “spirit of constant rebellion,” “bypassing the traps set by the institutions of art,” and “adopting the style of guerilla warfare, the tactics of constant disturbance.”<sup>86</sup> Such language portrays the Group of Six as militantly anti-institutional and fits neatly within broader narratives of “anti-art” and public intervention. There are certainly subversive elements in the Group of Six’s work, but Stilinović’s own recollection of the exhibition-actions suggests a more relaxed agenda: “the deal was the six of us would just go out and walk around town with our work.”<sup>87</sup> They chose to bring works that were easy to carry and made no attempt to coordinate any semblance of cohesion in terms of theme or style--Sven even showed up once with nothing and assembled a work at the last minute.<sup>88</sup> The exhibition-actions were informed by principles of laziness: the selection of works was based on minimizing the difficulty of their transportation rather than curating their content. They were aimless, open-ended experiments beginning with no particular intentions or goals. While it is true that they bypassed art institutions, this was not because of any moral or political objection: “we didn’t have anything against galleries, so when they started inviting us, we exhibited there.”<sup>89</sup> As they were not yet widely recognized by art institutions, the exhibition-actions

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<sup>85</sup> Darko Šimičić, “From *Zenit* to *Mental Space*: avant-garde, neo-avant-garde, and post-avant-garde magazines and books in Yugoslavia, 1921-1987,” in *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avant-gardes, and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918-1991*, ed. Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003), 324-35.

<sup>86</sup> Branka Stipančić, “This Is Not My World (after Željko Jerman),” in *Group of Six Artists*, ed. Bojana Piškur (Ljubljana: Moderna galerija, 2015), 2-3.

<sup>87</sup> Mladen Stilinović and Branka Stipančić, “A Talk with Mladen Stilinović,” in *Group of Six Artists*, 11.

<sup>88</sup> Stilinović and Stipančić, “A Talk with Mladen Stilinović,” 11.

<sup>89</sup> Stilinović and Stipančić, “A Talk with Mladen Stilinović,” 12.

resulted from impatience to find an audience for their work, indifference about the demographic of that audience, and unwillingness to put effort toward courting galleries to play the middleman.

Stilinović's fascination with repetition, perhaps the most pervasive manifestation of laziness in his work, can also be traced back to his collaboration with the Group of Six:

Demur had this work, which I really love; it is actually a theatre performance. He had set up eight panels around the space and eight of us were supposed to write "Repeat" on them. First, one would come out and start writing and say "Repeat" then "repeat" then "repeat," and then another one would come on... And so on. And then the first to fill up the entire panel with words goes out. And so the crew gets smaller and smaller until only one is left. We performed this at one of the *April Meetings*,<sup>90</sup> where we would frequently be, as the Group of Six. And it turned out really well in my opinion, because the drama develops in such an unexpected way. Everybody in the audience is looking, waiting to see what will happen next, and the performers drop out one by one until in the end only one is left, the slowest. That was Sven, since he is left-handed.<sup>91</sup>

This performance embodies multiple aspects of laziness. First, it is a subtractive, anticlimactic process of negation and disappearance--its end result is isolation, and ultimately, absence. Second, it demonstrates how repetition can be employed to prolong the temporal duration of experiencing a work. This may seem like an obvious property of repetition, but it is not inherent. It is easy for a work of art to employ repetition without demanding that its audience spend the time to experience each repeated element individually. For example, the repetitive photographs that make up *Artist at Work*, as well as most of his other photographic works, were originally assembled in book formats but have since been displayed side by side on gallery walls.<sup>92</sup> When presented unbound, the

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<sup>90</sup> The *April Meetings*, also called "Festival of Expanded Media," were multi-day, multidisciplinary artistic programs "conceived in the spirit of the time with the goal of transcending the boundaries between art forms," held annually from 1972-77 at the Student Cultural Center in Belgrade. "April Meetings," last modified December 21, 2011, [https://monoskop.org/April\\_Meetings](https://monoskop.org/April_Meetings).

<sup>91</sup> Stilinović and Stipančić, "A Talk with Mladen Stilinović," 15-16.

<sup>92</sup> Stipančić, ed., *Mladen Stilinović: Artist's Books 1972-2006*, 88-9.

repetitive nature of this work loses much of its power because it allows audiences to view all eight photographs at once. It becomes a grid, or a homogenous visual plane, rather than a rhythmic sequence. The sequential format of the book, because its pages must be turned and each one viewed independently from the others, necessitates a temporally extended experience. Repetition is the perpetual presentation of sameness, the prolonged absence of newness. Given time, repetition familiarizes, desensitizes, diminishes its substance. It is the opposite of typically expected book contents (or any inherently sequential format, e.g. film): readers expect a narrative that develops or changes in some way as the sequence progresses. Stilinović is aware of these expectations and wants to defy them, so he employs repetition to exploit the sequential nature of the book, creating the conditions for laziness in his audience.

His gravitation toward sequential formats existed from the very beginning of his artistic career, which started with producing short experimental films. In 1969 he founded the cinema club *Pan 69* with a group of friends and showed his films at the Student Centre in Zagreb.<sup>93</sup> He began making artist books in the 1970s, which ultimately helped inspire the Group of Six to launch the magazine *Maj '75* in 1978.<sup>94</sup> They (unofficially) published a total of seventeen issues over the course of the next six years, usually producing between 100 and 200 copies per issue and handed most of them out free of charge at exhibition-actions.<sup>95</sup> The A4-format magazine featured contributions by fifty-three different artists from cities all over Yugoslavia, including Zagreb, Belgrade, Novi Sad, Ljubljana, Kranj, Rijeka, Pula, and Sarajevo, as well as abroad, from Venice,

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<sup>93</sup> Ana Janevski, ed., *As Soon as I Open My Eyes I See a Film: Experiment in the Art of Yugoslavia in the 1960s and 1970s* (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2010), 36.

<sup>94</sup> Šimičić, "From *Zenit* to *Mental Space*," 325.

<sup>95</sup> Šimičić, "From *Zenit* to *Mental Space*," 326.

Bratislava, and Frankfurt.<sup>96</sup> Stilinović created well over one hundred different artist books over the course of his career and produced nearly all of them by hand. One early book titled *Sad [Now]* (fig. 10) consists of six pages, each with some variation of the



Figure 10. Mladen Stilinović, *Sad (Now)*, 1976, pencil, acryl, letraset, seal dye, adhesive tape, thread, staples. 20.9 x 29.4 cm. (Source: <https://mladenstilinovic.com/works/artists-books/>)

<sup>96</sup> Šimičić, "From *Zenit* to *Mental Space*," 326.

word “sad” scribbled in pencil.<sup>97</sup> One page includes a piece of tape, one is marked by a smudge of brown ink, one is pierced by a tack, and the final page adds some letters to form a new and seemingly unrelated word, “sadnice” (meaning “seedling”). This mode of repetition containing only slight alterations from page to page, as well as free-flowing word association that strings together terms unrelated in meaning but phonetically similar, are typical of Stilinović’s artist books. Through repetition, “sad” becomes a sort of mantra. However, its meaning also becomes significant: “now” is a term that disregards past and future, denoting a lazy outlook on time (i.e. the only applicable temporal term in “total amnesia”). It redirects attention to the present with each turn of the page, continuously demanding the reader’s presence, thereby functioning as a sort of simulated meditation. This applies not only to the experience of reading, but also to the process of making: Stilinović’s repetitive, manual working process resembles meditative practice that becomes encoded in the works themselves and ultimately mirrored by the reader’s experience.

*Nemam vremena* (fig. 11), the first book that was printed rather than handwritten,<sup>98</sup> appeared in 1979 in Croatian and was reissued in English (*I have no time*) and German (*Ich habe keine Zeit*) in 1983.<sup>99</sup> It opens with the introduction: “I wrote this book when I had no time. The readers are requested to read it when they have no time,” followed by over 100 saturated pages of text repeating the book’s title, without

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<sup>97</sup> It is possible, though unconfirmed, that Stilinović was aware of the ‘false friend’ status of “sad” as a word in English, in which case we might read a double meaning in this work.

<sup>98</sup> It also appears to be the *only* book which was typed and printed rather than manually produced, as I have not been able to find any others. However, none of the existing scholarship confirms this fact.

<sup>99</sup> Stipančić, ed., *Mladen Stilinović: Artist’s Books 1972-2006*, 22.

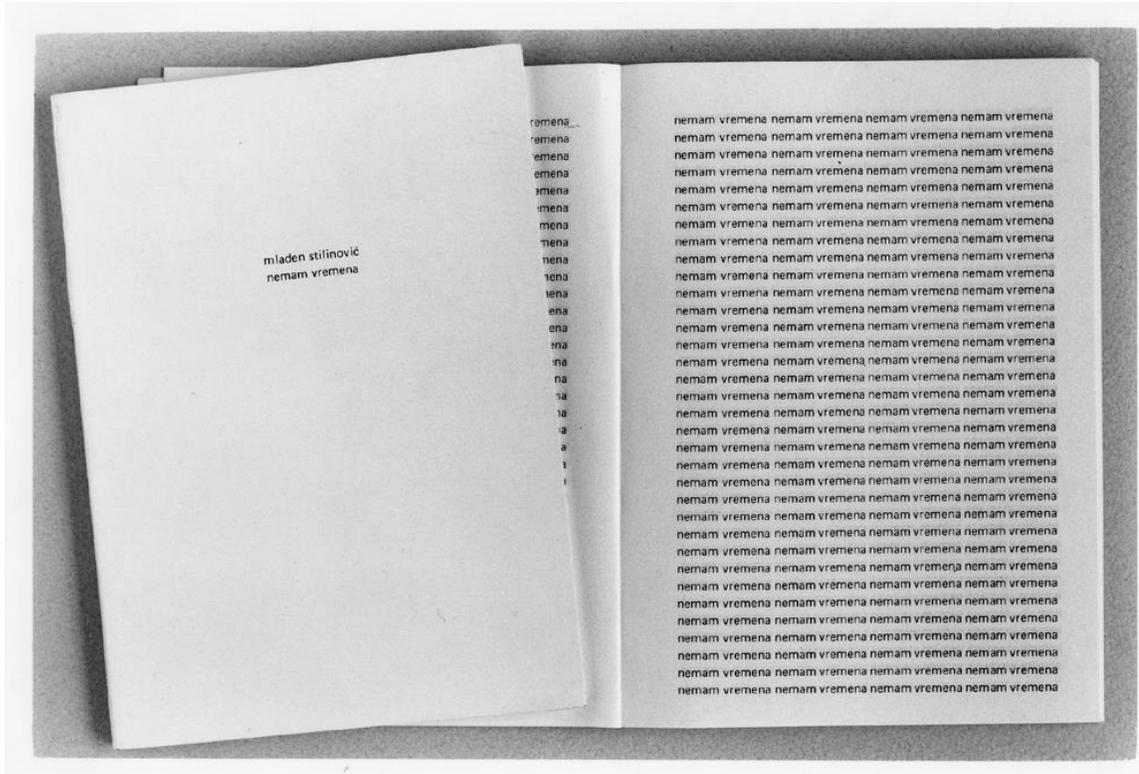


Figure 11. Mladen Stilinović, *Nemam vremena (I have no time)*, 1979, 1983. 52 sheets, paperback, stapled. 16.3 x 12cm. (Source: <https://mladenstilinoVIC.com/works/artists-books/>)

punctuation, more than 14,500 times.<sup>100</sup> This book epitomizes his repetitive tendency.

There is humor in the sheer absurdity of the book's demands, but there is also a serious critique of dominant attitudes toward time. Predating the Slow Movement, it appropriates the signature excuse of time-poverty, "the most commonly uttered phrase, with which we justify not having done the things that we should have done or would like to have done."<sup>101</sup> Already by the late 1970s the time-poverty epidemic was so pervasive that Stilinović, using only a few words, was able to produce "a book with which a numerous reading public can identify, something that has not been achieved by painstakingly

<sup>100</sup> Spomenka Nikitović, *Mladen Stilinović* (Zagreb: Meandar/Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, 1998), 15.

<sup>101</sup> Stipančić, ed., *Mladen Stilinović: Artist's Books 1972-2006*, 22.

constructed works of literature.”<sup>102</sup> Similar to the process of estrangement and reevaluation previously discussed with *Artist at Work* (though to a much greater extent in the case of *I have no time*), he incessantly repeats this “collective symptom and mannerism of modern man” to expose it as “a large-scale lie.”<sup>103</sup> *I have no time* aggressively questions conventional notions of time, including the idea of (not) “having” time, i.e. time as a measurable commodity or possession, subject to ownership, purchase, or sale--the notion that warrants the phrase “time is money.” The perpetual scarcity that characterizes the modern time economy is based on a linear conception in which time is always running out. Kim Brockett contrasts this model with an alternative, kairological time:

Most think of time in its chronological sense. That is to say, we follow ‘clock-time’: a measurable, linear concept that only moves forwards. The landscape of time that laziness occupies is less straightforward. It meanders through a freer notion of time—one that is populated by daydreams and inactivity, where time can simultaneously feel everlasting and yet come to an end all too soon...The counterweight to chronological time is kairological time, a term which originates from the Greek word *kairos*: an opportune moment. The kairological experience is largely intuitive and is more about *timing* than time. It is eating when you are hungry, and not because it is one o’clock and lunchtime. The process of art making follows a similarly loose timescale of occurring at the right, rather than the prescribed, moment.<sup>104</sup>

In other words, kairological time offers an alternative view more conducive to laziness. As an intuitive relationship to time that heeds biological functions and intellectual impulses rather than dictating when they should occur, kairological time adopts the same holistic approach that constitutes laziness. By conceptualizing time as an abstract venue for the flow of existence rather than a perpetually vanishing resource, it frees naturally

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<sup>102</sup> Nikitović, *Mladen Stilinović*, 17.

<sup>103</sup> Nikitović, *Mladen Stilinović*, 15-16.

<sup>104</sup> Brockett, “Nothing Doing.”

occurring inclinations from the prison of arbitrary schedule. As Brockett suggests, kairological time mirrors artistic process. Chronological time allows room for neither laziness nor art, and *I have no time* prefigures these losses, later observed by “In Praise of Laziness.” Stilinović inundates us with what he considers an irritatingly ubiquitous falsehood. If this work contains any optimism, it lies in the prospective revelation that time is not something to be possessed--in fact, it is not *something* at all. Time is abstract nothingness, a crucial ingredient in laziness (where it plays essential partner to concrete nothingness). In our current linear world, it is intangibility commodified. The occurrences by which it is measured--the planetary orbits, the rising and setting of the sun, the ticking of a clock--embody the same ceaseless repetition appropriated by Stilinović as a means of escaping dogma. *I have no time* is a monumental work of fiction.

Despite its many fundamental similarities, *I have no time* has a distinctively cynical and frantic flavor in comparison to Stilinović’s other repetitive books. This seems at least partially due to the fact that, unlike his handwritten books, the experience of creating it does not closely resemble the experience of reading it, which robs the reading experience of its intimacy and imbues the book with a sense of imbalance. It might also have to do with its over-crowded pages, as his manually produced books tend to consist mostly of negative space, giving readers substantial visual pause. The majority of his books are material manifestations of his own meditative, lazy practices which also foster lazy conditions for readers by silently yet unapologetically occupying time through slow and sequential repetition, almost functioning as guidebooks for following lazy philosophy. This element of shared experience is ruthlessly absent from *I have no time*. It appears to mark a moment of frustration in which Stilinović concedes to the fast forces he

normally resists, just to prove a point. *I have no time* serves as a guidebook of “what not to do,” making a mockery of time-poverty by exposing its absurd demands. It shares this formally deviant role with “In Praise of Laziness,” which uncharacteristically concedes to conventional use of language to convey its message. In both cases, concessions are made in the interest of promoting and/or defending principles of laziness.

The compromises Stilinović made when he first recited “In Praise of Laziness” in 1993 at the Opus Operandi Gallery in Ghent are amplified by comparison to an earlier performance. At the 1979 *Works and Words* exhibition at the De Appel Gallery in Amsterdam, he delivered a lecture against the English language titled “The Discourse about Language and Power” entirely in Croatian, and requested that it remain untranslated.<sup>105</sup> Recalling the event decades later, he explained: “Of course, no one understood what was I talking about. So, this is that double role of the English language: as a power and as a necessity...I prefer my mother tongue.”<sup>106</sup>

Fourteen years later in Ghent, Stilinović let go of his staunch commitment to resisting anglocentric expectations with the decision to read “In Praise of Laziness” aloud in English. This is both a symptom and indicator of several changes that took place in the years between which are beyond the scope of this chapter--but for Stilinović’s work, it marks a shift in his methods of asserting laziness. In some ways, his refusal to translate for his audience at De Appel can be considered a lazy decision. “In Praise of Laziness,” however, is not lazy--it is a carefully composed text *about* laziness, advocating (rather than performing or practicing) laziness. The brand of laziness implemented in the case of

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<sup>105</sup> Amy Bryzgel, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 323.

<sup>106</sup> Stilinović and Vasiljević, “Mladen Stilinović: Work is Disease,” 89.

the De Appel lecture is rooted in indifference as a mode of resistance. It is a deliberate and meaningful denial of linguistic hegemony, classified as lazy for Stilinović's refusal to do the work of translation, while also exposing the (lazy) expectation held by the English-speaking art world that outsiders will adapt accordingly. Knowingly speaking Croatian to audiences unequipped to comprehend the language qualifies as yet another form of laziness, namely indulgence in futility. Stilinović knows that the content of his lecture will fall on deaf ears, but decides to recite it anyway. This could even be read as a shaming tactic aimed at the anglocentrism of western art institutions, meant to expose the hypocrisy of their communicative double standards. In this case, his lecture might not be considered a genuine occurrence of his own laziness, but a *performance* of laziness intended as a provocation, calling out the linguistic laziness of his audience. Thus, his work *becomes* laziness, and vice versa--demonstrating one example of how work and laziness, in his view, are not only supplementary but can sometimes emerge as inextricably linked.

In addition to its performative laziness, Stilinović's lecture at *Works and Words* can be understood as an imposition of laziness on an unsuspecting captive audience. Its unapologetic incomprehensibility defies audience expectations and surely disappoints anyone without humility, a sense of humor, or a taste for the absurd. In this way, it functions similarly to his other works which not only embody his own lazy practices but also create lazy conditions for his viewers. Stuck listening to a lecture in a language they can't understand, Stilinović's audience was caught off guard by what those disinclined to laziness might consider a major waste of time. For those prepared to embrace laziness, this experience can be liberating. Without knowledge of the language, the lecturer's voice

is reduced to a sequence of meaningless sounds. In the absence of graspable meaning, minds become free to wander aimlessly for the duration of the lecture, allowing them to experience a time of nothingness, to indulge in laziness. By confronting his audience with foreign matter which they are incapable of deciphering, he also exposes their *impotence*. Ultimately, Stilinović's performance of laziness (i.e. his seemingly obtuse insistence on remaining within his linguistic comfort zone at the cost of successfully communicating his thoughts to an interested, international audience) is draped with layers of laziness. It imposes conditions suited to the practice of laziness on his audience. His performance of one kind of laziness (resistance, indifference, futility) creates an atmosphere conducive to other kinds of laziness (doing nothing, idle time, impotence). His works reward those who are willing to heed his call to inaction. By defying our expectations, Stilinović provokes our submission to laziness.

His tendency toward repetition is further developed by a series of works dealing with the theme of pain. *Pain (Cross)* (fig. 12) consists of two perpendicular, intersecting lines, forming the x and y axes of a graph, with the word "BOL" (Croatian for "pain") written at both ends of each line. It uses the visual language of statistical analysis to objectively illustrate the pervasive, inescapable nature of pain: no matter which direction you stray from the graph's center, you will always be approaching pain. *The Pain Game* (fig. 13), a die painted white with "BOL" inscribed on all six sides, sends a similar message: pain is the only possible outcome. Igor Zabel compares *The Pain Game* to a famous scene in Georges Bizet's 1875 opera *Carmen*, in which Carmen repeatedly attempts to see her future in cards only to find that they always read "Death" no matter

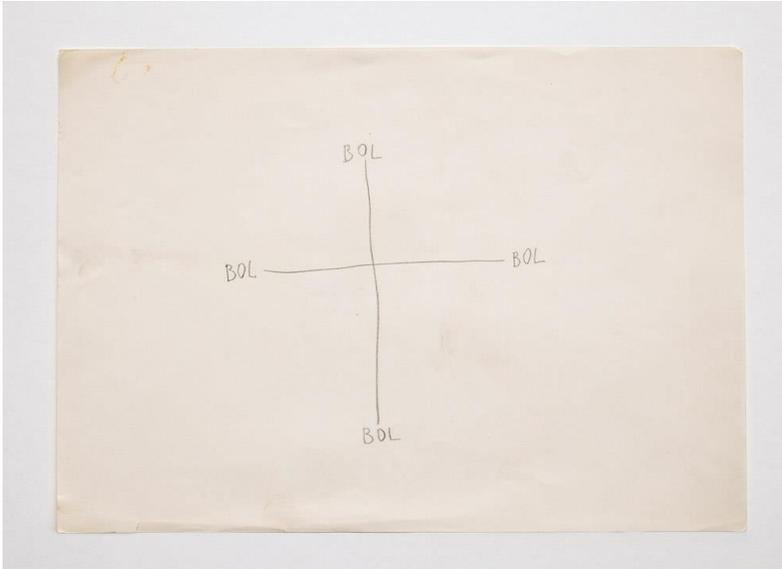


Figure 12. Mladen Stilinović, *Pain (Cross)*, 1989. pencil on paper, 20.6 x 29.2 cm.  
(Source: <https://dailyartfair.com/artist/mladen-stilinoVIC#vm--mladen-stilinoVIC/flow/-1>)



Figure 13. Mladen Stilinović, *The Pain Game*, 1977. Acryl on wooden dice, 2.3 x 2.3 x 2.3 cm.  
Instructions: Only one player, the die is cast according to his own rhythm, the game lasts 7 minutes.  
(Source: <https://mladenstilinoVIC.com/works/625-2/>)

how she shuffles them.<sup>107</sup> Due to the nonreciprocal nature of audience-performer relationships in opera, *Carmen*'s audience passively receives this forecast of doomed fate, comfortably distanced by the buffer of Carmen's character. *The Pain Game*, on the other hand, invites its audience to actively endure a simulation of experiencing this fate. Stilinović included the following instructions: "Only one player, the die is cast according to his own rhythm, the game lasts 7 minutes."<sup>108</sup> It would be easy to interpret this work as a playfully cynical prognosis based purely on its description--but Stilinović prescribed a duration, and this proposed temporal element begs to be experienced rather than merely contemplated or analyzed. What, if any, further insight might be gained from following Stilinović's instructions? We already know the sole possible outcome of rolling the die. Playing the game does not reveal any new information, nor does it produce any tangible reward. Intended for only one player, it offers no opportunity for social interaction or competition. In a lazy gesture of indifference to conventional values and definitions, *The Pain Game* eludes game theories and refuses to fulfill the basic requirements of its own label. According to the "difficulty view," a game's value corresponds to its level of difficulty: overcoming the challenges presented by a game rewards us with a sense of achievement, and the greater the challenge, the greater the value of the game.<sup>109</sup> *The Pain Game* poses no apparent challenge and thus does not seem worth playing--it hardly qualifies as a game. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, repeatedly rolling a dice alone for seven minutes to reveal the same unsurprising result over and over again as a

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<sup>107</sup> Zabel, "General Equivalent," 8.

<sup>108</sup> Tihomir Milovac and Branka Stipančić eds., *Mladen Stilinović: Pain* (Zagreb: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003), 30.

<sup>109</sup> Jonathan Gingerich, "Freedom and the Value of Games," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* (January 2018): 1-2. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.2017.1423224>.

means to no apparent end (essentially, doing nothing) seems like a waste of time. As articulated by Zabel, Stilinović wants us “to experience the emptied time of pain and nothingness.”<sup>110</sup> Thus, it cannot truly be said that *The Pain Game* poses no challenge. Its challenge, which has only become greater as the pace of the world has continued to increase since this work’s debut, lies in its demand that we lend it our time without expecting anything in return. In the context of the ongoing time-poverty epidemic, it becomes an extremely difficult game. *The Pain Game* challenges us to slow down and face our temporal horror vacui.

*Dictionary - Pain*, executed first in his native Croatian in 1979-80<sup>111</sup> and again using an English language dictionary in 2000-03 (fig. 14), applies the same idea to a dictionary as *The Pain Game* does to a die. Stilinović covered up all the definitions with white paint, materializing the lazy notions of erasure, negation, absence. Because this erasure is applied to a dictionary, it also functions as a rejection of codified knowledge and embodies the “sheer stupidity” of Stilinović’s laziness. He then replaced the original definitions with the handwritten word “PAIN,” effectively homogenizing the entire language. This work is by far his most labor intensive undertaking and represents a massive convergence of previously used methods, including erasure, repetition, materiality, sequentiality, and systematic (sometimes absurd) juxtaposition. As with *The Pain Game*, we could easily dismiss engagement with the object in favor of reflection on its description: it is a statement about the limitations imposed by the inherently

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<sup>110</sup> Zabel, “General Equivalent,” 8.

<sup>111</sup> For the original Croatian language version, each word from the dictionary was hand-copied onto a sheet of paper and followed by the word “BOL” (Croatian for “pain”). The later English language version, however, was made subtractively by painting over the definitions with white in a copy of the Oxford English dictionary and handwriting the word “PAIN” over top of them.

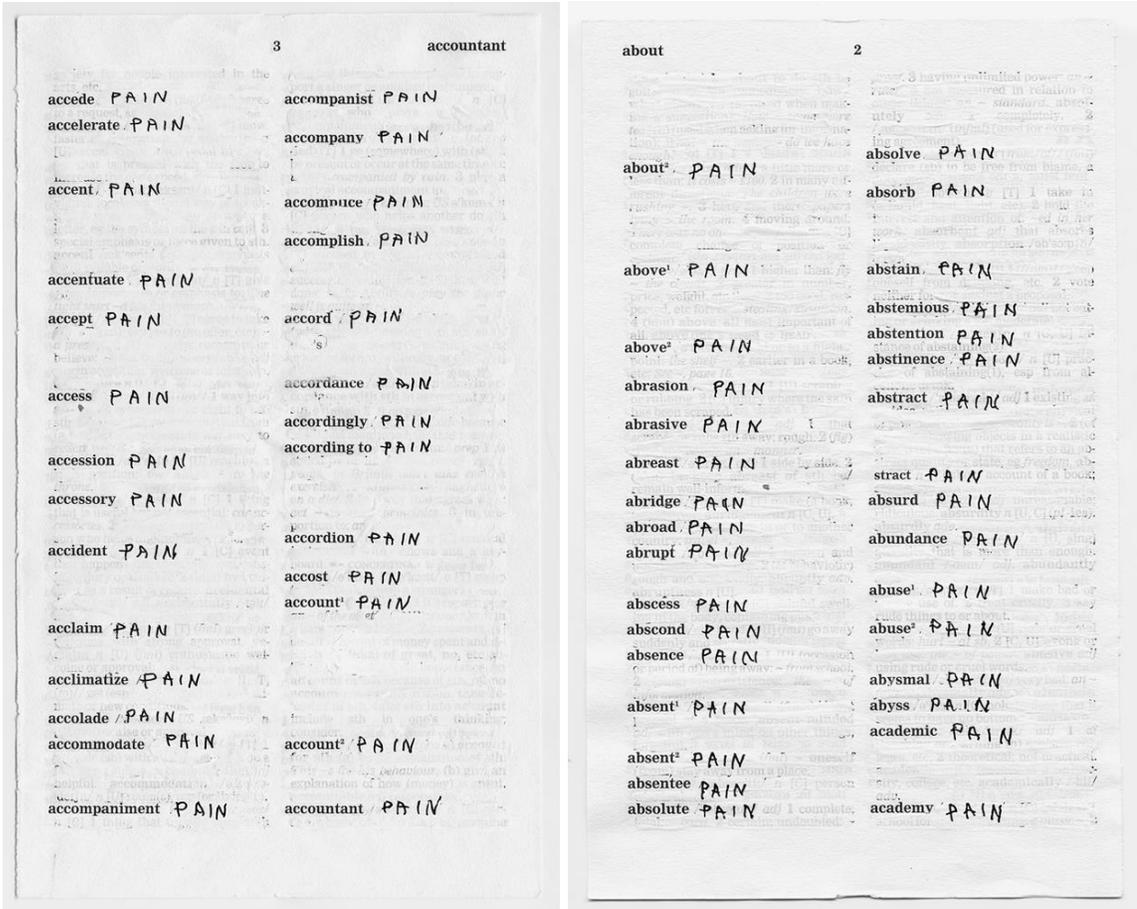


Figure 14. Mladen Stilinović, details from *Dictionary - Pain*, 2000-2003.  
 (Source: <https://mladenstilinoVIC.com/works/625-2/>)

ideological nature of language. As seen in his earlier works, Stilinović constantly attempts to free words from the grasp of ideological meaning through ceaseless repetition and absurd juxtapositions. *Dictionary - Pain* uses these same methods, i.e. juxtaposing “PAIN” with literally every other word in the dictionary, essentially rewriting the foremost authoritative text on language. It also contains the same cynical message as *The Pain Game*: there is no escaping the pain caused by the limitations of language.

However, such conclusions are drawn from knowledge of the works rather than experience of them. Recalling Stilinović’s convictions about laziness will help us arrive at a different conclusion: “*Knowing* about laziness is not enough, it must be *practiced* and

perfected.” Zabel heeded this wisdom: “The only appropriate way to understand it would be to read slowly, carefully and patiently, in a long and painful process, all 523 pages, word by word.”<sup>112</sup> While the work has not been reproduced and made accessible in its entirety, I was able to access and read the first 114 pages (letters A through C).<sup>113</sup> What sounds like an incredibly boring and tedious read turned out to be profoundly introspective and at times amusing. Certain words evoke real and relatable physical pain (“back pain,” “chronic pain”) while some trigger memories of loss (“cancer pain”). Others form utterances of laughable nonsense (“à la carte pain,” “chic pain,” “confetti pain,” “cucumber pain,” “cute pain”). Some are redundant (“ache pain,” “agony pain,” “bad pain”) while others are oxymoronic (“bliss pain,” “congenial pain”). Pain is defined according to its era (“ancient pain,” “baroque pain,” “contemporary pain”) and acquires all kinds of other odd descriptors (“artful pain,” “brackish pain,” “cosmic pain”). Some rhyme (“aeroplane pain,” “brain pain,” “complain pain”) and some are poetic in other ways (“abstract pain,” “boundless pain,” “concrete pain”). Verbs form a long list of sometimes strange, sometimes contradictory commands (“abolish pain,” “accept pain,” “Anglicize pain,” “ban pain,” “befriend pain,” “boycott pain,” “cause pain,” “cure pain,” “commodify pain”). Beneath the white painted surface, faint traces of the original definitions linger like ghosts. The associations arising from each pair of words will differ according to each reader’s particular past. Stilinović anticipated this uniquely personal reading experience cultivated by *Dictionary - Pain* when he declared that “this work is dedicated very directly to every individual observer.”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Zabel, “General Equivalent,” 5.

<sup>113</sup> Milovac and Stipančić eds., *Mladen Stilinović: Pain*, 41-156.

<sup>114</sup> Tihomir Milovac and Mladen Stilinović, “Pain Opera,” in *Mladen Stilinović: Pain*, 19.

As with his other books, the reading experience of this work approximates meditation through its mantra-like repetition. However, each repetition in *Dictionary - Pain* is punctuated by a totally unique thought experiment in the form of word association. This dynamic oscillation between constant and variable terms approaches styles of meditation categorized as open awareness.<sup>115</sup> Reading *Dictionary - Pain* is not a monotonous and predictable experience--it conjures unexpected memories, thoughts, and emotions. Just as in open awareness meditation, the mind is allowed to wander and have distracted thoughts. However, the goal is to acknowledge these distractions, build capacity for nonreactivity to them, and continuously return to an object of focus *despite* these distractions. This highly introspective process is necessitated by the structure of *Dictionary - Pain*.

As they involve not only erasure but also rewriting, his dictionary works thoroughly breach the boundaries of the author's domain, drawing attention to the "problem of authorship."<sup>116</sup> This vigorous display of disregard for the authorship of others might be seen as functioning in oscillating tandem with the passive principles of laziness: passivity entails relinquishing one's rights to act, to affect, to produce, to consume, to intentionally impose upon anything in any way--passivity revokes authorial rights. Stilinović tests the waters of authorship near the end of "In Praise of Laziness" by attributing an obviously fabricated quote to Karl Marx: "Work is disease." In Croatian, "Rad je Bolest." This quotation is a recycled phrase that Stilinović appropriated from his own work over a decade earlier, the message painted by hand on cardboard, similarly to *Rad je Riječ*. The Croatian word for disease contains "bol" (pain), which seems to hint at

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<sup>115</sup> Brown, Creswell, and Ryan, eds., *Handbook of Mindfulness*, 190.

<sup>116</sup> Nikitović, *Mladen Stilinović*, 42.

an underlying connection between work and pain--a linkage already implied by association with the inclusion of "pain" in his definition of laziness.

In addition to its rejection of language at large, Stilinović's ritual defacement of dictionaries necessarily includes an expression of contempt for the treatment of "laziness" in particular, as its negative connotations are reinforced by dictionary definitions. By rejecting dictionaries, Stilinović rejects codified wisdom and embraces the "sheer stupidity" of laziness. Considering Roger Conover's definition of ideology as "the opposite of biology,"<sup>117</sup> it appears significant that Stilinović's preferred term (pain) for obliterating the ideological powers of language denotes a biological phenomenon. This idea that biological experience provides some means of defying or combatting ideological dogma seems to find a parallel, or perhaps even an extension, in the materiality of works of art. Stilinović opts for intensive and time-consuming manual production because physical engagement with the material world, especially when performed lazily, approaches a mode of existence immune to ideology. However, the repetitive physical work that contributes to lazy materialization is not merely for the sake of subverting ideology--it might also be a means of creating new space to allow new things to flourish. Perhaps the reverberations of Stilinović's physical labor, as well as lack thereof, are capable of extending beyond the objects of his material manipulations.

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<sup>117</sup> Conover, "Against Dictionaries: The East as She is Spoke by the West," 352.

### Chapter 3: Remapping the Political Particularities of Lazy Landscapes

Many attempts to contextualize Stilinović's work tend to either ignore important particularities or overemphasize certain factors at the expense of others, creating a narrative in which the logic of his laziness is either oversimplified or overshadowed. The previous chapter's reassessment of his work avoided reliance on political context in an effort to liberate it from carelessly imposed yet firmly entrenched frameworks of pre-packaged political meaning. I have heretofore suspended critical discussion of his political context not only to allow previously unearthed lazy qualities to emerge, but also to create the space necessary for weaving his work a new contextual fabric properly fitted to his political particularities. This chapter aims to restructure and properly attune the contextual relationships between Stilinović's life, work, and laziness, which I contend will reveal the positive potential of laziness as an interrelated set of attitudes and practices that constitute a pacifist toolbox.

In her essay "Happy End of the Cold War," Zdenka Badovinac asserts the importance of proper contextualization: "Socialist and post-socialist art demand contextualization; they cannot be separated from local cultural traditions and the histories of their respective public spheres without distorting them beyond recognition."<sup>118</sup> While this statement arguably holds true for art of any political context, there does seem to have been a post-1989 tendency among western art institutions to gloss over the specificities of former socialist countries in surveys of Eastern European art. This trend might be condemned as a reductive means of maintaining the Cold War-era illusion of otherness,

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<sup>118</sup> Zdenka Badovinac, "Happy End of the Cold War," in *Comradeship: Curating, Art, and Politics in Post-Socialist Europe* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2019), 242.

or it might be excused as an innocently overeager yet underprepared effort to incorporate Eastern European artists into the contemporary canon. In any case, it has not spared Stilinović. Addressing his resulting mischaracterization and complicating these contextual oversimplifications is one goal of this chapter.

Badovinac also observes a tendency among artists critical of both communism and capitalism to propose alternative “ideal worlds” with their work.<sup>119</sup> While Stilinović certainly falls into this critical camp, he does not propose any sort of alternative world to be inhabited. Rather, he attempts to dismantle the dogmatic fixtures of our existing world and proposes an alternative *way* of inhabiting it. Laziness for him is “a positive *way* of being, a ‘yes’ to life.”<sup>120</sup> By working within the landscape of laziness mapped out in the previous chapters and reconstructing Stilinović’s political context upon this foundation, this chapter seeks to expand his notion of laziness to include not only what it means and entails, but what it can achieve.

The formerly socialist nations of Eastern Europe constitute a vast and diverse region with a multitude of different historical trajectories at play. Socialism, while geographically pervasive, was certainly not implemented uniformly across the region. This was especially true of Yugoslavia. By leaving the Cominform (Communist Information Bureau) in 1948 under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito, Yugoslavia cut political ties with the Soviet Union and instead pursued its own brand of “self-managed” socialism.<sup>121</sup> The Non-Aligned Movement, “an international coalition that refused to comply with the ideological division of the world into two opposing camps,” was

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<sup>119</sup> Badovinac, “Happy End of the Cold War,” 259.

<sup>120</sup> Daoust and Stilinović, “Idler // Mladen Stilinović // An Artist Who Invents Nothing.”

<sup>121</sup> Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković eds. *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avant-gardes, and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918-1991* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003) 10-11.

founded in Belgrade in 1961.<sup>122</sup> With these moves toward independence and neutrality, Tito's Yugoslavia fundamentally distanced itself politically from the rest of the Eastern Bloc. Its liminal geography and neutral policy combined to form a sort of gap in the Iron Curtain: "...the remote world lying between the East and West, the world that exists in the borderland between democratic and totalitarian states...Yugoslavia stood, politically speaking, wedged between the Eastern and Western Blocs."<sup>123</sup>

These conditions gave rise to certain cultural privileges that were not always enjoyed by citizens of other socialist states, such as greater freedom of mobility across international borders. Yugoslavia moved toward liberalization soon after the Tito-Stalin split and had begun opening up to western influence and exchange by the 1950s. For artists, who were among the first Yugoslav citizens allowed to study abroad, this presented opportunities to participate in western cultural spheres and art markets decades before they became accessible to artists from many other socialist countries.<sup>124</sup> While there was not much of an art market in Yugoslavia, there was an infrastructure developed for housing experimental and collaborative artist activities in the form of Student Culture Centers (SKC). These were established in Belgrade, Ljubljana, and Zagreb after the 1968 student protests (as a venue to allow, but also to contain, rebellious expression); artists and students moved freely and frequently between these three capital cities. The SKC Belgrade played a particularly important role in the development of Yugoslav experimental art and in fostering international exchange during the 1970s: it regularly attracted locals like Marina Abramović, hosted foreign artists such as Joseph Beuys,

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<sup>122</sup> Maja and Reuben Fowkes, "Introduction: Actually Existing Artworlds of Socialism," *Third Text* 32, no. 4 (2018): 376, doi:10.1080/09528822.2018.1532719.

<sup>123</sup> Djurić and Šuvaković ed., *Impossible Histories*, xi, 10-11.

<sup>124</sup> Šimičić, "From *Zenit* to *Mental Space*," 315-16.

staged a Phillip Glass opera, and even published a Serbian translation of texts by John Cage.<sup>125</sup> Though Tito's dictatorship was generally considered benevolent, it was not always benign--those who made jokes at the expense of certain state officials could be risking their job or even their freedom.<sup>126</sup> However, as Stilinović recalls, artists were typically aware of these boundaries and censored themselves accordingly: "We artists knew: Tito and the army, those were two things you weren't supposed to touch...you could screw around with Šuvar, but with Tito--no."<sup>127</sup>

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Yugoslavia had become "the most open country of the Eastern Bloc."<sup>128</sup> This was the world in which Stilinović came of age. He developed his artistic practice during these decades by taking full advantage of the available resources, making himself at home in this network of artist venues and communities, and exercising his Yugoslav mobility. He spent the 1960s ravenously consuming art and literature, soaking up avant-garde films, and burying himself in books by authors of diverse origins. He also wrote and published poetry, and by age sixteen witnessed John Cage perform at the Zagreb Music Biennale. The 1970s, however, were spent in constant motion: In the earlier part of the decade, he showed his films at amateur festivals in West Germany, Poland, and cities all over Yugoslavia, including Zagreb, Split, Pula, Belgrade, Skopje, Ljubljana, and Kranj. Frequently bouncing between the SKCs in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana, he met numerous other artists and regularly participated in programs such as Belgrade's annual *April Meetings*. In 1973, he and his

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<sup>125</sup> Bryzgel, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960*, 56-58.

<sup>126</sup> Križić Roban, "Laughter Protocol," 179.

<sup>127</sup> Stilinović and Stipančić, "A Talk with Mladen Stilinović," 20. Stilinović is referring to the politician Stipe Šuvar (1936-2004) who served as the Croatian Minister of Education from 1974-82.

<sup>128</sup> Djurić and Šuvaković eds., *Impossible Histories*, xiv.

partner Branka Stipančić<sup>129</sup> began hitchhiking through Italy, Austria, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Great Britain, where they studied art in museums and galleries. He followed opportunities to exhibit his work (and visit some Biennales) in Warsaw, Venice, Modena, Paris, Innsbruck, Graz, New Orleans, and Los Angeles, and concluded the decade by spending a year studying Italian in Perugia.<sup>130</sup>

Tito remained in power until his death in 1980, after which things in Yugoslavia gradually began to head down the path toward its dissolution. As the following decade became increasingly characterized by economic uncertainty, rising ethnic tensions, and growing nationalist sentiments, many of the student centers that had helped foster dialogue and collaboration between artist communities began to close.<sup>131</sup> By the end of the decade, the constituent republics of Yugoslavia had elected new nationalist governments who would soon begin declaring their independence from Yugoslavia (starting with Slovenia and Croatia in 1991, then Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992), to which the central powers in Belgrade would fiercely object. Thus began the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia: a series of wars for independence resulting in hundreds of thousands of refugees, territorial disputes followed by mass exodus of ethnic-national populations, genocide of Bosnian Muslims, rampant war crimes demanding UN intervention, and levels of death and destruction reminiscent of the 1940s.<sup>132</sup> As the Iron Curtain was being

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<sup>129</sup> Stipančić was a student of art history at that time. She and Stilinović remained partners until his death in 2016. Today (as is evident from the bibliography of this text), she is among the foremost scholars of his work. While her personal relationship with Stilinović is advantageous because it lends her scholarship on him a great deal of unique insight, I have tried to remain wary of how it might also potentially influence her critical approach.

<sup>130</sup> Branka Stipančić, “Biography,” Mladen Stilinović, accessed September 13, 2020, <https://mladenstilinoVIC.com/bio/>. All of the endeavors listed in this paragraph were retrieved from this source.

<sup>131</sup> Bryzgel, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960*, 61.

<sup>132</sup> “Timeline: Break-up of Yugoslavia,” BBC News, last modified May 22, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4997380.stm>.

pulled back and the rest of the formerly divided continent was undergoing a unification of sorts, Yugoslavia's internal borders were being violently redrawn.

For many artists, who remained unsubscribed to divisive nationalist rhetoric and “lived through the 1980s enclosed in subcultural enclaves,” these violent developments seemed to come out of nowhere.<sup>133</sup> Having split his early career between the former Yugoslav republics, the terrain across which Stilinović once freely moved had become dangerously divided territory. This was especially true of the highly contested border between his home of Croatia and his birthplace of Serbia, where much of the violence and destruction was concentrated--he had spent more time in their respective capital cities, Zagreb and Belgrade, than anywhere else. Many of his friends and colleagues, including Serbian artist Neša Paripović to whom he had dedicated *Artist at Work*, were now considered enemies by the state and their previously shared Yugoslav identity ceased to exist. The Croatian War of Independence ended in 1995, but the entire string of related conflicts would drag on into the twenty-first century. While the first few decades of Stilinović's career were characterized by freedom of movement and abundant opportunities for collaboration and experimentation, the 1990s marked an abrupt, devastating, and irreversible change. The political entities responsible for drastically altering the course of his future also tried to rewrite the past with historical revisionism “whose goal was to irreparably throw Yugoslavia into the ‘dustbin of history,’ labelling the fifty-year experience of peace, modernization, and relative prosperity as a ‘totalitarian prison house of nations.’”<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Janevski ed., *As Soon as I Open My Eyes I See a Film*, 51.

<sup>134</sup> Vladislav Beronja and Stijn Vervaet, eds., *Post-Yugoslav Constellations: Archive, Memory, and Trauma in Contemporary Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian Literature and Culture* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, Inc., 2016), 11.

Some of the residue from this revisionism has crept into western understandings of the Yugoslav experience. Post-1989 surveys of Eastern European art conducted by western art institutions frequently tend to ignore the substantial differences between Stilinović's experience as an artist in pre-1990s Yugoslavia and that of artists in other formerly socialist countries of the Soviet Bloc. For example, a 2013 exhibition at the German Historical Museum in Berlin, *The Desire for Freedom: Art in Europe Since 1945*, included a page from Stilinović's 1979 work *Rječnik - Bol (A)*. Grouped according to themes, this work was placed in a section claiming to deal with civil rights issues such as "the struggle for minimal freedoms" and "the uproar against state repression and patronising cultural policy."<sup>135</sup> The catalogue description of *Rječnik - Bol (A)* reads: "The artists regarded pain as the dominant emotion in late 1970s Yugoslavia. In the prevailing atmosphere of fear and hopelessness, there was an overwhelming sense of being trapped. Everything one could think of was associated with pain."<sup>136</sup> This description demonstrates a gross misunderstanding of the Yugoslav artist's experience. As discussed earlier, Stilinović was far from "trapped" in the late 1970s--he was hitchhiking across Western Europe, visiting museums, exhibiting his work and studying abroad. The catalogue accompanying the *2013 Carnegie International* in Pittsburgh demonstrates similar misunderstandings: Stilinović is said to have been "isolated from both state sponsorship and the commercially driven art world of Western Europe and the United States" and his work's amateuristic aesthetic is attributed in part to "restricted

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<sup>135</sup> Heinrich Wefing, "The Precariousness of Freedom," in *The Desire for Freedom: Art in Europe Since 1945*, ed. Monika Flacke (Berlin: Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2013), 159.

<sup>136</sup> Wefing, "The Precariousness of Freedom," 177.

communication with a wider creative community.”<sup>137</sup> The claim about his lack of state sponsorship disregards his inclusion in the major 1978 exhibition *The New Art Practice in Yugoslavia: 1966-1978* at the Gallery of Contemporary Art Zagreb.<sup>138</sup> As we have seen, he had ample access to and contact with western art markets and creative communities, not only through his own travels, but also through visits from prominent foreign artists such as John Cage and Joseph Beuys to local Yugoslav venues.

Another curiously common tendency plaguing readings of Stilinović’s work from the 1990s is a complete disregard for Yugoslavia’s extremely turbulent political context. This tendency is demonstrated by the critical treatment of two of his most frequently invoked (and most overtly laziness-themed) works: *Artist at Work* and “In Praise of Laziness.” *Artist at Work* was created during peacetime in 1978, when Stilinović enjoyed ample freedoms and was thoroughly immersed in artistic communities spanning Yugoslavia and beyond. “In Praise of Laziness” was written in 1993, when the ruthless wars ripping Yugoslavia apart were well underway. Despite the fact that *Artist at Work* preceded “In Praise of Laziness” by fifteen years and originated in an entirely different global political world order, these two works have consistently been reproduced alongside each other as if they were companion pieces. While they obviously have overlapping themes, too many authors have taken the liberty of presenting the photographs as illustrations of the text.<sup>139</sup> Still others have treated the text as a mere

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<sup>137</sup> Lauren Wetmore, “Mladen Stilinović,” in *2013 Carnegie International*, ed. Michelle Piranio and Katie Reilly (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 2013), 164.

<sup>138</sup> Marijan Susovski ed., *The New Art Practice in Yugoslavia 1966-1978* (Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1978).

<sup>139</sup> Some examples of this can be found in: Kunst, “Art and Labour: On Consumption, Laziness and Less Work,” 120.; Križić Roban, “Laughter Protocol,” 191.; Filippo Maggia ed., *Contemporary Photography from Eastern Europe: History, Memory, Identity* (Milan: Skira Editore, 2009), 182.

caption for the photographs, for example: “Stilinović advocates laziness with his series *Artist at Work*, which lays claim to an influence from Marcel Duchamp.”<sup>140</sup> Both of these claims are made explicit by Stilinović in his text but neither are obvious takeaways from his photographs. While such interpretations of *Artist at Work* could certainly be defended, none of the authors guilty of this anachronism bother to make the argument.

Conflation of these two works limits their potential meanings. Particularly because *Artist at Work* initially sets itself up as a punchline, pairing it with “In Praise of Laziness” precludes deeper engagement with and serious consideration of the text. By its linkage across time between two temporally distant works, Stilinović’s notion of laziness is stretched thin, robbed of its depth, and denied the opportunity to evolve in critical understandings. While there is no strong indication that his basic notion of laziness fundamentally changed as a result of any local or global political events occurring between 1978 and 1993, it does appear that these events contributed to the articulation and urgency developing in his rhetoric. As discussed in previous chapters, “In Praise of Laziness” is a formal anomaly because it concedes to conventional means of communication in three significant ways. First, its coherent composition breaks from his commitment to “de-symbolization,” which most often manifests as nonsensical, repetitive words or symbols isolated from meaningful contexts. Second, it articulates a definition, which he normally regards as an inherently ideological enemy that deserves to be painstakingly obliterated. Third, it employs the English language, and he “prefer[s] [his] mother tongue.”<sup>141</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, this decision acquires more

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<sup>140</sup> Christine Macel and Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez eds., *Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe* (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2010), 146.

<sup>141</sup> Stilinović and Vasiljević, “Mladen Stilinović: Work is Disease,” 89.

significance in light of his 1979 refusal of English in his lecture at the *Works and Words* exhibition in Amsterdam. This lecture offers a more apt comparison for *Artist at Work* than “In Praise of Laziness.” First of all, his 1979 lecture and *Artist at Work* are separated by only one year and essentially originate from the same context. Second, as we have seen, both can be considered laziness *performed* (by Stilinović), as well as laziness *imposed* (on his audience). “In Praise of Laziness,” however, neither enacts nor enforces laziness. It is a text *about* laziness, *defining* laziness, *advocating* laziness--it employs all the didactic modes of communication normally rejected by Stilinović.

I would like to suggest that the formal compromises characterizing “In Praise of Laziness” can be at least partially explained by a new sense of urgency developed in response to the crisis of war-torn Yugoslavia. Suddenly confronted with a new violent reality that cannot be combated with his usual set of artistic tools, Stilinović compromises his commitment to anti-ideology in favor of employing language that will clearly communicate his ideas to the widest possible audience. These concessions are made in order to share a valuable piece of knowledge that he’s mostly been keeping to himself: the importance of laziness. Stilinović had always known about the importance of laziness--he faithfully practiced, represented, performed, demonstrated, suggested, materialized, and imposed various aspects of laziness in his work, but he never quite articulated its concept or advocated its practice until 1993. Though he explicitly positions his advocacy of laziness within the broader context of East-West macro-politics and the receding Iron Curtain, the influence of his much more dire local circumstances at that time should not be overlooked. As we have seen, several authors prior to and since Stilinović have suggested various valuable potentials of laziness, e.g. as a requisite for

work, a mode of resistance, an artistic process, a research method, a health measure, and a pleasure in itself. While these values may also apply to the laziness conveyed by Stilinović within his post-socialist context, I propose that consideration of his more particular post-Yugoslav context reveals an additional positive potential of laziness as a form of pacifism.

Many of the practices and attitudes we have identified as strains of laziness can be seen as approximating and/or supportive of pacifist solutions. Stilinović illustrates one such example while discussing his book *I have no time* by condemning the global time-poverty epidemic and identifying it as an impetus for war:

People who had no time always got on my nerves. Today in particular, the excuse of not having time has become the worst kind of rhetoric...‘I have no time’ can be stretched so far as to become an excuse for murder...Bush has no time, so he has to attack Iraq. But it is not true. The war in Yugoslavia too is the result of this. Someone had the idea that there was no time and that the country had to collapse in five minutes. But if everyone had sat down and talked, perhaps for a couple of years, it would be better for everyone.<sup>142</sup>

Laziness as a time-based notion, as a reconfiguration of our perception of and relationship to time--perhaps in other words, the cultivation of *patience*--has obvious benefits for de-escalating conflict. This example also points to non-reactivity as a property of laziness (as inaction necessarily excludes *reaction*), which is an essential characteristic of non-violence. Laziness as a mode of resistance can be employed not only to resist externally imposed demands, but also to resist acting on one’s own impulses. Following in this vein, intentional passivity can be considered an assertion of will-power. This is a reminder that inaction is not merely the default state that occurs in the absence

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<sup>142</sup> Sabolović and Stilinović, “Mladen Stilinović in Conversation with Sabina Sabolović: I’ve Got Time,” 45-46.

of action, but an option that may be deliberately pursued as an alternative to action--and when the action in question involves violence, inaction certainly qualifies as a preferable alternative.

When Stilinović suggests that wars could have been avoided “if everyone had sat down and talked, perhaps for a couple of years,” he proposes (patient) dialogue as an alternative to violence. Effective dialogue requires its participants to practice at least as much perception as expression, and, as previously demonstrated, the passivity practiced in laziness induces a perceptive state. Thus, perceptivity is both an outcome of laziness and a fundamental ingredient of dialogue. Describing the process of making his *Dictionary - Pain*, Stilinović said: “I whited out all the explained words, and opened up a space for dialogue and interaction.”<sup>143</sup> His erasure is not motivated merely by what it seeks to negate, but by what might materialize in its absence. Just as Tanizaki’s parasol roof sweeps away the dust of the sun to make room for building a home, Stilinović declutters the dictionary to make space for new meaningful dialogues. The voids created by his lazy endeavors become potential sites of positive discourse.

During the 1990s, Stilinović began working on a series called *White Absence* (fig. 15) in response to the horrors of war for which he could find no appropriate words. This series consists of both two-dimensional works and seemingly random objects and assemblages, most of them painted all or partially white, sometimes covered in white fabric. Unlike nearly all of his previous work, it makes no attempt to be subversive or humorous. Merely poetic objects embarking on a refrain from politics, these works are

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<sup>143</sup> Milovac and Stilinović, “Pain Opera,” 19.



Figure 15. Mladen Stilinović, selection of works from *White Absence* series. top left: *Spectacles*, 1992; bottom left: *Protected Nothing*, 1995; center: *Shoelace*, 1995; right: *A Board in a Bag*, 1992. (Source: <https://mladenstilinoVIC.com/works/11-2/>)

enveloped by the color he associated with pain and absence.<sup>144</sup> White, described by some of the same terms used to define laziness, also happens to be the color that signals surrender. When exhibited in galleries, these works blend into their environment: “The white space between the works creates intervals, emptiness is as eloquent as the works themselves. White objects are lost on the white wall, dematerialized by the monochrome and require additional concentration to establish the connection.”<sup>145</sup> As is often the case with his works, these objects materialize certain aspects of laziness. Their precarious presence invites viewers to meditate by demanding “additional concentration,” coincidentally recreating the scene from *Artist at Work*’s inspiration in which Paripović is repeatedly pictured staring at a blank white surface. As white works on white walls, they negate themselves, formlessly receding into the background of life. They approach invisibility--another term with which Stilinović associated the color white. Why, he asks,

<sup>144</sup> Wystan Curnow and Branka Stipančić, *Mladen Stilinović: White Absence*, trans. Maja Šoljan (Auckland: The Gus Fisher Gallery, University of Auckland, 2001).

<sup>145</sup> Curnow and Stipančić, *Mladen Stilinović: White Absence*.

do people paint the walls in their houses white? His answer: Because they don't want to see them.<sup>146</sup> These dematerializing formal qualities of *White Absence* also function on a metaphorical level not seen in his earlier work: perpetually performing their never-fully-realized disappearing act, the painted objects begin to embody the painful sites of convergence between personal and political loss. Just like humans unable to cope with overwhelming hopelessness, these objects turn inward, retreating from painful reality. Like Yugoslavia unraveling in a tangled web of wars, they flicker in and out of the visible realm, teetering on the edge of existence. And, like anyone who outlives the place they once called home while carrying its memory and retaining its influence, these works are absence embodied. When faced with the unspeakable tragedies of war, Stilinović produced works that silently surrender to their surroundings.

When interpreted metaphorically in this way, *White Absence* reveals a new mode of impotent laziness: a type of absence or passivity that is not approached deliberately, but induced by a sense of hopelessness so overwhelming that it erodes one's very existence. Whereas laziness as pacifist orientation may be employed to avoid or de-escalate conflict, this version of impotent laziness emerges as an automatic emotional response to crisis. Like "In Praise of Laziness," *White Absence* marks a significant departure from his usual formal approach, but in a very different way. *White Absence* is nearly devoid of content, while "In Praise of Laziness" incorporates an unusually high amount. They approach laziness from opposing ends of the spectrum, as *White Absence* helplessly submits to it while "In Praise of Laziness" staunchly supports it. What these two divergent examples have in common are the adverse conditions under which they

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<sup>146</sup> Stilinović, "Abeceda nezavisne kulture: Mladen Stilinović, intervju," (interview).

were produced. Taken together and measured against the notions of laziness construed from Stilinović's own definition, they demonstrate the absurdity of his concept and the futility of attempting to reconcile its contradictions. Yet, these contradictions prove absolutely essential: First, if laziness is a "way of being," it requires adapting to one's environment (and not vice versa). Second, if laziness is "a 'yes' to life," then its principles must reflect life's contradictions. The absurdity of laziness, like the absurdity of life, defies rationalization. Perhaps the practice and perfection of laziness means coming to terms with absurdity and learning how to put it to use, or in Stilinović's words, "how to manipulate that which manipulates you."<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Mladen Stilinović, "Footwriting," trans. Maja Šoljan (first published in catalogue for solo show at Studio of the Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, 1984), <https://mladenstilinoVIC.com/works/5-2/>.

## Conclusion

Noticing the increased interest in Stilinović's lazy-themed work in recent decades, Jonatan Habib Engqvist suggests that this might be "a symptom of a desire for a kind of leisure, laziness or spare time that we no longer have."<sup>148</sup> While this remark rings true, I have tried to demonstrate how certain notions of laziness might possess the potential to serve purposes beyond merely offering a break from work. Inaction need not be the mere lack of intentional action. Rather, as articulated by Stilinović, inaction can and should be practiced intentionally for its own value. Engqvist's ruminations ultimately lead him to a similar conclusion regarding the value of laziness in the twenty-first century: "In the post-slacker age, people's passivity might be as important as their activity."<sup>149</sup>

There are precedents in art and literature for my contention that certain aspects of laziness contain pacifist potential. Robert Louis Stevenson explained his conception of idleness as the cultivation of tolerance and appreciation for difference, writing that those who practice it "will have a great and cool allowance for all sorts of people and opinions...while others behold the East and the West, the Devil and the Sunrise, he will be contentedly aware of a sort of morning hour upon all sublunary things."<sup>150</sup> This conceptualizes a lazy worldview in which the divisive and polarizing classification systems used to justify conflict are rendered obsolete. Overtly pacifist (in)activism is perhaps most potently exemplified by Yoko Ono and John Lennon's 1969 'Bed-Ins for Peace' --which produced images remarkably similar in content to Stilinović's *Artist at*

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<sup>148</sup> Jonatan Habib Engqvist, "Just as Money is Paper, so a Gallery is a Room," in *Work, Work, Work: A Reader on Art and Labour*, ed. Annika Engqvist et al. (Stockholm: Sternberg Press, 2012), 121-22.

<sup>149</sup> Engqvist, "Just as Money is Paper, so a Gallery is a Room," 124.

<sup>150</sup> Stevenson, Robert Louis. "An Apology for Idlers." 7.

*Work*. Considering how Ono and Lennon took advantage of their celebrity to bring media cameras into their hotel room for this idle spectacle, these events also foreshadowed Stilinović's methods by perfectly demonstrating "how to manipulate that which manipulates you."<sup>151</sup> My research here has been limited to lazy manifestations and the extraction of their potential in Stilinović's work alone, but this topic yields ample comparisons to works by other artists which I believe would prove especially fruitful and hope to pursue in the future.

The notion of laziness as a pacifist attitude, informed by its recontextualization within the hostile environment of 1990s Yugoslavia, has not been put forth with intentions of overshadowing the validity or significance of any other previously discussed or as yet undetected potential meaning of laziness. If any conclusion can be drawn from all of this, it is that Stilinović's notion of laziness is full of useful but also contradictory potential and ultimately defies definition. With this in mind, I find it appropriate to conclude with a brief discussion of a painting by Stilinović that succinctly captures the undefinable defining factor of laziness. Perhaps due to its apparent simplicity, *1 + 2* (fig. 16) has received relatively little critical attention. Here, he has avoided the problem of having to choose between his native Croatian, English, or some other language by using the more universal language of numbers. He humorously conveys laziness simply as a matter of apathetically *not doing* by introducing this unsolved equation as an example of "lazy mathematics" because it "avoids completing."<sup>152</sup> However, rather than the common equal symbol "=", Stilinović employs the more obscure, multivalent, "≡" used in a

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<sup>151</sup> Stilinović, "Footwriting."

<sup>152</sup> "Mladen Stilinovic - Lazy Birthday," uploaded October 12, 2011, by Kunsttransport, video, 2:46, <https://youtu.be/ftyMMPgdi0s>.

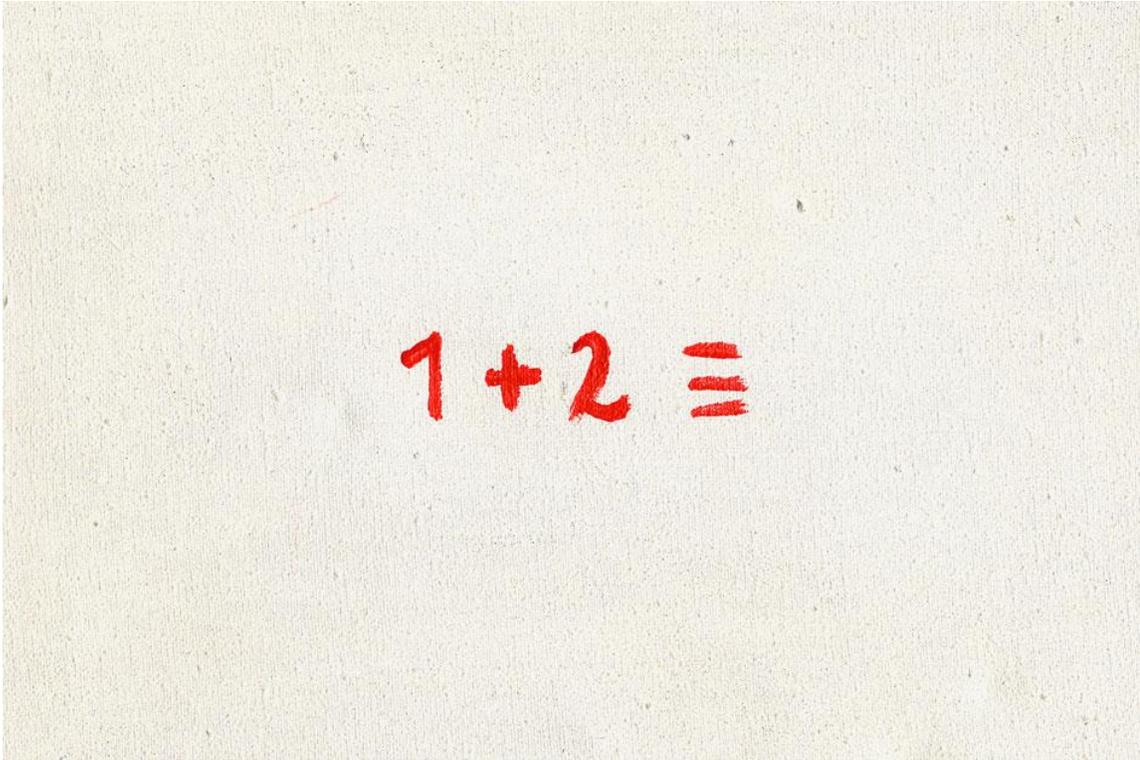


Figure 16. Mladen Stilinović, *1 + 2*, 2005. Acrylic on canvas, 15 x 20 cm.  
(Source: Ekaterina Alvarez Romero ed., *1 + 2 = Mladen Stilinović*. Mexico City: Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, UNAM, 2015, p. 6.)

variety of different contexts to indicate such things as a chemical bond or a more complex notion of equivalency in math or logic--but it does not indicate equality in the same straightforward sense that “=” does. So, even if the problem were to be completed, the presence of “≡” allows more than one potential solution, thereby precluding its definitive evaluation. In the spirit of defiance, Stilinović could have simply used “≠” as the opposite of equals--but that would allow the equation’s potential to be limited by defining what it is not. Excluding both “=” and “≠” is the numerical equivalent of erasing the dictionary’s definitions--it rejects definition not necessarily for the content of any particular meaning, but for the limitations it imposes. With the simple addition of a single line, an easily overlooked detail, Stilinović transforms an illustration of incompleteness into one of boundlessness. This subtle yet radical adjustment formulates laziness as a

celebration of freedom that “avoids completing” in order to avoid restricting its potential. Accessible only to those who are willing to take a closer look at Stilinović’s laziness, the message encoded in  $I + 2$  provides an ideal note on which to end this text because it is one of open-endedness.

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