

Mladen Stilinović

IF THEY HAVE NO BREAD LET THEM EAT CAKE

curated by Branka Stipančić

organized in cooperation with Galerie Martin Janda Vienna

hunt kastner
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An arrangement of loaves of bread spiked with cakes on the pavement in front of the hunt kastner will introduce the first solo show of Mladen Stilinović's work in Prague. The street action titled *For Marie Antoinette* was originally carried out in the 1998 event, *22% VAT On Books*, as part of artists' protest against higher tax rates imposed on the arts by the then new state of Croatia. The words IF THEY HAVE NO BREAD LET THEM EAT CAKE, purportedly uttered by the young queen on the eve of the French Revolution, resonated in a different context to highlight the roles of those in power and those without.

From the second half of the 1970s, Stilinović examined various aspects of power: power as the object of politics, ideologies and art, power enmeshed in the intricate mechanisms of everyday life. Exploring language and civilization symbols, he focused on political speech and its societal refractions, often resorting to irony, paradox and manipulation. His chief concerns were modern myths such as time, money, work, bread, communication, and he had no qualms about challenging unchallenged truths: time is money, waste not want not, work is virtue, bread is sacrosanct, language equals communication ... The artist set out to undermine them all.

The exhibition is saturated with cakes but nevertheless addresses poverty and peril. There is the *Swing With a Cake* and a wall installation with plates and cakes. While the emotions convey joy, abundance and abandonment, the mind discovers the world we live in. The slogans on the plates in *Poor People Law* (1993) refer to injustice immanent to law: New Lords – New Laws, Extreme Justice is Often Extreme Injustice, Much Law Little Justice, Where Drums Beat Laws are Silent..... The rules are not the same for everyone.

Bag People (2001) in the eponymous installation are photographed from behind as they make their way back from the flea market lugging plastic shopping bags, a long procession of gray faceless figures on a dusty road. We can trace their steps and then, on the reverse side of the photos, find out what was happening at that time in history: the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center in New York, the tenth anniversary of the fall of Vukovar and the exodus from the city that followed ... tragedies casting long and dark shadows on everyday life.

The artist himself is the protagonist of the video work *Potatoes Potatoes* (2001); like farmers who travel to cities to sell their potato harvest, Stilinović yells «potatoes, potatoes» from the top of his lungs, but instead of potatoes he is selling cream cakes, and not in the street, but in a snowy forest landscape bathed in sunlight. Poverty, social inequality and arrogance of those in power are Stilinović's main themes, but he is equally interested in language and its inversions, metaphors, puns and ironies.

The last work in the exhibition, from 2008, has the same title as the one introducing it, with a slight modification: the artist added a year, 1968, and spiked the loaves with stones like those thrown at the police in street protests, because only a fine line divides resentment from revolution.

The cakes first appeared in Stilinović's work early on, in his *Exploitation of the Dead* (1984 – 1990), as a startlingly irreverent presence among otherwise serious and painful topics. The artist would place them on the floor, somewhere in the corner of the gallery, like leftovers after a party. „When we see cakes in the exhibition“, said Stilinović „we laugh and wonder, what are they doing there? They seem cheeky and childish“, but at the same time they are meant to provoke profoundly different emotions, if we are prepared to feel them. It only seems appropriate to exclaim, like the artist himself did once in a reference to a drill command, «Forward cakes!»

Branka Stipančić, Zagreb, November 2020

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