

Mladen Kunstic – On the Way...

Mladen Kunstic is a sculptor, sound artist, painter, illustrator and collagist. All of his abilities – emerging more or less to the fore at different times, sometimes pointing in the one, sometimes in the other direction – are lived out in his art.

In early work his point of departure is sculpture. Large, massively powerful, often machine-like structures created out of rusty steel, demanding that the viewer touch them and enter into dialogue with them. A great many different sounds ranging from soft to very loud can be teased out of the sculptures when the viewer interacts with them: by pulling, tugging, or moving them this way and that. Kunstic creates these sound sculptures from objects he has come upon, the so-called *objets trouvés*. By assembling discarded objects and scrap metal, the artist creates new objects which, in their rusty bulk, are given a new acoustic life.

In the early nineties, Kunstic changed his material and began to create sculptures from spring steel. Now using a material more valuable, and shaping it in a more closely defined way, this was his revisit to the true meaning of sculpture. Sound still plays a central role, but now it is nature rather than people triggering sound. In a range of different projects, Kunstic exhibits his mostly large-scale objects in a natural setting, seeking new dimensions for his sculpture. Featuring more importantly than in earlier work are the ideas of coincidence and time. The blank surface of the spring steel reflects natural light and shadow and the colours of the natural world around it. The artist steps into the background and leaves the shaping to nature. The wind is instrumental in achieving an infinite variation of light and colour.

Painting

The mid-nineties see Mladen Kunstic, ever versatile and keen to experiment, redirecting his energies by taking up a fresh challenge and learning new principles of composition: the sculptor turns to painting. Unlike many other artists who have started as painters and then turned to sculpture, Kunstic does the reverse. His great curiosity in all kinds of different themes and directions was already evident in his early sculptures. However, through painting, even greater possibilities of self-expression seem to beckon. His work in hard and brittle steel now abandoned, he takes on this new art form with patience and persistence. Mladen Kunstic might be regarded as something of an outsider in the art world, someone motivated to do things in his own way. Originally an electrician, he went to night school to gain his university entrance qualification to study art and social sciences at the University of Aachen. He still has a preference for things he finds or encounters along the way, integrating them in an innovative way into his art. „Horror vacui“ (the fear of emptiness) and, more especially for Kunstic, fear of an empty canvas, prompted him to paint over his canvases before starting his actual works.

In that sense, his paintings can also be regarded as collages and thus explode the conventions of the narrow categorisation of works of art.

Kunstic „collects“ art and auction catalogues, computer manuals, Bible fragments, instructions of games from the Middle Ages and sheet music. Following a principle of „guided coincidence“, he integrates these items into his work. This is coincidence in the sense that the pages he uses are by coincidence part of the objects he finds, and guided in the sense that he, as artist, chooses and arranges the objects. The throwaway articles of our modern industrial society, such as auction catalogues and computer manuals, items which quickly become out-of-date, inform his paintings with a special sense of time. Used as a backdrop to his works, they are allowed to escape the throwaway society and are given a new kind of permanence. Analogous to the 17th century Dutch painters, who, by painting a briefly existing soap bubble, ensured the continuation of its existence into the centuries, thus releasing it from its transient nature, Kunstic also uses painting as a means of providing new impulses for thinking in this direction. Kunstic's work critically examines the ephemeral nature of our fast-moving society and, by extension, our art, expressed, for example, by his preference for using the exhibition catalogue „Art Cologne“. Today's great works of modern art are quickly forgotten and end on the scrapheap of culture.

A cursory look at Mladen Kunstic's art will fail to reveal its hidden and multi-layered content. To be grasped, his work requires closer inspection. The artist overpaints the canvasses, which in terms of significance are the provide the foundation of his work. He repaints and overlays them, thereby alienating their appearance, making it more difficult to read them, stripping off their independence and inherent value. Yet they remain present in his painting, in their colours and shapes.

After the long and sometimes difficult selection of the „ground“, Kunstic proceeds similarly in selecting his theme. Here again he uses *objets trouvés* from the ever-growing flood of images, and plays with the imagination and the knowledge of his viewer. His playful side already revealed itself in his early sound sculptures. This he transferred into his painting in an easy and individual way. When writing about Kunstic's sculptures, Dr. Gabriele Uelsberg once quoted Antoni Tapiés: „Art is like a game; only in the state of innocence do we perceive its deeper meaning, and who is to say if this is not valid for everything human.“

This playful approach opens the way for the viewer to find his own way of reading the works, always keeping the matter of interpretation open. While often having a particular idea in relation to his work, the artist wishes to open up his work to every kind of interpretation. For „Die Sieger“ (The Victors) his chosen model is a photo of a group of men from the sixties. The photo shows a group of workers. In a winner's pose, two of the four are lifting their arms. Various aspects of this painting might lead the observer into the topic of workers and politics. The glasses could be interpreted as safety goggles, the hairstyle of the central figure referring to contemporary fashion, and the portrait of Willy Brandt on the left of the painting might be construed to have a political meaning. A

cursory glance might lead the viewer to see the glasses as diving goggles and the group of men as a swimming club.

What creates the excitement is how Kunstic combines this first layer and the painting on top it into a unified whole. The icons – such as the Brandt portrait or the emphasis on art through the lettering *Die Art* (on the right in the painting) remain. Figures appear merely as contours, ensuring that the first layer remains visible. Attention is also given to the structure of the first layer and its colour. As in *Sieger (Victors)*, the background often forms a grid composed of the right-angles of the catalogue pages, or a horizontal structure emerges, as happens when sheet music is used. Individual fragments of the background can also be interpreted as design elements, such as the target, which can be seen here as „armpit hairs“. This reveals a characteristic quite typical and quintessential for Kunstic: in the face of all possible interpretations of the content, he maintains a humouristic „*clin d'oeil*“.

The artist's sense of humour is also evident in the titles he finds for his works, titles which for him are essential to the work while also revealing love of wordplay. One example is the title *Frauchen (Mistress)*, the artist's interpretation of what is most probably the most well-known picture of Marilyn Monroe, a still from the film *The Seven-Year Itch*. The artist plays on the fact that the viewer is most probably able to identify the original, by placing the well-known sex icon of the fifties and sixties at the feet of a dog lying on its back and begging to be stroked. The film star remains apparently unperturbed by the presence of the canine, whose position allows him a direct view up the starlet's dress, the picture thus achieving its effect by playing on the viewer's sense of desire. Here again, well known works of art – themselves also icons in our collective memory of images – for the basis of the painting. The lettering „Die Art“ (The Kind) interrupts the line of the low horizon.

The dog and the contour of figures from the history of art likewise confront the viewer in other works. In the work entitled *Wartespiele (Waiting Games)* the demimondaines of Henri Toulouse-Lautrec observe the medieval ruler playing chess while they wait for their next clients. Together with Picasso's thinking yet despairing figure, the *Embryo* of Leonardo da Vinci forms an *intersection*. In these works, in which he firmly remains faithful to the figure as means of compositional element, Kunstic achieves a reconfiguration of things.

After his years of sculpture, Mladen Kunstic began to see painting as the possibility of going down new roads, while at the same time not forgetting his former interests and preferences. Paintings such as *Buchblumen (Book Flowers)*, *Gartenmusik (Garden Music)* and *Notenblätter (Music Sheets)*

underline again and again the artist's great love of music, itself overlaid by his love of nature, here figuratively represented by leaf and blossom. A further feature, already present in the works discussed so far, also becomes clearly apparent: the scrutiny of the sequence. The blooms and leaves return eternally. Both the background to his compositions – especially in the case of the music – and the floral element, show a sense of sequence. In the composition, blooms and leaves, sometimes differentiated between only by colour, are added, occasionally taking on an ornamental density. „Sound“ is features largely in these works.

Manufactus Edition 1000

While Kunstic's large format work started with a concentration on sculpture and turned subsequently to painting, since 1989 he has continued to direct his attention to a small format style, which might be described as *graphic collage*. Here again, his work belies the conventional categories. The influence of his sculpture is particularly apparent in the earlier works, later giving way to a much more pronounced pictorial direction. The chronologically arranged series mirrors his changing artistic focus.

Stehkreuz (Crucifix) (1989) shows an exemplary proximity to sculpture. Not only in terms of the materials he uses – paper and metal – is the artist pointing to the duality between graphic art and sculpture, insisting that his object is transformable from one to the other: the crucifix is not bound by two-dimensional graphic art, but is accessible to the three dimensionality of sculpture.

The idea of the *Jahresgabe (Annual Gift)* motivated Mladen Kunstic to these works. It was he who entitled the series *Manufactus* Edition, meaning hand-made, and sees them both as connected and as individual pieces. Here the artist is taking the time at the turn of the year to reflect upon what has happened and to express this artistically. Which topics are touched upon remains completely subjective, often even extremely personal. He chooses that which occupies him, and the banal is by no means to be excluded. The viewer is left either to follow the artist, or to follow his own thoughts, interpretations and ideas. The titles which Kunstic carefully selects, sometimes in an almost philosophical way, may be pointing in the right direction, but may even point away from the right direction. In whichever way the viewer's interpretation may lead him, for him or her it will be the right one.

Bahnübergang (Level Crossing) is the title of the blue crucifix, which the addition of a strip of spring steel turns into a cross with two horizontals, which allows associations about the connectedness of cultures. This form is reminiscent of the Russian crucifix, whereas *Bahnübergang (Railway Crossing)* brings to mind the occidental cross of St. Andrew. The artist, born in Zagreb, when the Croatian town was part of the former Yugoslavia, is the initiator of this transition between two cultures. *Zwei-Heit (Two-Ness)*, also taking duality and the belonging together of contrasts as its themes, focuses on such pairs as metal and paper, sculpture and graphic art, wholes and sections, colour and whiteness, a list which might be extended far into our social-cultural space. His *Heimat (Homeland)* demonstrates Kunstic's wish for interpretation also to enter the social domain. Using frottage, two red hearts are transferred onto the smooth paper surface and show the two hearts of the artist. With the red and unconsumed heart symbolising his adopted German homeland, the white Croat heart reveals the projectile which has transversed it. The war which so long raged in his homeland, is rendered visible and brought emotionally close in this painting. As theme from the old year, *Zwei-Heit* also appears to refer anew to *Heimat*.

These Editions have given Mladen Kunstic the opportunity to express himself using a very wide range of different techniques. Reductionist in terms of both colour and form, *Vorhang (Curtain)* is seen as a „truncated picture“. *Das neue Haus (The New House)* is the first work in this Edition to show a special preference of Kunstic's for using *stamps*. Stamps have an extremely long tradition in the history of art. They offer for the first time the possibility, for example, of pattern repeats. They are the start of the development of woodcuts in the 15th century, and in Asian lands they are used as name stamps and signatures. In our society, they are a symbol of power, usually bureaucratic power, frequently proclaiming what purports to be the truth and drawing our attention to rules and regulations. The stamps used by Kunstic are sometimes *objets trouvés*, sometimes redundant stamps from offices, or just sometimes leftover items, which, in his art, now find new opportunities to transport their messages. In other instances, according to his theme and requirements, the artist simply has them made. The affairs of the *das neue Haus* are thus stamped approved by the workers' council, while the switchboard is identified by the unequivocal fingerprint. Alongside such personal matters such as moving house or being injured – *Kreuzfinger (Crossfinger)* – which thus become quite special personal matters, themes to do with

global politics, such as *Hunger* or *Kampf der Kulturen (Struggle of the Cultures)* also find a space.

Starting in 1997, the increasing use of colour in the work of Kunstic announces itself in the blue, red and yellow triad of the elementary colours, which the artist first applies to the smooth paper surface and then once again roughly removes using a knife, and which lends a special quality to the composition. Likewise open to various interpretations is the „photocopied redundancy notice“ which here marks a *Beginn* (for Kunstic the start of his work as a painter). This is followed in the following year by the execution of this theme *Netzwerk (Network)* in a red/blue elementary colour contrast. Here again the artistic use of paint, worked on again with the knife, is combined with the form of the collage through the introduction of a fabric net, serving perhaps as a framework on which to hang our thoughts.

More personal and romantic in character is the work *Frankreich (France)* created after a stay in that neighbouring country. Observers are reminded of their own personal recollections of France and the French national colours through the cut composition of the picture and the tricolour. And who thinks of Paris and not of love?

The work which plays hardest with the rules of painting is *Reminder*, although interpretation of the content of this work may extend into quite distinct areas. Kunstic starts by laying down the red/green complementary contrast on the paper, in the extended form of point and line. The broadness of the brush calls our attention to the surface, thus achieving an assembly of the essential compositional features in which things are kept to a minimum. The stamp is included as a genuine reminder, inviting us to „Bleib' hier!“ (Stay here!) It is, perhaps, an unconscious invitation extended by the artist to himself to remain with the style of painting he newly discovered in 1997.

At the same time, in composing other works included in the Edition, Kunstic reduces painting to a minimum, as in *Don't forget!* (2002). Here his look back at the year is dominated by the shocking experience of the destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York and the death of all the many thousands of people who perished on 9/11. Two long, horizontally-positioned stamps symbolise the towers, while other stamps announce the absurdity of the must-be-insured mentality of modern man. The base of the towers is represented by „Bestätigung“ (Confirmation) and „Kasse bitte zahlen“ (Please pay) stamps. The term „Erloschen“ (Expired) is a reference to the incredible scale of this terrorist

attack. The invitation of the artist, *Don't forget!*, is meant to be taken literally by the viewer.

Highly complex objects born of the consumer society like the *Eckenschutz (Corner protection)* are used by Kunstic as a kind of ready-made art. Unfolding the cardboard produces a picture with encoded messages („30 x 40“, „b+h“) containing their own sculptural and aesthetic effect. From another *objet trouvé*, a hymn book, Kunstic has extracted the page containing the Agnus Dei. Large red stamps enclose the hymns bearing the message „sofort vorzulegen“ (to be presented immediately). The stamped sequence of the working days of the week in the work *Days* warns us to be careful („Vorsicht“) on Wednesday.

Kunstic discovered a new working technique for his work *Homosapiens* (2005). Two feet (or footprints) merge, ending in spirals. They are cut into the paper, a technique not normally used with paper. This removal of the contour creates a special aesthetic effect and shows how ready Kunstic is to experiment with techniques in order to find new creative potential.

For the time being, *Homosapiens* is the final page in the cycle. This will not remain so, for through *Manufactus Edition*, the artist is pursuing a long-term ambition. In each following year, the series will be complemented by the addition of a further work. Kunstic envisages the addition of a new work each year so that at the end of his Way (i.e. life), the Edition will bear testimony to his life as an artist, thus juxtaposing the idea of timelessness of art with the transience of mortal existence.

Manufactus Edition 71

In a second series, the *Manufactus Edition 71*, Kunstic continues to direct his energies to the reduced format. The possibilities which resonated in *Jahresgaben* are revisited here and probed further. The limited edition of 71 multiples is referred to in the title. Kunstic himself describes the works as a kind of *creative reservoir*, enabling him to realise what comes into his mind when painting in large format and for which he seeks a form of expression other than painting. Many of the pages show political, contemporary and socially critical elements, from which, quite characteristically, humour is not excluded.

In these works on paper, frottage, stamps, and also collage play a major role. Frottage is used in *Brain book* to create a cross-shaped element on the paper, while the stamps insist that „BÜCHER Bleibt hier!“ (Stay here, BOOKS!) a demand only discernible among the compositional elements after a second, closer look. Likewise in *Brain storm*, frottage is applied to the two crossed strips, seen as a large braid, but which, on the

microstructure level, are crystalline. Here Kunstic's works do full justice to the tolerant graphic medium, where in the small elements a distinct composition, and thus also a level of meaning, become apparent. The crystalline shapes, showing truly amazing variation, point simultaneously both to the infinite invention of nature and to the convolutions of the brain itself (the „*Brain storm*“ of the title). In the macro composition, the stamps soberly announce „Zweitschrift Bücher Bezahlt“ (Book copies paid).

Kunstic's serious and contemplative side resurfaces in *Bildschmuck* (*Picture Decoration*), a collage of death notices covered in stamps demanding order numbers and remittances, and placed in the form of a cross. The title „*Was bleibt*“ (*What remains*) is a reflective work, making reference both to the transience of life and the immortality of the bureaucratic files.

In several instances, the artist, by stamping his own name, includes himself in the work, the stamp thus becoming a *Selbstporträt* (*Self-portrait*). As in „*Kunstic Kreuz*“ (*Kunstic Cross*) this can also be used together with the forms used in other works: the background composition recurs in a number of other works and the artist has also used the circle inside a square stamp in „*Bullaugen*“ (Bull's eye). Yet also in the skyline of Munich featuring the two characteristic towers of the Frauenkirche is *Kunstics Selbstporträt* present. In „*One Way*“ he becomes entangled in the closed circle of his stamped identity, and the stamp placed centrally in „*Entgelt zahlt Empfänger*“ (Receiver to pay) informs us of the link between art and business. Again tapping into his sense of humour, Kunstic shows himself in the second work with a Munich backdrop as „*Säule der Gesellschaft*“ (*Pillar of Society*) reposing on three somewhat shaky columns.

In „*1. Februar*“ (February 1st) Kunstic includes a sheet from a hymn book he has chanced upon, framing it with his name stamp, and in the middle gives a warning about literature and letters and refers in the duality to process: *Auf EDV übernommen Dat. 01. Feb. (Recorded on computer, dated Feb. 1)*. This is a reference to the imminent loss of haptic knowledge and information material (books, newspapers, letters) and the begin of a new era of electronic media.

We experience the artist in romantic vein in *Manufactus Edition 71* in various flower paintings and „*Aachen wa!*“ (*This is Aachen!*) which takes the artist's love of his adopted town of residence as its theme. In „*Aachener Dom*“ (Aachen Cathedral) he introduces a new technique by sealing the icon of Aachen onto the paper using red gloss. He uses a

chocolate wrapper from a well-known sweets manufacturer from Aachen. In old German lettering we read the name „Deutsche“ with a neutral stamp „Päckchen Paquet“ (Parcel). Kunstic opens a door through which the observer's mind can wander.

„*Europa Grenze*“ (*Europe Border*) is a work of social criticism in which the small crucifix reminds us of the many victims claimed by this still „*open border*“ down the years. In „*Erinnerung*“ (Remembrance) we see seals of the „European vulture“ in the shape of 10 Deutschmarks mounted on the blacked-over paper. Can we look ahead to a Europe of the people, where we can live against a background of social and cultural equality and justice, or a Europe of the „European vulture“?

In his most recent works, Kunstic has placed importance on reflecting on German history. Old postage stamps figure prominently among the *objets trouvés* used in this endeavour. „*Spurbreite*“ (*Trackwidth*) thus features a stamp showing the head of Adolf Hitler together with the Reichsbahn stamp, prompting a reflection, sixty years after the end of the Second World War, on the Third Reich.

The „*Brandenburger Tor*“ (*Brandenburg Gate*), also represented by an historic postage stamp and crowned by the opening cross, suggests references to Germany's recent past, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of the two Germanies. At the same time, the cross can be read as symbolic of Christianity and Pope John Paul II's active support in this political process. The historic walk through the Brandenburg Gate in 1996 by the Pope and Helmut Kohl, the chancellor of the day, is seen as a symbolic gesture for the power of freedom and peace. As a born Croat, the removal of the Berlin Wall and the end of communism has a special significance for Kunstic. Yet the fascist disease which forms the background to this work also functions as a reminder of a different past, which actually culminated in the building of the wall in the first place, and which must never be allowed to return.

In his works, Mladen Kunstic is revealed as an extremely versatile and impressively creative artist. Not only on the level of technique and artistic media does he insistently seek out new modes of expression and creative challenges, but also shows an astonishingly broad thematic range. Social and political themes are placed alongside more romantic and whimsical works, *clins d'oeil* and irony alongside seriousness and compassion. His *Manufactus Editions* have opened up a special space for the realisation of his ideas and to show the world his themes.

This dynamic path will also provide much room for new forms of artistic expression in the future.

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Translation Less Cook