09/22/10 - Interview: Mladen Dolar

"*I think to make art is to make a break. And to make a cut. There's a cut in the continuity of being, in the continuity of survival.*"

Mladen Dolar is co-founder of the Ljubljana school of psychoanalysis, together with Slavoj ?i?ek, Alenka Zupan?i? and Rastko Mo?nik. Conny Habbel met the Slovenian philosopher in June 2009 in Ljubljana.

WgK: Is there an artwork that had a lasting effect on you?

Dolar: The work of Samuel Beckett ? if I have to single out just one. It is both the importance it had for me and for the particular historic moment of the end of the twentieth century. I think he is the one who went the furthest in a certain way. There are various reasons for this, and one of them has to do with an enormous will to reduction. What Beckett did was to create an infinitely shrinkable world. There is never little enough. You can always take away more.

Take the The Trilogy: *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. In the Beginning there is some sort of plot and some sort of characters. Then in the second novel you have just Malone, who is dying alone in his room and who is inventing stories as he is waiting for death. The space has shrunk, there is no more travel. And then you have the third novel, where you don't even have this. You don't even have a space, you don't even have a character, you just have a voice. A voice which just rambles on and continues, and it doesn't matter what it says in the end. It's just the sheer thrust of perseverance, of persistence, which carries the whole thing. So just persist. You have to go on. And you know how this ends, it ends in the most beautiful way: "I must go on, I can't go on, I will go on".

I think this is an incredible point, I don't think literature has ever gone this far this radically. This is so completely reduced to a bare minimum, what Beckett has called ?the unnullable least'. And extremely

powerful.

WgK: So what is art actually?

Dolar: I think to make art is to make a break. And to make a cut. This would be the simplest way of answering your question.

But there are different ways of answering. One of them would go to Freud's theory, which looks at art through the spyglass of sublimation. I think what Freud conceives as drive, ?der Trieb', actually has to do with the transition between something natural and a creation of a separate space, and that everything he describes as the specificity of culture actually has to do with the structure of the drive. The drive is like thwarting of a natural hang, it gets thwarted towards a different sort of end. This is like a supposed initial natural need, but which in the process of its satisfaction actually gets thwarted. It produces something else than merely the satisfaction of a natural need. If you look at the way Freud describes culture in *Unbehagen in der Kultur*, he defines culture with a list of features.

The first on the list would be the question of tools. We're getting more and more tools in order to be the masters of nature, so that we can do all the magic things, we can look at far away distances through the telescope, we can see the invisible in the microscope, we can talk through distance with the telephone, we can do absolutely magical things. And Freud uses the wonderful word, he says: "Der Mensch ist ein Prothesengott". So he's a god with prostheses. You just need some prostheses to be a god. So you have these extensions of the body. And what actually the drive to master nature produces at the same time ? something more than the simple mastering of nature ? it produces prostheses, a sort of ?in between space', a space which elongates your body, prolongs your body into the world. The eerie space between the inner and the outer is libidinally invested. And, to cut it short, this is also the area where culture comes in.

WgK: Do you have any idea of what good art is? Which art do you regard as good?

Dolar: Well, this is not a subjective question. There is a strong tendency to reduce art to the question of taste. And the question of taste is kind of dangerous because it always goes down to the question of narcissism. There is something profoundly narcissistic in the judgement of preference. ?I prefer this, I am a connoisseur, I prefer the late Beethoven quartets against symphonies.' The difference which means difference as such and which means that you are distinguished and that you can distinguish yourself from the common lot of people by being the man of refined taste, to see all these differences that the others don't see.

I have this conception of art, which is that art has to do with universality and infinity. It introduces something into the continuity of being, into the continuity of our survival. A break. Which is a universal break. A break to universality. It can speak universally. What is important in art is not a question whether it is an expression of a certain individual or whether it is an expression of a certain ethnic group or nation or of a certain age.

I think that the break is such that it makes the universal out of particularities.

But the problem is how to do this with the subjective means at your disposal, within the nation to which you belong, or language, or culture, within a particular type of civilization, within this historic moment ? which are all very finite and singular things. How to produce universality and infinity out of this? And this I think is the moment of art. This is not a production of spirit, this is a material production of the break. I like very much this saying, which is on t-shirts like: "Art is a dirty job, but somebody's got to do it". You have to get your hands dirty. This is a very material thing. You produce the idea with the material, with the matter. Art has always worked with the sensual. If one tries to get immediately to universality or the infinity of a beyond, an idea, the sublime or whatever ? this is, I think, a big mistake. You cannot do this. You just have to produce it the hard way. But it depends on being able to produce a break.

And this sets the standard by which it can be judged. I don't think it can be judged on the basis of taste, it's not just a question of whether I like it or not. It has the power to produce universality. It creates a potential

virtual audience which goes far beyond this audience here. And I think the awareness that it goes beyond this, beyond my particular taste and reaction, is what makes good art.

WgK: Is art a benefit for society? Why does there have to be someone who does this dirty job?

Dolar: Well, I think that in the question with which I started, the question of drawing a line, making a cut in the continuity of our animal or social being, of our finite being, that this is what defines humanity. I'm not saying that art is the only way to do this. I think thought is something which does this also, it breaks with the conditions of its own production. This is the practice of philosophy. I think philosophy, similarly, but also very differently, makes a conceptual break in the continuity of particular received ways of thinking.

We have the definition of man as *homo sapiens*, the *thinking animal*, but the trouble is that thought is very rare. It's not that men think all the time, it happens very rarely. There are very few occasions when thought happens and when it does, it seriously changes the very parameters of the ways we conceive the world, ourselves, whatever. There's a handful of thinkers. This is a strange thing in the history of philosophy, there's only a handful of thinkers with which we have to deal continually. But I don't think ? this is important ? that thought is some sort of prerogative of philosophy, that philosophers are very special because they have this specialisation in thought. I don't think that at all. I think thought can happen anywhere. In silence and...

WgK: Does it also happen in art?

Dolar: Oh yes. It does most definitely. It has a different way and the question of art working with the sensual, with sensuous material means is very important, this is a materialised thought. It's the thought which works within the matter and shapes the matter. It is attached to matter, and matter thinks in art. This is very important, the materiality of thought. I think thought actually happens in a number of areas of human endeavour. And art is one of the most reflected.

WgK: Which are the others?

Dolar: Do you know the work of Alain Badiou? He has made a list of four truth procedures, four areas where truth emerges.

These are: Science, and above all the completely constructed science like mathematics. It doesn't refer to anything in the world, it just creates its own entities, pure entities. Then: Poetry and art as such. Then politics. Politics not of opinions but politics of truth. There's an opposition between the two. Democracy basically is a democracy of opinions. Anybody is free to hold any kind of opinion and then you count the votes. This is not a politics of truth. There is a sort of truth at stake in politics which has to do with justice and equality, it has to do with an idea. And then there is the question of love, which is the emergence of a truth event. A subjective truth event.

Badiou lists the four areas as the areas in which this break happens. I am not sure that this list is the best, exhaustive or conclusive. Maybe this list is too neat in some way. I think things are messier in life. In many everyday situations, even trivial ones, there may be a sudden and unexpected break, people show an inventive creativity and do something very unexpected, and actually change the parameters of the situation and their own lives and the lives of others. I would leave this field open.

WgK: I just had this spontaneous thought if humour might be one of those areas too?

Dolar: Well, you have an old suggestion which goes back to Aristotle, that the man is a *laughing animal*. You have various proposals for the definitions of man, one is the *thinking animal*, another one is the *tool-making animal*, which goes back to Benjamin Franklin. Marx takes this up that one can define the man through the tool which conditions his capacity for work. And then you have Aristotle's suggestion: Man is

a *laughing animal*. The only animal that can laugh ? laugh at what? To laugh, precisely, at being able to produce a certain break. The break in meaning, in the very parameters of making sense. One way of describing this could be where I started ? to make a break, to make a cut ? which is also to make a break in meaning in order to produce sense, if I may use this Deleuzian opposition between meaning and sense. And sense is the sort of unexpected thing which emerges. In order to produce this you have to cut down the usual expectation of meaning. The very horizon of meaning in which you move, in which you live your life. And this is the capacity of art.

As far as humour is concerned, I would just point out that there's a question of humour and there's a question of ?Witz'. Freud has written a book on ?Witz' and a different paper on *humour* and he says that those things are absolutely not to be confused. Additionally there's a question of *comedy* and there's a question of *irony*. So we have four different things which are not the same. We may laugh as a result, but there is laughter and laughter. Laughter itself does not have to be subversive. It can also be very conservative.

WgK: Who becomes an artist? What is it that makes people become artists?

Dolar: I don't think there's a rule. There is the capacity, well, the break-making capacity. The way that we relate to ourselves is always conditioned by a break, there is a question of redoubling. Culture is always a question of redoubling: it redoubles the ?normal' life. It reflects it into something else, but redoubling is always already there.

WgK: But still there are some people who don't become artists or intellectuals.

Dolar: No, no, of course. I think the capacity is there, and it is a capacity which defines humanity and subjectivity. And... how the hell do you become an artist? What particular things have to come together? I think what makes the greatness of art is precisely its

singularity. Which means that if you could establish this rule art would stop being art.

WgK: But couldn't it be that there is some reason why people start to make art? Robert Pfaller once suggested that artists might have some traumatic experience that they ? all their lives ? try to handle by making art.

Dolar: Don't we all have to handle some sort of traumatic experience? It's very hard to say. I mean, the question has been asked many times, so you have art schools which precisely can teach you everything except what is essential.

WgK: Yeah, but art school starts at a moment where you already decided to go to art school. Who is likely to go to art school? So there are two aspects of this question. The one is: How do you become a good artist? The other question ? which actually interests me ? is: Why does someone want to become an artist? No matter if good or bad, if successful or not: What makes a person take up this way?

Dolar: If you want to become an artist, what do you want to become? If I take some of the greatest musicians of all times, like Bach and Mozart or Haydn. You can see what? Who was Haydn? He was hired by the Esterhazy family as a craftsman. I mean, did he want to become an artist? I don't think he ever thought of himself in that way actually. He was a paid craftsman. And if you look at Mozart, he was all the time trying to get hired by some court or something. If you look at Bach, he was employed by the St. Thomas church in Leipzig to produce a piece of music for mass every week.

It was not a question of genius or inspiration. You were hired. Because this was another craft and I don't think anybody would look at themselves this way today. If you want to become an artist you don't want to become a craftsman. You see yourself as a person with a

special vocation, which goes beyond all usual vocations. This is due to the romantic model of art and then to the modernist conceptions.

WgK: Let's stick to today's understanding of art: Do you think artists are narcissistic?

Dolar: The question of art and narcissism... I would say that on the one hand it's profoundly narcissistic. It's usually linked with a project of profound narcissism of self-expression and the precious treasure I have in me and want to disclose to the world.. But I don't think that this is what makes art. As I said before: Art is not expression. It's not an expression of yourself. People may want to do it to express themselves, but what makes the break and what makes the universal appeal, the claim of art, is not a question of whether they express themselves well or not. It's just not the question by which art is ever judged. So on the one hand I'm sure that the motivation for doing this is in most cases narcissistic.

WgK: Did I understand you right when you say art is not an expression ? could you say art is one of the ?Prothesen'?

Dolar: Yes. Oh yes.

WgK: I really like this picture.

Dolar: The ?Prothesengott'? Yes. But, well, Freud uses this in the context of technology and tool-making.

WgK: I have the feeling that it's very good, maybe not only for tools.

Dolar: Yes. It's a good thing. It's not just a question of tool. A tool is never a tool. It's a libidinally invested extension of the body.

WgK: So you could also say art is a libidinal extension of yourself. Of the body.

Dolar: Well, it has something to do with the libidinal extension. The way Freud introduces the notion of prosthesis, it has more to do with technology than with art. But I think it's nevertheless a useful metaphor also to think about art.

WgK: Could you also call it objet a? Art as an extension towards objet a?

Dolar: Well, yes. I didn't want to use the heavily technical Lacanian language for this. I mean this could be described in another language, but what Lacan calls *objet a* is precisely the object of transition between the interior and exterior, which doesn't quite fall either into interior or the external world out there; the objective world. I mean it's neither subjective nor objective. In this sense it's always in this zone of indeterminacy, in the zone which opens in between. And which is the zone of ?Prothesen' if you want, I mean, the Prothesen always fill the zone: you put something between subjects and objects. You extend your body into the world, and at the same time the world extends into you. Still, what Lacan calls the object a doesn't coincide with any existing object, it has no substance of its own, while art produces existing objects whose task is to evoke this impossible object. To evoke the impossible.

WgK: Would you agree that artists and philosophers share similarities in the realities they live in?

Dolar: Yes. I think there's a lot of common ground. The tools with which they work are different, but I think they work on a common ground and that they can't be neatly delineated. One way of differentiation ? which I particularly dislike ? is to say that artists have the passions and the feelings and they work with this and philosophers have the reason and understanding and they work with this. I don't think this opposition is worth anything. It never works this way. I think that any human activity has both: indiscriminately passion and reason inscribed into it.

If you look at the history of philosophy ? look at Plato, look at Spinoza, look at Augustine, look at Hegel, Marx, Kant, Wittgenstein ? there is always a huge passion. This is terrible passion you have in this. They are all passion-driven. To describe this as works of mere intellect is completely misguided. This is the erroneous common conception of philosophy, rationality and concepts. If it doesn't involve passionate attachment and passionate involvement, then it's not philosophy. There is very, very serious passion at work in this. And at the opposite end I think there is very, very precise thinking involved in art. If it's not, it's just not good art.

WgK: We were talking about passion and reason ? do you think artists or philosophers can have a family? Do you think it can be organised to do such an ambitious or passionate work and to have love for people?

Dolar: On the general level I don't see why it should be exclusive. But this is not a question which concerns only art. I think it's a question which concerns any sort of passionate attachment to your profession. I mean it could be a lawyer, a politician, a scientist, a teacher, all kinds

of things. It can be sport, it can be all kinds of things and it does produce problems, very practical problems, how the hell you then deal with your family, with your love, with your private life. I suppose it very much depends on what kind of person you are. There are people who would somehow erase everything else and there are people who would always find ways, no matter how. They can work twenty hours a day but they will nevertheless find a way to have a private life.

WgK: And what can you tell me about passion? Where does it come from and what can you do to prevent its disappearance?

Dolar: To prevent its disappearance?

WgK: Can anything be done?

Dolar: Have you ever read Ovid? *Remedia Amoris*, the remedies against love. The question that he asks is the opposite. Not how to keep the passion going but how to prevent it happening.

You can see this through thousand years of antiquity: It's not the problem how to keep your passion alive. It's the problem of detachment. "Remedia Amoris" are rather humorous. Ovid's advice is: don't go for it. Keep your mind aloof, otherwise you go crazy. Passion is folly. This is a bad thing for you. It would completely ruin your life. So you have a history of passions. This is a stage of antiquity and then you have a certain stage of Christianity which again is very differentiated in itself. I mean the passion is the passion of Christ. So the passion worth having is the passion in this other sense. There is a passion worth having and which is this suffering you must undergo in

order to be worthy of redemption. The ultimate passion to sacrifice all other passions. This gives the word passion a very different meaning. It comes from ?patior', ?passus', which means suffering. Like ?Leidenschaft' comes from ?leiden'.

If I put it in this very reduced, simplistic way, the question of passion which drives you, the question of passionate love is a question of romantic love, a certain conception of romantic love which we deal with. It emerged only in the 19th century.

WgK: It's a very interesting point that you made about the difference between trying to get rid of it or trying to keep it alive. You said before philosophy is always passionate, driven, so in this way it's actually necessary to keep it. I didn't only mean passion in private life, also as an activating thing like in your work.

Dolar: Yes, there has to be a passion which drives this. There's an interesting passage in Helvetius. Helvetius was a philosopher of the French Enlightenment and he has written this book *De l'esprit* in 1759 ? the book was actually burnt at that time and banned. He has a passage there which I always found terribly funny, he says: "Why are passionate people more intelligent than others?" He completely overturns this common view that you either have intelligence ? and then you can control your passions ? or if you let the passions have the upper hand, then you lose your head. He puts these two together and he says: People never use their intelligence unless they are driven by a serious passion. It's only the passionate people who are intelligent. Otherwise they are lazy. Come on, why use your head? You can always get along somehow. So it's only the passion which actually drives you to use your reason. And this is just a funny way of putting it that you can't see the two as being on opposed sides.

WgK: Do you have an influence on it, can you do something to keep it or to feed it?

Dolar: I think passion is what drives you, drives you towards something. But it's not that passion as such is enough. It's not that it just drives you and you let yourself be driven. It actually demands a hell of a lot if you want to pursue this passion! It demands that you put something, everything at stake.

To risk the usual ways of your life, the ?bequemes Leben', if you are lucky enough to have a comfortable social position. There is the spontaneous hang to pursue your social survival within a certain slot, the script for your career is waiting for you. And this is where the question of break comes in. The passion is what makes a break. But the break, it demands a hell of a lot of ?Anstrengung' and you have to put things at risk. Sometimes drastically at risk. You risk everything for the question of passion, to pursue your passion.

What Freud names ?Todestrieb' (death drive) in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips (Beyond the Pleasure Principle)* is not some striving towards death, but too much of life. There's too much life, more than you can bear. So this is the excessive moment which derails the usual course of things and in order to pursue this it takes a lot of courage and persistence, perseverance. I think most people give up at a certain point. There are many ways of giving up, also as an artist. One way of giving up is to somehow be content with your role or to... ?übereinstimmen'. So that you consent to being that role. And this is a socially assigned role which can bring glory and awards. If it started with a break, then the big danger is that the break starts functioning as the institution of the break. The break itself gets institutionalised and highly valued.

WgK: It has a place then.

Dolar: Yes, it has a place then. Freud has this wonderful phrase "people ruined by their own success". And I think that in art many

people are ruined by their own success. Precisely by succeeding in what they wanted to do and then they fit into this. They have made an institution of themselves and somehow started to believe that they are this. You have this wonderful phrase in Lacan: who is a madman? It's not just an ordinary person who thinks that he's a king. The definition of a madman is a king who thinks that he's a king. And you have this madness among artists who believe that they are artists. This is psychosis, in a certain sense, if you really think that you are what you are. You really think that you are an artist. This is the end of art, I think.

WgK: You were saying that one has to be courageous to proceed with passionate work. I have the feeling that there is another big thing, besides from missing courage, which might be a cushion for passion: The desire for containment, for feeling secure. I don't know the best translation, I mean ?Geborgenheit'.

Dolar: Geborgenheit?

WgK: Yeah. You know Geborgenheit? Feeling secure.

Dolar: Security, yes. Sicherheit.

WgK: A warm feeling.

Dolar: Feeling at home. Is there a good way to feel at home? I don't know. I think there's always an ideological trap in this. What you mostly feel at home with is always ideology because it offers a sort of security. I mean security in the sense of providing a certain status within which you can dwell. And also security of meaning, which means that it provides you with some answers as to ?What does it all mean?' ?We live in parliamentary democracy, we're a free society, in the aera of progress and prosperity', etc. I mean the words which fulfil a certain horizon of meaning which situates you within a certain social moment and social structure, within a certain type of social relations. And this is always ideology, ideology is what makes this run. And I think that the break that we are talking about ? the break with meaning or the break with the continuity of things ? it could be described as a break with ideology. Art and ideology are at the opposite ends. Art always makes a break, a cut into the ideological continuity of what you most feel at home with. And what you feel at home with is entrusted upon you. But this is not to say that art is immune to ideology, it can easily be made into ideology.

WgK: At that point when you feel content.

Dolar: Yes. When you feel content in your role. One could make a certain opposition between art and culture. I think culture is a sort of domestication of art. You establish canonical artworks which you are taught at school. And it's a question of what comes into the canon and is it a good thing to have a canon or how to include or exclude works. Of course you always have a canon. There's no escaping this, but at the same time you have to understand that culture is always a domestification of what is dangerous or excessive in art. It domesticates things by giving them a sort of proper place and value. You can say: ?Well, Shakespeare is the greatest dramatist of all time.' I mean it's quite true, but it's also a very forced statement to domesticate Shakespeare's work. You glorify it instead of dealing with it.

WgK: It ends their quality of being a break by giving them a place.

Dolar: Yeah. You reinscribe them into a continuity of a tradition, of a cultural identity.

WgK: I have the feeling it's a regressive desire.

Dolar: For home?

WgK: Yeah. Isn't it?

Dolar: Yes. Ultimately yes. I think that being at home means being in the ideology and being in the meaning and having some sort of meaning secured. And I think that creating a home as a way of being with yourself ? or being with another person ? is precisely to try to deal with the unhomely element of it. To keep the unhomely element of it alive. What Freud called das Unheimliche, litterally the unhomely, but with the utter ambiguity where it can be given the comic twist. I think that love is keeping the non-homely element alive. It's not to finally ?go home' with someone, but actually to keep this thing in the air. Keep this thing in the air. And comedy is precisely ? to keep the ball in the air. Keep the ball in the air, I mean constantly.

WgK: So then I can come to my last question: How can one become happy in life?

Dolar (laughing): It beats me!

WgK: So this is why I kept it till the end. Is there a good strategy?

Dolar: Ah, god knows! But I am an atheist.