

Introduction

“Pain is not in language. Language inflicts pain.”

when language is not a medium of communication and expression, but a system that carries violence? In this work, the dictionary serves as the prototype: word entries are retained, the original definitions are erased, and all are rewritten as *pain*. This operation collapses the dictionary’s mechanism of explanation, which relies on the “difference” between entries to function. The layers of linguistic distinction are flattened into a single referent. The words remain, but their function of differentiation is lost; the dictionary is still arranged in order, yet can no longer produce meaning.

This work is not an isolated conceptual experiment, but a continuation of Stilinović’s long-term artistic position. Born in the former socialist Yugoslavia, he was an important member of the “New Art Practice” movement. At a time when English was gradually becoming the lingua franca of the international art world, he began creating as a non-English-speaking artist, continuously challenging the logic of linguistic power. In his early work *Artist at Work* (1978), he lay in bed “sleeping,” turning idleness into a critique of artistic production and labor; by the time of *An Artist Who Cannot Speak English Is No Artist* (1992), he more directly revealed the structural barriers within the art system, pointing to the predicament of non-English artists who are forced into self-translation. *Pain Dictionary* extends this position. It is not simply an act of linguistic translation but a political gesture: he merges his own experience of linguistic pain into the dictionary itself, writing:

“What pain, whose pain, wherefrom the pain, as if pain had to be explained, analyzed. There’s nothing to be explained: the pain is there.”

As a designer who works within the English language system, I find resonance in this. All of my writing and expression must pass through the structure of English, meaning that every translated word carries a certain displacement and distortion. I am constantly adjusting myself within language, while also being reshaped by it. Stilinović’s extreme approach exposes this condition: when the order of language collapses and its meanings are stripped away, its structure becomes visible—it is not merely a tool for communication but a space where boundaries are constantly redrawn.

Main Analysis: The Stasis of Language and the Regeneration of Gesture

In *Pain Dictionary*, Mladen Stilinović reduces every entry of the dictionary to the same definition, pain, creating a state of linguistic stasis. This act is not only a semantic

erasure but also a form of violence in which movement itself is eliminated. The pages of the dictionary retain perfect order and structure, yet the generative process of language is completely frozen. Writing ceases to be an act of motion and becomes a mechanical repetition. Stilinović deprives language of its life as writing; each word is immobilised, as if turned to stone under Medusa's gaze, trapped in a stillness that reveals its own fragility. This suspension is itself the emblem of linguistic violence: under the name of order, it erases movement, difference, and breath.

Tim Ingold, in *Drawing, writing and calligraphy*, argues that writing should not be understood as a system of coded symbols but as an act of line-making—a bodily event through which meaning emerges via gesture, rhythm, and time. Referring to Chinese calligraphy, Ingold explains that the vitality of writing lies in movement. Each stroke is an extension of the body; its rhythm and breath give form to meaning. When the movement stops, the character disintegrates. Its integrity does not derive from form but from continuous becoming. Writing, therefore, is redefined as an active process rather than a static system.

Viewed from this perspective, *Pain Dictionary* becomes a machine of language stripped of motion. Through endless repetition, Stilinović exposes the emptiness of language once it has been fully systematised: every word the same, every gesture erased, every difference neutralised. Language no longer happens; it is merely stored. What remains is a lifeless order, a shell of meaning. This oppressive stillness reveals a fundamental contradiction: when language loses movement, it also loses the ability to generate.

My own practice begins from this moment of linguistic suspension and turns toward the possibility of regenerating gesture. As a non-native English speaker working and creating in an English-speaking environment, I constantly feel a certain distance from the language. When writing in English, I must first form an idea in my mind, then search for the appropriate words before I can begin to write. The process is often filled with hesitation and pauses. The words I find are not always precise, and the act of writing is frequently interrupted by uncertainty over grammar or expression. Thought precedes movement; writing becomes a cautious negotiation with a system that demands verification and correction.

By contrast, writing in Chinese feels like a natural flow. It requires no prior organisation and no deliberate search for vocabulary—it happens through the movement of the hand. As my mother tongue, Chinese writing is almost like breathing, an act that unfolds in rhythm with the body. In it, language and gesture are no longer separate but become two dimensions of the same process. Writing feels lighter, more direct, and closer to perception itself.

This contrast forms the foundation of my practice. I plan to write the same text in both Chinese and English, recording through video the motion of my hand and arm: their trajectories, rhythms, and pauses. By comparing these two acts of writing, I hope to reveal how linguistic systems operate through the body. English writing tends to be linear, continuous, and governed by grammar, while Chinese calligraphic movement is cyclical and bodily, with each beginning, turn, and completion forming the breath of language. These differences are not merely formal or technical; they expose how language systems shape the body—one through regulation, the other through generation.

Ingold's theory provides the methodological framework for this exploration. His concept of "the generation of the line" reminds me that writing is not simply a linguistic product but also a trace of time. When I overlay, compare, or translate the trajectories of my two writings, these gestures themselves become images of meaning—a language beyond semantics, returning to the body. By using gesture as a medium, I employ the body as a tool to re-examine the structure of linguistic violence.

If *Pain Dictionary* is an experiment in fixing language, then my research is an attempt to reactivate it. The gesture of writing here is not only a form of expression but also a mode of thought. It releases language from systemic constraint and allows meaning to be regenerated through movement. By reintroducing gesture, difference, and time, I hope to let language breathe again. *Pain Dictionary* exposes the pain of linguistic order, whereas my work seeks to reinterpret that pain—not as an endpoint, but as a beginning, a site of becoming.