

We might come from Hell, but we're too young to tell...

(Tiger Lillies, *Little Boys Blues*)

"We can sell animals as long as they are pretend. We sell the sort of attachment to objects and sentimentalism that means that a kid will run back into a burning house to rescue a toy rabbit, but Dad won't swerve in the car to avoid a real one. That is the real power of brands... One rabbit has a label on its arse, another one doesn't. You can love the one with the label and everyone accepts that. Risk your life for a real animal and people say you're mad".

(Scarlett Thomas, *PopCo*)

The products of modern pop culture, like the short animated films from the series *Happy Tree Friends* — whose characters appear in the new series of paintings by Dejan Kaludjerović — are a form of exploiting violence in the climate of liberal post-ethical permissiveness. But any discussion opposed to this form of visual representation is all too easily rejected as over-serious, old-fashioned conservative moralising, which, if the truth be known, in most cases it actually is. Having stated that, however, can we simply gloss over this symptom of contemporary culture? Systems of censorship in developed liberal societies are still weighed according to the principle whereby the illusion that certain models overstep the mark even if they no longer exhibit any traits of infringing social limits, is strictly upheld. For example, *Happy Tree Friends* is a cartoon not recommended to children under the age of 17, yet it is based on typical models of "classical" children's cartoons where the characters — almost always stylised animals — have horrible things done to them, in reality even fatal things, after which they are resurrected and come to life again: from the utterly squashed

mouse Jerry who, in the twinkling of an eye, resumes his usual chubby shape to that coyote who gathers up bits of his own body after some ACME contraption with which he had intended to dispatch the Roadrunner has exploded. The violence in *Happy Tree Friends* is founded on these models but, in fact, goes even further. And this is not meant to be a cartoon for children. So the question might well be asked, who is it actually meant for? Because what we see here is obviously not some *tongue-in-cheek* anarchic intellectualism such as *South Park*, which can truly be called an adult cartoon. The victims here are not Tom Cruise, Jesus, or Barbra Streisand, but the innocent furry inhabitants of the forest. So, are *Happy Tree Friends* and similar products commercially successful precisely because they live in the impossible limbo of some unidentified target group?

In an Internet debate on this phenomenon, one of the participants, clearly younger than the prescribed age of 17, offered the following analysis: "This site has to have some of the goriest animated cartoons I have ever seen in my entire life. In every episode the characters get decapitated and killed in the most disgusting, inhumane ways. In case parents are wondering why kids find this funny, it's not because they're messed up in the head. Teens these days (including myself) find "randomness" funny — therefore, when characters get mutilated or have their hand chopped off out of nowhere, kids laugh because it's usually the last thing you'd expect to happen". However, in the discursive range of this cartoon, this is exactly what we expect, — if all the characters are brutally cut to pieces in the end — that there can be no "accidental" dimension here because everything is submitted to a strict discursive discipline. And it is this discursive discipline that is the chief characteristic of modern culture as it is a pre-condition for the commercial planning of pop culture which includes giving a brand name to something that is, on the face of it, surprising, unexpected or a diversion. The market aimed at children and teenagers is especially indicative since children are reared to be consumers, and the sophistication of their tastes, therefore, far outstrips that of adults. In what has now become a cult novel, *PopCo* by Scarlett Thomas, the heroine works for one of the world's largest toy-manufacturing companies, whose marketing strategy is designed to cater for the sophisticated young in such a way that they do not have the impression of buying some mass-produced corporate product, but something extremely specific and unusual, as if produced underground, something that is only available on a web site in order to make it more authentic and which even has its first pages written in Japanese. This method of cultural distribution dominates as a model of the relationship between mass culture and alternative culture, like two sides of the same coin in the neo-liberal shaping of culture as a whole.

The world of children and that of adults have never been closer than in today's consumer society. In Fifties' America, the famous discovery that teenagers are the ideal consumers is now truly pre-history. Nowadays there is absolute synergy in consumerism where the dilemma about whether it is adults who create the world of children according to some kind of *master plan* or whether being an adult is nothing more than execution of the *master plan* of a child is quite superfluous. However, as a social issue the child-adult relationship has never been as important as today because it exclusively revolves around the relationship between sexuality and violence, on the one hand, and a fixed, inviolable social identity, on the other — an identity based on the fiction that there exists a certain formative stage at which the identity of a child and the identity of an adult diverge. And while no one is able to render this difference clear in recollecting his own life, society nonetheless has developed on the basis of this difference.

These are a few of the possible frameworks from which we can draw associations as we view the paintings of Dejan Kaludjerović, and especially those from the latest series *Can I Change My Career for a Little Fun?* In every picture in this group a little boy and a little girl, both in their pre- or early-adolescent years, occupy the foreground. The poses they strike and the way they are dressed suggest that they have been taken straight out of some modern fashion magazine devoted to children's *casual* wear. Therefore, they are portraits of the children but with an ironic link between consciously posing for the artist and self-consciously posing for the needs of widespread commercial circulation. At the same time, these portraits are based on the timeworn traditions of hyperrealism, the photo comic strip and sentimental kitsch. The children are surrounded by the heroes of the *Happy Tree Friends* series, but establish no direct relationship with them, so that the impression of artificial montage of these two fictional worlds is very striking and it is this that gives Kaludjerović's paintings a note of alienation from any feeling of naturalness, spontaneity and not being "staged". The figures of the children and the small stylised animals turn their gaze exclusively towards the onlooker so there is no clear level of mutual relations except through the eyes of the consumer/voyeur at whom they are looking. In a very striking way these paintings also attach themselves "like leeches" to a standard imaginary background characterised by an attractive colour scheme which seems to be following the instructions of some market researcher where children's products are involved. The chromatic spectrum seems to follow the colour card that the PopCo corporation from the Scarlett Thomas novel uses for its toys, video games and other products, which is dominated by lemon yellow, candyfloss pink, baby blue, strawberry red, leaf green, and white."

Kaludjerović's "perversion" in his paintings lies in his repetition or duplication of the object chosen to be viewed without asking any questions (which would make the artist a traditional moraliser) or without any "creative" additions to this object (which would make the artist a skilled post-ethical exploiter). Jacques Lacan has understood this perversion, not as a form of behaviour, but as a structure — after all, anyone can engage in a perverted act without actually being a pervert, whereas the pervert never has to commit a perverted act recognised as such by society- and he considers this to be inverted neurosis.



× *Waiting for the Man*
 iz serijala/from the series *HEDONISM*, 2001
 akrilik na mušemi/acrylic on table oil-cloth
 120 x 240 cm (dipih/diptych)
 ljubaznošću sekretarijata za kulturu grada Beča/
 Courtesy of Cultural Department of the City of Vienna

Whereas neurosis is characterised by asking *questions*, perversion is qualified by *the absence of questions*. In contrast to the neurotic position adopted by the critic/moraliser, Kaludjerović searches for a perverted position that avoids a neurotic fixation with "objective" elimination of the perverted content. Instead, he opens up a space for subjective visual participation by repeating this content. All the more so since the paintings of Kaludjerović are in no way designed to elicit some ritualised social shock favoured by a number of artists with similar preoccupations. His paintings speak of very personal relations because he avoids dividing the world into the world of children and that of adults, and their structural perversity (their failure to ask questions which would satisfy the social norm) defies analysis, perhaps in the exact way in which many psychoanalysts consider that a perverted subject defies analysis. However, it is precisely this structural position of not asking questions, of not questioning, that represents a possible way forward for what we must continue to call critical art. This art has recently found itself stuck in such a blind alley that that when it appears today in its supposed pure form of "asking questions", it is in severe danger of self-parody. The art of Kaludjerović establishes no fiction of critical distance, but is deeply involved in the world of symptoms of present-day psycho-capitalism.

Since his early work Kaludjerović has endeavoured to find the point where distance is lost, the point where there is a psychological interweaving of internal/external, personal/social, past/present, childish/mature, remembered/forgotten, aesthetic/ethical, dangerous/harmless, fictional/real, and, in the narrow sense, his works themselves have reflected the interweaving of photographic/mechanical, photos and their subjects/ manual painting, figures/background, and perspective/inverse perspective. The idea of losing distance is illustrated very well in the works from his first one-man show in 1998. These were drawings on toilet paper with childhood motifs (e.g. "a piggy bank"), so not only a clear relationship between towards the notion of normal privacy (first encountered on the toilet seat) but also in indicating the anal phase of a child's development where he is confronted with the demand of another (the parent) that he pass a motion by himself as the first step towards future independence, i.e. adulthood. (Nowadays, for instance, it is a condition of acceptance into a pre-school institution that the child should be able to defecate by himself). It may be noticed that Kaludjerović has constructed a complete inversion of what psychologists from Freud onwards saw as the link between producing faeces and the production of a work of art. There is no question here of painting being the liberating result of the need to spread one's own faeces all over the wall (Freud), but of an answer to the demand of that other person who gives you the toilet paper and teaches you self-control and discipline as a pre-condition for growing up.

In his later works Kaludjerović also addressed the specific context of his own period of growing up, including the socio-political *mise-en-scène* against which it takes place. Witness the series of paintings *Atlas* (1998-9), *Hedonism* (2000) and *Waiting for the Man* (2001). Within this framework, by far the most personal work by Kaludjerović is the photographic and sound installation *What Did Tomorrow Bring Us?* (2001), which is absolutely unique and somehow the most lyrical but also the most cryptic work by this artist. However, in the next series of paintings entitled *The Future Belongs to Us*, Kaludjerović alludes to contemporary ways of creating a fascist society through the roles taken on by children and through the social construction of the identities allotted to them. One of the most familiar motifs from this series (which occurs in different versions) is linear and flat? (as if we were dealing with serigraphy although it is executed in this artist's favourite technique – acrylic on canvas

or on some other textile]. It is that of a boy in striped underpants seen demonstrating his growing biceps. Of course, what we have here is the expectation fathers most often have in regard to their sons, but in a characteristic "retro" form, a magazine from the Seventies and Eighties. This lends the paintings a paradoxical quality, which is present in all works by Kaludjerović. At the same time these paintings deal with a certain historical distance by not mentioning the present, but some preceding historical period – yet what seems to be distance leads us to that hypothetical "autobiographical factor" (which Kaludjerović has always openly exhibited in his work to date, and which from now on can only be the product of later speculation), for the time these motifs were taken from is the period when the artist himself was a child and in the process of growing up.



× **Spring Soap**
 (deo instalacije *Genocid/part of the Genocide installation*), 2000
 print, promenljive dimenzije/dimensions variable
 ljubaznošću umetnika/courtesy of the artists

The most striking motif from this series — typically painted in various versions by this artist, but also in the form of blow-up photo-ready-made and video — is taken from the German magazine *Burda* in the early Eighties and is an advertisement for children's wear beneath the caption "No fear of small animals". It is truly bizarre because we see three children wearing little dresses and dungarees covered with cat and rabbit appliqués. A small boy stands between the two little girls pushing a carrot into the mouth of the girl who is seated. We could say that this motif is quintessential in the sphere of Kaludjerović's interest. First of all, we see here a parallel between this scene and the usual iconography of pornography. Then, we establish a relationship between the advertising code of the Seventies or Eighties and the present day where this motif would never appear innocently or spontaneously (which was not the case even up to 20 or 30 years ago). And finally, the relationships say us absolutely nothing about the children or their small animal toys but are focused on the world of adults which, at one moment, overlooks, and at the next moment, recognises the utterly bizarre quality of the scene. So we have instability of meaning in a scene which is composed by adults to reflect innocence, blamelessness, an idyllic state of being, but which those same adults can condemn as an expression of perversion, a sick imagination, and a social danger.

If we take the perspective of this scene as our departure point in looking at the new series of paintings *Can I change my career for a little fun?*, we are instantly struck by a major change in the paradigm that has taken over the past 20 years. In this case, it can be reduced to the following: while it was possible earlier for an advertisement depicting a boy pushing a carrot into the mouth of a little girl to appear without any fear of censorship, this was not the case with a cartoon in which an eye torn out of a small beaver left a slimy trail or an explosion ripped out the intestines of a sweet little squirrel.

Nowadays everything has been turned topsy-turvy. The present day sees itself as far less "naïve". We think that we know much more about ourselves and about children. We are conscious that innocent motifs hide terrible sexual perversions and that the presentation of explicit violence always and only a "show" that, so people think, has no link with reality. As we have pointed out, the paintings of Kaludjerović asks no questions in this regard. What they do primarily is to confront us with the change in the paradigm and with the as yet unexplained relationship between "pretend" violence and real violence. Despite the fact that — except in a hypo-ironic project from 1999 called *Genocide* — Kaludjerović's works establish no explicit contact with the contemporary socio-political context which spawned them (Serbia during and after the Milošević era), these artworks in their own way speak of the consumption of violence as the most collective act possible where the victim/executioner relationship is viewed from some distant observation point completely devoid of empathy. This is most obvious in the latest series of paintings.



Empathy or aesthetics? This is the priority issue in modern art. Kaludjerović chooses aesthetics, but he then undermines it in order to lay bare it one of the possible faces of modern fascism. For this reason, the attractiveness of his paintings fills us with fear because he is forcing us the whole time to look at what we see every day in a different way — whether this is a scene of wartime violence or some new mass media fashion dictate for the young. Not one of our views of the universal commercial exploitation of children can remain the same after we have seen the works of Kaludjerović. On the other hand, these paintings are not the result of any didactic intention on the part of the artist. On the contrary, they are themselves deeply enmeshed in a world governed by our inability to play a direct part in it and hence to change it. It is precisely the *closeness* of these paintings that disturb us.

Branislav Dimitrijević

× *What Did Tomorrow Bring Us?*
Galerija Studio, Budimpešta/Gallery Studio, Budapest
izgled postavke/installation view

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