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Child of the Universe: Objectivity at the Threshold of Individuation

Dejan Kaludjerović's practice in the last few years has taken a unique turn, pushing the notion of research by artists to new heights through employing empiricist methodologies for his artistic output. Approaching the politics and knowledge of art through a sociological prism, his work's epistemic import, however, lies in its fruitful transformation of quantitative methods into qualitative reflections. Evaluating the subtle differences between nation-states, Kaludjerović's series of fieldworks has probed the materialization of *weltanschauung* and subjectivity in various vernaculars. His collaborations with young children from around the world reveal the significance of "childhood" both as a space for channeling the cultural and political assumptions of different societies as well as its accommodation as a platform for the articulation of the children's very own subjective judgments. In his new work at Vienna's Weltmuseum titled *Conversations*, Kaludjerović combines these various "national" findings to present the viewers with a multilingual and international conversation between cultures from the perspective of children. Occupying the metaphoric space between a playground and a model United Nations summit, the work brackets out the geopolitical roots of cultural disagreements and conflicts so as to arrive at how different understandings of commonsensical units such as dreams, the future, fear, freedom, war, wealth and language are what unites and divides individuals and societies at their very basic human level.

Before addressing Kaludjerović's new exhibition, I will first conjure a working definition for the term 'research-based art', one that allows us to not only better understand the significance of this mode of art making but also to contextualize why Kaludjerović is able to transcend the limitations of the category and arrive at a new approach to both research and art making. Dictionaries describe the term 'research' as the systematic investigation of materials and resources directed towards establishing facts and making truth claims. While the term has been around for hundreds of years, its usage begins to peak around the early 1960s and stabilizes in the 2000s.¹ The term 'research-based art', however, frames a rather more recent phenomenon. It begins to circulate frequently in the world of art around the turn of the century and is used as a new marker of art practices and methodologies. The term owes its staying power not only to the desire of artists to expand beyond the claustrophobic and self-referential arena of art, but also to the pressure placed by state and non-state agencies on art in general to yield quantifiable justifications for the continuation of its presence in the social space.

¹ See Google Ngram for the term 'research': https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=research&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cresearch%3B%2Cc0 (accessed August 19, 2017).

Rooted in the scientific method, the term 'research' implies rigor and endurance in art making, distancing creativity from its expressive ontology towards measured procedures that are associated with the general production of knowledge. At their best, research-based art practices use the opportunities provided by considering art as knowledge to escape the limitations of art for art's sake. At their worse, they are merely a fashionable genre, fueling the desires of curators and institutions to showcase new art forms. However, it must be possible to bracket out these best- and worse-case scenarios to arrive at a more humble and pragmatic understanding of the phenomenon. Research-based art cannot consist only of the presentation and/or visualization of knowledge and, regardless of being rooted in rigorous investigation, must, at the end, resemble and function as art. If we agree that non-research-based art comes to life at the intersection of its phenomenological and cognitive functions, research-based art has the extra burden of supporting its cogno-phenomenological aesthetics through the trial and error of empiricism.²

If we agree that the production of knowledge operates by means of the two mainstays of researching and experimenting, then research-based art can be understood as a distinctive form of knowledge production in which even though the investigation and experimentation aspects of the practice might be conducted in fields other than art, the final knowledge claims are given and received predominantly in the world of art and art audiences. In this type of work, artists, often using particular artistic epistemologies stemming from their prior practice, move outside the specialized field of art to produce a kind of knowledge that, while belonging to the canon of art, has ramifications outside of art's narrow purview. At the heart of the question of research-based art are both the relationship between quantity and quality as inherited from the philosophy of science, and the role of the artistic subject in mediating the realms of objectivity and subjectivity. While the former has to do with how the buildup of quantifiable measures might lead to a qualitative leap, the latter involves the quality of precise interventions by artists in this formalized process in order for the work to transcend its scientific pretense and enter the realm of art.

It is here, in the last stage and through the decisions made by the artist, that research transmutes into art, for research from other fields of knowledge normally possess their own procedures and places of dissemination. However, artistic promiscuity, or the creative desire to transcend the disciplinary limits of art, together with the flexible possibilities of what we have come to understand today as contemporary art provide other fields an opportunity to resettle their concerns into another world. Thus, research-based art is only successful in meeting its own expectations when it crosses the spectral two-fold thresholds, on the one hand, between quantity and quality, and on the other hand, between objectivity and subjectivity. It is only then that it can provide, on demand, the weight and depth necessary for constructing new truths without sacrificing the existing realities.

² The concept of art as a form of cogno-phenomenological entity goes beyond the physicality and function of objects that capture human attention. It considers art as the ultimate trap, which uses an appeal to the senses of the viewers to capture their mind, forcing them to find their own way out of there entrapment creatively and making a permanent mark on their minds in regards to how they navigate life afterwards.

Kaludjerović's *Conversations* at Weltmuseum is composed from the audio-visual elements of the earlier iterations of the series *Conversations: Hula-Hoops, Elastics, Marbles and Sand*. These works were previously exhibited by different galleries and institutions in Austria, Azerbaijan, Israel, Iran, Russia and Serbia as a series of site-specific installations consisting of the voices of children between the ages of six and ten from the country in which each respective exhibition was taking place. In each project, financed and organized independently, the artist asked children from different backgrounds to respond to a similar set of questions; but in the process of editing the work, the voices of the artist and his translators were replaced by samples of the exact questions being asked by some of the children. In this way, what originated as an interrogation of children by adults was presented as an introspective conversation amongst children, the content of which ranged from the heartfelt and surprising to the predictable and mundane. Each sound installation was accompanied by a sculptural element in which the artist visually articulated the essence of the sound installation, expressing the tension between the children's worldview and the official state ideology. These sculptural components, six in total, also addressed the totality of the social settings in which the research had taken place. They also functioned as the artist's abstract reflections on both his investigative process and his method for gathering data in each local setting.

The present exhibition at Weltmuseum is not merely a gathering but the synthesis of these separate works into a new project placed in a fresh context. Entering the main gallery, the viewers are spatially confronted with a colorful wall made of 33 alphabet cubes from the Azerbaijani version, immediately blocking their view of the rest of the exhibit. Once circumventing the alphabet wall, they find a large platform covered with linoleum that stages a circle of marbles from the Serbian version held up by concrete constructions from the Israeli version that resemble bomb shelters used in that country. Behind the circle sits a sand box from the Iranian version. To climb up the platform, the viewers have two options. They can either walk up a ramp that is constructed from a school blackboard from the Russian version on which a hopscotch grid is painted and which is supported as it happens by some sticks from a Mikado Spiel box from the Austrian version; or alternatively, they can get up onto the platform by ascending steps made from some of the extra alphabet cubes from the Azerbaijani version. To absorb the exhibition, the viewers are free to walk around, climb on the platform, sit at the edge of the sand box or on extra alphabet cubes and bomb shelters. The setting is also suitable for resting while listening to the selected conversations of children from the six countries speaking in Arabic, Azeri, Farsi, Hebrew, German, Russian and Serbian. These voices are presented as an 18-channel sound installation synchronized with German and English subtitle videos, projected on the four walls of the gallery.

Describing *Conversations* only in terms of its previous stagings or its current iteration at Weltmuseum disregards the necessary pre-production required from the artists by research-based works of art. *Conversations* preexisted in the form of proposals, plans and estimates long before materializing in its current shape. This nearly bureaucratic pre-history is the invisible thread that links art making in countries as disparate as Israel and Iran, namely, that the internationally universalized system of support for the arts makes it possible for artists to plan and execute projects with such a geographic scope. Thus, it is not cynical or sarcastic to claim that taking advantage of existing funding structures and institutions' need for self-justification is another common axis binding research-based art with similar activities in

sciences and humanities. We are all familiar with the deeply held suspicion that focusing on funding opportunities hinders spontaneous creativity. What is new is the fact that the social proficiency in navigating art bureaucracy for research-based art has become an artistic skill itself, comparable, for example, to the familiarity of painters with the conditions of possibility for their isolated work in the studio. In this sense, *Conversations* could not have existed outside the myriad limits of its funding frame.

Kaludjerović's project arrives at Weltmuseum with its own brief history in the adjacent lounge in the form of cylinders that present graphic information about its previous iterations. The cylinders are clearly identifiable from a distance, making it easy for viewers to gravitate towards the sections of the large installation that interests them. Each of the six columns contains information about the geopolitical setting of the project taken from the CIA World Factbook, together with a curatorial statement about the particular iteration as well as the full transcript of the respective conversation. These documentation/archival stations are necessary if we are to keep in mind the fact that, before transforming into the seamless exhibition in Vienna, the project had to navigate geographically and politically from one nation-state to another, often encountering and confronting new set of constraints and possibilities in each vernacular. The lounge is also a reminder of both the bureaucratic and sociological origins of the project and is reflective of the estrangements between its different iterations, most obvious in the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Jewish State of Israel. The information design in the lounge also reflects the fact that, as a European city hosting one of the United Nations' headquarters, Vienna is the most suitable metropolitan vessel for displaying and synthesizing these geopolitical tensions.

However, starting with the basic means for carrying out a project cannot by itself guarantee the final quality of a work. Nor can a comprehensive and sustained research project backed by quantitative data guarantee the greatness of a work of art in the end. If the radicality of scientific method is assured by the flexible perspicacity of the initial hypothesis and its cross examination with a rigorous collection and application of empirical research, in research-based art, often the work begins modestly with quantitative research, and the qualitative leap comes only in the final stage, when the results are about to be aestheticized by the artist; for in the arts, we often recognize the greatness in art backwards and from the very sensible surface with which it confronts us and not with the conceptual or epistemic scaffoldings that holds it up.

Even though Kaludjerović's *Conversations* at Weltmuseum resembles a large theatre set, once we augment the exhibit's visual elements with the 18-channel time-based voiceover, it becomes clear that the most appropriate way to approach the work is to consider it as a form of cinema, albeit a partially invisible one in which the actors are not visually present. The uniqueness of the work as a cinematic installation – in line with what is known in contemporary art as “expanded cinema” – lies in the fact that it de-emphasizes one of the key characteristics of the genre, namely, the use of physical projections in favour of what can be called cognitive projections.³ In Kaludjerović's cinema, the projections are cognitive and internal, that is, in the minds of the viewers; the mental images are produced in the dialectics between

³ For a definition of expanded cinema, see Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (Boston: E. P. Dutton, 1970).

the voices and the empty architecture of the playground. On the other hand, as a form of cinema concerned with children, the origins of *Conversations* can be traced back to the works of Abbas Kiarostami, the Iranian auteur whose early films addressed the pedagogical development of subjectivity in children.⁴ Like Kiarostami, the desire to both approach and reach out to children does not weigh on the artist in such a way as to compromise the depth of his work, but rather, the installation offers an opportunity for young viewers to have a uniquely self-reflective experience while simultaneously addressing adults as its primary audience. Hosting *Conversations* at Weltmuseum, an institution often frequented by school-age children, provides the artist a further chance to pursue some of these objectives.

Listening to the content of the conversations makes it clear that the enthusiasm expressed by the participants is indicative of their excitement at participating in this experiment, since being asked their opinion is an unusual and extraordinary phenomenon. By lifting them out of their mundane daily routines and asking them to focus instead on forming opinions, the project creates a children's utopia in which they recognize themselves as subjects worthy of attention. The therapeutic effects of this exercise can be felt in the dialogues where participants move very close to expressing or reflecting on their personal trauma resulting directly or indirectly from their surroundings, be it family or society. Moreover, like other children's playgrounds, the installation doubles as a line of flight away from the concerns of adults to where children construct worlds of their own.

The viewers' first impressions of *Conversations* might lead them to think that the participating children are merely reflecting what they receive from their social surroundings, and there might even be plenty of evidence in the dialogues to support this proposition; however, a closer listen and a comparison between different layers of dialogue might prove otherwise. As the narrative develops, participants recognize their interactions as a chance to reflect on basic philosophical questions and formulate opinions, and through this process, they arrive at their selfhoods. Thus, the best way to describe the sound portion of *Conversations* is as the space wherein the function of transparently channeling the surroundings by children subtly transforms into individuating away from whom they're told they are toward whom they would like to be. The age of the participants, most of them being 6 to 9 year olds, puts them at the thresholds of subject formation, where a child's internal self-conception transforms from a mirror reflecting the world around them to a self-consciously composed collage of images, habits and values.

The German and English subtitles for the voices emphasize that *Conversations* is a fair example of the universalism of particulars. The different voices presented in the piece speak the same language when it comes to abstract concepts, but deviate when particulars get in the way. This shows that, despite differences, there exists a substantial local basis for a strong global understanding of humanity as a whole, and that no amount of vernacular specificity can prevent the emergence of a universal picture of humanity-at-large.

Even though Kaludjerović has intentionally removed his own voice from the conversations and is presenting them as a quotidian discussion between children, he is not entirely absent from the exhibit's en-

⁴ For a general introduction to Kiarostami's cinema, see: Alberto Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami* (London: Saqi, 2005). For a closer look at the Iranian director's relationship with children as the subject of his films, see: Amir Soltani, "The Child Heroes of Abbas Kiarostami's Films" at <http://moviemezzanine.com/abbas-kiarostami-essay> (accessed August 19, 2017).

vironment; his presence is felt through the objects that constitute the visual elements of the installation. In fact, the primary conversation bouncing around the space in the hope of being heard is between the artist in the shape of his objects and the children in the form of their voices. This is why the work could not have been complete as merely a sound installation and the corresponding text videos. By staging the visual components, Kaludjerović recalls the ghosts of the project from their previous lives during their original iterations. They are reconvened to form the basis of an experiment in how particular formal settings can potentially produce a generic universal. What this means is that if each installation functioned in a particular way in its vernacular setting, their assembly at Weltmuseum measures the project's universal appeal and application. The six different localities that were each a basis of a reflection about a particular place, once put into interaction, become a global experience. We must add that, even though the implications of Kaludjerović's *Conversations* are manifold and seem to diverge, together they share the tendency to reconcile and complicate significant dualities that have continually haunted the production of knowledge. Thus, the presence of the artist is crucial as the acting body linking the dualities with which the exhibition grapples. At the heart of *Conversations* is an artist's attempt to deal with the binaries of quantity versus quality, objectivity versus subjectivity, universal versus particular, and overall, scientific and artistic inquiries. *Conversations* cleverly sketches the co-dependent topologies of these opposites and proposes a roadmap as to how these complex distances can be navigated.

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