Armenians 01 **(RAIL, 8 years old, Azerbaijan)**
/ from the series: *Conversations: Hula Hoops, Elastics, Marbles and Sand* (2017)
Carbon paper and colored pencils on canvas paper, 92 × 95 cm
Courtesy of the artist

Klaus Speidel

World Shrinking: The Self and the Other in the Eyes of Children and Other Grown-ups.
An analytical collage.

> *Children are haughty, disdainful, choleric, envious, inquisitive, selfish, lazy, fickle, fearful, intemperate, liars, dissemblers and laugh and cry easily; they are immoderate in their joys and sorrows on the least of subjects; they will not bear any pain, and delight in causing it: they are already grown-ups.*
> (JEAN, 43-year-old boy)

This famous aphorism published by Jean de la Bruyère in his *Characters* (1688) seems to be a perfect epigraph to Dejan Kaludjerović's *Conversations*. It sums up one of the fundamental ideas governing the project: if we take children 100% seriously, we learn something not only about them but about the society they grow up in as well and the adults they will one day become. Perhaps we may also attempt an inversion: if children are already adults, then, in a certain sense, adults may also be said to still be children. In any case, it ought to be possible to create an artful dialogue between adults and children as well.

While Kaludjerović is especially interested in the cultural and social differences that appear in the conversations, I here want to focus on some of the fundamental principles that seem to underlie different declarations. The fact is that many of the statements made in *Conversations* are somewhat like aphorisms—about which Nietzsche insisted that merely reading them was not enough:

> *An aphorism […] has not been "deciphered" when it has simply been read; rather one has to begin its interpretation, for which an art of interpretation is required.*
> (FRIEDRICH, 43-year-old boy)

There is indeed a certain similarity between the statements chosen by Kaludjerović and aphorisms such as those produced by Nietzsche: they have clear subjects, they are short and they are put together in a form approaching collage. Their differences, however, may seem more important than their resemblances, and the reasons why they need to be interpreted are diametrically opposed to one another: aphorisms are complicated because they are highly sophisticated and reflected-upon creations by professional writers. In contrast, the statements made in Kaludjerović's *Conversations* are spontaneous replies to unexpected

questions. They have to be interpreted not because they are so complex, but because they are deceptively simple. Most of them surprise us not because they are so original, but because what they reveal fits so well with what we expect. Thus, many affirmations could easily be used as illustrative examples in sociological textbooks of how social and national differences shape worldviews. This is interesting in and of itself. Here, however, I want to focus on some of the more universal elements that appear in the conversations, which I will do by analyzing only a few of the statements and showing how the children's reflections contained in them are linked to themes that have preoccupied authors throughout the centuries. Half collage and half analysis, my text may also be seen as a first attempt to assess what a closer analysis of specific statements in *Conversations* can reveal. In order to work within a fairly specific field of reference, I focus only on the question of the relationship between the self and the other:

What is an enemy?

*Someone who is mean.**
(MARIJA, 8-year-old girl)

It is a person that you don't like.
(FIDAN, 8-year-old girl)

An enemy is someone who you don't get along with.
(ALEKSA, 8-year-old boy)

Each of these answers gives a definition of enmity, as required by the question, yet also does more. Each statement implicitly provides an answer as to why the given enmity exists in the first place. Presupposing that this is to be explained, each answer also represents a micro-theory about where enmity comes from and who is to blame for it, giving three fundamentally different kinds of answers to the question: we could call these the *other-centered*, the *self-centered* and the *reciprocal* approaches to enmity.

1. The first kind unambiguously blames the enemy. It may well be the most common approach: if there is a quarrel between me and someone else, I certainly cannot be blamed. Therefore, it must be the other's fault. However, it is not just about something they've done. We are talking about something more persistent, a problem of character: the other party is mean. And as it is certainly the most likely to fuel the conflict, this kind of narrative will often be encouraged by belligerent governments. While governments will usually refrain from describing enemies of the state—be they states, nations or individuals—as "mean", opting rather for accusing them of *fascism, imperialism, subversion* or *terrorism*, it all comes down to deferring the blame for the existing hostility onto the other.

2. The second kind of answer seeks the motive for the enmity rather in the speaker's personal antipathy. It is interesting in the reduced form isolated here insofar as the "other" is not blamed at all. Thus, the reason given is nearly the exact opposite of the one linked to the first stance: we are antagonists because *I* don't like *them*. The blame for the quarrel is thus implicitly taken by the speaker. From this perspective, there might be hope for reconciliation: since we ourselves are the driving force of the enmity, it ought to be enough if we worked on ourselves, and the conflict could be ended. Sometimes, however, we might

not want to. Yet, even then, we will usually be quick to give a reason for our dislike, as did, for example, Muhammed Ali, one of the fastest and most prolific talkers in the history of boxing, when he said about his great rival George Foreman:

> *I don't like him—he talks too much.*
> (MUHAMMAD, 32-year-old boy)

3. The last vision of enmity is the most considerate and, again, one where there is hope for reconciliation. When we say that an enemy is someone "we don't get along with", we seem to distribute blame among both parties. This is clearly a better condition for a settlement than the first formulation. However, as the following statement shows, the potential of getting along with someone in the future can also be blocked by an ontology of otherness that allows for no variations over time:

> *Foreigners should be in their own country, because we don't understand each other and will never understand each other.*
> (MARIJA, 8-year-old girl)

Ouch! Rather than an analysis of a present lack of understanding, it is the declared impossibility of ever bridging the gap that strikes us here. Construing all dialogue as being pointless, such statements are rendered reliable self-fulfilling prophecies when they are embraced on a larger scale.

One way to attempt to overcome the lack of understanding affirmed by Marija is to try to make the *other's* vision of events available and to explain it, possibly by showing its historical roots. However, such attempts are often sabotaged by the quarrelling parties. Thus, the Peace Research Institute in the Middle East (PRIME) produced a history book that portrays the conflict between Israel and Palestine from both perspectives. *Side by Side: Parallel Histories of Israel-Palestine* has appeared in installments since 2002; however, both Israel and Palestine have banned this publication from being used in schools. This is a good example of how identities are based on stories that are told rather than what has "actually" happened. It also shows how different parties often try to make sure that a single narrative prevails, usually the one where all serious blame falls on the other, which brings us back to 1. An enemy is someone who is mean. But, wait a minute, the question was what foreigners are. Martin has an answer:

> *Foreigners behave differently, they like foreign games.*
> (MARTIN, 9-year-old boy)

Rather than race or origin, Martin defines being foreign through salient behavior and what they like—for instance, foreign games. Think America and football (yes, American football), India and cricket, Wales and rugby, China and Go. It is clear what you have to do if you do not want to be foreign anymore: stop behaving differently, stop playing different games. This seems to connect nicely to Hermann Broch's observation about tolerance:

> *Tolerance is intolerant. It requires assimilation.*
> (HERMANN, 61-year-old boy)

As long as you do not accept this requirement, you are prone to remain unknown and thus a nobody:

> *Well it is not so nice to be a foreigner. Because nobody knows you, and nobody, I guess, wants to be friends with you nicely.*
> (FILIP, 8-year-old boy)

The "Nobody knows you" in this statement cannot, of course, be literally true. It is only true if the scope of "nobody" is limited. It is probably safe to guess that the term "nobody" extends only to the people of whatever group Filip identifies with. For a child—only for a child?—"nobody in my group" is synonymous with "nobody relevant", which is synonymous with "nobody". Hence, since being a foreigner means to not be part of the "in" group, its meaning comes to be synonymous with not being known by anybody. This is a typical example of what we could call *world shrinking*, where the personal frame of reference becomes the frame of reference *tout court*. Used by children and adults alike, it is a way of reassuring ourselves by declaring that the part of the world that we can master is the only one that counts. Attempts at radically inverting our perspective, such as Georg Christoph Lichtenberg's following aphorism—

> *The first American who discovered Christopher Columbus made a terrible discovery.*
> (GEORG CHRISTOPH, cca. 38-year-old boy)

—are still rare 240 years after Lichtenberg wrote it. However, this kind of mental movement can sometimes produce a greater truth than a self-centered point of view can. After all, our ordinary vision of events, where it is Columbus who discovered the Americans, is purely Eurocentric—the fact is, we would find it utterly odd if someone came into our home and then proudly declared that they had "discovered" us. Isn't it, in fact, truer to the actual events to say rather the opposite, that it was first the Native Americans who discovered Columbus, when they espied the Spaniard's ship approaching on the horizon? Whatever the truth of the matter, few are those who, like Martin, believe the following:

> *Serbs, Arabs, Chinese, Japanese, we are all the same.*
> (MARTIN, 9-year-old boy)

"We are all the same," Martin says. Even though he uses the indexical "we", we might find it hard to tell where he is from if no further context is provided. The speaker asserts that nationality is not important and his statement conceals his own. By putting shared humanity rather than differences of origin or race to the fore, his statement, presumably, could be readily connected to Schiller's *Ode to Joy:*

> *Joy, beautiful sparkle of God / Daughter of Elysium / We enter, fire-drunk / Heavenly, Your Holy sanctuary / Your magic binds again / What custom's sword has parted / All men become brothers / Where your tender wing lingers*
> (FRIEDRICH, 26-year-old boy)

However, for Schiller, as well as for Beethoven, who made the *Ode to Joy* famous, universal human brotherhood seemed to be more of a wish than a reality, something that is quite unchanged today, when one's own "difference" is rarely seen as being simply a difference:

Americans 01 **(AMIL, 8 years old, Azerbaijan)**
/ from the series: *Conversations: Hula Hoops, Elastics, Marbles and Sand* (2016)
Carbon paper, acryl, graphite and colored pencils on paper, 54,5 × 76 cm
Courtesy of the artist and CCA Andratx, Spain

> *Serbs are different from other people because they are somehow better.*
> (MARIJA, 8-year-old girl)

As opposed to Martin, Marija uses no indexical like "I" or "we", and yet it is utterly unnecessary that I tell you where Marija is from. Why is this so? This statement is likely to be the briefest and most direct formulation of the belief that is at the heart of all forms of chauvinism and the ensuing ostracisms and exclusions. The bluntness with which Marija expresses her in-group bias is stunning. The difference between her and adults who hold similar beliefs is that the adults have learned to mask those beliefs behind more sophisticated babble. While we may find Marija's self-laudatory assertion touching when it is clumsily formulated by a child, we may also share Karl Kraus's objection, in at least certain cases:

> *What is unappealing about chauvinism is not so much the dislike of other nations as the love of your own.*
> (KARL, 35-year-old boy)

Of course, most statesmen who, in order to resist the far right, embrace its ideas would loudly protest—and so would many ordinary citizens. You have to love your nation after all! Or do you? The truth is

that Bernhard von Bühlow's somewhat hypocritical dictum seems to dominate current politics. When arguing that Germany should try to get its own colonies in 1897, he said:

> *We don't want to cast shadow on anyone, but we do want our place in the sun too.*
> (BERNHARD, 48-year-old boy)

This is the "We do not mean to do harm, but we will pursue our own interests" apology that dominates foreign policy all over the world. While ignoring others is no reliable way to avoid conflict, it can lead to not experiencing their presence, and hence, perhaps sometimes being confronted with one's fundamental loneliness:

> *When it's dark, you feel like you're alone.*
> (SELIN, 8-year-old girl)

This explanation of why we fear the dark is highly original and beautiful in its simplicity. Antonio Carlos Jobim, however, is not afraid of closing his eyes, for

> *The fundamental loneliness goes away / Whenever two can dream a dream together.*
> (ANTONIO CARLOS, 40-year-old boy)

So, is love the answer? Well, if Paul Valéry is right, a fundamental, insurmountable difference remains between one's conceiving of others and one's thinking of oneself:

> *No individual conceives directly that he is man—no one is man—but the center, the goal, the base and the end all. No more than he can understand that he has to die can he understand that he is only a detail. And, lastly, he never knows these things except through reason.*
> (PAUL, 59-year-old boy)

"Children only see themselves," I once heard someone say when a running child bumped into someone out for a stroll. But if Valéry is right, this is true of adults as well. At the least, we all see the other only in relationship to ourselves.

We can, however, once in a while, get a glimpse of how the others might be seeing us in relationship to themselves. Dejan Kaludjerović's *Conversations* can be such a moment. Reading through them can be an exercise in adopting perspectives. When you do so, slow down, try to not hear only what you already know. While it is true that most statements are echoes, don't be too quick to judge them. Take interest in the differences, but also keep an eye out for the similarities and the ways of thinking that they are based on. And listen carefully. The voice they are echoing could be yours—or the one in your head.

* Certain statements have been truncated for more clarity or to underline the differences between different assertions.