

Séamus Kealy

Repositories of Unseen Impulses: A Few Notes on the Work of Dejan Kaludjerović

Vienna-based, Yugoslavia-born artist Dejan Kaludjerović makes drawings, paintings and research-based projects that often culminate in installations. *Conversations* is one such project, a kind of overview of a multi-year research and production. Between 2013 and 2017, Kaludjerović interviewed children, asking simple but provocative questions. The interviews took place in the context of artist residencies that the artist held in Russia, Azerbaijan, Israel and Iran as well as versions of this project that he realised in his “home countries” of Austria and Serbia, and were presented in the varying exhibitions in each context. Each installation rendered the produced material as a sound installation. The video projections within provided no images of the children per se but simply the soundtrack of the interviews with subtitles translating the children’s responses. These interviews have been edited together in this exhibition, synthesizing all the material together as kind of an overall analysis. Each prop-like sculpture that the artist made for each original context (sandbox, marbles, cubes, etc.) has now been re-made and re-presented in this exhibition, albeit in larger formats, presented together in an unsettling, giant playground that seems to stage some sort of invisible performance.

This is not a playground for playing in, however. It is rather a setting for the artist’s toying with ideas. In this case, the word “playing” would be insufficient for capturing what the artist has set about doing. In one sense, there is a sort of *jouissance* in the artist’s enactment of bringing and balancing together a number of unsettling scenarios. In another sense, there is also a sort of compulsion combined with the artist’s fascination with his subject material, here set together in this installation, containing within it something more than what first meets the eye. However, in order to engage with a few of the particulars of this installation, it may be helpful to step back and look at some of the artist’s previous works.

In 2014, the artist produced a sound and slide installation called *The First of May, 1977*. This work was shown at the 55th October Salon in Belgrade, and later, in 2015, at the Salzburger Kunstverein as part of the touring exhibition *Invisible Violence*. Two identical, narrow rooms are constructed in a larger gallery space. These rooms are neither adjacent nor near one another; rather, they are deliberately removed from one another. Other installations and rooms separate them. It is as if they are meant to be accidentally identical in their individual discovery by attending viewers. There is a deliberate gap between these two spaces, like a gap in belief, or indeed, like a gap in memory – a kind of *déjà vu*. There is also certainly



The First of May 1977 (2014)
29-slide carousel projection with sound (13'20" EN, 15' 48" DE, 12'15" SRB)
Courtesy of the artist and Museum of Contemporary Art Belgrade

the sense of time being displaced, or even a Nietzschean return of time,¹ when the second installation is discovered. Each room is painted black and has a self-standing wall placed within it, dividing the room into two. One room has several, dissonant voices speaking within it, one after the other, as if each voice is that of a person somnambulistically responding to an unknown question. The artist has assembled their replies to his single question into a narrative. We hear responses from the mothers of two children, a boy and a girl, then from their fathers. The boy then responds, while the girl refuses to remember the situation.

This first room has descriptions of these various interlocutors of an event that apparently happened on the eponymous date. The other black room simply has a series of diapositive slides projected, one by one, onto its central wall. The second room seems to depict this described moment, which appears to be something rather innocuous actually, and clearly from a somewhat distant childhood. We see only blurry, colour projections of a long-ago event with children in a garden, concluding with close-ups of, presumably, the boy in question.

The title immediately creates associations with uprising and revolution, the passing of states from one political body to another, labour rights, and naturally, the anthem “The Internationale”. The First of May is, after all, International Worker’s Day. As such, it is a holiday, a global one, and historically relevant (if not internationally celebrated) as such.² The title may, however, only be indexical and thus coincidentally meaningful. The entire artwork arrives out of the artist’s own probing of the complexity of memory, truth and the ongoing, often severe manipulation of narratives in the context of the Yugoslavian wars in the 1990s. And here, colliding with a troubled history of war and tragedy (and related concurrent and postwar narratives) – and perhaps also entwined with occasions that problematically mark modernism’s development (the influence of Marxism on society and political structures) – here, appears some documentary evidence of, it seems, a naïve act of violence committed by a child.

The artist is indeed very close to the subject of the artwork. For here, we are hearing his family members describe the moment when he, the boy who also speaks in the sound installation, himself struck his cousin with a stone many years ago, and here we see photographic remnants presented as some form of self-incriminating evidence. The artist himself dissects and analyses this long-ago moment and its documentation and its later, flawed descriptions to engulf it within the dream-like, playhouse mirror structure of its own open fragmentation. Its visual presentation and adjoining subjective verbal descriptions are based on several mnemonically challenged narratives as they interact with each other and become contaminated by associations of war and its representations.

¹ Nietzsche’s “eternal return”, which he first refers to in *The Gay Science*, is a concept of the universe and all its energy and life recurring endlessly. The notion originally comes from Indian myths and is later also referred to in Greek philosophy. Throughout modernity, and indeed repeatedly in the late 20th century, Nietzsche’s more atheistically inclined version of “eternal return” has had a deep influence on artists and philosophers.

² In fact, President Donald Trump recently re-coined this day as Loyalty Day, a quirky and somewhat long-attempted act to rid the day of any of its original political associations

The artist here stages and re-stages the event like in a feverish dream endlessly caught in a dark labyrinth, or indeed, as we might imagine a detective obsessively reviews the evidence of a crime. In this case, it is the act of a child who, at the age of five, we presume, has not developed his conscience or sense of the world enough in order to always differentiate right from wrong. Yet, the staging of this everyday event by the artist is not intended as some sort of confessional self-portrait. It, in part, appears to underline his need to strip layers of normalcy as it is made up in shared narratives down to a kind of speculation in visual form of darker regions of consciousness, identity-development and the production of the ego. These forms themselves flicker in and out of the structures of shared language and story-telling, for example, as they are inevitably caught up in webs of ideology and the collective wish fulfillment that ensures collective belief.

Dejan Kaludjerović is interested in the everyday inscriptions of power, culture, language, belief and law on the body and on the mind. His work, he says, is “mainly concerned with issues of responsibility and manipulation.” He thus examines the usual suspects, such as forms of mass media, education systems and indeed the influence of family and society on the psyche. But underneath this ongoing examination, as we have seen, we can pinpoint (and the artist openly admits to) a central concern with violence, and the nitty-gritty that emerges from mechanisms of power and capitalism as they are inscribed on the body and mind. Thus, when we unpack a work such as *The First of May, 1977*, elements of a long-ago act unfold into some sort of presentation of documents and fragments to be examined, and the testimonies then bear witness to something not only within the room, but outside of it, in the streets around the gallery space, and in living histories. We can ascertain several unfolding situations in this work. Matters of innocence and non-innocence, the passage into adulthood and all that carries with it in terms of borne memory, the production of perception, the role of day-to-day cultural propaganda, even matters of political crises and war – these all begin to emerge as we see a kind of sketch of the human condition as it is emerging and shifting in the malleable shape of a child and the memories attributed to a long-ago act, here caught up in a web of associations around the war in Yugoslavia.

Children are also the central figures and components of a video series the artist has made (and has been continuing, since 2008, to make), entitled *Je suis malade*. In each video, we see a child (from Australia, Slovenia and other countries) singing to chilling effect the ballad of the same title that Serge Lama wrote and performed in 1973. This melody has been revisited by French and international pop stars many times since, with lyrics such as “*I can't dream no more, I don't even have a personal history no more, I am dirty without you, I am ugly without you, I am like an orphan in a dormitory, I don't feel like living my life no more, My life stops when you leave ... When you leave, I am sick, completely sick, Just like my mother when she used to go out at night, Leaving me alone in my despair, I am sick, perfectly sick, I pour my blood into your body, You have emptied me of all my words, That love is killing me, and if things keep going, I'll die all alone with myself.*”

This whirlwind melodrama is full of a self-chastising and obsessive self-pity. This self-admonishment is almost masochistic in its flagrancy, to the point of an utter loss of self. Each child sings the song with an earnest need to impress, and with what appears to be some sort of familiar abandon. In one of the actual, former pop performances of this song – the song's most popular revival in France, in the 1990s,



Je Suis Malade feat. Fidan / Azerbaijani Version (2014)
HD Video, 4 min 38 sec
Courtesy of the artist

Je Suis Malade feat. Si Tompel / Indonesian Version (2017)
HD Video, 4 min 38 sec, the puppet is produced in collaboration with Iwan Effend
Courtesy of the artist

actually – a tragic and pointless portrait of despair and heartbreak is swallowed in the spectacle of *kitsch* to disappear into the pleasure of the attentive audience, as an almost fascistic impulse that binds bodies in the crowd together. What remains is a universal self-hatred and bathos, albeit not a knowing one but rather one of *jouissance* and shared, collective pleasure. And thus, the question arises: why would one stage such a troubling set of expressions with different, international children in recording studios, those who do not know the meaning (or the language) of that which they are singing?

One must admit, when taking a closer look, that there is something rather unsettling in the conditions sought out, prepared and presented within Dejan Kaludjerović's work. At first glance, the video series *Je suis malade* appears innocuous. It depends on how far one scratches away at the lyrics and how much one weighs on the mournful, masochistic expression that, while being pure *kitsch*, has also – because of this and in equal measure – far-reaching impact across the cultural spectrum (at least in the French-language world). The artist is scraping away at common, universal principles imbedded in language and in shared cultural formations, especially in the dominance of the image in contemporary, Western society (yet also through complex cultural expressions, be it in the omnipresence of pop music or in Hollywood films) to get at some of the impulses behind what we might identify as the invisible forms of violence in these representations. It is an uncomfortable process even though these presentations at first glance appear familiar, even *gemütlich*.³ The everyday veneer of common perception and language are held up to a kind of critical, funhouse mirror that distorts their everyday dreaminess and comfort into an analysis of despair, sometimes drifting into a nightmarish reality. This is done through an assemblage of somewhat *off* components – as in the *Je suis malade* video series that puts together a pop ballad and children singing it – that sets everything together in a kind of blurry, off-kilter effect. This is both dizzying and worrying; for what appears normally in a stable guise (lyrics, common customs, heartbreak as a common muse for a pop song, or, as in the *First of May* or even the *Conversations* material in this very exhibition, discussions of war, belief, death, religion and so on) all breaks down, and then the related, apparent belief systems often made up of ongoing forms of self-delusion and mutually agreed upon fantasy allow themselves not only to be seen, but to be prodded at. This prodding, which is the very act of making and showing these works of art in their video and installation formats, in fact, brings the most discomfort, if one looks at these works for a long enough time – something that one can, naturally, choose not to do, which indeed would also reveal their nature in another fashion. Indeed, at one point, this essay was going to be titled, “Playhouse Mirror-Effect: On the Work of Dejan Kaludjerović”. This so-called reflection, whether one looks at it or not, is palpable.

Thus, with the installation *Conversations*, the streams of often naïve responses by the children in these recordings appear at first glance to simply be these reflections in the form of curious absurdities, humorous outbursts, and perhaps a few slightly enlightened musings. Now and then something eloquent, mildly frightening and even profound is spoken by these kids. As with his previous works, the entire assemblage of this several-year process takes on the format of an unusual sociological research, one with apparently no direct or pragmatic results. The viewer is left to himself/herself to make conclusions; however, the artist, as we can get glimpse at in the above text, is certainly concerned with the origins

³ German for “cozy, snugly, homely”.

of ideological, philosophical and political thinking as it manifests within various communities and cultures. This work presents these concerns within an apparent framework of childhood innocence, re-orienting familiar symbols and dialogue in an uneasy manner into a grander mirror of collective thinking. Yet again, when we look closer and begin to not only dissect the content of what these different children from different cultures are saying but also consider its apparent universality, we again come to the same conclusion as above: that there are currents of a shared human psychosis and hints at darker impulses here. Dejan Kaludjerović stoically pokes away at these impulses as they appear in his ongoing investigations. It is for us to decide what to do about them.