

**I DON'T KNOW THAT
WORD...YET**
ДЕЈАН КАЛУДЈЕРОВИЋ
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Кнез Михаилова 6, Београд

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The Art Gallery
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I Don't Know That Word...Yet



I HAVE NEVER SEEN A EUROPEAN

In the past ten years, stories in various media, both in the local and international context, have often included a sentence referring to the activity of the European Union, European Commission or European Central Bank, certainly the most relevant structures in the area that many think of as the Old Continent. In investigative journalism and state-run tabloids alike, these three entities credibly describe a paradigm that has been falling apart at the seams for a long time.

The *merits* that can be attributed to the European bureaucracy are great in many ways, but they mostly refer to the preservation of territorial integrity, i.e., general security and protection from influences that are not inherent in European values, whatever they may be. At this moment, compromised and contaminated by the Right that contributes to the frequent increase in violence and hatred of all kinds and forms, Europe is no longer able to ride the bull as in a Greek myth, and it seems as if it has no alternative but to bring to consciousness centuries of domination based on racism, destruction and looting, and reformulate its own actions.

In the vortex of the current economic crisis, gruesome wars, migrations and climate catastrophe, practically at the beginning of the end of the world, the question arises of who the Europeans are. Are they an extinct species like the Amazons and the Atlanteans? And far more important, does such a determination have an identity foothold in coherent political subjectivity?

During the past decade, Dejan Kaludjerović has developed his multimedia project with a simple, yet very intriguing name, *Conversations*. So far, this project, based on his work with children from eight world cities, aged seven to ten, has had several iterations and involved different media (object, photography, video/audio installation, site-specific) in order to provide answers to the aforementioned, apparently, puzzling question.

The latest edition of *Conversations* is based on the opera performance *Conversations: I Don't Know That Word... Yet*, which was performed in 2021 in Graz, at the prestigious Steirischer Herbst Festival. However, it is a new work – a five-channel ambient audio-video installation, set at the Art Gallery of the Cultural Centre of Belgrade, and it puts Kaludjerović's multi-year project in a completely different context. So, here we are not talking about the documentation of the Austrian performance (although it is largely based on it), but about a completely new procedure whose goal is precisely – conversation, that is, the establishment of a dialogue between sound, digitally generated image and the physical presence of the viewer.

By juxtaposing two planes, the changing background made of frames that the artist shot especially for this work and a series of four screens with individual projections of the performers presented in the talking-head manner, an immersive environment is created. The narrative flow, based on eight thematic songs (*Fears, House, Freedom, Expressions, Hairdresser, Enemies, They, Europe*) derived from Kaludjerović's scripts of selected statements of the interviewed children, enters into a direct dialogue with the viewer, stunned by the hybrid musical performance that combines electronic music with genres of hymns, lullabies, hip hop and opera.

Images, music and text are building a dramaturgically strong and consistent whole through a tangle of glitches, intense polychromatic changes and other interventions. Towards the exploration of the scope of children's play, the artist's imagination, expressed for the first time through a complex collaboration with composer Marija Ba-

lubdžić, playwright Tanja Šljivar, director Bojan Đorđev and performers Zoja Borovčanin, Liza Cristelli, Christoph Gerhardus and Sebastian Hiti, reaches its culmination.

Here we should take into account the fact that the artist himself enters the research process mostly focused on participation and performativity. Therefore, the setting in the gallery space can also be seen as a backdrop within which – with the help of children's voices (from various contexts, class and ethnic groups) embodied through the figures of the performers, and certain objects such as props (alphabet blocks and mikado screen holders) – a unique ephemeral order is built anew through viewers' interaction with the found scene.

Despite the obvious metaphors produced with the compiled statements of children, emphasising current socio-political phenomena and problems, this setting corresponds to the present-day image order and screen culture. Similar to avatars, like some minimalist Power Rangers, the performers utter the text in a humorous, but also sometimes disturbing way so as to fully express the schizophrenia of the contemporary moment.

Such a performance is inviting, like a child's game among other things. However, as capitalism persistently monitors, controls and, if necessary, punishes quietly and stealthily and, with the help of algorithms, pushes fake news, conspiracy theories and political spin, the emancipatory potential of children's play is waning.

Europeans who recycle, follow the rules and are automatically good people is a cynical thought even though it comes from children. Such an observation is not at all surprising considering the fact that childhood, like any other aspect of human life, has become commodified. Thwarted by TikTok and constant performance in front of a screen, children more and more often see play as an activity moderated by digital technology that largely blurs the line between reality and fiction. Alienation becomes a common phenomenon, and such a changed view of the world limits the perception of the wider picture and the manifold nuances of social reality.

However, this statement is applicable only to those generations whose childhood was not exposed to various forms of systematic exclusion and far more painful processes which non-belonging, non-white, non-Christian, etc. inevitably go through on their way across the sea and seven mountains to attaining the status of that flattering title of European, which their Western peers from the Old Continent can boast of.

Given the multitude of differences, countless challenges and constant anxiety, being a human, let alone a child, on this planet right now is far from easy. However, by giving space to the most vulnerable whose voices are not heard enough, like children, the level of social awareness can perhaps be raised. This is exactly how the work *I Don't Know That Word... Yet* functions, suggesting that with the help of imagination, play, humour and togetherness, we can better understand this world and make it, if not ideal, then at least a good place to grow up.

Vladimir Bjeličić
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