



Well, I want in general, when I grow up to become a blogger, YouTuber.

Foreigners Are People Who Can See Spirits

In “Purity and Danger” (1966), Mary Douglas observes, “There is a comfortable assumption in the roots of our [Western] culture that foreigners know no true spiritual religion.” Her book examines how societies classify the world into binary categories of pure and impure to preserve social boundaries and, in doing so, portray the ‘other’ as both threatening and ‘extra-ordinary’. Foreigners are often perceived as impure when they fail to conform to the internal logic of the society they are expected to integrate into.

When eight-year-old Nikita remarks, “Foreigners are people who can see spirits”—a statement that lends its title to Dejan Kaludjerović’s solo exhibition at Memphis, Linz—he captures, with striking clarity, the interconnectedness of such figures. Principles of equivalence and assimilation are defined here. His seemingly guileless observation reframes foreigners as beings with an almost otherworldly, auratic ability, at once challenging and corroborating the societal attraction and fear described by Douglas. Much like spirits, foreigners are defined by their displacement, bearing the burden of betraying their origins or no longer fully identifying with them. Nonetheless, living in a state of perpetual in-betweenness grants them a unique perspective: the ability to perceive the unseen and the unspoken.

Nikita’s statement ties directly to Kaludjerović’s long-standing project *Conversations* (2013–ongoing). In this body of work—which manifests as sound, performances, and sculptures—the artist employs a processual and discursive framework of interviews to engage with children from diverse socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds. While the children’s responses may initially seem lighthearted, they ultimately expose unsettling undertones. Adopting the role of a listener, Kaludjerović collects concise yet incisive remarks on complex issues such as foreignness, social exclusion and inclusion, war, and more.

In this exhibition, the series “Drawings from the Conversations” (2016–ongoing), produced from interviews conducted in Vladikavkaz (Russia), Dnipro (Ukraine), and Tehran (Iran), transforms the first room of Memphis into a hall of mirrors. These stamp-like drawings prompt visitors to embark on a process of self-reflection. How can the ‘pure,’ uncensored imagination of a child carry ‘dangerous’ warnings, forcing us to confront uncomfortable realities such as war, trauma, and displacement? And how do the systems of values that both cause and emerge from such experiences actively inform the boundless yet fragile landscapes of their imagination?

This series of drawings builds upon a previous iteration of *Conversations*, originating from a 2014 project in Baku. That project incorporated a mix of three alphabets: Russian Cyrillic, Azeri (a Turkish dialect), and the Lezgi minority language of Azerbaijan. In both the earlier and current iterations, the intentionally cryptic design of the drawings reflects the artist’s view of language as often inaccessible or fragmented. By employing pastel colours and toy-like objects such as wooden letter blocks—associated with playtime and movable type printing—Kaludjerović points to the ideological matrices of families, schools, and media that imprint biases on children.

By engaging in conversations with them, he reaffirms Gilbert Simondon’s principle of individuation, which posits that the individual emerges through a dynamic process involving the material world and relational context. School children aged six to ten exist in a state of “metastability”—a condition full of potential yet not fixed into a definitive form. It is precisely this liminal state that children share with both foreigners and spirits, enabling them to articulate the unspeakable contradictions of the society they live in and to envision the unseeable in their dreams.

The fragile yet tangible presence of their voices in the drawings undergoes a shift in the immersive film *Dreams Station* (2024), encountered in the second gallery of Memphis. Here, the tragic reality of the aforementioned principle of assimilation comes into focus. Recorded just one month before the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the children’s statements lose intensity in their materiality but gain profundity in substance. They resonate like whispers—ephemeral yet enduring—lingering in the enigmatic Dnipro-Lotsmanska Railway Station. This poignant setting sees the children, caught in the brutality of war, assimilated into spirits. As if witnessing an unsolicited rite of passage, their voices transform into a murmured lament that evokes a sense of injustice. The glorious future depicted by the large ceramic mosaic panel *The Metallurgists*, spanning an entire wall of one of the waiting rooms, clashes with the children’s articulated dreams, which seem destined never to depart from that station. The deliberate cinematic decision to reverse the footage amplifies this discord, as the fragile hopes move in a direction opposite to the retrofuturistic aspirations embodied in the mosaic.

Leaving us to wonder whether they speak from this world or another, Nikita’s and the other children’s voices echo across the exhibition space—not to haunt us, but to invite us to assume the position of foreigners. This ultimately means observing and listening to seemingly invisible and inaudible signs, and exercising the ability of premonition to take a stand in the present.