

1.19 / Precisely In Between

Interview with Dan and Lia Perjovschi

By Hou Hanru

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Image: "The Institute Drawing," 2010; marker and chalk on wall; installation detail, Walter and McBean Galleries, SFAI. Courtesy of the Artist and Lombard-Fried Projects, New York.

*Romania-born and -based artist Dan Perjovschi's medium is site-specific drawing... His "canvas," like that of a graffiti artist (whose "baroque" and territory-marking methods he nevertheless firmly distinguishes from his own), is the nearest wall, preferably topographically marginalized or, in his own words, "left over." And his utensils are nothing more than those easily accessible in a grade-school classroom: chalk, marker, pencil, or pen....The artistic voice he developed as his native land began to turn away from **Ceaușescu-style communism** toward its 2007 inclusion in the EU is a voice that retains the traces of its passage—the madness of political austerity and censorship having been transmuted into a method of simplicity and candor, at once humorous and pungently*

critical.

Above all, it's Perjovschi's candor, his commitment to what he calls "leav[ing] the idea intact," that has carried over to his current practice: drawing (and writing) against the grain of one-dimensional transnational media conglomerates whose Big Brother-like "right" to stay—and to keep their target audience—on message seems all but indefeasible....With a lightness of gesture, his aim is to activate and to celebrate the space he has been given to work on and with, as well as to avoid the surface cheer but deep cynicism of the cultural, social, political, and economic prerogatives he counters.¹

Hou Hanru: Starting from a historical perspective, Dan and Lia, your work has always utilized humor and irony, as well as critiqued social images, especially media images that represent a social system, and how they position human relationships. I wonder, in the very beginning, was this humor and irony a way for you to survive a dictatorship, and if so, how do you negotiate that as an artist?

Dan Perjovschi: I think the humor and irony is found more on my side. Lia is more serious. For me, it was like a national sport at a certain moment—you don't have any kind of civic courage, but you have a lot of jokes. People in my country relied on jokes, and somehow, to mock the leadership became a kind of intimate resistance. But nobody did it in public; in public, things were very serious. In my case, I didn't really understand that I had this power for creating images and analyzing them until very late, after the change in government. At that moment, all this illusion of doing great art was gone, and I was just trying to find an honest language to comprehend what was happening around me.

HH: But it seems that, at that time, a similar sense of humor was pervasive among many Communist countries—the same kind of mockeries and strategies for creating a little space for self-expression or personal kind of critique. We can find it in many works; for example in work by the Bulgarian artist **Nedko Solakov** and even some of the Russian artists like **Oleg Kulik**. What was particular to Romania at the time?

LP: I consider myself to be an alien in my country and that part of Europe. I took everything serious and I couldn't laugh, because I didn't like my country. Actually, we share guiltiness, which means you have to look deeper, and when you look deeper, it may become too serious.

HH: How did you access modern or contemporary art at that time? In other Eastern European countries, there was a tradition of avant-garde movements before Communism. How did you get access to the avant-garde in Romania?



"Projects 85: Dan Perjovschi, What Happened to Us?" 2007; permanent marker on wall; installation detail, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy of the Artist and Lombard-Fried Projects, New York.

LP: We found out about the so-called experimental artists from the '70s in 1992, after the revolution. The information came through Russians; they told us. There was a moment of experimentation in Poland and other countries from central Europe, but I wouldn't call ours significant.

DP: We didn't live in Bucharest; perhaps people who lived there knew more. The communication was totally censored, so it was like islands without boats: we could not travel between them. We had rare information from the few people who could travel a little bit, and who sold us books and magazines from Poland or elsewhere, but that was it!

LP: But we start doing performance art before the revolution. I started in 1987, doing performances similar to people in the West in the '60s. I really had the impression that I invented it, not knowing the history.

DP: We are great admirers of Conceptual art, because our hands were trained, but not our brains. Therefore, we were very surprised by Conceptual art and have great respect for the artists from the '60s and '70s who did amazing works. We got to know some of the people that were relevant in the '70s, and then gradually we filled the gaps. One of my great surprises was to find out about early movements like Dada; I had no clue and no idea about it! But I found it too late! I couldn't incorporate them in my own strategy.

Our knowledge about our own art history or culture was corrupted by the Communists. Brancusi was understood in Romania just as a folk sculptor. The problem is very interesting. We rediscover these figures after the change, and in some cases, you just put them on a pedestal because they are the sculptor of your culture, and then you find out that they were from the extreme right, so you put them down again. It is a big shock to comprehend these figures.

We are still in the process of rediscovering them. This applies to Dada, to Brancusi, to whatever philosophers, because our direct links were totally manipulated. We have to redefine, re-understand, and relearn; we have to position ourselves differently.

LP: Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco, and Dada were more important than Brancusi for my generation of artists. And the accidents were very important for both of us. We got to know about mail art in '85. I was working in a theater, Dan was working in a museum, and we were watching Hungarian television without knowing the language, trying to make sense out of images, using some words from a dictionary and so on.

DP: This was the idea of "how to travel without traveling." We traveled by mail, and we had no copy machines, because they were forbidden in a Communist country. So artists sent us a Xerox, we sent them original drawings. [laughs]

LP: It was about attitude, because a lot of the mail art were correspondences about some political events in Mexico, the United States, or Belgium. So somehow, without having necessarily political problems on our minds, we were provoked. More so without knowing...

HH: It was the air of the time.

DP: We were also a bit late, making our art at a late stage. All that disappeared when we could travel. We had no idea that this was coming from the art nouveau; we just joined it because it was messages from the world.

HH: It is interesting to see that, even today, both of you are working through questions of the world and the global. Dan's work is very much about the phenomena happening on the surface of the globe. Lia's work digs much more into "how time is organized" in the making of the world. What was the image of the world at that time for you? How big was it?

LP: My only wish was to travel. I was in love with the world and I hated my country. In general, I don't like the things that I was forced to like. I really am in love with the whole world.

HH: At that time, did you imagine that you could travel? How did you conceive a view of the world? **Kabakov** was always imagining places in the universe itself and wondered how to fly away.

"THE INSTITUTE DRAWING" IS ON VIEW AT **WALTER AND MCBEAN GALLERIES** AT SAN FRANCISCO ART INSTITUTE THROUGH SEPTEMBER 18. 2010.

Dan Perjovschi lives and works in Bucharest, Romania and has had exhibitions at Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy; Galerie Michel Rein Paris, France; Museum of Modern Art, New York; and Basel Kunsthalle, Basel, Switzerland; amongst others. He received his MFA from George Enescu Conservatoire of Fine Arts, Iasi, Romania in 1985.

LP: I had fragments, so I traveled each time I found an image or I saw reportage on the television. Even now, I only need one image, and I travel! [laughs]

DP: It's building from scratch, from little pieces. You are doing a puzzle, and you start from Hollywood movies or French films, from pieces of translated literature, from whatever you have at your disposal. Traveling is one of the things we fulfilled. It is still extraordinary for me.

I have been afraid to be seen just as a Romanian artist, or after a while, an Eastern European artist. So I tried everything possible to become an international artist. You can dig against the politics of a country only if you are known in the West. Then, they don't kill you. So this is what we did. We became known in the West or outside Romania to be listened to inside Romania.

HH: It's a very common phenomenon. In a way, the revolution is the product of so-called globalization. After the end of the Communist regime, Romania had to embrace the Western European economy and social system. How did you see the function of your work change during this transition? And also, as independent artists commenting on issues common to Europe and the West, and not specifically about what was happening in Romania?

DP: I think that our way to build up works and practice changed because of this, and the way we are living here and there changes things also. When Lia started the project of contemporary art in Bucharest, everybody believed that it was an archive about Romanian artists, but it wasn't; it was about art history at large. At a certain moment, you feel that you are not allowed to have a vision or a statement about art in general, but you can have your own piece. We tried to refuse that. My struggle was to get out of that, to embrace as quickly as possible some kind of international level. And now, after some years, I have the clarity, or the distance, to be able to apply criticism to both.

We've been activists for years in our own context, so we dedicated a lot of our time and money to build the context. We were not able to build it institutionally, but we built ideas, discussions, and things like that. And now we are more selective with our time and the places where we show. I gained the self-awareness to not spread energy around—it might be my age!

HH: I think your work today is very much a critique of the liberal capitalist world and its promotion as beneficial to the world. Your main approach is to shift from a command of your own context to embrace the one of wherever you go to. And that is about where you find yourselves. Every time that you travel to a place to work in such a systematic way, how do you identify yourself in that temporary state?



"The Fifth Floor: Ideas Taking Space," 2008; chalk on black wall; installation detail, Tate

DP: I try to introduce something to the way people think, especially in the art world today. I am criticizing neoliberal society, which is comprised of all these fake dreams and selling out. But I criticize this from my experience living in a totalitarian society. On the one hand, the drawings are absolutely for somebody who got trapped in his own country. The world of today is amazing in the possibilities given to the individual. On the other hand, all these promises came with lies, corporations, selling, markets, and all this money, money, money.... In a sense, I realized that there is enormous potential, but if you look at the figures—how much poverty, how many deaths—it is crazy! You know? It's unacceptable; let's say that. So, I try to make criticisms that people can understand. I don't want to be cynical; it is very easy nowadays to be very cynical and cruel.

LP: He is not underlining things precisely because they are in between.

DP: I am not convinced, either, that I am a depository of the truth. I might change my mind or some of the statements next week, because I might read another article or be subjected to another statement or opinion.

There is something purely visual to what I do because I try to have a vocabulary of very minimal signs. I recycle some of the drawings. Some I get impressionistically—looking around and listening to discussions—while others come through research and trying to get to the bottom of things. These signs, which are minimal, have to be named in order to make

a difference. A square can be a museum, a painting, a computer, or a place, so I have to put a text with it. I've been shocked numerous times because to me it was so clear, and somebody came into the show and described something totally differently. So I don't have total control over the drawings and their meanings, although I try to be very precise.

LP: And all the time, he tries to make new drawings, so he looks hard for new issues.

HH: An important issue that artists have to face today, which is totally different from the outset of your career, when art was much more about the ideological struggle, is that art has become a normal commodity. How do you survive this relationship between art and market?

LP: I think art is really like research in physics, chemistry, or math. If you are looking for something, you may reach ninety years of age and nobody will appreciate you, but maybe you find something. I believe in this kind of artist. If you enter the market, you are pushed here, there, and further, but without you having too much say about it. So I am for the thinker artists, and not for the maker artists.

DP: Wow! [laughs] Usually my statement is "I am not very convinced about the left or right." [laughs] I understand the base and the function of the market, but because we didn't grow up with it, I don't have the real notion about it. I cannot comprehend why my work operates like this. I don't have a reason or a motive why it costs this and not that. So I stay as far as possible from it, but I still work with galleries because I understand that this is a system, and it is another way to communicate. For me, art is more of a way to live: we go from place to place, and this is our time to think while building an art project.

LP: My strategy is to teach or do related jobs. You can survive doing a lot of things because art means a lot of things. I really believe that the art market becomes way too powerful, but we cannot only blame the art market; we have to blame all of us, because we are all part of this.

DP: I have just a single permanent wall drawing, which is in a public library in Prague. I don't do permanent drawings, so this installation will go away, and what stays promises just to seed the notebook. It didn't start as a criticism of the market; I did it because I feel free to do this. I didn't have a precise plan, I just somehow adapted it, like jazz, improvising. I like escaping the market in a sense. But I haven't experienced living in New York; I come to do a project and leave. I don't know what it means to survive in the condition of an "ultracapitalist country." We enter and exit the system. In a sense we are balancing...

LP: We work really hard. We need to have jobs in Romania. It is not such a big pressure, but it is another type of pressure. We work very hard, but we feel free.

DP: I think the market in itself is not such a big problem. It has been corrupted, that is the problem! Art is not only a commodity, it is also an investment. Somehow, museums became obsolete investments funds. The institutions that made the rules of the game are now out of the game. They can no longer control everything.

HH: The last question is actually regarding institutions, as this project, made specifically for the institute here, is called "The Institute Drawing." Is there is something more specific for you to say about what our Art Institute [SFAI] could be, especially in an environment where public places are disappearing?



"The Institute Drawing," 2010; marker and chalk on wall; installation view, Walter and McBean Galleries, SFAI. Courtesy of the Artist and Lombard-Fried Projects, New York.

DP: I admire and appreciate galleries that have a sense of courage and experimentation. They are platforms that maintain a certain freedom for thinking and building ideas. But the best is that this is a school to train people to do this! This is the territory of much more freedom, because you are experimenting and learning, and this is fantastic! This should not necessarily be a fortress, but an open platform where the notion of institutionalization is critiqued continually. You can do this here. In general, art schools can provide certain shelter against commercialism or big interests.

I know that the students are learning to do engraving and silkscreen, but the spill on the Gulf of Mexico is still going on, so we have to think about that. When you learn art and you are an artist, you have to think, you have to have this context. And it is not only about the oil, is also about how artists understand these issues.

I can talk about them more freely in a school than in a museum like MoMA. I can be very open and tolerant, but I cannot cover all the angles. Sometimes I am very angry with myself because I forgot to draw or think about something, so somewhere in the history of my notebook drawings, a particular issue will not show up. Maybe people have something to say and they know their own issues here that I could not find. And even in some of the cases, they probably have a different interpretation than me, and this will be interesting too.

NOTES:

1. Hou Hanru. From the essay for "The Institute Drawing" at the Walter and McBean Galleries, San Francisco Art Institute, June 17–September 18, 2010.

Lia Perjovschi lives and works in Bucharest, Romania and has exhibited at Dorottya Gallery, Budapest, Wilkinson Gallery, London, England; Gallery Yujiro, London, England as well as the Sydney Biennial in 2008 and has had multiple residencies and fellowships. She graduated from the Bucharest Art Academy in 1993.