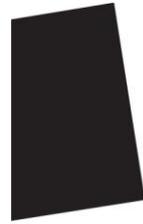


Dan Perjovschi: COMMA 05

Essay by Richard Gott



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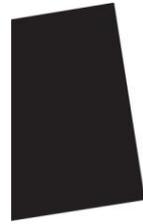
Dan Perjovschi is an internationally famous Romanian artist whose witty and incisive work is both immediately attractive and politically acute. His artwork cartoons are usually drawn on the walls of galleries, but he has experimented with other art forms over the years, including performance and installation art. At a superficial level his drawings have some affinity with those of Saul Steinberg, although he was unaware of the American artist's work until he visited New York for the first time in 1995. He has shown widely throughout Europe and the United States, and some of his drawings have been seen before in Britain, at the Edinburgh Festival in 2004, and most recently at Tate Modern (in the Members' Room) in 2006.

Now in his late forties, Perjovschi belongs to a talented generation of artists that began their studies during the Communist regime of Nicolae Ceausescu and have subsequently been active in the recent tumultuous and conflictive years. "The last years of Ceausescu were terrible!" Perjovschi recalls. "Not the shortage of electricity, of heat and soap and toilet paper. No, the shortage of human thinking. There was intellectual mass suicide. You couldn't really deal with that by painting a still life." Perjovschi himself has been in the vanguard of those searching for new idioms in the post- Communist era, in a country still constricted by its historical experience.

Potential artists were singled out as children in Communist Romania, and given a formal, academic training, but Perjovschi soon found that he had more talent for drawing than for painting. At school in the Transylvanian town of Sibiu, he would draw caricatures of his teachers to amuse his fellow students. Later, when Ceausescu decided that the country had a superfluity of artists, he survived in the interstices of the state system before being able to explore new artistic possibilities after Ceausescu's downfall in 1989.

Perjovschi's traditional way of working is to draw on the gallery walls, sometimes sketching from high up on a ladder with an audience present, as happened during his show at MOMA in New York in 2007. An alternative tried out in 1999, when representing Romania at the Venice Biennale, was to draw on the floor, allowing his illustrations of contemporary life to be slowly eroded under the feet of visitors. In reaction to the propagandist nature of public art in Communist times, he likes to emphasize the ephemeral as well as the participation of the audience.

At Bloomberg SPACE, inspired by the thought of Bloomberg as a purveyor of information, and by the need for transparency in the transmission of information, he has been drawing on the glass



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windows. Some of his drawings in previous exhibitions have had a single life, while others have been allowed to develop over time. An initial drawing of an artist lying on the floor with a hammer and sickle stabbed in his back has a group of observers saying “Nice Show”, suggesting an ignorance of what the artist might actually have been living through. A later version, reflecting the disillusion of the more recent era, has the same stabbed artist confronted by a similar figure with a credit card in his back, and a caption that reads “We have a lot in common.” Ironic and sceptical, Perjovschi’s perceptions are highly political and exceptionally well informed. The ideas that lie behind the drawings, he explains, are collected from everyday experience, but particularly from newspapers, national and foreign. They come “from talks, sightseeing, rumours, newspaper articles, gossip, television, jokes, major stories, insignificant stories, global news, local events, everything.” He never stops working, drawing incessantly in a series of notebooks. Then, “out of two hundred drawings, twenty will make it to the wall.”

Perjovschi would probably prefer to be considered simply as an artist, but given the particular recent history of his country and his own involvement in the hard struggle to create a new cultural environment there, it is perhaps inevitable that he should often be perceived as a specifically Romanian artist, in whose work can be seen the tensions of the new post-Communist society created over the past two decades. Perjovschi can make fun of this perception, disliking the notion that a particular group of artists can be exoticised in this manner. He has a drawing of himself (he has a trademark moustache) with the legend “I am not exotic I am exhausted.” He has in fact been tireless in campaigning on behalf of Romanian artists in the surprising environment in which they found themselves after 1989.

For much of the time he has been associated with his wife, Lia Perjovschi, a performance artist who also comes from Sibiu. They have worked together collaboratively and politically, although they do not make work together. Lia was instrumental in setting up the Archive of Contemporary Art in Bucharest, later the Centre of Art Analysis (CAA), a space for critical debate started by Lia that Dan has supported and promoted. This year she has been part of a team that has set up “Pavilion Unicredit”, a permanent alternative art space in a former bank in the city, itself partly financed by a bank.

Bucharest became an influential centre for artists in the 1990s, and Dan Perjovschi became a familiar presence when publishing drawings about the country’s political and social condition in *Revista 22*, an independent weekly (named after December 22, the date of Ceausescu’s overthrow in 1989) to which he has also contributed as a critic and essayist. Through this influential magazine, he became acquainted with a wide range of politicians and social activists, as well as writers and historians, academics and scholars. “My first published drawings were political but arty. Ten years later they are still political, but more rough and biting. I’m not involved in the gallery system, still less the market, but I do have a place on this independent newspaper platform. This has helped me to discover what the art world had failed to see: the simple power of drawing.” *Revista 22* has helped to form and sustain the new emerging culture, but over time, says Perjovschi, “the scene has diversified and the number of players has increased dramatically”. The



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atmosphere has changed significantly. “Bucharest has become too political and too bureaucratic. It has lost its charm and become too cool - and too lazy. Life-style has replaced life. We don’t talk of freedom anymore, we only talk of money. Romania has passed from extreme communism to extreme capitalism, yet much of the country - ‘deep Romania’ - remains in the Middle Ages.”

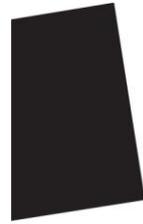
Perjovschi grew up in a country without a cartoon culture – there were no samizdats, no fanzines, no underground press. “The media and the public space were totally controlled,” he explains. “If you owned a typewriter, you had to go four times a year to give a sample of your typing to the police.” There were no cartoon strips at all, and even witty cartoons in newspapers like those of Matty Aslan, who had a daily column in *Romania Libera* for many years, were innocuous and unpolitical.

Yet a handful of western cartoonists did succeed in penetrating the Iron Curtain and Perjovschi recalls reading, as a schoolboy, *Le Journal de Pif*, a hugely popular weekly comic for children, produced under the auspices of the French Communist Party. Over many years it was the only western magazine permitted in Romania. *Pif le chien* was a dog character (created by José Cabrero Arnal) that gave its name to the paper, and there were several similar creations. Perjovschi says he used to love *Corto Malteze* and *Rahan*, two of the other comic figures in *Le Journal de Pif*. Unknown or ignored in the Anglo-Saxon world, these comic characters were popular throughout Europe during the postwar years. Perjovschi remembers them with affection, but forgot about them when he went to high school. “*Pif* was important for my childhood, but it never played a role in my becoming an artist.”

An influential element closer to home were the frescoes of the 16th century churches of the Bukovina in the northeast of the country – at Sucevita, Voronetz and Humor – that are painted on the outside walls. “Those painted churches have long been the diamond of Romanian tourism,” says Perjovschi. “They were praised and accepted by the Communist authorities, and we studied them as art history. I loved them not as religious stories but as cartoon strips. I visited the sites while a student at high school in Sibiu, and then later when I was a student at the Art Academy in Iasi. What really impressed me about them, something that became clearer over the years, was their size, the multitude of characters portrayed, and the composition as a whole.”

In the 1990s, when the Orthodox church became an important player in the country’s politics, priests used to turn up at gallery openings. “I would sometimes make a joke by nominating the wall paintings as my source of inspiration. I really pissed off Romanian nationalists and academics by saying that they were my only ‘model’.”

Romania at the start of the 21st century has witnessed an explosion of creative activity, most noticeably marked by Perjovschi and other visual artists, but also by many young film-makers. A number of brilliant low-budget films that give a harsh and highly critical vision of the continuities in Romanian culture have found an appreciative international audience and helped to put Romania on the map - films like Cristi Puiu’s “*Death of Mr Lazarescu*” in 2005; Corneliu Porumboiu’s “*12:08*



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East of Bucharest” in 2006; Cristian Mungiu’s “*4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*” in 2007; and Cristian Nemescu’s “*California Dreaming*” in 2008.

“I think the emergence of the new generation of Romanian film directors has been great,” says Perjovschi. “Suddenly, as a visual artist, I come from somewhere – from Romania.” His favourite film is “*12:08 East of Bucharest*” which takes place in the small town of Vasliu where three guests at a hopelessly incompetent television talk-show discuss the events of December 22, 1989, when Ceausescu was overthrown just after midday in Bucharest. The film reflects the tragic and absurd illusions that Romanians have about their recent history.

There is no direct link between the film-makers and the visual artists, says Perjovschi, but “they do have a contextual influence over the visual arts and a general influence over the cultural scene. They broke with the old generation that was stuck in the past, and the new, more hawkish critics are with them.” So too is Perjovschi and other members of his generation who have been using their art to encourage debate about the direction Romanian culture and politics should be taking in the post-Communist era. His drawings are wonderfully witty, but there is no disguising the fact that his humour is brandished as a political weapon.

Richard Gott

Richard Gott, a former features editor of The Guardian, is a writer and historian.