

Surreptitious rebellion

A conversation with Dan Perjovschi

Scarcely a week goes by without an exhibition of his work opening somewhere in the world and virtually exhibition is devised and drawn by him on the spot. The Romanian artist and cartoonist Dan Perjovschi is having the busiest years of his career. American artist Otto Berchem is a big fan of drawing and cartoons and managed to entice Perjovschi into a conversation about his oeuvre which is just as taciturn as it is boisterous.

By Otto Berchem

Otto Berchem: Didn't your parents teach you not to draw on the walls?

Dan Perjovschi: 'They didn't need to. When I was kid I was a nice, boring, "where-you-put-it-you-find-it" kind of guy. No need to be taught. Never dared to do something outrageous. All of this changed very late in my life, in my twenties. When I was ready to do foolish things it was the worst period of the dictatorship, when nobody could do anything. Therefore I boiled inside and was completely frustrated, preparing myself to explode. That's what I've been doing since. Getting it all out.'

Can you briefly tell me about the kind of work you were doing that time (before the ousting of Ceausescu)?

'For a long period (general school of art; high school of art; and art academy, and some years after that) I did a lot of bad art. They almost killed me in schools with their still-lives and post-realist socialist compositions (obligatorily happy). I was studying painting but I hated painting. I was very unhappy with what I did so I tried a gateway, and I remembered the time I did cartoons about my teacher in high school and had an enormous success among my colleagues. It took me 10 years to get back to that stage.

In the last years of the Ceausescu regime, due to my wife Lia (a much more courageous artist than me) and a group of young artists that happened to be in the same city, I started to do performances (without knowing such things existed and had a history). Lia and I started to use our home as a venue for art activities... It was pathetic but it was a beginning. Having no idea political things would change I, like the rest of the more progressive artists, just imagined a way and a practice to survive in an acceptable mental condition. This meant a mild mute rebellion.'

So you, your wife Lia, and your colleagues are surreptitiously rebelling against the establishment, and then things change radically in 1989. A year later you're drawing cartoons for a political newspaper in Romania, and still doing performances. Was this a case of 'Toto we're not in Kansas anymore'?

‘Absolutely! We weren’t in Kansas anymore, but we weren’t in Wonderland either. The thing is, the honest and sincere artists resisted and the fake ones disappeared into the new situations. Freedom can hit you as hard as dictatorship. At the time of the change Lia was a student in Bucharest, and was involved in all kinds of events. After the Communist regime collapsed, the Student League and its branch in the Art Academy (of which she was the leader) became a strong political force. I was asked to come from where I lived (in the west of the country) and take a job at the Ministry of Culture at the brand new Youth Department. This department had no less of a mission than to crush old habits and install a new revolutionary democratic thinking amongst the cultural rhinoceroses. At the beginning it looked as if we could do it, but in the end we failed. We are all out now but the rhinoceroses are still there (in Armani suits). Try to imagine a week in December 1989 when everybody is kissing in the street because of OUR Revolution, and one month later the country is split into two and each half hates the guts of the other, because of who got the power and who didn’t. We have our own mini Tiananmen Square (the University Square) where the students protesting the neo-communist leadership were crushed by local militia and paramilitary forces. Battalions of miners from the southwest of the country were brought into the city and man, they hit us with a vengeance! Anybody wearing glasses, long hair or blue jeans was in jeopardy. It was a mess and the last cry of communism: barbarism. That was why I turned to political drawings. For me painting was no longer an option. I needed to do something in the public space. And I found it in the pages of a weekly magazine where I still work to this day.’ (www.revista22.ro)

Did you consider the cartoons that you were doing for 22 as part of your artistic practice at the time, or was it something separate from the rest of your work?

‘Actually an American art historian, Kristine Stiles, was the first to write about my newspaper activity as being part of my artistic activity.² In the beginning, for me, art was art and press was press. I did wall or floor drawings but with a sort of handmade pattern based on repeating human faces, kind of conceptual decorative works. Cartoon-like stories came into the picture in 1999 at the Venice Biennial, when I drew with a marker on the entire floor of the Romanian Pavilion. I can now flex my intellectual muscles about that project, but the main reason I did it was because the Romanian Ministry of Culture kept postponing their decision to give me the requested budget and I ended up being forced to find something quick and cheap. Cheap it was, but quick it was not. I drew for three weeks standing on my knees, man. Venice was for me a big piece of concrete floor.’ I let accidents, and happenings, occur in my artistic life.

In your show at the Van Abbemuseum, one of the pieces on the wall was a text that said ‘don’t worry, this is art not cartoon’. I assumed that it was in reference to the controversy over the Danish cartoons of Muhammad, and the ensuing discussion about free speech, but I also found myself thinking of a certain snobbery that the artworld has towards cartoons. It makes me think of the difficulty that David Shrigley had in the beginning of his career, when many in the art scene considered him a cartoonist, and not an artist, and the cartoon/comic scene didn’t understand his work

at all. Maybe I'm focusing too much on that one line, but do you think it's necessary for the so-called artworld to be reminded that your work is art?

'For a long question, a short answer: yes!

Seriously, I did not imagine Shrigley having any problems; his work looks more like drawing than mine. But you are right about the statement on the Van Abbe walls. It was referring to the free-speech-no-Muslim situation, but also hinting to the cartoon looking drawing being underrated in the artworld. That's why sometimes I cross cartoons with graffiti, to mess the genre and make it difficult to rate. Sometimes I do not like being seen as a cartoonist, and sometimes I do not like being seen as a museum artist. That's why you see me in strange spaces. They don't give me white cubes anymore but rough or in between spaces. I do not get catalogues but readers. I've become a kind of lobby artist.'

Let me play devil's advocate here: what's so bad being a cartoonist, and what's so bad being a museum artist?

'About being a cartoonist: The way people say it is bad as if you are some kind of curiosity. About being a museum artist: the way people say it as if you are a kind of celebrity. In my case people are just lazy, if it looks like a cartoon they say cartoon. What I do is an intellectual cartoon. An indoor graffiti. A drawing.'

You've made your work in South America, the US, and all over Europe. Seeing as humour is such an important aspect of your work – the velvet glove over the iron fist – I'm curious how well it – your humour – travels? Will a Turkish audience appreciate something that a German audience completely misses, or do you try and work with a 'globalised' humor?

'I try to globalize myself. There are very site- and time-specific drawings of mine, that even I, after a year or two can't recollect the story. And there are some kinds of universal images. One example is the trashed, cut jeans costing more than intact ones. This drawing functioned everywhere I did it. The same goes for the one with the non-smoking tank, etc. But of course there are differences. I had difficulties to refer to Cypriot problems... I did not know how people would respond, what embarrassed them, what kind of humor they have. During the Istanbul Biennial, the first question from Turkish CNN was: why do you dislike Istanbul? My god, I was sure my drawings showed my interest in the city. I am more relaxed in pure western capitalist countries.

I have not done any serious research but I don't think there are ethnic or age borders (although when I was drawing at the Ludwig Museum Cologne, which was open for the public to see, outspoken American visitors engaged me in conversations even when I was standing four meters high on a scaffold and Germans wouldn't even look at me, so as not to disturb. I saw old people laughing their heads off and young punk metal chained kids not getting any of my drawings). Some people recognize themselves in what I draw, some don't.'

How about your use of text in the drawings? So far I've only seen them in English – which, if you don't mind my saying, is filled with spelling mistakes. To me, that's part

of the charm of your work, as well as the fact that it reinforces the directness of it. You're not sitting around with a dictionary. Are they always in Perjovschi English?

'Yes! I feel very comfortable in this language because I can make mistakes with it and there is no problem (do not try this with French). There are misspellings because when the first time I wanted to correct them, people around me told me to leave them like they were because they were funnier that way. I use a simple and broken English. Like out of a movie. I try to reach as many audiences as possible, and at the moment English is the language that does that. But I'm starting to learn Spanish and I've made some Chinese friends.'

Hopefully Rita Verdonk (the Dutch Minister for Integration and Immigration) won't start insisting that only Dutch be used in public spaces by the time of your upcoming show at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Speaking of which, do you know if they'll be putting you in the lobby or in the actual galleries? You already have some competition in the hallway and elevator – there's some really bad graffiti there at the moment.

'What's wrong with the Dutch these days? We South-Easterners, the bad guys of Europe, thought that the Dutch were tolerance personified, and we as the black sheep should follow and praise them. You're killing our dream, man. One should ask Madam Minister how to spell Red Light District in Dutch.

Regarding the Stedelijk, I told the organizers to let the other 4 artists take whatever spaces they like, and give me the leftovers. So it might well be the lobby. Yeah sometimes I see somebody else's chalk drawing on a street and first I think, when did I do this? Global competition man, and not only from Pettibon.'

Notes

I. 'Concerning Public Art and Messianic Time' in Marius Babias and Achim Konneke (ed.), *Art & Public Spaces*, Verlag der Kunst, Dresden 1998. Excerpt reprinted in *Manifesta 2*, Luxembourg 1998.

Dan Perjovschi has been nominated for The Vincent 2006, under the auspices of which he is showing in the SMCS in Amsterdam from 15 September 2006 until 14 January 2007.

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