The Romanian Artist Protesting Authoritarianism With Doodles

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May 30, 2016

Dan Perjovschi. All photos by Andrei Radu

This article originally appeared on VICE Romania

On the 7th of January, 2015, the whole world was in mourning after the shootings at the French satirical mag **Charlie Hebdo**. A day after that, a frightened Romanian government spoke of instating a big brother-esque law, forcing cell-phone providers to retain their clients data and hand it over to the authorities when asked. While the law was being debated in the government's Victoria Palace, a group of young protesters staged a demonstration right outside the building. A couple of them held signs that read "Freedom of Expression", while another protester held the drawing of a man being shot with machine guns. Both images were created by Romanian artist Dan Perjovschi.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

DEMOCRACIES   OTHERS

Drawing by Dan Perjovschi made during the protests in Gezi Park.

This was not the only time Perjovski's work has appeared in protests. From the Roșia Montană marches against cyanide mining in Romania, to the Turkish protests in Gezi Park and the social movements against the Brazilian World Cup, Perjovschi's drawings have been printed out and used as banners all around the world.

But his work has had the strongest impact in his home country because for a long time nobody cared about youth movements in Romania. The media refused to cover them considering activism – as a whole – irrelevant, unless it was done by the major political parties. When Perjovschi, an internationally renowned artist, backed the local protests with his art, a lot of people became convinced of the importance of fighting for a cause you believe in.

EU PROBLEM:

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At first, Perjovschi's drawings make you laugh. Then, slowly but surely, they leave you with a bitter aftertaste. To find out more about the man behind the drawings, I got in touch with him and asked for a meeting.

"I was born in 1961, when the Berlin wall was built," Perjovschi tells me. "I come from the side that didn't have any graffiti."

Ever since he was a child, Perjovschi loved to draw. At 10 years old, he took his first steps into the world of Soviet art when his parents sent him to art school in the Transylvanian city of Sibiu.

"I didn't realise that things were so bad. I was very young and living in Sibiu – a nice city with girls, love and Lia," said the artist remembering the young woman who would eventually become his wife. "We were in the same class when we were 10. We became friends in the eighth grade, then had a nasty break up and found each other again right before the end of high school, when most people were splitting up."


Perjovschi in Bucharest

But it wasn't long before he started to find out what it meant to grow up in a repressive regime that frowns upon anyone who feels like expressing themselves. "I was in high school and when I opened my textbook, I noticed somebody had drawn a moustache on Ceausescu. I thought to myself, 'Wow, what if the professor sees it?' So I discreetly tore the page, slowly, so nobody would hear me," remembers Perjovschi.

But the teacher caught him and called the principal and the school council. She wanted to kick him out of school. "And I wasn't even trying to act like a dissident, I was just trying to cover my ass."

Because he didn't tear up any other photos of Ceausescu, Perjovschi graduated and went on to art college in Iași. If you ask him to talk about his early work, he makes a sour face, as you've just offered him a rotten apple. "I always hated painting," he tells me. "I ended up majoring in it because there wasn't really an alternative. I did some absolutely horrible paintings. Some sort of boring surrealism."

After college, Dan Perjovschi married Lia and moved to another city, Oradea, where he took a job as a museum curator. There he joined Atelier 35 Oradea, a platform for young artists. "I got there with my crappy painting style and those men influenced me. They worked with photography, they experimented. Meanwhile, my wife had gone to college in Bucharest and she also was responsible for exposing me to new ideas. That was my true education."

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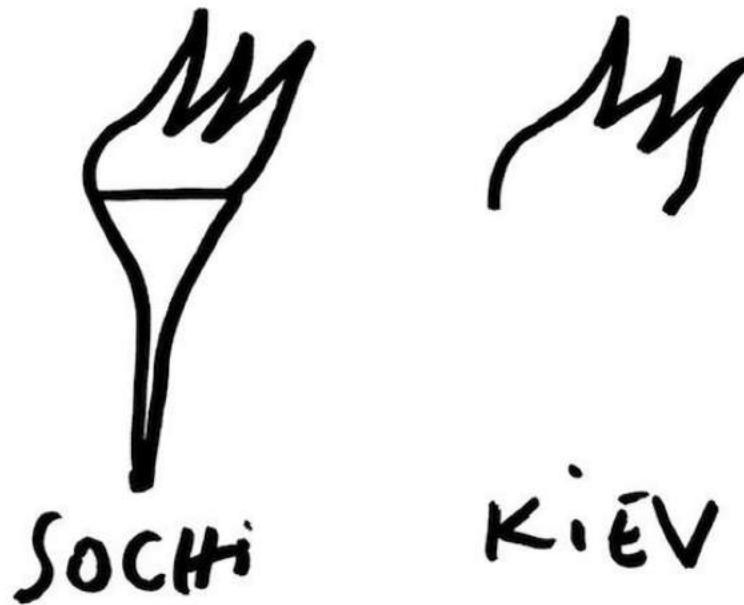
Perjovshci knew each of his works or exhibits would go through the filter of communist censorship. He had to invent his own language, something which couldn't be a protest against dictatorship but which also would disrespect the status quo of paintings of flower pots and apple baskets. That's how he started making his "little people".

"I was doing a sort of pattern; I would make a grid on a paper and draw a little man in each square. The people in charge of censorship didn't get it. I would tell them 'It's about industry, working men, whatever'. They figured out that I was pulling their leg but they needed me to go through with it. In Oradea, we were a young group of experimentalists but we couldn't attack the system. We were basically playing with our dicks in the sand and they let us do it. But we were playing, not hiding."

Despite the Iron Curtain, Dan Perjovschi's art left Romania before he did – in an envelope. He would send his work to foreign artists and they would, in turn, respond with their artwork.

BETTER
GOVERNANCE
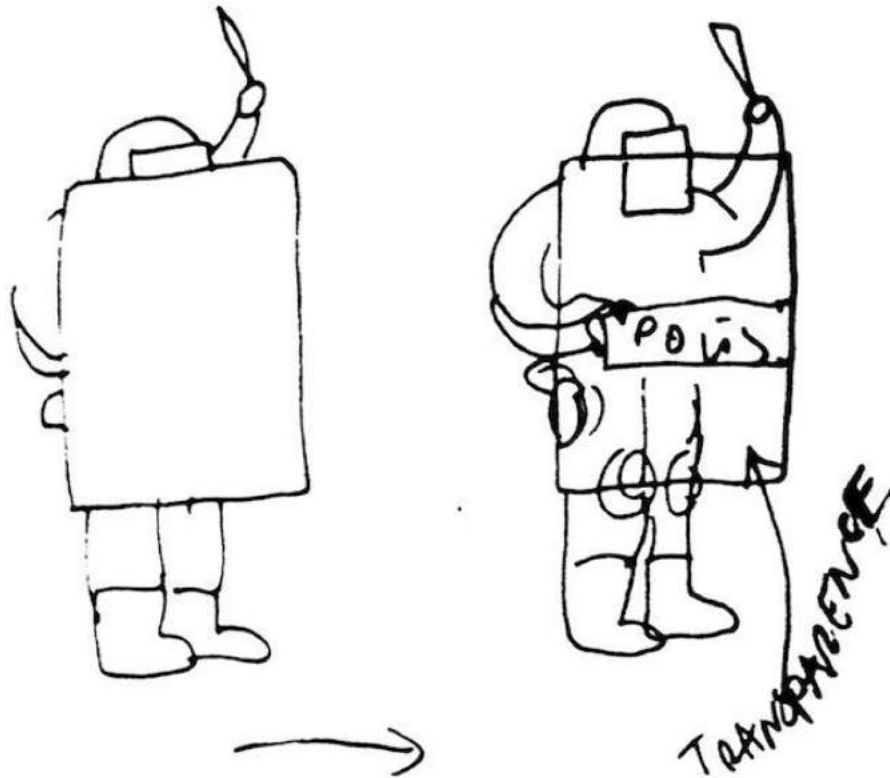
A drawing by Perjovschi in which he states that government transparency sometimes just means that riot police use transparent shields

"There was an entire alternative trend in the West against the art market. I would send art to you, you would send art to me. Some even did entire exhibits in their workshops with what they received in the mail. Other works, which were more complex, were called 'Visual Poetry' and they were shown in museums. That's how I had my work exhibited in Sao Paolo back then. I would just send them my drawings of little men," explained the artist.

The rebellious streak came later for Perjovschi: "Back then, I didn't do what I do now. I only started fighting the dictatorship after it was over."

A drawing by Perjovschi about the situation going gaga in the Gaza Strip

When the communist regime fell in 1989, Perjovschi was spending his Christmas with his family in Sibiu. That was the same city in which dictator Ceausescu's son resided so it was covered in security and armed forces. It became the scene of pandemonium, a city under siege, where nobody knew who was firing at who.

"History was changed by the corpses of the people who marched on those streets. I will never forget that 1,000 people died so I can speak now," says Perjovschi.

Perjovski holding a sculpture of his with hundreds of little men – "a society", as he explains.

He's not a theoretical man but one who likes to experiment. "I look at something and think, 'Does it make sense, doesn't it, does it say something?' These objects are slightly strange, they function in a minimal setting but if you look carefully, you can see more. They are like a society – if you pull them, they bend, but you cannot break them," he says about his little wire men, a sculpture he's working on when we meet.

We arrive at the Regional Francophone Centre of Advanced Research in Social Sciences (CeReFREA) in Bucharest, where a curtain of little wire men hangs in the library of a classroom. The library is also decorated with some of the little men he made out of paper at the beginning of the 1990s, when he was in Germany on a scholarship. "Sometimes I have no mental strength left, so I let my hands do the work. I am ashamed to just sit around, because I'm an artist. This kind of activity helps me clear my mind, it helps me relax."

What do his little figures represent? "You can imagine whatever you want about these dudes," he says. And indeed you can: some seem to dance, others seem to fight. Their creator takes each one and makes them face each other, just like he convinces his audience to pay attention to his drawings.


To get a better idea of who Dan Perjovschi is, I spoke to several people who have known him – artists as well as activists.

"I saw something which made me freeze on that wall. There were hundreds of figurines drawn on paper, layers and layers of them. The work was signed by Dan Perjovschi," says Olga Stefan, a Romanian curator, who was born in Chicago and lives in Switzerland.

The young woman was studying art management at the University of Chicago. Her Masters term paper was about the relationship between art and the development of civil society. It was the first time she heard the name of Dan Perjovschi and she decided to contact him.

"He became my mentor for the Master's degree. He helped me, he opened my eyes," says Stefan who, later, became a curator for his exhibits. "Dan Perjovschi's messages work on several levels. They leave conventional space, they go from museum walls to the street."
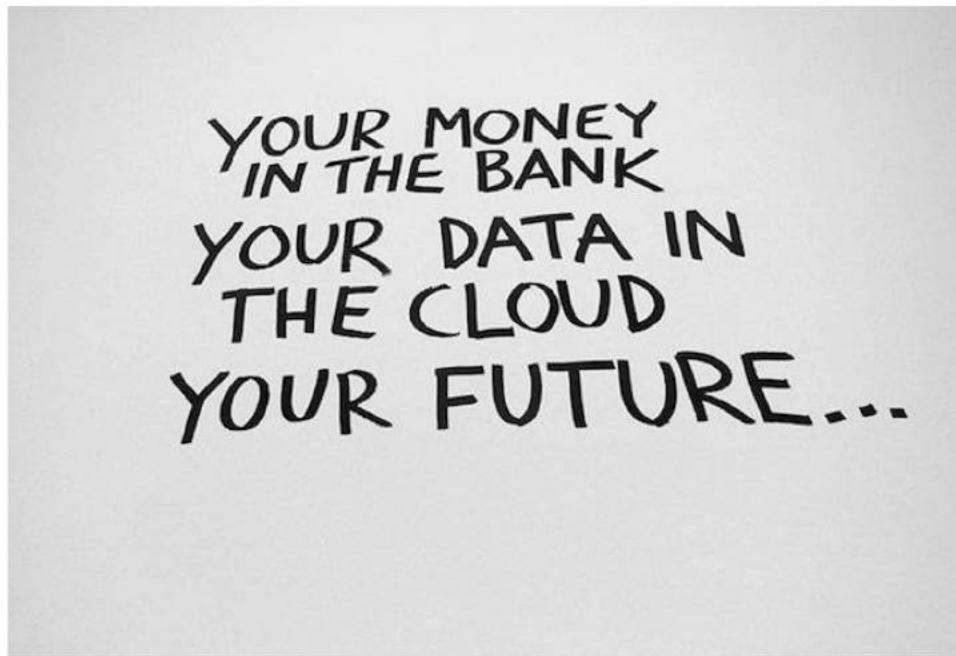
One of Perjovschi's wall drawings

In the spring of 2013, Dan Perjovschi received a message. It was from Mihai Bumbeș, a former history student and a founding member of NGO Spiritual Militia, whose mission is to mobilise civic consciousness.

These were the first days of the Occupy University movement, where students from several universities around the country refused to leave their classrooms as a protest against the poor funding of the education system and government negligence. The students from Bucharest invited Dan Perjovschi to support them and his drawings ended up covering the classrooms.

"He constantly uses anti-systemic political messages in his creations. He is a well-trusted person, and his minimalist message has a strong impact on society, especially in the marginal intellectual groups. Also, he's very modest. Success never got to him," says Mihai Bumbeș.

Dan Perjovschi's drawings move people and can be found everywhere from amphitheatres to protest fliers because they are "smart, critical, concise, edgy, ironic and subversive," says curator Simona Nastac, who currently lives in London. She organised Perjovschi's exhibit, Drawings in the Factory, in May 2014, in the city of Suceava.

"He creates a space for critical reflection and convinces the public to participate – to enter a dialogue. Dan creates new drawings every day, he keeps you in check with what is happening around the world and he inspires you to react," says Nastac.

It will come as little surprise then, that when the protests concerning the Roșia Montană mining operation started, Dan Perjovschi couldn't just stand by. These were basically the first large youth protests in Romania since the early 1990s, and no major media outlet was talking about them, even though thousands of young people occupied the main streets of Bucharest and hit the asphalt with plastic bottles filled with pebbles to wake up the blazed city. On September 7th, which was the seventh day of the protests, he told the protesters "Keep calm and smash the plastic bottles" on Facebook. "The noise those bottles made, the rhythm made by hitting the asphalt with them was like a subliminal chant. I've seen soldiers with riot shields who stomped the same rhythm with their boots," says Perjovschi.

A drawing through which Perjovschi expressed the fears of the protesters, that the Roșia Montană mining operation would destroy several mountains in northern Romania

"I would receive thousands of messages every day. I don't want to brag – I can't handle protests anymore – I had my fill in December 1989 when the regime fell. I couldn't imagine that such solidarity could exist again. To me, it was a great surprise and I admired their strength. I grew up with another type of protest, where we were isolated in the middle of the city and the government surrounded us, so we stewed in our own juices."

Dan Perjovschi produced a lot of slogans for the Roșia Montană protests. Again, his drawings had spread through the streets. Just like they would spread in 2015, on the 8th of January, when a protester could barely feel his hands from the cold after holding two papers with Perjovschi's messages. The protester, called Alexandru Alexe, told me that he chose those messages because they were clear: "A drawing by Perjovschi helps everyone understand why we are protesting and what it is we want."