

Graphic Equalizer

MICHAEL WILSON ON DAN PERJOVSCHI



AS AN EXHIBITION decidedly integrated into its urban environment and as much attuned to questions of contemporary geopolitics as to those of aesthetics, last year's Istanbul Biennial rarely conformed to the standard gallery model for its installations: Among the radically repurposed venues were the Deniz Palas Apartments, a tobacco warehouse, and the Garanti Building, a former bank. But perhaps the most unlikely location of all was the Bilsar Building, a large warehouse that looked suspiciously derelict even after one gained access to its balcony-like upper level and cast an eye down to the echoing hall beneath. Though superficially dressed up with a lick of white paint, this space still looked more than a little rough around the edges and, well, empty, apart from what appeared to be a rash of graffiti. It was only on closer examination that one realized these markings comprised a site-specific installation of small marker-pen, pencil, and chalk wall drawings offering wry takes both on local culture (one featured twin images of a woman wearing a traditional Islamic hijab, with captions underneath reading *SOME TIME AGO AND TODAY*—the only visual difference being that the woman in the latter picture is holding a cell phone to her ear) and on an increasingly globalized art world—with "biennial culture" the object of particularly pointed fun. One sketch depicted a *BIG WESTERN ARTWORK* surrounded by a pawnlike *TINY DISPOSABLE PUBLIC* being manipulated by anonymous hands reaching in from stage left; another showed one figure telling a guy, who looks nearly smothered under a stack of canvases, *THERE ARE SOME PARALLEL EVENTS ALSO*; a third ran down a list of terms, in what some might consider to be descending scale of importance: *SPONSORS, SMALL SPONSORS, CURATORS, ARTISTS*.

Titled *The Istanbul Drawing, 2005*, this multifarious work was by Dan Perjovschi, a forty-five-year-old Romanian artist who, ironically, first achieved international recognition through his participation in the very type of event he was critiquing. At the 1999 Venice Biennale he represented Romania with another wraparound (and underfoot) mural, this time seeking to undermine persistent stereotypes of the Eastern Bloc's cultural isolation while also considering what it might mean to be European at the turn of the millennium. Indeed, Perjovschi frequently addresses the complexities and contradictions of social and political life in a post-cold war world. Coming from one of the poorest countries in Europe, the Bucharest-based Perjovschi seems acutely aware of what Bulgarian philosopher Alexander Kiossev has termed "self-colonization," where cultures "import alien values and models of civilization by themselves and . . . lovingly colonize their own authenticity through these foreign models." A sustained interrogation of this dynamic and of the societal antagonisms often arising in tandem—Romania, for example, is today increasingly divided between a ruling elite keen to profit from membership in the European Union and disadvantaged masses longing for a "radical return" to the strong identity formerly offered by a communist state—provides one of the few fixed points in Perjovschi's practice.



**Dan Perjovschi creating
The Room Drawing 2006,
Tate Modern, London.**

The issue of "self-colonization" no doubt remains of central interest to the artist because it neatly speaks to a core experience of many peoples in Europe who have, since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent rise of the EU, seen a shift in the complexion of regional and national identities. In fact, the matter is only of increasing relevance globally, as evidenced in Istanbul by Perjovschi's drawings alluding to Turkey's desire to join the EU—those depicting a mosque, for example, one tower of which asks another, I'M A NEOLIBERAL. YOU?; or featuring a man yelling (at a presumably Turkish crowd), YOU HAVE TO HELP OUR EUROPEAN IMAGE SO SHUT UP PLEASE. *Indoors and in general*, Perjovschi's 2005 contribution to "New Europe: Culture of Mixing and Politics of Representation" at the Generali Foundation in Vienna, included a drawing of the EU's initial letters in which the *U* became a pit into which figures hurled themselves, and a reinterpretation of the organization's insignia, in which each star became an inward-hurling comet.

Perjovschi trained as a painter at the conservative Universitatea de Arte George Enescu, in Iasi, but was encouraged to question the continued usefulness of his classical grounding by the collapse of Nicolae Ceausescu's autocratic regime in 1989. With the fall of that dictatorship came a general galvanizing of resistance to all authority, including that of the academy. Eventually Perjovschi jettisoned such techniques and modes of presentation (which now signified, above all else, the operation of an obsolete power) by recalling his school days as a class clown, doodling cartoons for a laugh. Today this stark, apparently off-the-cuff style of line drawing allows him to condense the conflicts and dilemmas of the new European order (as well as the ironies and inconsistencies of the global art world's relationship to it) into a skeptical, rapid-response commentary. And the unadorned line of Perjovschi's drawing—as transparently functional as that of a blackboard diagram, imperfect yet confident and unfussy—enables his art to be political without seeming didactic.

While Perjovschi is not a native English-speaker, his command of the language is subtle yet conspicuous, often hilarious, and sometimes even brilliant. Puns and multiple meanings abound in his works' frequently significant textual elements; the diverse influences of gossip, newspaper headlines, and literature are all apparent and skillfully interwoven. Perjovschi is a master of the punch line, using it to repurpose images that might otherwise appear enigmatic. His background in journalism certainly helped him refine this sensibility: In 1991, after having been invited to contribute to the Romanian literary/political magazine *Contrapunct* the previous year, Perjovschi joined the staff of Bucharest's more prominent opposition newspaper, 22, as political illustrator and art director. Founded by a group of former Romanian artists, philosophers, and dissidents who were also the driving force behind a radical democratic think tank called the Group of Social Dialogue, 22, which argued for freedom of expression and basic democratic rights, first hit newsstands on January 20, 1990, almost immediately after the revolution began.

Roughly coincidental with these efforts, Perjovschi in 1990 cofounded the Contemporary Art Archive (CAA) with his wife, Lia (who is also an artist). Housed in Perjovschi's studio, where it is still located, the CAA is a privately funded collection of materials relating to contemporary art internationally and a locus for related events. And so even at the very outset of Perjovschi's career, it was clear that he had established a politicized visual practice whose expanded notion of art would negotiate relations between official culture and "alternatives" of dubious provenance and intent: By pursuing such projects as 22 and the CAA, the artist

helps to maintain and strengthen a vital third way. Perhaps the best example of this approach to take place outside his native Bucharest occurred in Edinburgh as part of the "Off-Site Projects" series organized by the Collective Gallery there. In 2004, Perjovschi was commissioned to be "artist in residence to Festival City (unofficial)" and made street drawings echoing, as writer and critic Michael Bracewell noted at the time, the "news walls" of the former Communist states. Additionally producing an eight-page giveaway newspaper during his stay (the fourth such publication he had produced), Perjovschi used his platform to launch a criticism of the curious blend of cultural and economic consumerism that the Edinburgh festival represents, again fusing the roles of commentator, critic, and artist.

While most of his works comprise many individual drawings displayed together, his installations have not always resulted in the accumulation of imagery. In fact, for his New York gallery debut in 1996, the opposite was true: In *Anthroprogramming*, made for his show as a resident at Franklin Furnace's now-defunct gallery, he marked a grid on the walls of the space and filled each square with a loose portrait sketch, then began reversing the process by erasing a small area each day over a period of ten days. The obvious precedent is Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953, but Perjovschi's move was not motivated by a need to create iconoclastic mischief but rather by a casually fatalistic attitude toward the fruits of artistic labor and the threat of censorship to which he had grown accustomed (an earlier drawing for 22 included a figure with its mouth sewn shut, and similar images persist in current work). Perhaps more provocatively, Perjovschi returned to the technique of erasure in 2003 when, as his contribution to "*In den Schluchten des Balkan*" (In the Gorges of the Balkans) at the Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany, Perjovschi had a tattoo with the legend ROMANIA removed from his upper arm, an ambiguous gesture of self-liberation. It was a fitting close to the project, which began when he had the tattoo executed in front of an audience at a Romanian performance festival in 1993, a time when the more general situation in Eastern Europe was just beginning to shift.

It should be noted, however, that Perjovschi's occasional pursuit of his vision beyond the confines of the gallery has its origins more in a critique of inherited exhibition parameters than in any romanticization of art as urban-style protest. (In fact, in a recent conversation with curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist, he expressed reservations about the effectiveness of an occupation of public space such as that exercised by graffiti artists.) Perjovschi now most often works in situ on a kind of semiperformative "applied drawing." He makes notes and sketches continually, whether specifically preparing for a show or not, but also draws spontaneously at the site of any given exhibition, allowing still-unfolding political and personal developments to influence the project's content.

In *The Room Drawing 2006*, on view until June 23 at Tate Modern, a current of institutional critique and site-specificity runs through the work. Perjovschi talked to a sampling of the museum's members, staff, and councillors before making a series of drawings covering the walls and windows of the Members' Room, a café that is usually open only to fee-paying affiliates (although it is accessible to all four days a week during the artist's intervention). The drawings incorporate the interviewees' comments on "personal, regional, and international" issues and often address notions of exclusivity and belonging and the status of the viewer in relation to the institution: An image of a head with a closed-circuit security camera where its brain should be sits next to a real camera, while elsewhere we see a crowd fixated on a painting's label while pointedly ignoring the work itself. Here, as elsewhere, Perjovschi invites viewers to follow his progress within a specific context that they share with him. His drawings tend to become tighter in the transition from notebook to architectural surface, but an improvisational element remains: As the artist explains to curator Julia Friedrich (his comments are reproduced in her Museum Ludwig catalogue essay, "The Line that Speaks: Dan Perjovschi's 'Naked Drawings'"), "There are moments of intense thinking and moments of pure jazz." Yet such spontaneity may have implications well beyond the aesthetic sphere: "My revolution happens there," he boasts, "in the ten-by-ten-centimeter drawing."

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