

## Ten Questions: Dan Perjovschi

By Marius Meli



Dan Perjovschi, *Freedom of Expression – From Here to Here*, Kunsthall Trondheim, 2014. Foto: Marius Meli.

A defining moment for Dan Perjovschi came in 1999 when he was selected to represent Romania at the Venice Biennale. Without a budget for production or transportation, he solved the challenge by drawing directly on the floor of the pavilion – thus creating the modus operandi he has used ever since. In his simplified drawings covering the walls at Kunsthall Trondheim, Dan Perjovschi addresses political issues such as global neoliberalism, the distribution of wealth and popular uprisings, using tools from his long career as a political cartoonist. With a background in communist Romania and as a worker in today's international art scene, freedom of expression has become a central theme, as the title of his current show at Kunsthall Trondheim suggests: *Freedom of Expression – From Here to Here*.

The show displays a cacophony of words and simple pictograms in his easily recognizable style of drawing, including word plays and puns that are both amusing and thoughtful. His drawing installation refers to significant recent events, such as the Hong Kong protests and the turmoil in Ukraine (written *EUKRAINA*) as well as smaller touristic snapshots of Trondheim, such as a drawing of two Rumanian stick figures, one inside the Kunsthall, presumably the artist, the other one just outside the door begging for money. Even though the references to contemporary Romanian society are kept to a minimum, the theme of the distribution of wealth within a society of scarce resources is recurring.



Dan Perjovschi participating in the 11th Manifesta 10 Dialogue, St. Petersburg. Photo: Manifesta.

*Your artworks address contemporary issues, such as increasing social inequality, precarious political situations and other destabilizing conflicts. Your art seems to be a critical undertaking, but at the same time, your use of both naïveté and humor is extensive. Is this a way of creating engagement, or does it rather express a dark pessimism?*

I try to place myself in the shoes of the viewer and I never draw specifically for the mega-specialized academics preoccupied with Deleuze, Žižek or global politics (nor do I exclude them). Only a small crowd of people are exclusively into political or artistic theory, and they may or may not happen to be in Trondheim. I am an optimistic kind of guy – humor creates both distance and intimacy: you get closer by smiling and gain perspective through laughing. Also, the naïveté occurs because I am not a specialist; I am a regular guy who happens to be enormously curious about the state of the world and who browses through newspapers and watches the news. If I can “understand” a situation through drawing I hope I can make you understand it too.

*Your works might remind us of graffiti and street art, with a seemingly cacophonous composition, in a way embodying the many voices of modern democracy. Is this a tradition you feel at home in?*



Dan Perjovschi, *Freedom of Expression – From Here to Here*, detail, 2014. Photo: Marius Meli.

I grew up in a society that did not have a variety of voices in public art. Everything was controlled and censored. I had no idea graffiti existed (except what I saw but couldn't really comprehend in the background of some American movies). I couldn't travel outside. Books and catalogues couldn't enter the country. Cartoons in newspapers were limited to sports, fishing and family stuff. I was educated in an elitist manner, painting the queen, then sculpture, and graphic art was really at the bottom of the hierarchy – cartoons weren't even considered an art form. There was no street art in Romania until things were about to change. The first graffiti I saw in 1989 was revolutionary, it said: “Down with Dictatorship!” I will never forget this graphic scream.

So no, graffiti does not inform my work, nor do cartoons, comics and art brut, if you want to throw in some art history. I am heavily educated. I went from the museum to the street and what I draw in newspapers, I also draw on walls. I don't have a “childish” style because I do not know how to draw. I know that all too well – twelve years of art studies taught me to hate rules.

My art is a conceptual rebellion against the way art was taught. It is an uprising against painting as the queen of the ball, and against the auctions and the market. I merge my free style with other free styles of expression, from the kid who has no fear of white paper to the stencil graffiti guy protesting the government, and I am one of the first artists in the world doing what I do on large surfaces in institutional settings without the framing of the tableau.

*As an artist who has worked both in a socialist dictatorship and in modern capitalist society, how have the limits of freedom of expression changed alongside Romania's greater transition?*



Dan Perjovschi, *Freedom of Expression – From Here to Here*, 2014. Photo: Marius Meli.

There was no freedom in 1985 when I graduate from art school. Every gesture was closely scrutinized and could easily create panic. In today's Romania you can do whatever you like and basically nobody cares. Romanian capitalism is a sort of turbo-capitalism that has become much worse during recent years as the country has been held captive by people resembling the Russian oligarchs. Under these conditions, both in Romania and many other Eastern European countries, you can do whatever you like, so long as you leave out the Catholic or Orthodox Church. In some cases the freedom to express yourself becomes the freedom to utter hate speech, open vulgarity or unbelievable populism. As an artist I am shocked the public tolerates such utterances. It seems like we are in the extreme opposite position of a society of censorship that suppresses speech, more like we are living in an absence of rules and laws.

*Your working method, namely drawing directly on the walls, has its origin in the lack of funding for art in Romania. Does scarcity have a productive potential, or is this a romanticizing myth?*

Yes, it started because of economic conditions, as well as with my love of drawing and my job as an illustrator at a political weekly. I was forced to find a language that allowed the movement and flexibility I needed, that created a minimal dependence on the absurd bureaucracy, and that gave me the ability to make big museum installations from small sketches. I started an enormous work effort and I did repetitive graphic patterns with pencil or chalk on walls and floors. The 1999 Venice Biennale marks the shift to "press drawings" and the future free style. I haven't stopped since.



Dan Perjovschi, *Freedom of Expression – From Here to Here*, 2014. Photo: Marius Meli.

It is also about the speed. I get bored easily and I always seek new stories. Another reason for my method is to force the host institution to invite me to be there in person. Don't laugh! Getting out of the country was an obsession for us (me, my wife and maybe our whole generation). After all, we lived in a jail, and it feels like a sort of revenge every time we cross the border. We also instinctively knew we could do better and develop as artists if we saw, experienced and confronted what's going on in the world at large and in the world of art.

*What are the current conditions for contemporary art in Romania?*

The state is retracting and art is left to the market. Galleries and international art fairs are popular, while artist-run spaces and artistic research fades away without funding. The National Museum of Contemporary Art is located in the former dictator's palace, which today also houses the parliament. A wall surrounds this building, separating us from them. Overall there is no interest in contemporary art, except for some small pockets of resistance. *Transit Network*, *Idea Art Magazine*, and other independent organizations... it may not seem like much, but believe me: they are strong and very much alive.

*You have been drawing political cartoons for the political magazine Revista 22 since its founding in 1990. What are the differences between your work as a cartoonist and your artistic practice in institutional settings?*



Dan Perjovschi, *Freedom of Expression – From Here to Here*, 2014. Foto: Marius Meli.

Actually I started illustrating a literary weekly and then shifted to a more political platform. As an illustrator I have to stick with a text and do a drawing based on the text that can also stay autonomous. My installations are made from the same drawings but without the text. They originate in a narrative (newspaper, essay on the internet, blog post, TV show, or a discussion with somebody), but the text is absent. I did numerous experiments displaying the newspapers I use for research on tables in the exhibition space, drawing directly on newspapers, drawing on newspaper pages glued to the walls, showing the entire *22 Magazine* collection as a sort of sculpture, etc. So the influence from the news world and the *22 Magazine* is strong.

*On some occasions you have drawn your installations after the exhibitions have opened. How does this performative staging influence the result?*

All my wall drawings are performative. I draw fast, as you can see by looking at the lines of the finished product. I do not correct: it's the way it turns out or nothing. People see me drawing and they love it. It is hard for me, but from time to time I accept letting myself be seen working. Drawing may be entertaining, but thinking about drawing is not. I try to deliver both moments of spectacle and anti-spectacle.

After the collapse of communist Romania, performance art was considered to be the art form that most encapsulated freedom. It was cheap and radical. Before the change I did some "actions" for my friends, after the change I did them for the public. These actions were political. Between 1988-1998 I was performing quite often, but then drawing replaced this. If I draw I am alive. This is enough of a performance for me.



Dan Perjovschi, *Freedom of Expression – From Here to Here*, detail, 2014. Photo: Marius Meli.