



WHAT HAPPENED TO US?

projects **85** dan perjovschi

Interview between Roxana Marcoci and Dan Perjovschi, conducted in conjunction with the exhibition Projects 85: Dan Perjovschi, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, May 2–August 27, 2007

ROXANA MARCOCI: To start, let's discuss the beginnings of your practice. You were formally trained as a painter at the University of Art George Enescu in the academic city of Iași, Romania. Probing the value of your classical training, you mentioned on more than one occasion that if one medium cannot allow complete expression, a complementary one must be identified. What made you question the inadequacy of painting in the late 1980s, and how would you describe your medium?

DAN PERJOVSCHI: My practice started at a young age, but for a while it was suspended. The "while" part relates to the 1980s, the years of my formal artistic education in Communist Romania. The Soviet-style educational system was based on specialized schools that identified special talent, which explains why I began studying art at the age of ten. By the time I joined the University, I was already dead sick of official art. The political situation had also changed. The liberal Communist ideology of the 1960s had been replaced by [Nicolae] Ceaușescu's autocratic cult of personality. The good life of pretending not to know anything was over; the surviving mode was in. Painting was not my medium. After fourteen years of painting still-life motifs, I felt I had had it

with that kind of art. When I talk about my practice, I refer to my natural drawing instinct. Early on I used that talent to mock my teachers in cartoons. It took me the full length of studies in high school and at the art academy to understand that the only way I could express myself was through drawing. Painting was just an intermediary stage. Water was freezing in the glass, no soap, no books, and no future. How could one paint that?

RM: You decided to turn to performance and drawing to articulate your views on social and political issues. Some of your earliest actions, such as *Red Apples* (1988), involved wrapping the full interior of your home—everything from bed and table to television set and bookshelves—in white paper on which you scrawled text and drawings. Was this done in response to the climate of increasing censorship in Romania?

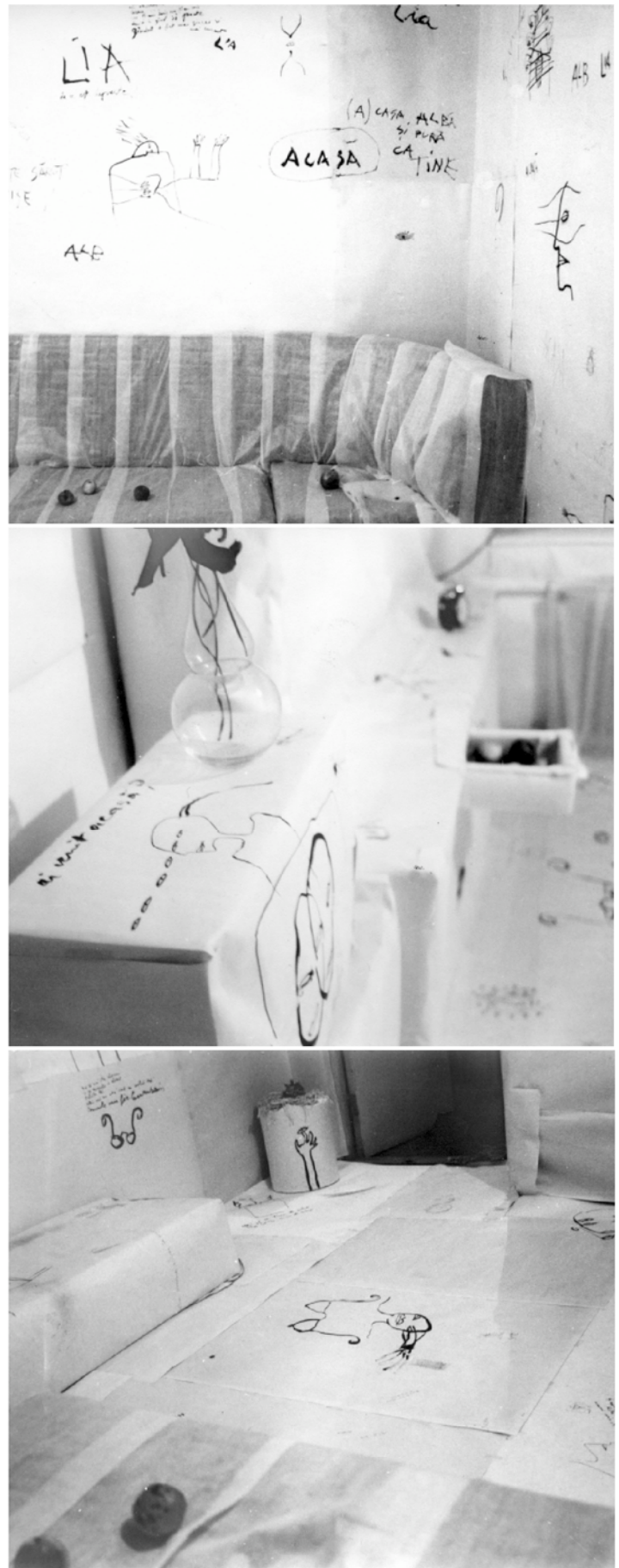
DP: Yes. The repressive system allowed us to play a little, and we did. We organized exhibitions, lots of them. But we had to pay a price. Each show was submitted to three censorship committees, one more stupid than the other. After a while you naturalized that mentality. Thinking that you could outsmart Communism or exercise freedom, you ended up reinforcing the system. Self-censorship ruled. Corrupted values were first established, then imposed. We complied. It was a big lie. That's why Lia [the artist Lia Perjovschi, Dan's wife] and I took refuge in our flat. We could do whatever we wanted because what we did was just for ourselves and some friends. (In Lia's case I was the only witness to her performances.) I wrapped our flat in paper and drew all over it. It was as if I was living in my own drawing. I performed something poetic to offset the gray, boring life outside. We lived this way for two weeks. It was great.

RM: At about the same time, you became loosely associated with an alternative group of artists in the city of Oradea known as Studio 35. What was its project?

DP: In Romania the Artist's Union Association owned all the studios and exhibition spaces in the country. Studio 35 was the "waiting room" before one became a full-fledged member of the union. I worked a lot with these guys and loved them dearly. On one hand, we were living in a blind spot. We were pretending that the repressive system did not exist, turning to culture as a refuge from reality. On the other hand, doing something in a frozen society was in itself a radical act. Every ten days we organized a show. There was no career, no money, and no recognition involved. We were engaged in artistic practice because art was a way to feel alive. But we sacrificed the truth. This was a big mistake.

RM: In 1991, after the fall of Communism, you staged a performance similar to *Red Apples* titled *Nameless Mood* for the first "free art festival," organized in the city of Timișoara. On that occasion you transformed the janitor's room at the art museum into an all-over environment of drawings. Was the change from a private activist to an institutionally based activist intended?

DP: How could I face my generation when we did nothing against dictatorship? We shut up and played our little game. That's why I stayed locked up inside the janitor's room. I had to address the questions of who we were, what we did, and what art was for. I



Red Apples. 1988
Installation in artist's home, Oradea, Romania



Nameless Mood. 1991

Performance at *Free Art Festival*, Timișoara, Romania

also wanted to undermine the elitism of high art and exercise modesty. The working classes, the simple people, the common lives were totally fucked up by Communism. I used the janitor's room for three days, drawing all over it until the room turned black. And yes, it was the beginning of a sort of activism that Lia and I engaged with throughout the following years.

RM: Was there a decisive break in your artistic outlook following the end of Ceaușescu's autocracy?

DP: Yes. Three things made an impact on my art: the political events of 1989, free press, and the international art scene. It was not an immediate change. It was a slow process, but it all started with freedom of expression. I had to learn anew how to speak and express myself freely.

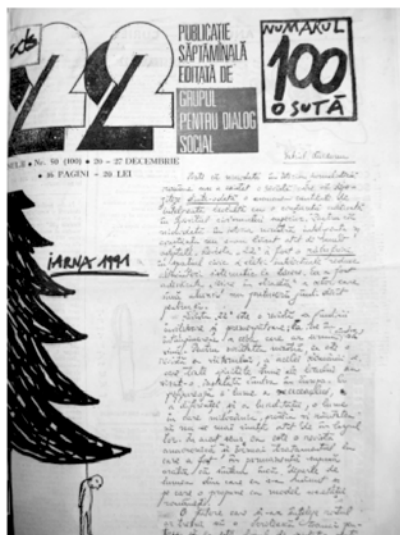
RM: In 1991 you were asked to join the Bucharest-based weekly oppositional newspaper 22. What is your role at the newspaper?

DP: I was not asked to join it. I somehow found my way in. I had previously published drawings in the young writer's magazine *Contrapunct*. People at 22 noticed my work. I proposed some drawings to 22 and they took me on board. At the beginning of the 1990s, 22 was the most prestigious intellectual paper in Romania. Shortly after I started working there, I was involved with every aspect of the press, from editing and proofreading

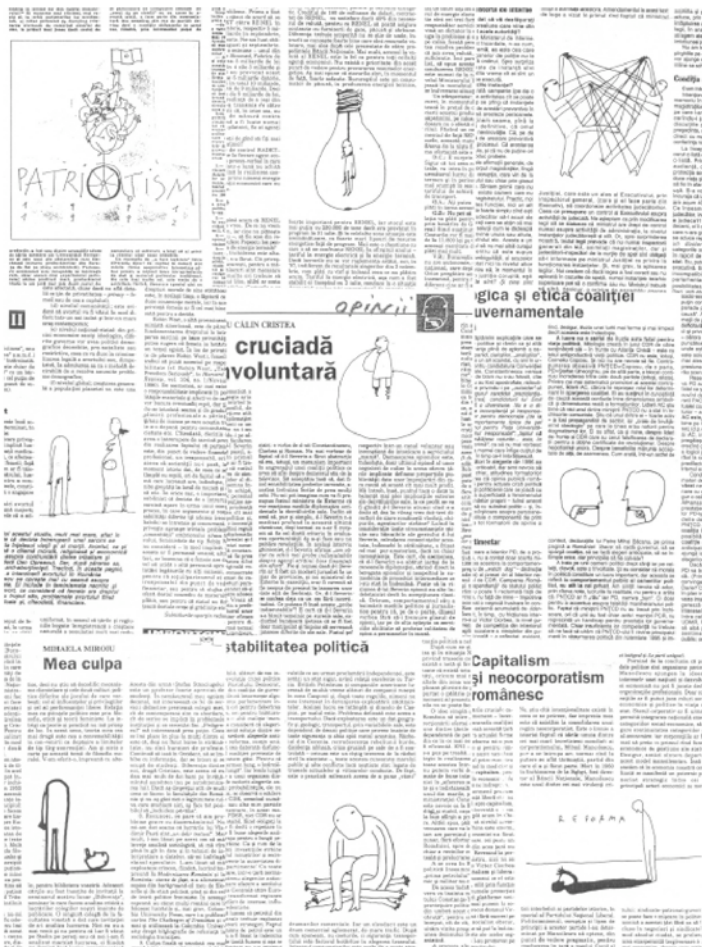


to designing the layout of the paper. Although I am the second oldest member of the team, my presence is nowadays more virtual than real. Since I travel a lot, I send my drawings to 22 from all over the world, but I am no longer involved in editorial decisions. 22 was the first independent weekly in Romania and it may be the last. Nearly all other newspapers are owned by media conglomerates.

RM: I noticed that you carry a notebook with you, always ready to jot down another sketch. What are the primary sources for your ideas?



Cover of 22. December 20–27, 1991



Selection of pages from 22

Wonderful World (A) (detail). 1994–97

Pencil and ink on paper

Sixty drawings, each 11 7/8 x 8 3/8" (30.2 x 21.3 cm)

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Purchased with funds provided by the Friends of Contemporary Drawing



DP: Everything: talks, sightseeing, rumors, newspaper articles, gossip, television, jokes, major stories, insignificant stories, global news, local events, everything. The notebooks are my resources, my private Wikipedia. Out of two hundred drawings sketched down in the notebooks, twenty will make it to the wall.

RM: The two large series of drawings, *Postcards from America* and *Wonderful World*, were conceived in 1994 during your first trip to the United States. Can you talk about them?

DP: Actually, I started working on *Wonderful World* in 1993 after completing a huge piece titled *Anthropoteque*. Consisting of five thousand drawings, *Anthropoteque* was difficult to handle. I was looking for a more mobile format. I like cumulative pieces and wanted to work wherever I was traveling. *Wonderful World* is made of several letter-sized modules, each comprising some twenty drawings, like a flipbook. Easy to carry, it allowed me to draw in hotel rooms, trains, or other places. I could put the work in a suitcase and carry it around the world. Every time I exhibited the piece it was in a different format, since new modules were added. Basically, *Wonderful World* has two components: a Romanian part comprising thirty elements, and an American part of one hundred elements. The American grouping was made in 1995 and 1996 when Lia and I received successive ArtsLink grants in New York, and it was completed in 1997 when we were invited back to the States by Kristine Stiles to teach for a semester at Duke University. The work is like a library of drawings.

Postcards from America is a happy testimony of a trip I made cross-country as part of a USIA grant, which allowed me to travel east, west, north, and south, to big cities, middle-of-nowhere towns, and coast to coast from New York to Topanga Canyon and from San Francisco to New Orleans. It was fantastic. My first encounter with the enormity and diversity of America was like a kid's adventure book, including a 4 a.m. shuttle launch in Cape Canaveral, my first fast-food dinner, a visit to MoMA, a meeting with Chris Burden in Los Angeles, and a biking excursion in Florida. I enjoyed every second of that trip. After making the grand tour, I had a one-month residency at Atlantic Center for the Arts, where I made an installation of five hundred drawings.





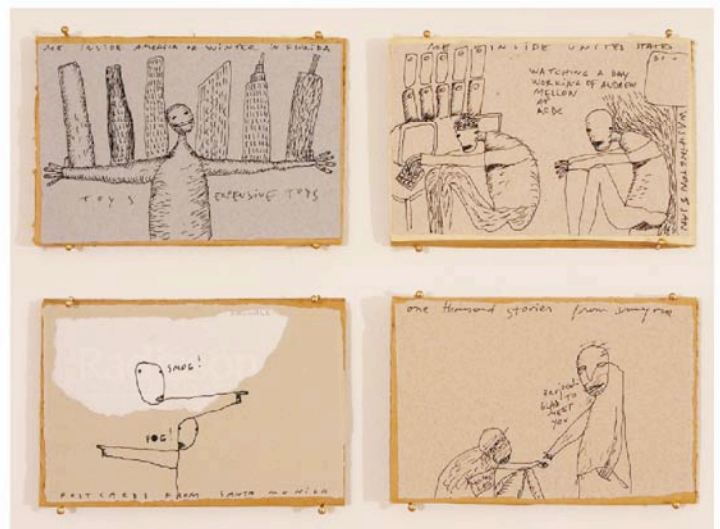
I was seduced by America, so I called the series *Postcards*. I used colored paper, and each sheet was the size of a postcard.

RM: What is the Group of Social Dialogue (GDS) and how does it relate to 22?

DP: GDS is the editor of 22. It was founded as an intellectual think tank. It is a nongovernmental association that brings together former dissidents, writers, political analysts, and cultural historians, a who's who of contemporary Romanian society. The mission of GDS has been to assist the newly founded democracy. In the beginning it focused on anti-Communism. Like any other Eastern European intelligentsia, it promoted a liberal society. Each millimeter of democratic reform—feminism, minority rights, free press, etc.—was achieved with pain, struggle, and determination. At the beginning of the 1990s, GDS had unlimited power. Luckily, it lost most of it. That's why it is still independent. Overall, GDS delivered its promise: Romania is now part of the European Union and it's NATO-shielded against its powerful neighbor, Russia. GDS's offspring, 22, grew more independent and equilibrated than its parent editor.

RM: In 1990 you and Lia cofounded the Contemporary Art Archive (CAA) in Bucharest. This is a privately funded collection of materials that has served as an important resource in the city. Can you elaborate on the contents of the CAA?

DP: CAA is more Lia's business. She organized the enormous quantity of information that we received from abroad (catalogues, slides, video tapes, etc.). Our work was successfully received abroad but not properly understood in our own backyard, so Lia created a context for our work. Creating that context became her artistic practice. She organized an archive of contemporary art



Postcards from America (detail). 1994

Ink and pencil on paper mounted on cardboard
500 drawings, each 3 1/2 x 5 1/4" (8.9 x 13.3 cm)

files and we disseminated that knowledge. According with the rapid changes in art, CAA switched from being an archival bank to a center for art analysis. For a while CAA was the only platform for institutional critique in Romania. Now it is on hold, waiting to be transformed again into something different.

RM: In 1996, the year I visited you in Bucharest, you and Lia staged the first Open Studio event, a forum for discussion among artists, curators, and scholars. Can you name some of the participating guests and explain the studio's infrastructure?

DP: Everything that happened in the studio was part of CAA.

Basically, our studio has been open since 1991 when we first rented the space. In 1996 we staged a three-day event focusing on the Romanian underground and experimental art scene since the 1960s. The studio was used as a site for debate. We believed that sharing information was more radical than any other form of artmaking. We wanted to send a signal that dialogue is essential in society. There were lots of informal meetings reuniting art professionals to expand the way art was understood and practiced. We did not have funds to make formal invitations, but we were flexible enough to react quickly if somebody was in town. We asked artists and curators to give lectures (Mike Nelson and Rachel Lowe from London, Cristian Alexa from New York, Kristine Stiles from Duke University, Claire Bishop from the Royal College of Art, Werner Meyer from Kunsthalle Göppingen, etc.). Some recorded and live TV programs were also held in the studio. For one memorable broadcast about art education, we invited students who had recently been expelled from the art academy because they had protested against the conservative curriculum in schools. Actually, I have lost track of all these activities. I just remember making coffee and carrying chairs around.

RM: Let's go back to your artistic practice. What prompted you to draw directly on the wall instead of using the traditional support of paper?

DP: I wanted to be quick, mobile, and direct. When traveling with nothing, I could improvise on the spot. Like in performance, there is a huge sense of creative freedom. My practice always subverted the market. It's a transitory event that makes me very focused and charged. I make ephemeral works with permanent markers.

RM: In fact, your drawings are erased at the close of each exhibition. Is there an instance when the artwork was preserved as part of the architectural structure?

DP: Nope. Only the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven kept the wall drawing I did in its enormous lobby for a full year instead of three months. The interesting part is that the erasure of that wall was transformed into an [Allan] Kaprow Happening. It was pure Dutch practicality. They had a Kaprow exhibition that included a Happening that took place every Friday when a guy came to paint a wall. So they asked me if I would agree to have my wall erased. I instantly said, "Yes!"

RM: How do you see the ephemeral nature of your projects relating to issues of memory and remembrance?

DP: I can only understand the world if I draw it. If I draw it, I will remember it. I mean this in a metaphorical way. Actually, looking back at my notebooks or at the illustrations in 22, I am surprised to see the same drawings repeating themselves in different contexts. I have sort of a repertoire, but it's in my mind. If I remember it, I redraw it. On the other hand, every time I do a drawing it's like for the first time.

RM: Yes, you often recycle old images by mixing them with new ones. How do you understand the concept of a visual archive?

DP: As I told you, it is not on paper but in my mind. Each project takes about fifty percent of its drawings from previous projects. I redraw them and therefore I keep them alive.



The Appropriation (of Land) Commission. 1992
Performance at Timișoara Art Museum, Timișoara, Romania

RM: Let's talk about the series of performances you made explicitly in reaction to changes in Romanian politics. For *The Appropriation (of Land) Commission* of 1992, you "sold" one square meter of your land to the public in the form of small, soil-filled packages. In the aftermath of the 1989 revolution, two slogans—"We want land" and "We don't sell our country"—underscored the premise that in Romania the privatization of land is but another footnote to xenophobic dissent. What was the outcome of your performance?

DP: When I did the land piece I was furious that the government kept postponing the return of private properties that had been nationalized in the aftermath of World War II. I wanted to do something absurd. I gave out 10 x 10 cm packs of soil to mock the property papers. If you think of it now, it seems like a joke, but at the time one brother was killing another for a meter of land. That's why I chose to give out one square meter. Nowadays, peasants want to sell their land, either because they are too old

to work it or because agriculture is bankrupt. Romanians no longer buy land in the countryside. Only the Dutch buy it to grow tulips or the Scots to build summer resorts. Isn't it ironic? I don't recall that my performance had any effect, although it meant a lot to me. At that time, politically inflected works were of no concern to art critics. Only American theorists reacted: you and Kristine Stiles.

RM: Do you see drawing in institutional or other spaces as a gesture of public reclamation of space?

DP: Yes. It is my way of reclaiming space. Given my Communist heritage, I may seem an obedient artist. I do what I am told. But once I comply, I try to get out of the frame and expand the borders. For me, more is more.

RM: In 1993 you had "Romania" tattooed on your arm during a performance festival. A decade later, for the exhibition *In the Gorges of the Balkan* organized at the Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel, you had the tattoo removed. Can you talk about the decisions that led to these two actions?

DP: Tattooing the word Romania on my arm was a political statement. It was done in the context of *Europe Zone East*, the first national festival of performance, organized by Ileana Pintilie in Timișoara, the city where the Romanian anti-Communist revolution started. Living in Romania, I felt like cattle—marked and owned by someone beyond my reach. I had to engage in action. I was also interested in defying the

Romania. 1993

Performance at *Europe Zone East*

Timișoara Art Museum, Timișoara, Romania



Erasing Romania. 2003

Performance at *In the Gorges of the Balkan*

Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany

canonical definition of performance as a time-based event. I thought performance should last as long as its author did. However, ten years later the context changed. I too changed my views and decided to remove the tattoo. This was a political statement made within the international context of the Balkans. You see, in 1995 I was exhibiting in East Central European shows, at the end of the 1990s in East European shows, at the beginning of 2000 in South East European shows, and subsequently in Balkan shows. Yet I have never moved from Bucharest. This geopolitical situation compelled me to remove the tattoo. I sometimes joke that erasing the word Romania from my shoulder marks the moment when I became an international artist.



RM: As an artist who is also an activist, and as an activist who is also a journalist, why do you think art should be politically engaged?

DP: Not necessarily politically engaged, but engaged. Artists are sensible humanists. Our statements should be heard outside the art world. I have something to say about my society, in the same way a sports icon has something to say. I opted for the popular language of political cartoons in order to reach more people and the media.

RM: You include text alongside the drawings, either in the form of speech bubbles or punning wordplay. These pictographic fragments function through visual analogy. What comes first to your mind, the text or the image?

DP: They both come at once. I have such dexterity now that I draw as I talk. Image and text are interrelated. Because I use a minimal vocabulary, a square can signify a tableau, a museum, a house, a TV, or a room. I just have to name it.

RM: Who has influenced your artistic practice?

DP: I admired 1960s and 1970s artists as smart and courageous. I also looked at newspaper cartoonists. In the end, I am mostly influenced by the media.

RM: In January 2007 Romania became an official member of the European Union. How do you think this will impact the production and reception of contemporary Romanian art?

DP: Certainly we don't have the same problems that cheesemakers faced when they suddenly realized that they didn't match international standards and risked going out of business. We will have to face other problems. As an outsider, one is helped and encouraged. As an insider, one is part of the club. The good news is that we don't need imported paper for our art (I did not need it anyway); the bad news is that the little exoticism we had is gone (I did not have it anyway). I go for an optimistic viewpoint: more idea exchanges will occur. Let's see who gets the dividends.

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Cover image: *White Chalk Dark Issues*, 2003

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