

In Search of the Missing Words

ECF Princess Margriet Award

Pre-ceremony presentation and conversation by Lia and Dan Perjovschi

Brussels, 19 March 2013

The Perjovschis, or Dan and Lia, or is it rather Lia and Dan? For here is an artist couple who defy expectations of how artists, or couples, should be: united in vision, but not likeminded; too radically mainstream to be merely ‘alternative’. A few hours before they stepped onto a Brussels stage to receive the Princess Margriet Award, they each gave a presentation of what it is they do, later discussing openly and humorously why they do it.

Lia Perjovschi’s presentation was bookended by two unearthly images: one of the first moon landing, and one of earth viewed by the Voyager 1 spacecraft from 6 billion kilometres away. The images underline the importance to her of the long-scale and long-term point of view – the ‘bird’s view’, she calls it, using a less physically distant metaphor. In both outer-space images the focus remains on the human: that first lunar footprint which no wind blows away, and the pale blue dot that hosts us.

The Voyager image was taken in 1990. In the previous December, the Romanian Revolution had ousted the oppressive regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu. 1990 was the beginning of the period that Lia calls her ‘subjective art history’, during which she accumulated some of the information and expertise (on art history and other subjects) that was missing from the Ceaușescu years, reflecting these in self-produced timelines and mindmaps. Not only the official art of the Communist time, but also the alternative scene had left her cold. ‘I felt like I would die,’ she says.

The information-gathering began on a modest scale. Lia simply asked people from different fields how they worked. This immediately introduced an element of transdisciplinarity into the archival work. Aged 29 when the revolution started, she (along with Dan) decided to stay and fight for the creation of democratic institutions. They soon found that ‘the street was coming into [their] studio’, and so chose to make their studio an open space for meeting and learning. Some of the catalogues she acquired were of exhibitions featuring their own work. The first exhibition which they put together themselves showed 150 objects, and was both international and low-budget. Workshops were run. Crucially, Lia and Dan travelled, both within Romania and abroad, simultaneously spreading and gathering information, meeting up with people who ‘made a difference locally’.

New Unknowns

Then in 2000, an interesting development occurred. Their Centre for Art Analysis experiment took to the airwaves. For three hours every Saturday night, on Romanian TVR1, the Perjovschis put out an arts television programme – one whose content Kristine Stiles, Duke University Professor of Art, described at the award ceremony later that day as being the most radical she had ever seen on any television station, anywhere. The show lasted for three months.

The democratic institutions they had fought for began to materialise, but not as envisioned. A National Museum of Contemporary Art was established – in the west wing of the Palace of the Parliament, the same building that had been ringed by a human chain of

protesters, including Lia and Dan, as they demanded access to secret service files held on the population. Mindful of this, the Perjovschis chose to boycott the museum.

When the electricity was cut off in the Bucharest building that housed their studio and living quarters, the Perjovschis stayed on, shivering along with a steady stream of visitors as they continued their conversations. But eventually they moved out, relocating to the artists' native city of Sibiu. Here the archive space flourishes anew – with, less exhaustingly, a focus on group-based discussion rather than the frequent one-to-one meetings of before. The Centre for Art Analysis, which became the Contemporary Art Archive, is continuing its metamorphosis as the soon-to-be Knowledge Museum.

Both looking back and looking forwards, Lia resists despondency. 'I didn't want to wait and I didn't want to complain,' she says of the dark days. And looking vastly outwards, she takes heart from the fact that just four percent of the universe is 'known'. In the balance of what we know and what we don't know, the latter is her driving force.

Onto the Streets

Not only was Dan born in the same city as Lia, and went to the same school – he was even a classmate of hers. Yet their experiences have been different. The art of this artist-couple relationship lies in negotiating these differences. In Ceaușescu's time, they faced the same predicament, however – one faced then by all genuine artists in Romania: telling the truth in the middle of the biggest lie.

In complementary contrast to Lia's bird-view, Dan insists on the value of the ephemeral, the temporary. That wasn't always his take on things; as he says – perhaps literally, perhaps figuratively – 'I did my masterpiece, but I got stuck with it.' It dawned on him how to get unstuck, and he began drawing directly onto the walls, ceilings, windows, and floors of the places in which he exhibited. These witty, politically engaged, and powerfully influential drawings won him international recognition, and the opportunity to leave his (temporary) mark on the Romanian pavilion at the 1999 Venice Biennale.

In the pavilion, Dan's drawings literally disappeared under the feet of visitors, being gradually erased. In another exhibition, any drawing which took a visitor's fancy could be cut out and handed over by the gallery, underlining Dan's characteristically witty point that 'Disappearance is a sign of success!' Though he is happy, passionate even, to have his work featured in the Occupy protests – as on the streets of Stuttgart – he resists being defined as a political artist or activist. 'My drawings step onto the streets,' he says, which is about as much definition as he allows.

Researchers of Truth

After the presentations, the discussion broadened out, first under questioning by moderator Ann Demeester (Director of de Appel arts centre in Amsterdam) and then by audience members. Demeester raised the dynamic of the artist-couple, in which, from a feminist perspective, the woman tends to be less dominant. Lia answered that, though she had created the archive, this was made possible financially by Dan's success as an artist. Together, they conducted a 'parallel discourse'. Dan summed up their different approaches by saying 'Lia reads books, and I read newspapers,' before comically sending himself up as 'an exhibit in the Knowledge Museum'.

The examination of their relationship took a serious turn, with Lia pointing out that they had sacrificed having a family life for their art. The sharing of the archive was not an act of generosity but of an inner compulsion, a case of 'have to'. Likewise, Dan insisted that

drawing was not a medium – he draws to understand. Quite simply: ‘We want to get older in a better context than the one we grew up in.’ Since even a catalogue was unaffordable for most Romanians, it would be wrong not to share their resources. This desire to illuminate does not stop their intentions or their work from being misunderstood at home. ‘In your own culture,’ Dan said, ‘they presume that they know what it is you are doing. But they don’t.’

One instance of misunderstanding, common abroad as well as at home, is that Dan is an alternative artist rather than, as he insists, a mainstream one. Did they feel the need to be present in the mainstream? Their TV programme was ‘the only tool to reach everybody’, but it came about by accident – an opportunity, which they took. The mainstream drift in information-sharing is overwhelmingly towards the digital, but their archive remains an ‘analogue’ one. For the work they do, their presence is required – they have to be on the spot. During the Communist time, Lia felt as if she was in a kind of coma, from which she awakened only by doing the archive, undertaken as if in an attempt to ‘find the missing words’. In a certain sense, they belong to the ‘old media’ of books and newspapers; and besides, ‘conversation is cheap’.

Given their different temperaments and approaches, what is it that they most admire in each other? For Dan, it is Lia’s stubbornness; for Lia, thinking back to the early days, it is Dan’s intelligence – ‘he didn’t have so much humour then.’ Their different outlooks are apparent in their response to the idea of truth: whereas Lia cannot conceive of doing anything without believing in truth, Dan avoids theoretical definitions of truth, the temporary nature of his practice allowing him always to adapt. Blaming Ceauşescu for all of Romania’s previous ills is an avoidance of truth too, according to Lia, since society is constructed by people together, whether passively or dynamically. Speaking of the role of artists in that construction, Dan drew applause from the audience when he observed: ‘We are not the holders of truth, we are just the researchers of it.’

The Value of Being Known Abroad

On the phenomenon of self-censorship by artists in the ‘free world’, they both spoke of the difference between self-censorship and responsibility. Raised on the notion of the artist being wholly free, they had grown to value the notion of artistic responsibility instead. This does not equate with being a conformist, which really means being a bore. ‘If you are not afraid to lose your fee,’ Dan said, ‘then you are free.’

This sense of responsibility is apparent in their vision of artistic education, which for Lia boils down to being ‘the teacher you never had but you wanted to have’, unafraid of being surpassed by the students. Nobody ever invented anything in isolation – a chain of ideas is involved in each new advance. According to Dan, their wide experience of many different models of art school has taught them that the most liberal and the most conservative art establishments produce both good and bad artists. Nor should lack of resources limit achievement: if there is only green paint left, then ‘Paint green!’

Finally, on the subject of the award itself, is there not a danger inherent in such recognition? ‘No,’ said Lia, ‘it will save us.’ On the same day that news broke of the Princess Margriet Award, they were being ‘lynched by the regime’ for not being ‘national enough’ – which, of course, they aren’t. ‘If you are known abroad, they don’t kill you inside,’ Lia remarked, chillingly. ‘I’d be afraid to receive a prize at home!’

Earlier, one audience member admitted to feeling sceptical that art could be the answer to Europe’s crisis, but had been swayed by the Perjovschi’s talk of ‘negotiating

different experiences' – a wording that fits the present need in Europe. Dan echoed this sentiment at the end, arguing that 'Artists can help bring a solution beyond economics, beyond this fake unity.'