

Compilation 17

This reader-generated compilation was created from the contents available on Pages Magazine's online platform (www.pagesmagazine.net) and is mainly for the reader's personal use.

4

Hedayat: The
Opium of
Translation and
Creating the
Impossible Memory

Saleh Najafi

6

Self-Colonisation,
Dan Perjovschi and
His Critique of the
Post-Communist
Restructuring of
Identity

Marius Babias

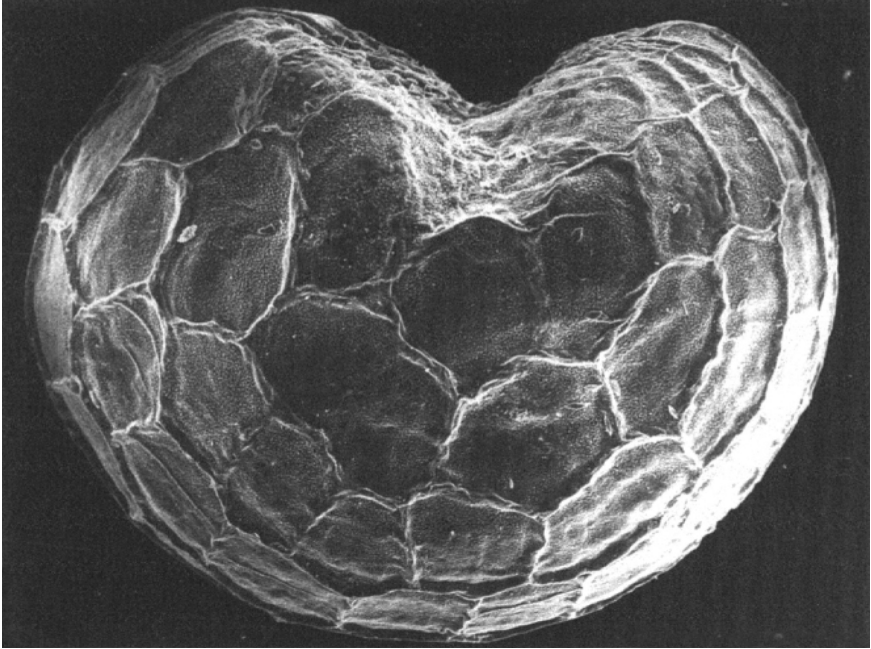
Hedayat: The Opium of Translation and Creating the Impossible Memory

Saleh Najafi

October 7th, 2020

This article is currently only available in the printed version of the
magazine.

::



Seed of *papaver somniferum*, from *Poppy: The Genus Papaver*, ed. Jeno Bernath, CRC Press, 1999, page 71.

Self-Colonisation, Dan Perjovschi and His Critique of the Post- Communist Restructuring of Identity

Marius Babias

August 14th, 2005

Marius Babias first became acquainted with Dan and Lia Perjovschi in 1996 at an international symposium at the Brukenthal Museum in Sibiu, Romania. Dan Perjovschi was interested in the ubiquitous processes of transformation in a post-Communist society suffering from collective self-imposed amnesia - an interest mirrored in his sculptures and installations, performances and interventions. His drawings, which later gained in prominence, were not at that time fully developed. His contribution to the symposium consisted of a minimal intervention: from time to time a telephone rang in the lecture room. The ringing interrupted the proceedings, subjecting the experts' discourse to an artistic disturbance and simultaneously pointing to the actual situation in the museum: the staff members were unable to telephone directly and had to have their calls connected by the switchboard. The switchboard had served during the Communist era to record and monitor all of the conversations, and was still there under Post-Communism.

Perjovschi's intervention was directed at the structural conditions of surveillance, control and communication, which have continued to exert their influence in more recent times. Essentially, his later work as an artist, activist and publicist (Perjovschi is a staff member of the Bucharest weekly newspaper *22*, and since 1991 its political illustrator and art director) serves as a critique of the incidences of

totalitarianism that continue to bubble under the surface of parliamentary democracy, and that are constantly revived in the general social discourse, in the media and institutions, as well as in the citizens' psychic economy.

Already in 1990, directly after the Romanian revolution that climaxed in the execution of Elena and Nicolae Ceausescu and that ultimately revealed itself to be a seizure of power by technocratic elites, Lia and Dan Perjovschi founded the Contemporary Art Archive (CAA) in Bucharest. This 100% private funded and state independent archive has been located ever since in the artists' studio, and serves as an autonomous instrument for scientific production in post-Communist Romania. The material it contains relates to the theory and practice of contemporary international art and is openly available to interested parties. Publications are issued and discussions and events organised on a regular basis. Dan and Lia do not however perform this discursive practice as curators, but see it rather as part of their artistic work. The fact that the couple have not left their country in order to embark on a rapid career in the western art world has increased their status as critical intellectuals in Romania; most recently they used their politico-cultural power to speak on the occasion of the opening of the MNAC (National Museum of Contemporary Art) 2004 at the "People's Palace" (the present Parliament), when they discussed the problems of the lackadaisical approach to history under post-Communism. The "People's Palace" towers over the city after being built by Ceausescu as the third largest building in the world - after the Pentagon and the Merchandise Mart in Chicago. This mixture of Versailles Palace, wedding-cake-style Stalinist bunker, and Disneyland, which required a whole district of town to be razed, is now paradoxically the seat of Parliament and the Museum for Contemporary Art – demonstrating a seamless continuation in the representation of political power and historical relativism.

Romania, since 2004 a NATO member, and due to enter the EU in 2007, is one of the poorest countries in the European community. Programmes for structural assimilation ordained by the West are

exacerbating social hardship in the country and indirectly triggering old nationalistic reflexes. These in turn are channelled by chauvinist groups and parties, leading to a destabilisation of the process of democratisation. Romanian society has been split into two ways of thinking. The large mass of social losers longs to return to a national Communist politics of identity (comparable to developments in the GDR, where subsequent to the fall of the Berlin Wall the PDS was able to cultivate a similar production of desire), while a small ruling class pours the profits it reaps from shady transactions and parliamentary privileges into hedonistic lifestyles. Rather than the new ousting the old, the old authoritarian baksheesh paternalism has returned in new wraps, and its central taboo remains as ever the socialist utopia.

Focusing on the contradictions in the socio-political metamorphoses and the processes of reshaping cultural identities in Romania, which are equally to be found all of in (in all of) the so-called transition countries of the former Eastern Bloc, Dan Perjovschi has developed a fitting artistic concept and a reduced graphic language that enables him to respond with maximum speed, efficiency and autonomy. He first came to the attention of a broad international audience through his piece in the Romanian Pavilion at the 48th Venice Biennale in 1999. He covered the floor of the pavilion with drawings, doodles and political graffiti, all on the theme of life under post-Communism and the role of art in the face of the all-embracing colonisation of the East under the dictates of western values and profit interests. Perjovschi's drawings and caricatures pose uncomfortable questions to the post-socialist claim to an identity as "Europeans"; simultaneously they repudiate in a deviously ambiguous manner the western reading of East European art as historically obsolete. A still prevalent cultural dispositive in the West concerning the "Eastern Bloc" as a space cut off from Modernism hinders the long overdue reassessment of European history as a whole, as well as mutual acknowledgement as equal partners in the "New Europe" that is currently emerging.

The Process of Ideological Reconstruction in Eastern Europe

The growing interest that Dan Perjovschi's work receives in the West guarantees him independence in his own country, which brings us to the second fixed point in his artistic practice: the study of the phenomenon of self-colonisation, as described by the Bulgarian philosopher Alexander Kiossev in 1999 ("Self-colonising cultures import alien values and models of civilisation by themselves and ... lovingly colonise their own authenticity through these foreign models").

In short, self-colonisation refers to the metamorphosis of the identity of entire regions and groups of people who have now come under the domain of the EU, because since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 the European Union comes across as the sole historical alternative to Communism. It would be naïve to believe that the EU's European Enlargement Process is based on cultural acceptance and the true embracing of Eastern European cultures. The developing interest in recent years in East European art and culture follows the same linearity as politics and economics – and not the logic of the cultural sphere and certainly not the logic that goes with a purported autonomy of art. The dilemma in which East Europeans find themselves rises from the fact that the pressing need to tackle the phenomenon of self-colonisation leads indirectly to buttressing the western hegemony in the post-Communist East – even in the very expression of their critique. This is particularly so since East European artists and intellectuals who are invested with the power to speak draw their authority and independence, not least in economic terms, from the West.

The way self-colonisation functions, as already described in 1978 by Edward W. Said in his book *Orientalism*, lies in the act of self-perception and self-construction using the concepts of the West, which thus ensures its ideological dominion over the East (as it has for centuries over the so-called Orient). Western hegemony is realized in the moment Eastern Europeans think of themselves as Eastern Europeans, and constitute themselves as objects of Western dominion. This is precisely what appears to have happened in

Eastern Europe since the fall of the Wall – a positive identification with the conceptual dispositive of the “Balkans”, “south-east Europe” etc. The “Europisation” of the regions taken into the EU is the most sensitive point in the reshaping of identity – for it is simply as if prior to EU integration the Eastern Europeans were not Europeans at all.

In the ideological process of reconstruing Eastern Europe, old cultural values get replaced by new – in some cases opposite – values.

Today the burnout of Communism and Nationalism is being succeeded by the ideology of Europeanism, which for its part is an outcome of the actual economic and political process of transformation. Art and culture do not simply replicate these processes, but are actively involved in constructing the new ideology of Europeanism when – mediating between East and West – they generate cultural values on both sides and place vacuous identity moulds at the ready.

With his drawings Dan Perjovschi has found a means - using just a few strokes - for not only naming the dilemma of self-colonisation, but also for prising open and unmasking the Western Europeanism dispositive behind the EU European Enlargement Process. His drawings, which straddle with great virtuosity caricature, cartoon and graffiti, train our eyes for the complex connections between everyday life, political agenda, and cultural self-definition. Without reproducing anti-Western and anti-Modernist resentments (as have become fashionable among parts of the East European cultural elites), they focus in an ironic and at times sarcastic way on the process of self-construction with Western concepts and dispositives.

Despite frequent encounters since 1996, it was not until 2003 before I (together with Florian Waldvogel) could invite Dan Perjovschi to be Artist-in-Residence at the Kokerei Zollverein | Zeitgenössische Kunst und Kritik in Essen, where over a period of three months he covered the entire bunker level with his drawings and graffiti. From an enormous fund of several thousand sketches that he previously had devised in his notebooks – sometimes fleetingly in a café or the subway, sometimes in concentrated sessions at his desk – he selected those that could be suitably scaled up for the walls and rendered in

chalk. “White Chalk – Dark Issues“, as he entitled this work that extended to some 700 square metres of exhibition space covering all seven rooms, and that amounted in its entirety to a truly impressive panorama of our times. It constitutes Perjovschi’s largest presentation to date.

As his contribution to “In den Schluchten des Balkan“ (In the Gorges of the Balkans) at the Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel (2003), Dan Perjovschi had a tattoo with the legend “Romania“ removed from his upper arm. He had the tattoo done in front of a live audience at a Romanian performance festival – at a time when the economic transformation, and with it the cultural self-colonisation of Eastern Europe, was underway. Back then Dan Perjovschi had wanted to reveal the process of the restructuring of identity through an affirmation of the cultural designations “Romanian“ and “Eastern European“; by removing the tattoo he has now articulated the necessity of liberating oneself from Western identity patterns that had literally inscribed themselves into his flesh.

Marius Babias is a critic and curator based in Berlin

The article was first published in: Dan Perjovschi, Naked Drawings, Museum Ludwig, Verlag der Buchhandlung WaltherKönig, Köln 2005

Dan Perjovschi is an artist living in Bukharest.

The drawings at the p. is made by *Dan Perjovschi for this issue of Pages magazine.*

::