

Yes, Kilroy Was Here, Armed With Agitprop

Drawing is a verb, according to Richard Serra, and the Romanian artist Dan Perjovschi seems to agree. This spring, as cranes were hoisting Mr. Serra's steel sculptures into the Museum of Modern Art for his retrospective, Mr. Perjovschi was scaling the eastern wall of the building's atrium in a cherry picker.

ART REVIEW

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Crowds gathered for almost two weeks to watch him dash off simple black drawings with punch-line captions, satirizing subjects from the European Union to the war in Iraq to global warming. The results form a hybrid of graffiti and activism, a "Kilroy was here" for the MoveOn set.

Mr. Perjovschi is gone (you can still watch him in process on YouTube), but his drawing remains. So do the crowds. People cluster around the Barnett Newman obelisk, pointing and laughing, lingering for longer than I've seen anyone at MoMA stand in front of, say, van Gogh's "Starry Night." It's a scene straight out of a Thomas Struth photograph and a testament to the power of unabashed agitprop.

As institutionally sanctioned protest, the Brobdingnagian doodle recalls Mr. Serra's contribution to the 2006 Whitney Biennial: a poster that read "Stop Bush." Or Hans Haacke's "MoMA Poll" in 1970, which asked museum visitors for opinions on Nelson Rockefeller's views on Vietnam.

If this project, organized by Roxana Marcoci, feels more like alt-media cartooning than art, there's a reason: Mr. Perjovschi is a longtime editor of Bucharest's weekly alternative newspaper 22, established shortly after the fall of Nicolae Ceausescu's regime, and his drawings have graced its pages since 1991. (He made an eight-page newspaper for MoMA, available free during the show.)

Mr. Perjovschi draws with incisive economy. United States protectionist trade policies and Big Brother-style surveillance are skewered in one fell swoop as the stripes in the American flag double as Venetian blinds, which a man on tiptoe pulls down and peers through. The art market is not exempt. A thought bubble depicting a muscle-bound arm is captioned

ONLINE: MARKINGS ON THE WALL

Additional images from the exhibition "Projects 85: Dan Perjovschi" at the Museum of Modern Art:
nytimes.com/arts

"Projects 85: Dan Perjovschi" continues through Aug. 27 at the Museum of Modern Art, (212) 708-9400.

Projects 85

Dan Perjovschi
Museum of Modern Art

"Chelsea galllllleries," the proliferation of L's echoing the ad-absurdum expansion of the neighborhood.

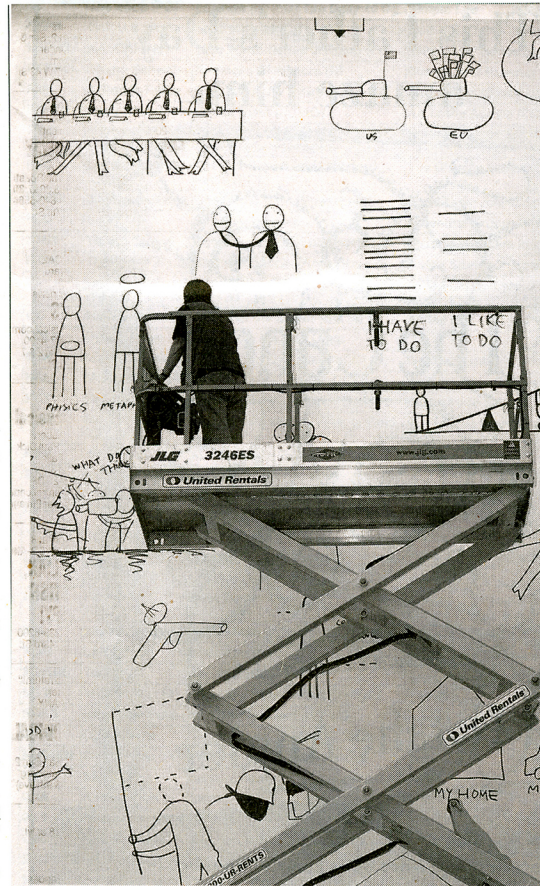
Other images favor a before-and-after format. The progress of elected officials from grandstanding to inefficacy is charted in a succinct image captioned "How Politics Goes." Two dots and a circle make an open-mouthed face. Move the circle up to a nose, and you've got a clown with no voice. "Tragedy" becomes "statistics" as crosses multiply from four in the first image to far more in the next. Tragedy, in the form of the Virginia Tech shootings, struck just three days before Mr. Perjovschi started drawing. A reference to the media circus that ensued is visible at the base near the floor.

You might not guess it, but he was formally trained as a still-life painter in a Soviet-style art academy in Romania. The turmoil of the late '80s prompted him to question the medium's relevance. In an interview with Ms. Marcoci (available on momama.org), he explains: "Water was freezing in the glass, no soap, no books and no future. How could one paint that?" A section of his wall drawing reiterates the dilemma: Two heads flank a square labeled "Still Life"; one reads, "Van Eyck," and the other, "Food!"

Performance quickly became part of his populist strategy. He made his first all-over drawing in 1988. In response to state-sanctioned censorship Mr. Perjovschi wrapped the interior of his house in white paper and for two weeks kept a running social commentary. He came to wide attention in 1999 at the 48th Venice Biennale, marking up the floor of the Romanian Pavilion, and the current Biennale includes his drawings in the main international exhibition.

Mr. Perjovschi's site-specific strategy feels daring here, but it isn't exactly new, and his bare-bones style lacks nuance, a familiar problem with agenda-laden art. His work could use some of the formal zip of Keith Haring, the poetry of the similarly socially conscious cartoons of William Kentridge or the visceral punch of Kara Walker's take-no-prisoners murals.

For all its political task taking, Mr. Perjovschi's drawing at MoMA feels a little tame. It makes tentative forays around a corner or two, but looks incomplete. The work-in-progress air may suit the artist's intentions, but it leaves viewers with a less than feral cousin of a Haring dog, one with more bark than bite.



Dan Perjovschi applies his satirical images to the wall at MoMA.