

Gary Taxali and the team at **Narwhal Art Projects** have brought together a collection of original illustrations by Taxali. Hundreds of works are assembled in groupings that flow like a free form comic strip. Ranging over the generous displays is an experience that lends itself to playful associations amongst neighbouring illustrations, while demonstrating Taxali's dexterity as a visual communicator; tracing themes throughout the exhibition is inevitable. Common visual tropes, such as the delicate tones of antique papers and the imperfections that come with Taxali's screen-printing process, along with a crew of retro-Americana characters, carry a viewer along the busy walls.



Installation view | The Taxali 300 at Narwhal Art Projects | Courtesy of Juxtapoz

The retro look of the materials, typography, and characters in Taxali's work have attracted attention from a range of creatives, including critics and artists of the 'Low Brow' or pop-surrealist movement, as well as illustrators and design junkies of all

Illustration Proclamation: Gary Taxali And Dan Perjovschi

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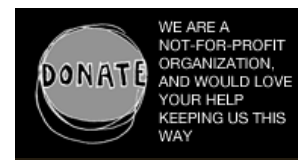
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stripes. Taxali certainly has an affinity for the American idealism of the first half of the last century. As Taxali tells us, advertisements from pre-war America “were selling hope in an age where the possibilities of technological advancement were exciting”ⁱ. Compared to the strained gardening metaphors of “shovels in the ground” and “green shoots,” wherein analysts betray the frail grasp we have of the complexity of our current financial circumstance, Taxali’s embracing of the frank, awkward solicitations of old logos is a breath of fresh air.

What has been lost in contemporary appeals to green futures and financial regulations, Taxali tells us, is not only the cheerful tone of *Big Boy* and the *Monopoly Man*, but their honesty: “In my work I attempt to show the awkwardness in the characters and logos to praise their humanity and innocence by purposefully highlighting their imperfections”ⁱⁱ. These characteristics of ‘humanity,’ and ‘innocence’ come through in Taxali’s work as a gentle nudge away from an insistence on control that some designers convey with “sterile imagery of water, the colour green etc.”, promising serenity and clarity in a more harmonious, fertile futureⁱⁱⁱ. For example, Taxali illustrates the slogan “eat local” with a smiley bunch of fruits and veggies growing out of a pile of dreary apartment blocks, and they’re doing this all by themselves, too! I don’t see the smugness of most greens, and I imagine that we are more inspired to tend our

own garden by this jolly bunch than by swooping panorama shots of wind farms and solar panels. Furthermore, the happy food group doesn't force a tenuous connection between global sustainability and my vegetable garden, but rather, captures the charm of the DIY mentality without taking on an air of self-importance.



From The Taxali 300 | Courtesy of Narwhal Art Projects

Taxali's charm sets an important tone in our visual culture that has not gone unnoticed by other illustrator-cum-fine artists. Dan Perjovschi is another master doodler who has stripped his work of the sleek, sterile style of advertising visuals, and the sensational scale and gravity of most news media. Outside of Romania, Perjovschi is best known for his illustration installations. Using simple tools (indelible markers and projections) Perjovschi covers the walls of galleries

with black and white cartoons.

Perjovschi will be coming to Toronto on February 15th to create the next of a series of these installations, which have been commissioned by numerous prominent galleries, in the Royal Ontario Museum's *Roloff Beny Gallery*. The coincidence of these two exhibitions will provide valuable insight into the value of artists who are able to humanize an increasingly confusing visual world.

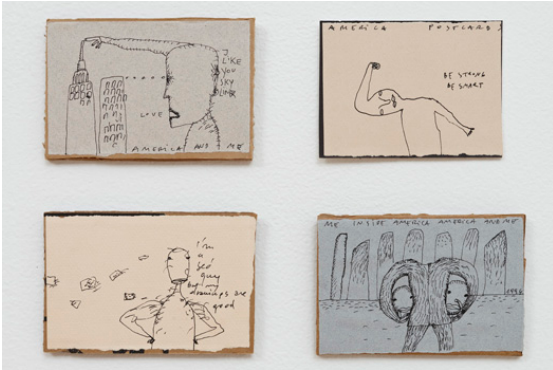
By constantly translating the ideas and issues that he encounters on his travels into cartoons, which he records continuously in notebooks, Perjovschi captures the attitudes and behavior of local communities as well as his reaction to changes in place^{iv}. Each installation is an edited and enlarged version of these notebooks^v. Perjovschi adds a humanized character to his work by taking such a personal approach to art making. "Everything I see is linked after all with the way I see things, and with what happened to me," Perjovschi tells us^{vi}. Art is a working out of everyday experience in Perjovschi's practice, where drawing maintains the humility of a journal entry.



Installation view | Postcards from the World |
Courtesy of Lombard-Freid Projects

The best example of this diaristic aspect

of Perjovschi's practice is his current exhibition New York, which bears a striking resemblance to the exhibition of Taxali's work at the **Narwhal Art Projects**. *Postcards from the World*, which is currently showing at **Lombard-Freid Projects**, is an installation of small format illustrations by Perjovschi sprawled out across the gallery space like the cells of mammoth comic strip^{vii}. *Postcards from the World* brings together a work by that same name and a second work: *Postcards from America*^{viii}. Each piece is a collection of the notebook, scribblings that Perjovschi uses as the subjects for his installations^{ix}. *Postcards from America* is a record of Perjovschi's first trip to America, which took place in 1994 after the Romanian revolution in 1989^x. A doodle of a man whose bulging bicep is also his head captures the flippancy and wordplay that pervade Perjovschi's illustrations: the annotation 'Be strong, be smart' is lent a Kafkaesque humor when we see that the macho man showing us his 'guns' has actually metamorphosed into the might with which he's conflated right. Perhaps this drawing captures an early encounter with the archetype of the American machismo.



From Postcards from the World | Courtesy of Lombard-Freid Projects

Perjovschi has created a personal account of his first encounter with America with hundreds of similar drawings in order to allow viewers to see the great struggle for understanding that characterizes an inquisitive, critical mind. If we consider the current installation at the **Lombard-Freid Projects** in isolation we can see that a time-based element of Perjovschi's work is emphasized thanks to the comic-style hanging of these two temporally charged pieces. Each piece is the result of a journey, a passing of time and place, captured like a snapshot. Nuno Faria explores a second aspect of time at play in Perjovschi's work by explaining how these illustrations act as an invocation of memory.

Not only are the works at the **Lombard-Freid Projects** a record of Perjovschi's travels, they also represent a constructive act through which he organizes and filters his experience into comprehensible segments or episodes. Without outlining a clear psychological analogy for this process of constructing an image of the past, it is still plausible to suggest that such acts of willful remembrance are an important aspect of

becoming conscious of the constant shifts in our understanding of the world. Faria suggests that a viewer's response to the montage of works presented by Perjovschi can be understood as an act of remembrance^{xi}. This is not to suggest that we remember as Perjovschi would, but that the images someone 'gets' are the images that resonate for them. An installation such as the one at the Lombard-Freid lends itself to a kind of free association of images, and the weaving of idiosyncratic narratives present in the diverse array of subjects illustrated by Perjovschi.

Much like Taxali, Perjovschi presents a less serious or highhanded form of design. However, where Taxali brings a tangible sense of character to our visual culture through a sensitive attunement to a humble attitude present in the forefathers of the contemporary logo, Perjovschi has further developed the time-based aspect of his performances in order to tap into a similar vein of humanized illustration. The performance of the continual act of understanding and the subsequent redefinition of that understanding is a central element of Perjovschi's work, through which he admits his own fallibility. Perjovschi must constantly revise his responses and adapt his illustrations to constant changes in the media environment, as well as other aspects of the local context, that he encounters on his travels. For example, while his macho-man could back a big mouth with a bugling bicep in 1994, by the second Moscow biennial, whether by virtue of a new setting or a different time, our

meathead is all talk. His images have such rich character not only for their wit, but also for the development of themes that reoccur across the passages of time and place that Perjovschi captures in his notebooks.



Installation view | Footnotes on Geopolitics | Market and Amnesia at the 2nd Moscow Biennial | Courtesy of Dan Perjovschi

The humanizing affect of the temporal and commemorative aspects of Perjovschi's illustrations is a vital aspect of his ability to maintain the role his work fills as a public art form. The way Taxali can capture our fallibility in his toons by avoiding the sleek, inhuman look of advertising is another valuable contribution to a public visual culture. Kristine Stiles has paid close attention to the status of print media and illustration as a public art form, and with direct consideration of Perjovschi's practice. An outline of Stiles' work on public art will flesh out the relevance of the term 'public' and help draw out the importance of the humanizing elements that I've identified in the work of Taxali and Perjovschi.

For Stiles, it was Perjovschi's role as political cartoonist and the context in which he took on that role that were the

most compelling reasons for calling his work a genuine public art^{xii}. After the fall of Ceausescu's regime in 1989, Perjovschi soon began to create the illustrations for two new publications - *Countrapunct* and *22* - both avenues for critical voices emerging after the silence of the communist state was broken^{xiii}. Stiles argues that post-revolutionary Romania shared a history clouded by secrecy, and that a collective assessment of that past was essential^{xiv}. Presented with a moment in which an entire country was faced with issues that would resonate throughout the population, Perjovschi's illustrations could help focus the attention of the public on the complexities of the social consequences that would arrive in the wake of the revolution^{xv}. The presence of such shared interests is key for Stiles, and is what constitutes an identifiable 'public.' Stiles is able to elucidate the value of Perjovschi's work because she can explain the relevance of the issues that Perjovschi illustrates to a clearly defined group.

However, by focusing her analysis on the communicative brilliance of Perjovschi's illustrations within the context of his practice as a uniquely Romanian artist in a Romanian moment, Stiles must end her treatment of public art on a wan note. If there is no public interest in an appreciation of our past, or a critical reflection on how that past resonates in our present, then public art does not exist because there is no clear public to engage^{xvi}. Though Stiles presents us with an example of a

Western community within which public art has engaged successfully, she is concerned with the difficulty of defining publics within western democracies^{xvii}. Above, I have tried to articulate the means through which Taxali and Perjovschi have managed to engage people without a public that could plausibly be said to have the same invigorated sense of the importance of the past that Stiles believes to have been present in Romania after 1989.

Developing communicative tactics with the flexibility of those employed by Taxali and Perjovschi shows that illustration (within the context of print culture and installation art) may be able to engage with people despite a lack of a clearly defined public. The engagement that I've described takes place on a level of a humanizing of visual culture. The value of this humanization of visual culture is best understood in opposition to a misplaced faith in the role of news television as the centerpiece of the deliberative democratic ideal.

Laboring the supposed rationality of a democratic or economic sense of progress by employing a medium that cannot support the sustained thought required for such complex projections, i.e. television, is a misuse of our creative potential. Richard Anderson, in "The Place of the Media in a Popular Democracy", has shown us that the impact of 'negative campaigning' (read: mudslinging) and 'agenda setting' (read: sensational journalism) are enough to undercut a vision of a rational, well

informed group of citizens being led by a visual culture. It is not visual media that we should look to for guidance in goal setting and decision making. The persistence with which we have done so reveals a misunderstanding of the potential of visual media. It is, perhaps, art that can help us understand a more valuable form of engagement with visual forms. When news television can only present us with so many uncertainties, vagaries, and abstractions, it seems strange that we have not given up the hope that visual communications might help us grasp the complexities of the early twentieth century. The work of Taxali and Perjovschi points to another, more valuable, potential inherent in visual media, the potential of an engagement with more basic aspects of human nature in a way that may help people understand how their shared humanity is iterated in the present moment.



From The Taxali 300 | Courtesy of Narwhal Art Projects

Fallibility is the aspect of human nature that Taxali has shown us so skillfully. Taxali has given us a renewed humility in the form of his jovial characters, which drop the pretense of a sleek, serene vision of a revitalized, green American economy. The self-consciously caricatured quality in Taxali's work, which is achieved with a charming handling of the visual legacy of the American dream, not only makes the hubris of American finance laughable but also humbles contemporary attempts at easily encapsulating the flaws in our economic system. Taxali's handling of the now-quaint mascots of the past reveals that both the new and old must stand together in their acceptance of their fallibility and the uncertainty of their grasp of present crises. Taxali's

Monopoly-Man-come-Uncle-Sam is perhaps the best instance of this humanizing tone. The star-studded hero of commerce looks on in disbelief as his bubble is about to be burst. This bubble could be the bubble of 'bubble capitalism,' the bubble of our neighbor's supposed economic superiority, and perhaps the deflating of a more collective personal fable: that ubiquitous visual media could bring the coherence promised by a dream of electric omniscience. No, no. The best we've got are Taxali's chumps.

Perjovschi's work is a performative and time-based rendition of our fallibility. The theme of fallibility is not an obvious one to relate to Perjovschi's work when presented with his vibrant wordplay and the breadth of the thoughts that he stimulates with such simple drawings. One might imagine that if anyone can present a thoughtful or comprehensive view of the world, it would be this adept visual communicator traveling the world with no job other than doodling. But once you consider that Perjovschi has seen what it is too live in a place where images were elevated to the level of infallible icons, my proposal gains new weight. Perjovschi is embracing the beauty of a continual transformation of belief and understanding; an organic process that was perhaps denied him, or at least curtailed, by the limits placed on his access to information and freedom of speech. After he left Romania this process broadened in scope. Though Perjovschi's practice as an illustrator may be addressed to a more nebulous public, the more fundamental

exploration of the value of a constantly shifting imminent critique has enriched his practice by adding an inspiring characterization of the essential struggle we all face by virtue of our imperfect understanding.

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ⁱ Gary Taxali Illustration Press, “Juxtapoz Interview”,
<http://www.garytaxali.com/press.php>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Dan Perjovschi Official Website, Texts, “The Line That Speaks”, by Julia Friedrich, <http://www.perjovschi.ro/line-speaks.html>.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Dan Perjovschi Official Website, Current Projects, “Dan Perjovschi—Postcards from the World”,
<http://www.perjovschi.ro/dan-perjovschi-postcards-world.html>.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Ibid.

^{xi} Dan Perjovschi Official Website, Texts, “Dan Perjovschi: When I’m working I see everything as a drawing”,
<http://www.perjovschi.ro/dan-perjovschi-when-i-m-working-i-see->

everything-drawing.html.

^{xii} Kristine Stiles, “Concerning Public Art and “Messianic Time””, Google Scholar Search: “Concerning Public Art and “Messianic Time””, (accessed February 12, 2010).

^{xiii} Ibid.

^{xiv} Ibid.

^{xv} Ibid.

^{xvi} Ibid.

^{xvii} Ibid.