

Kristine Stiles

PASSAGES 1992— 2007.

Interview with Lia Perjovschi

BUCHAREST: FEBRUARY 1992

KRISTINE STILES: While you studied art throughout your childhood and adolescence, would you say that your work as a professional artist began in 1985, so to speak, with the international Mail Art movement dating from the early 1960s?

LIA PERJOVSCHI: Mail Art was an important beginning, but it came out of a larger situation. [Fig. 303] It coincided with a new beginning in my life when I moved from Sibiu to Oradea in 1985 and worked painting sets in the State Theater. In Oradea, I was able to watch Hungarian tv, and I used a Hungarian dictionary to try to understand and analyze images on television. Life in Oradea was a period that made more sense to me, coming after 1980–1984, which was the worst phase of my life. During that time, I repeatedly failed my entrance exams for the art academy because of the corrupt system of selection in Romania. Each year the application process (and the ultimate rejection) was a surrealistic experience. Even my second choice—to study psychology—was not possible anymore, as Ceausescu closed all the psychology departments in the universities around the country in 1980. So between 1980 and 1984,

I had temporary jobs decorating Christmas glass balls, making leather suitcases, and collecting state fees for electricity. Each was a brutal experience. During these four years, I worked on perfecting the drawing of still life and the figure in order to acquire the standardized academic “methods” of representation necessary for passing the exams. Actually, I preferred to draw mostly in abstract lines, not figurative, and to make signs only for myself. I always liked abstraction, and in childhood I drew rain. Growing up and being fascinated by tv, I also drew “films,” kind of like what we would today call storyboards for films. My first exhibition, *Ex Libris* at Astra Library in Sibiu, was in 1980 after I finished high school. It was of notes and drawings that recorded what I felt or ideas that I had while reading books. [Figs. 301–302] In 1988, these drawings were collected in a small artist book published in Italy.

All this history contributed to making Mail Art appealing, as it brought imaginary people, networks outside Romania, and other issues into my life. Dan and I found out about Mail Art from older artists from Oradea and Timisoara who gave us some addresses from Europe, Asia, Mexico, and the u.s. My Mail Art consisted basically of empty envelopes that I saturated in colors used

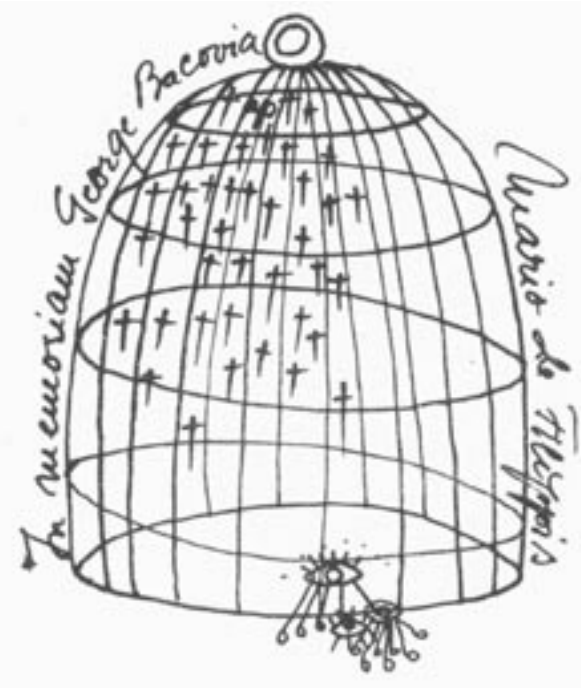
for textiles with which I painted costumes for the stage. Sometimes the envelopes also had painted drawings or collages as discreet messages. Through mail art, I could mentally travel. Mail Art was also a kind of resistance, as we (like most Romanians) had no money, and were not given passports or permission to leave Romania in the 1980s. In general 1980 to 1987 was a kind of coma for me, a kind of somnambulism. I was not capable of understanding anything. My messages were discreet and disarticulated, perhaps similar to William Golding's novel *Pincher Martin* (1956), whose character is drowning but still trying to fight for his life in slow motion with a heavy body that is incapacitated and cannot escape. [Fig. 304] Things changed again in 1987 when I was finally admitted to the Art Academy in Bucharest. I started to be clearer in what I wanted both from others and myself. I developed a double personality: one to play the rules of the school (in order to have good grades and the fellowship that sustained my studies); and one that rejected the academy because, after so many years of being told I had failed my entrance exams, I no longer trusted anyone.

ks: The action called *Test of Sleep* that you performed in your apartment in 1988, in Oradea, is also about discreet communication if one considers the indecipherable script you wrote on your body. [Figs. 69, 200–208, 305]



Fig. 301, above
Lia Perjovschi, *In Memoriam, Nichita Stanescu*, 1980–1987
bookplate: ink on paper.

Fig. 302, above right
Lia Perjovschi, *In Memoriam, George Bacovia*, 1980–1987
bookplate: ink on paper.



LP: *Test of Sleep* represents overwhelming feelings. To explain it better I can approach it by recalling the Gilgamesh story, in which Gilgamesh lost his best friend because he fell asleep. I was impressed by the idea of losing and of being weak. I can also mention *The Pilgrim Kamanita* (1906) by Karl Gjellerup, which also deals with the theme of losing something important because one doesn't pay attention, or *Il Colombre* (1966) by Dino Buzzati, where the theme is of being afraid. I cannot explain this concept better in words because they sound so banal. Or, I have to use too many words; better to keep silent. Returning directly to *Test of Sleep*, I also thought of it as visual poetry, with no real words, just invented symbols on my body that were similar to the ones I used to decorate the envelopes in my Mail Art.

ks: This discussion also makes me think about your book-objects *Our Withheld Silences*, 1989, the balls made from sections of text that you cut from books and glued in patterns on papier-mâché balls. [Figs. 71, 73, 307]

LP: I wanted to make a round book, like a collection of all my readings. I cut up a French travel diary into very fine strips. I cut vertically so that you can read a letter but not a word in the collaged cuts. In this way, it is

about the silence of books. Books are read in silence. We understand different things from the same books. Also, books hold secrets for people who have not yet read them. Each book offered me a new experience and was very important to me. After 1989, I could not read fiction any more, only nonfiction because after the Revolution I needed facts. I didn't want to waste any more time. But before 1989, I needed fiction to escape.

ks: Romanian social conditions produced silence.

LP: A woman told me that one of the balls from the series *Our Withheld Silences* was a stone because it was not round and it looked heavy.

ks: What you just implied in response to my point about Romania is that Romania itself is a stone.

LP: Yes. Romanians keep something inside that is very heavy. This reminds me of something very interesting about Romanians: we save all kinds of things because we are poor. For example, people keep cups without handles. After some time, we don't bother to buy a new cup. This way of keeping things became a mentality that resulted from the forty-five years of Ceausescu's regime.

ks: Why didn't people go to the streets to protest Romanian conditions?



Fig. 303
Fold out envelope/poster for
Mail Art exhibition, 1985, Atelier
35, Galeria Orizont, Bucharest.

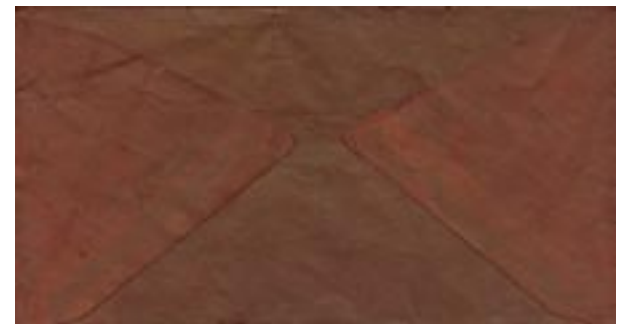
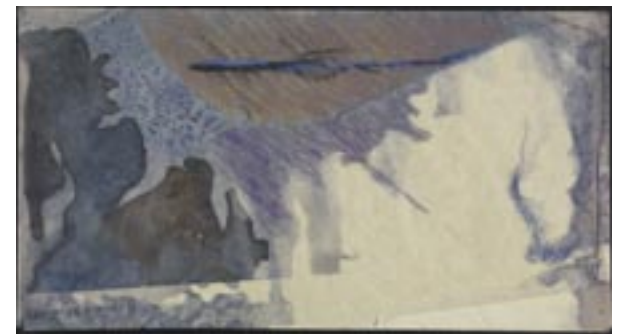


Fig. 304
Lia Perjovschi, *Mail Art/Discreet Messages*, 1985–1988; dyed and collaged envelopes.

LP: That is a question we ask ourselves: why didn't we go onto the street before Timisoara? The answer is that we didn't have enough courage because we feared that we could die for nothing.

ks: What do you think is the artist's role in society?

LP: Art helped me to understand many things. I had moments when I had the feeling that a book or a movie was special for me; it was not an accident that I read or saw them. I like to think that some of my works are there for someone else. I want and I like to help others, to empower people: but discreetly. So I create situations for special moments to happen.

ks: Is the subject of silence a theme in your work?

LP: Yes: become without knowing. I like silence. I have a lot in me. I was a silent child. I like better to look and to listen, as in *Mein Name sei Gantenbein [A Wilderness of Mirrors]* (1966) by Max Frisch, where one pretends to be blind. My father was also very silent. Silence is



Fig. 305
Lia Perjovschi, *Test of Sleep*, June 1988, performance in the artist's flat, Oradea.

like a gesture in a dream, or like the game of charades in which you have to find words for the actions of other players. Also, my works at the beginning were a kind of therapeutic act or game.

ks: The psychology of the body clearly informs your *Maps of Impressions* of 1989.

LP: I made the first *Map of Impressions* in 1989 in Oradea, and exhibited it first in a window niche in Sibiu in 1990. [Figs. 74–81, 306–307, 314] These were costumes for my feelings. I compare them to the Möbius strip, linking the inside and outside of the body in one continuous line. We modify and are modified by the environment and by others. The difference between inside and outside is not clear. *The Maps of Impressions* are for me also like armor.

ks: *Magic of Gesture/Laces*, 6 November 1989, the happening you made just two months before the Romanian Revolution, makes an interesting connection to the Möbius strip. You tied your classmates, who were seated on chairs in a circle, together such that they were required to work together to extricate themselves.

LP: It was an experiment. I wanted to make visible the ties that hold us together, making us dependent on one another, being destructive or positive. The cameraman arrived eight hours late but nobody left. Waiting so long created a special mood. Then it took

me forty-five minutes to tie everyone's hands and legs together. Everyone was calm. Suddenly by accident someone made a gesture and, like with dominos falling, everyone was affected. After some time a lot of confusion took place. For some people, the laces became unbearable and they tried to untie themselves. Others worked very quickly and some regretted being untied. After the event was over, I asked everybody to talk about the experience. People told me that they remembered a lot of events in their personal and social lives. Some still felt the experience of being tied; some liked the experience and were sorry that it was over. People made of their actions what they wanted, behaving as their personalities dictated.



Fig. 306, above
Lia Perjovschi, *Map of Impressions*, 1989; newspaper, cloth, and mixed media.

Fig. 307, opposite page
Lia Perjovschi, *Map of Impressions*, 1989, and *Our Withheld Silences*, 1989, installation view of 1992 exhibition, Bucharest.





Fig. 308
Lia Perjovschi, *I'm fighting for my right to be different*, July 1993, Art Museum, Timisoara.

ks: I think that *Magic of Gesture/Laces* is also related to your installation *About Absence*, 1990, made soon after the Revolution. [Figs. 88, 93–94, 209] You constructed this ephemeral work from charred window frames that you found, which had been burned during the Revolution, and then you constructed a system to hold them up with string and bricks painted black.

LP: Maybe it was like a monument to nothing: about absence, about empty space. I needed something but nothing was there.

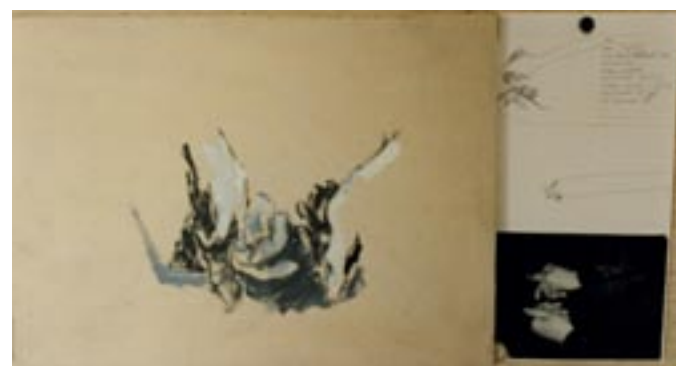
BUCHAREST: AUGUST 1993

ks: Your performance *I'm fighting for my right to be different*, 4 July 1993, in which you performed with a doll dressed as your double, reminds me of how you developed two personalities during your years in the art academy. [Figs. 10, 99–110, 308]

LP: In *I'm fighting for my right to be different*, I started by wearing a black outfit like a man's suit. Then I took the suit off and put it on the doll. I sat and spoke to the doll through hand gestures. Next I became aggravated with the doll and threw her in a large bowl of black paint. I began throwing her around, against the walls, at the public. Then I took the position of the doll next to her on the ground. This performance was about accusing myself and others of being weak, but also about being sorry for being too tough, and about going into another period of my life, beginning a different dialogue with myself, at another age. The doll was an image of me, like a photograph.

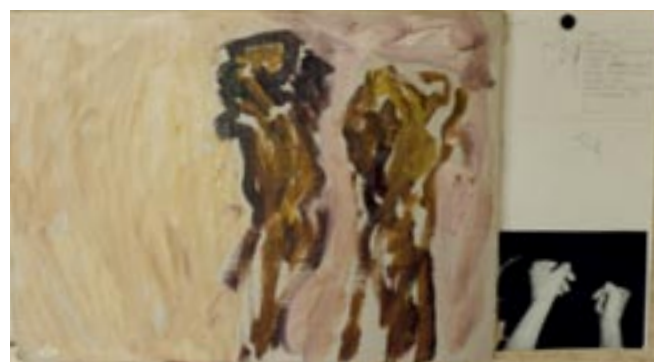
ks: Why didn't the audience move when you threw the wet doll covered in black paint at them?

LP: Two people said that they liked to be punished. Some people liked to have the black paint on their clothes because it marked them.



Figs. 309–310
Lia Perjovschi, installation photograph of two units of *32 Moments in the Life of Hands*, 1993; oil paint on canvas,

together with photograph and drawing of hands in the same position as the painting.



BUCHAREST: NOVEMBER 1997

ks: Why do hands play such an important part in your work?

LP: *32 Moments in the Life of Hands* was about gestures and their messages. [Figs. 119–125, 309–310] If you are confused about a face, you can always look at the hands. Hands have their language. Hands play, are bored, are absent, nervous, dirty. I tried to explore the state of hands. In my happening, *For My Becoming in Time*, October 1989, I washed with white paint the hands of participants that were painted in various colors—black, violet, blue, green, pink, red, and orange. [Figs. 84–85] My own hands were also covered with white paint. I then shook hands with the audience, transferring the white paint to their hands as well. It was a symbolic gesture for a new beginning, for a less dirty society. [Figs. 311–313]

BUCHAREST: LIA EMAIL, 16 DECEMBER 2003²

I am in between (artist—curator—researcher, art coach)

I am a detective in contemporary art

I am interested in what is relevant in art/culture, local, regional, international: ideas, issues, attitudes, critical discourse, issues of context changes



Figs. 311–312, above and right
Lia Perjovschi, *Similar Situations*, October 1993; eight-minute, silent video installation of hand motions; nine monitors; rain installation, Bucharest.

I am a facilitator

I like to help people to have access to contemporary art

I like to empower people

I live on the interval (in between East and West)

Because an exhibition consisting of real works is practically impossible to organize—at least for the time being—I propose a solution, which I think is very clever and can be read on many levels—informative, creative, ironic, provocative—a work of art too

The entire project has to be a project in process (depending on many factors), open, flexible, organic, dynamic (open to have quick reactions)

Long term (we all hope)

A laboratory of ideas

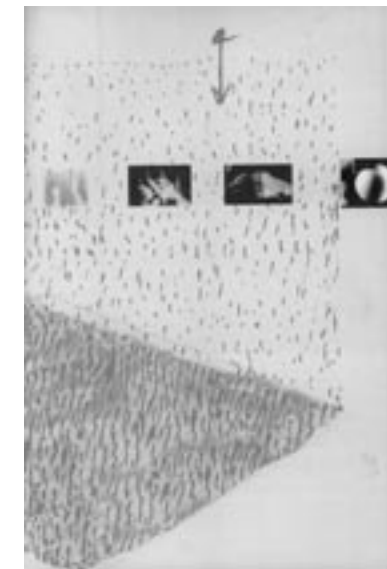


Fig. 313
Lia Perjovschi, drawing of installation *Similar Situations*, October 1993, in *amaLIA Perjovschi*, 1996.



“Our heads are round so that our thoughts can change directions,” Picabia

Open platform for Contemporary Arts, Everyday life (time between arrival and departure)

What is important is the content not the size, form—

A generator of ideas, attitudes—

In order to be able to invite artists and curators we have to create a conceptual platform

I am thinking of interesting artists selecting interesting curators—interesting curators will bring interesting artists—if there are good conditions, theoretical and financial

Each exhibition will take and make its own distinctive curatorial perspective

CAA CAA

BUCHAREST: OCTOBER 2006

KS: The first newspapers you produced in 1992 were on your own and Dan’s work. [Figs. 276, 314] These anticipate the development of your art in a more conceptual and social direction. They also mark the beginning of the formation of your archive (CAA) in 1997, which eventually you renamed as *Contemporary Art Archive Center for Art Analysis (CAA/CAA)* in 2000. [Figs. 146–153, 315]

LP: Maybe. But we already began organizing informal meetings for film directors, artists, literary people, and journalists to discuss their work in our apartment in Oradea in 1985. Those meetings might be considered part of this history. I was curious at that time to know how different people worked in different fields. What are their professional interests? How do they manage their profession? And so forth. So this history might



Figs. 314–315, above and right
Lia Perjovschi, *Perjovschi LIA*, 1992, and *lia perjovschi*, 2002; newspapers.



be part of the chronological development of CAA as an archive of knowledge. Also, in 1987, I created an experimental place in my studio in the Bucharest Art Academy, and I opened it to all students. I did my events, such as *Magic of Gesture/Laces* and *For My Becoming in Time*, in this context. In addition, we opened the studio that we received from the Union of Artists (located ironically in the yard of the Bucharest Art Academy) in the fall of 1990 to anyone who knocked at the door: foreigners, Romanian journalists, artists, critics, and the general public. From the beginning, the studio was less a place to produce artworks in the classic sense, but more a place to produce relationships. It reflected the time after the Revolution and our fight for a democratic society. I began to collect materials on art in 1990 when we started to travel abroad. Others borrowed these archival materials. Very quickly the materials helped to create a context, a platform, a frame for our ideas and projects, but also for other artists’ and scholars’ ideas and projects. Before the Revolution, there was no history for us: it was just suspended time. My obsession with collecting and archiving is a desire to make history. It is a response to the lack and distortion of history. I now dream of making a *Knowledge Museum*, an interdisciplinary space which will have three departments: Body, Earth, and Universe. [Figs. 169, 226] It will be my next step after my globe collection, *Globe Endless Collection*. [Figs. 160, 239, 316–321, 324, 363] It is a bit like André Malraux’s *Musée Imaginaire* [Museum without



Figs. 316–321, above and below
Lia Perjovschi, *The Globe Collection*, 1990–present, installation view, Generali Foundation, Vienna; five details of objects in the collection.

Walls], 1947, Marcel Duchamp’s *Boîte-en-valise* [Box in a Suitcase], 1934–41, or Marcel Broodthaer’s *Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section Financière* [Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles], 1970–1971. Also, all the time as a child, I wanted to have a globe but it was too expensive. In 1990, I found a pencil sharpener that was a globe. After that I began to find banal things. I started to collect them, being intrigued by the object that made me dream so much about travel and knowledge. It says something about the time in which we are living.



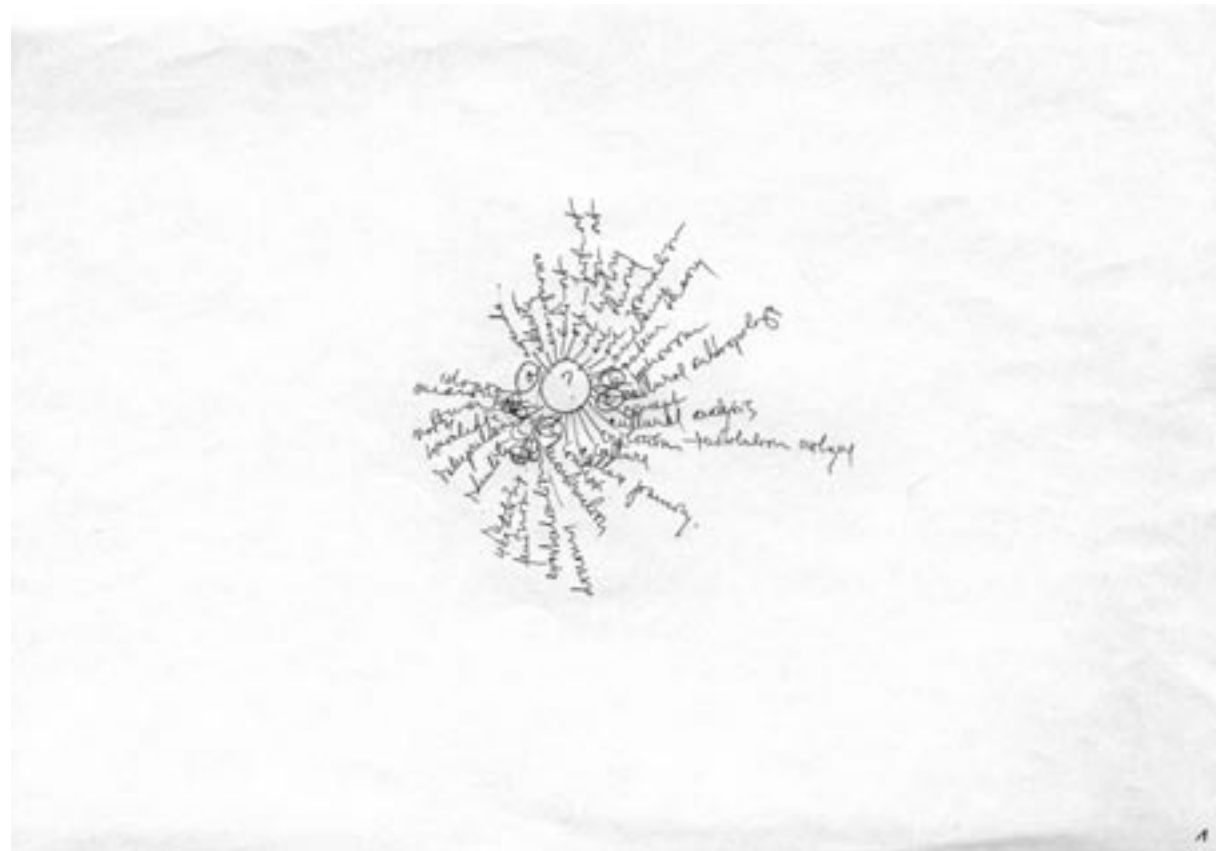


Fig. 322, above
Lia Perjovschi, *Mind Map*
(Diagrams), 1999–2006; ink on
paper, one of a series of sixty.

Fig. 323, opposite page
Lia Perjovschi, *Research File. Gen-
eral Timeline: From Dinosaurs to
Google Going China*, 1997–2006;
collage and drawing on paper,
one in a series of thirty-one.

KS: Tell me about how, in the process of developing *CAA/CAA* as a structure, it enabled you to create works such as *Mind Maps* and your *Timelines* and *Chronologies*. [Figs. 11–12, 15–16, 18, 161, 163–168, 241–264, 322–323]

LP: I first exhibited *CAA* in a public space, the A35 Gallery in Bucharest, in 1998. Because of the widespread interest by the public and media—more than 3,000 people in a month visited the gallery—I wanted my archive to exist in another space besides our studio and not to depend on me. So I started to organize my mind to find a solution for this interest. I started to make mental maps and to take notes on books that I was studying with the aim to have the résumé of the book on

only one sheet of paper. From these notes came my diagrams, *Mind Maps*. First I had to read the whole book superficially. Then I had to find a general point of view, and finally I made the map. Since childhood, I have always taken notes while I was reading as a way to help me to concentrate and annihilate surrounding noises. The diagrams serve as my extra memory. In this way, I can add other information from other sources on the same subject over time. This process gave me the feeling of being a kind of detective doing research in art history and working with materials from my archive to produce the *CAA/CAA* newspapers. I also started to create *Timelines*: the first one was on art, next on general culture, then on Romanian culture, and the last one, so far, is a visual curriculum vitae. These works helped me to make further sense of how information appears in different contexts: what happens when. These works helped me to understand the development of history and then to see how my art also developed in different historical contexts.

KS: What do you see in the future for your work?

LP: Now I am fascinated by the idea of the *Knowledge Museum*. I make plans and models for it. I wait for opportunities to create in real space what I have in my mind. *CAA/CAA* is an inventory, and it will change again. I don't like routine—in this attitude, I am like my mother. I like to let myself be distracted by different things, life, ideas, events, and others. I am open and I like to be free.

BUCHAREST: LIA EMAIL, 11 APRIL 2007

Dear Kristine,

Since we met, all these years, I tried to understand what I did in what context, and why.

I thought that if I could only understand, I would be able to offer something to others.

I think now that I understand (I worked hard for this).

Looking back, I see a silent period before the Revolution. (It makes me nervous to articulate explanations

because I don't have words for that period, even now. Maybe I never will; maybe I don't want to; I cannot.)

Then a loud period after the Revolution: I found my voice and could explain everything. (I could not stop talking.)

In my evolution (before the Revolution), three things were very important for my art (I know now): working in the theater (made me do performance art); watching Hungarian tv (not knowing the language, made me pay attention to the images); and Mail Art (helped me to become conceptual).

The Revolution (did not end for me yet): it made me willing to be the subject and not the object of history.

After the Revolution, being able to travel outside Romania, made me realize that I come from a culture cut out from the main structure of history, that reconnection was impossible without recuperating what was lost: I had to recuperate fifty years of knowledge and that's why I become a researcher, an archivist (*CAA*), a theoretician (*CAA/CAA*), a guide, and a curator.



Your questions from 1992 launched a long chain of questions (thank you for being with us all these years).

I became a detective in the local/international/art-culture context and a Dizzydent from Dizzy when the Romanian Contemporary Art Museum was established in Ceausescu's Casa Poporului, which was then turned into the Palace of the Parliament.

Living in a transition time/context, my intellectual attitude replaced the classic art form, becoming my new art form.

I insist upon these explanations because I want things to be well understood

(of course, everybody is free to interpret as he/she wants).

From my point of view, it is not about me. It is about art (how it happens, what it has to say).

Today is my birthday (only a nice coincidence).

DURHAM: KRISTINE EMAIL, 11 APRIL 2007

ks: As you pointed out in 1992, "There are no coincidences."



Fig. 324, above
Lia Perjovschi, object from *The Globe Collection*, 1990–present.

NOTES

- 1 In about 2700 B.C.E., Gilgamesh was the King of Uruk in Babylonia, on the River Euphrates, in what is now Iraq. Known as the one who saw all the great mysteries of the universe and had recovered lost knowledge of the world before the Great Flood, Gilgamesh was believed to be both man and a god. As a young man, he journeyed with his best friend, who was killed while Gilgamesh slept. The only way that he could imagine living was to attain immortality and eternal life. In the end, Gilgamesh recognized his folly.
- 2 This text is an excerpt from a draft statement in Lia's exhibition "Detective (in art history from modernism till today)," at the Stanica Center, Zilina, Slovakia, 2004.



Fig. 325, opposite page
Exterior of Dan and Lia Perjovschi's studio.