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Opposition is not enough

The Role of Roma Art in the contemporary constellation

A tanulmány arra tesz kísérletet, hogy az 1970-es évektől kezdődően bemutassa azt, a kortárs roma, cigány képzőművészetben bekövetkező fordulatot, amelyet az ideológiai pozíciók változása, hangsúlyosan a posztkoloniális elmélet megjelenése eredményezett. Ehhez vonultatja fel a műalkotások tényleges tereit, amelyben a kiállítások tettként értelmeződnek, ahol lebontódnak a kiszolgáltatott reprezentációk, a "gondolkodni és cselekedni" pedig tényleges állítássá válik: a műalkotás nem tiszta esztétikum, hanem politikai cselekvés – és ezzel együtt nem csupán ellenállás, hanem "önmagunk újrateemtése" is.

In the second part of the twentieth century creative Roma writers, artists, and film directors making self-representations were finally allowed into mainstream discourse—after the first World Romani Congress in 1971—Roma visual artists started to claim recognition as a group. Until this time Roma productions were represented as not being the work of individual authors, but rather as collective facts of nature, which only become a concrete representation when they are in some way presented by an art collector or folklorist.¹ Until the late 1970s, the support of the creative activity of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe has been provided by minority institutions and admirers of "outsider art" and "naive painting," ones who essentially consider Roma Art an ethnographic phenomenon—paradoxically maintaining along the way the very peripheral position of such art. As a result, several actors in the Central European contemporary scene are hostile to manifestations of minority art for ignoring aesthetic norms canonized by the majority of society.² Under the aegis of "excellence," aesthetic discrimination comes to rule the art scene, little different in its motivations from racial or gender discrimination. I dare to declare my stance on this issue, and point out that this kind of "elitism" in art means social injustice and unfairness. An event of historical importance marks the beginning of the Roma cultural movement in Europe: the 1979 *First National Exhibition of*

¹ During the 1960s, a number of Roma organizations were established in France and the United Kingdom. As their numbers grew, there was increased interest in the creation of an international Roma organization. After years of extended effort Roma from a number of European countries met in Orpington, near London, in April 1971 for the first World Romani Congress. This congress, considered the first truly international meeting of Roma, brought a number of successes. The International Roma Union was founded, the Roma flag was accepted, and the song *Gelem, Gelem* composed by Jarko Jovanović was adopted as an anthem. As well, the delegates unanimously declared 8 April as International Roma Day. The congress also concluded that the politically correct term for all Roma, Gypsies, travellers, Gitani, Manoush, Kalle, Kalderash, and other Roma groups shall be "Rom," meaning man/human in the Romani language.

² It was only in 2004 that Roma artists appeared on the official contemporary art scene in the exhibition *Elhallgatott Holokauszt* [Hidden Holocaust], Kunsthalle Budapest.

*Self-Taught Roma Artists*³ in Hungary, organized by activist Ágnes Daróczi and hosted by the Pataky Cultural Center in Budapest. This exhibition raised international awareness, generated fans and supporters of Roma culture, and had a long-lasting fertilizing effect on Central and Eastern European Roma cultural production. Through the outstanding media response Daróczi managed to bring together an extensive international group of Roma artists. She also made preparations for a comprehensive publication on European Roma Art, which unfortunately never made it to print. Her work on this publication inspired Sandra Jayat, the French poet, writer, and painter who organized *Première Mondiale d'art Tzigane* [First World Exhibition of Roma Art] at the Conciergerie in Paris in 1985. These exhibitions were international successes; their significance in keeping Europe's Roma artists inspired and the Roma creative production stimulated was outstanding. The results were discussed at the third World Romani Congress in 1981, in Göttingen, where Daróczi established great friendships with Czech Roma activist Karel Holomek, who was then the lead advocate for the establishment of the Museum of Romani Culture in the Czech Republic,⁴ and with Thomas Acton, Professor of Romani Studies at the University of Greenwich, who curated the first exhibition for Roma artists in the UK.⁵ In the early 1990s the interpretation of the cultural practice of minorities was enabled by a paradigm shift, commonly referred to in specialist literature as the "cultural turn," a shift that began in the 1970s. Culture became the focus of contemporary debates in Central European societies: this was the time when the notion of cultural democracy became crystallized in the debates carried on at various public forums in Central and Eastern Europe. Civil society gained strength, and civil politics, a prerequisite of cultural democracy, appeared. This shift of attitude in scholarly circles derived from concerns specific not only to ethnicity, but also to society, gender, and class. This change brought about an interest in exploring the history and value of Roma culture. Not only has it become obvious that the arts are laden with stereotypes about Roma, but also that the cultural classification describes the visual products of Roma with terms the experts themselves claim to be positive, like naive, barbarian, primitive, primordial, archetypal, and autodidactic. Roma artists rarely had the opportunity to experiment with new techniques, and they could exhibit only in community centers, venues that seem marginal from the perspective of artistic discourse. Roma intellectuals defined one of their chief missions as the exploration and presentation of Roma art, and the removal of

³ For more information, please see the catalogs, in Hungarian only, for the three iterations of the exhibition: Ágnes DARÓCZI, *Autodidakta Cigány Képzőművészek Országos Kiállítása* [National Exhibition of Self-Taught Roma Artists], ed. Zsigmond KARSAI (Budapest: mmi, 1979); Ágnes DARÓCZI, *Autodidakta Cigány Képzőművészek II Országos Kiállítása* [II National Exhibition of Self-Taught Roma Artists], ed. István Kerékgyártó (Budapest: mmi, 1989); Ágnes DARÓCZI, *Roma képzőművészek III Országos Kiállítása*, [III National Exhibition of Roma Artists], ed. Éva KALLA and István KERÉKGYÁRTÓ (Budapest: mmi, 2000).

⁴ The Museum of Romani Culture in Brno, Czech Republic was established in 1991.

⁵ For more information see Grace ACTON and Thomas ACTON, eds., *Second Site, An exhibition by four artists from Roma/Gypsy/Traveller communities* (London: University of Greenwich, 2006).

stereotypes and prejudices from the image of Roma, but they faced a scarcity of resources and very difficult circumstances.

By the early 2000s, the Central and Eastern European Roma cultural movement raised active cultural theorists and many of them specialized in the examination of Roma representation and cultural participation. In this decade Roma artists have successfully participated in several international contemporary art events.⁶ The increasingly vigorous discourse on Roma identity and representation, together with the appearance of Roma cultural experts, has begun to dismantle the sophisticated machinery of cultural oppression. Roma culture has generated such interesting new phenomena as the renewed permanent exhibition of the Museum of Romani Culture in Brno, a professionally installed museum space with multiple functions and a carefully worked-out strategy of presenting the history of Roma representation accurately and engagingly. Similarly momentous are those attempts that present Roma artists in official spaces of contemporary culture.⁷ The establishment of the First Roma Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Contemporary Art Biennale in 2007 was the climax of this process. The First Roma Pavilion presented *contemporary* Roma Art. The Roma Pavilion was the first conscious subaltern revolt⁸ of the European Roma intelligentsia, where Roma theoreticians and artists proved, that it is in the field of the visual where Roma subalternity: this burden of being the 'other', and the physical, symbolic, epistemic – violence, in other words, the colonizing act of European majorities toward the Roma, is the most visible and evident. At the same time, an effective solution to critique the existing structure of national representations of the Biennale tradition. The timing was also very important, as the Roma Pavilion proposed a transnational identity in 2007, one that is competitive, up to date, multicultural in nature, bilingual in character, and as such embodies many European ideals such as, for example, adaptability, mobility, multiculturalism, etc. In this context Roma appeared as an asset—an advantage and a quality—and not a problem as have become customary. The 16 artists from 8 European countries shared a transnational vision for alliance and unity for Roma in Europe.

The acceleration of the Roma art field's activities contributed to the Roma contemporary art - term's institutionalization. While in 2006 the term was highly questioned by art

⁶ These exhibitions include, for example: *Second Site*, Stephen Lawrence Gallery London, UK, 2006; *Hidden Holocaust*, Kunsthalle Budapest, Budapest, 2004; and *We are what we are: Aspects of Roma Life in Contemporary Art*, an exhibition that traveled to: Galeria Nouă, Bucharest, 2006; Galerija ŠKUC, Ljubljana, 2005; Ján Koniarek Gallery, Trnava, 2005; City Museum Ústí nad Labem, Ústí nad Labem, 2005; and Minoriten Galerien, Graz, 2004.

⁷ The 2004 exhibition *Hidden Holocaust* was the first in Hungary to open the gates of the Kunsthalle Budapest, this "bastion of contemporary art," for Roma artists. This was in effect the first time that Roma artists (11 in all) could exhibit in an official space of contemporary art, and could use the infrastructure of the institution to realize their works. A glimpse at the exhibits at *Second Site*, held in London in March 2006, also convinces us that the way we are invited and allowed to think about Roma visual art has changed irreversibly: the paradigm shift has occurred.

⁸ The research of the subaltern desire is a scientific field which is (naturally) often explored by minorities which are the victims of discrimination. This notion of the subaltern was confirmed by Gayatri Spivak, who in 2011 held a presentation at the Vienna, Festwochen during the Safe European Home Program Series about the possibility of placing European Roma into the postcolonial theoretical framework.

historians and experts, by 2011 you could actually organize a comprehensive tour of international Roma Art exhibitions and events. On 8 April 2011, International Roma Day, the Kunsthalle Budapest presented the exhibition *New Media in our Hands—Roma New Media Artists in Central Europe*, curated by the young curator Sarolta Péli daughter of the famous Roma painter, Tamás Péli. This exhibition presented primarily young Hungarian, Czech, and Slovak Roma artists, and a new tendency: young Roma artists and talented individuals using technology to disseminate their ideas for creative productions and for the organization of the community. In the middle of April, 2011 an event of historical importance took place, the first Roma commercial art gallery opened in Berlin, Galerie Kai Dikhas. The first exhibition of the gallery presented the works of Lita Cabellut, the Spanish Roma artist (later in the year the gallery also showed Daniel Baker, Damian James Le Bas and Delaine Le Bas, and Gabi Jimenez). Between 26 May and 8 June 2011 the series *Safe European Home?* took place in the frame of the Wiener Festwochen in Vienna. Delaine and Damian James Le Bas's gigantic installation defined the scenery in front of the Austrian Parliament, in Vienna (Image 21) while inside the parliament building we could visit the *Roma Protocol* exhibition curated by Suzana Milevska. The exhibiting artists—Milutin Jovanović, Marika Schmiedt, Alfred Ullrich, Malgorzata Mirga-Tas, and Marta Kotlarska—and the curatorial concept was explored by the presentation of one of the seminal postcolonial theorists Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Spivak's presentation encouraged those in the field of Roma Art to "use" postcolonial critique not just as a distant analogy, but as an actual and important tool for working through the condition of Roma amidst western "democracies." At the same time, an international exhibition and conference *Ministry of Education Warning: Segregation Harms You and Others* opened in Prague during the World Roma Festival Khamoro 2011. By the beginning of June, 2011 we all traveled to Venice to visit the *Call the Witness* exhibition of the Roma Pavilion at the 54th Venice Contemporary Art Biennale organized by Maria Hlavajova and to engage with the speculations about "an other, hopeful future for the Roma," prior to which BAK in Utrecht opened a Roma contemporary art show. In November 2011, the *Reconsidering Roma—Aspects of Roma and Sinti Life in Contemporary Art* exhibition took place in Berlin, curated by Lith Bahlmann and Matthias Reichelt. The works were on display in the beautiful space of the Kunstquartier Bethanien, and the simultaneously organized conference about the Roma situation in Europe, called to life by Allianz Kulturstiftung, gave a place for theoretical discourse on Roma arts and culture. The line of events and exhibitions continue to grow in 2012 and 2013, mainly with the activities of Gallery Khai Dikhas⁹ in Berlin and Gallery8 – Roma Contemporary Art Space¹⁰ in Budapest. Through these precious memories of our cultural

⁹ Gallery Khai Dikhas is a Roma commercial art Gallery in Berlin: www.khaidikhas.com

¹⁰ Gallery8 is a contemporary art space in Budapest's 8th district, the area mostly populated by Roma inhabitants: www.gallery8.org

movement, we may construct the notion of Roma Art from the historical perspective. In this sense, we understand Roma art to be an important result of the Roma cultural movement.¹¹

The legitimacy of Roma visual production is also affirmed by the need for Roma images in the fight against Anti-Roma (visual) propaganda: Roma people are undoubtedly subject to physical attacks¹², forced evictions, mass deportation, economic exploitation, cultural depreciation and political exclusion. The increasing number of paramilitary organizations, racist and neo-nazi groups and nationalist formations in Europe are using visual propaganda in their campaigns for increasing and disseminating anti-Roma hatred and violence. Their websites and visual forces include new "creatives" to humiliate and abjectify¹³ Roma. We need to understand the operation of these oppressive pictures –not just to learn why to appreciate the work of Roma artists and creative talents, but also to recognize the pervasive and still hidden mechanisms of their strategies: When Franz Fanon writes about negritude he uses the term „corporeal malediction” to describe the phenomenon articulated in the moment of visual encounter, which he refers to as “Look a negro”.¹⁴ In the Central European panoptic regime the “Roma” became the pendants of western Europe’s African and Asian primitives.¹⁵ J. T. Mitchell explains how the mechanisms of racism with its visual violence splits its subject into two, making it invisible and at the same time hiper-visible, making it the object and target of both its adoration and hatred.¹⁶ According to Mitchell, this is analogous of what the Bible describes as idolatry. „The idol, just as the Black man, arouses both adoration and hatred, it appears as an insignificant person, a slave and at the same time he is feared as a stranger or as a metaphysical quality.” On many photos taken in the past decades, the main “theme” is the abjection of the “victims” - the Roma people on the picture. These photos consciously distort and manipulate their Roma subject, until it is expedient for the eliciting of disgust – and the maximum possible. Julia Kristeva’s theories describe, that the “abject is what society marks as “filth/dirt”, “which distracts the order imagined or constructed by society”,¹⁷ which subverts the identity, the structure, the system,

¹¹ The movement started with single events of cultural recognition and success in the late 1960s, such as, for example the discovery of artist János Balázs, Hungarian poet Károly Bari, and writer Menyhért Lakatos and the achievements of the Central European Roma activists such as Ágnes Daróczy, Karel Holomek, and many others.

¹² In June 2008 the paramilitary formation - Hungarian Guard – marched through Galgagyörk, Hungary (for the first time) to threaten its Roma residents. This was the first location in a series of attacks, where shots were fired at Roma, one month after the march. The violent attacks against Roma resulted in the death of 6 Roma victims, including one five year old boy, 5 Roma victims were severely injured, including an 11 year old girl, 55 person were injured, 78 shots fired at Roma targets, 11 molotov cocktails were thrown at Roma families. The Europe-wide summary is just this tragic.

¹³ J. KRISTEVA, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

¹⁴ F. FANON, „The Fact of Blackness” in *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109.o

¹⁵ É. KOVÁCS: *Fekete testek, fehér testek*, *Beszélő*, 14.évfolyam I. szám, 2009. január.

¹⁶ W. J. T. MITCHELL: What Do Pictures "Really" Want? *October*, Vol. 77. (Summer, 1996), pp. 71-82

¹⁷ J. KRISTEVA, "Bevezetés a megalázottsághoz" (ford. Kiss Ágnes). In: *Café Babel*, 20, 1996.

which does not respect borders, rules etc.”¹⁸ Kristeva’s metaphor about the skim of the milk, which she is morbidly disgusted by perfectly, illustrates the idea of the abject. The images used in web advertisements, billboard campaigns, flyers, newspaper advertisements and political campaigns degrading Roma are the agents of ideological manipulation, which harm people, they operate in the same way as pornographic images, which are –according to Catherine MacKinnon¹⁹ – not simply the presentations of a violent act, but the act itself, the act of violent degradation. In this oppressive, racist and fearful (visual and physical) environment there is an even more important demand for Roma art which deconstructs the traditional “Roma image” established by the hegemonic and powerful white majority.

The Roma artists are looking for analytic and practical “options confronting and delinking from [...] the colonial matrix of power”, and this is how they arrive to the movement of decoloniality²⁰. This Roma decolonial “thinking and doing,” is both a political and epistemic project²¹, a means of eliminating the provincial tendency to pretend that Western European modes of thinking are in fact universal ones. This way Roma art is in search of a “new humanity” or the search for “social liberation from all power organized as inequality, discrimination, exploitation, and domination”.

And the Roma Art practice takes us even one step further: there is plenty of artistic practice and curatorial work that focuses on the analyses or description of the mentality of the non-Roma, or in other words the Whiteness (and its racism, nationalism, Roma-hatred), the main component of the present “situation”. Roma contemporary art has the potential to innovatively—as other segments of the Roma cultural movement—shed light exactly on the perpetuation of the kind of asymmetry that has marred the critical analyses of racial/ethnic formation and cultural practice, where the majority (white) position remained unexamined, unqualified, essential, homogenous, seemingly self-fashioned, and unmarked by history or practice. Roma art supports the excavation of the foundations of all racial formations and cultural positionings. It can resituate “whiteness” from its unspoken status; it can make whiteness visible by asserting its normalcy and transparency.

The argument for the legitimacy and support of Roma artistic production based on Roma cultural rights is very often disregarded by the art world, while it is perhaps the most often debated and advocated by the Roma communities. Against the growing number of Roma Art events around Europe, the cultural rights - situation since 2008 has

¹⁸ E. GROSZ, *Volatile Bodies, Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington, The University of Indiana Press. 1994

¹⁹ C. MACKINNON, *Feminism Unmodified*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987. 172-173.o

²⁰ MIGNOLO, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham: Duke UP. MIGNOLO, Walter 2011.

²¹ MIGNOLO 2011: xxiv-xxiv.

deteriorated significantly in the Central and Eastern European regions: Roma creative production is in worse circumstances than it was in the 1970s, Roma tangible cultural heritage is in actual danger, completely invisible and inaccessible to the public. For example between 1979 and 2004, more than 5,000 artworks by Roma artists were bought by at least 10 state collections in Central Europe—yet to date there isn't a single permanent (or regular temporary) exhibition where Roma Art can be studied. The current Central European Roma cultural map indicates only one institution (this is the Museum of Romani Culture in Brno). The cultural rights of the Roma minority are not fulfilled, Roma are deprived of their own right to access their cultural heritage, of their right of the production, presentation and interpretation of their own Roma culture. The political and cultural recognition of Europe's largest minority is of key-importance for the stability and peace in Europe, and the solutions must be formed, primarily, in Central and Eastern Europe.

The Roma cultural movement and its central notion Roma contemporary art, has been the most efficient vehicle in the past four decades for the exploration of Roma subjectivities. bell hooks African- American feminist critic claims – “opposition is not enough. In the vacant space after one has resisted there is still the necessity to become – to make oneself anew”²², and in this hard labor over „making ourselves anew” Roma art has the most vital and defining role. The Roma cultural context offers creative and critical practices for the Roma minority through which our widely dispersed and fragmented Roma minorities can “transcend national boundaries, creating a mutually accessible, translatable, and inspirational political culture that invite[s] universal participation”²³.

²² B. HOOKS, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, South End Press, Boston MA, p.15.

²³ BROWN, J. Nassy, “Diaspora and Desire”, p.75.