

ROMAISM - Constructing Roma Cultural History

ROMAISM is an experimental exhibition project which attempts to construct Roma cultural history through presenting 100 objects: artworks, documents, research materials, archive photos, posters, newspapers, books, videos, websites and items of personal memories from the 1960's until the present day.

Participating artists: János Balázs, Tibor Balogh, Lada Gaziova, Henrik Kállai, Roland Korponovics, László Kosztics, Erika Lakatos, Katherina Lillquist, Nihad Nino Pusija, Jolán Oláh, Omara, Teréz Orsós, Tamás Péli, Nihad Nino Pusija, André Raatzsh.

Art historians, curators, ethnologists, theorists, sociologists quoted in the exhibition: Thomas Acton, Katalin Aknai, Daniel Baker, Pál Bánszky, László Beke, Tayfun Belgin, Ágnes Daróczy, Péter György, Maria Hlavajova, Jana Horvathova, Karel Holomek, Timea Junghaus, István Kerékgyártó, Katalin Keserű, Éva Judit Kovács, Edit Kőszegi, Menyhért Lakatos, Suzana Milevska, Mária Neményi, Gábor Pataki, Salman Rushdie, Katalin Székely, Péter Szuhay, Jenő Zsigó.

We understand Roma art to be an important result of the Roma cultural movement. 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.

The first reference to the notion of Roma art (although speaking rather of “Gypsy painting”) in the Central European artistic scene appears in 1968, when art historian István Kerékgyártó and ethnographer Pál Bánszky “discover” their “Roma hermit genius, the elderly painter János Balázs.” 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.

An event of historical importance marks the beginning of the Roma cultural movement in Europe: the 1979 First National Exhibition of Self-Taught Roma Artists in Hungary organized by activist Ágnes Daróczy who managed to bring together an extensive international group of Roma artists. Her work 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.

Between 1980 and 1990, “social inclusion” became an important pan-European agenda, with the consideration of the situation of the Roma population, and although it did not have a component of “cultural inclusion,” it prepared the ground for the second and more momentous wave of the Roma cultural movement. The cultural turn 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. It also has become clear that Roma artists rarely had 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 stereotypes and prejudices from the image of Roma.

By the early 2000s, the Central and Eastern European Roma cultural movement raised active cultural theorists, for instance art historian Jana Horvathová (Brno), sociologist Angéla Kóczé, media theorist Mária Bogdán, graphic artist Tibor Balogh, art historian Sárolta Péli, (and many others) – all specialized in the examination of Roma representation and cultural participation. In this decade Roma artists have successfully participated in several international contemporary art events. 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. Official spaces of contemporary culture were similarly important (Hungarian Institute for Culture and Art; Museum of Romani Culture in Brno) and by 2006, when the preparations for the First Roma Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale started, we identified and we were in contact with Roma artists all around Europe.

In Hungary it happened only in 2004 that Roma artists appeared on the official contemporary art scene in the exhibition *Elhallgatott Holokauszt* [Hidden Holocaust], Kunsthalle Budapest, Budapest and only in 2007, after the opening of the First Roma Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale, Venice that one of the most distinguished art historians in Hungary, Gábor Pataki stated in *Új Művészet*, the leading Hungarian art journal: “There is no doubt that we are witnessing the birth of . . . autonomous Roma art.” The First Roma Pavilion presented contemporary Roma art: this new term suggests the exceeding of white racism and prejudices against the liminal outsider, and the potential examination of interrelations between gadjo[non-Roma] subjectivity and “Roma” reality.

The curator of the First Roma Pavilion, Tímea Junghaus argued for the necessity to explore—with the participation of Roma intellectuals—the possibility of situating Roma in postcolonial discourse, “as an analytical support to expose the racialized social, economic and political hierarchy in Europe.” This was particularly difficult since the position of Central European academics around 2005 was that the application of the postcolonial theory and its environment is illegitimate in the Central - and Eastern European regions due to the fact that these regions are historically and structurally different from the West.

The situation since 2008 has deteriorated significantly in the Central and Eastern European regions, due to the strengthening nationalist and neo-Nazi voices, outspoken racism, and growing anti-Gypsyism. Roma creative production is in worse circumstances than it was in the 1970s—Roma tangible heritage is in actual danger, completely invisible and inaccessible to the public.

The analysis of Postcolonial racism and social justice argues that the “colony” as such, in our case the Roma community, “is internal to the state, comprising subaltern classes and those human subjects perceived to be ‘infrahuman’.” One could easily identify and highlight these internal colonies on today’s map of Europe, geographically tracing Roma to the Balkans and throughout Central and Eastern Europe.

Thus the realization of the Roma Pavilions (2008, 2011) at the Venice Biennale was an important effort to critique the existing structure of national representations of the Biennale tradition. In this context Roma appeared as an asset—an advantage and a quality—and not a problem as has become customary. The 16 artists from 8 European countries shared this vision.

The acceleration of this field’s activities also contributed to the term’s institutionalization. While in 2006 the term was highly questioned by art historians and experts, by 2011 one could actually organize a comprehensive tour of international Roma art exhibitions and events.

The Kunsthalle Budapest presented the exhibition *New Media in our Hands—Roma New Media Artists in Central Europe*, curated by curator, Sárolta 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*.

In June 2011 the *Safe European Home?* program series 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, while inside the parliament building we could visit the *Roma Protocol*

exhibition curated by Suzana Milevska. 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, we all traveled to Venice to visit the Call the Witness exhibition, Roma Pavilion at the 54th Venice Contemporary Art Biennale curated by Maria Hlavajova, and to engage with her speculations about "another, hopeful future for the Roma."

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.

Roma art has the potential to innovatively 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 remains unexamined, unqualified, essential, homogenous, seemingly self-fashioned, and unmarked by history or practice. It can resituate "whiteness" from its unspoken status, it can make whiteness visible by asserting its normalcy and transparency, and that is how Roma art shall achieve the status of equal "marker."