

“Roma Women Weaving Europe” - Roma feminist thought and contemporary art

Opening speech by Anna Mirga-Kruszelnicka

Roma women tend to see themselves much differently than how the majority society tends to portray them.

The image of a “Gypsy woman” has been shaped by the majority society for centuries. Through literature, in visual arts, and later on through policies, research and the media – the representation of the Roma women oscillated somewhere between the romanticized and hyper-sexualized image of “Carmen” to the image of a Gypsy witch, beggar, thief. These representations treated Roma women as both promiscuous and free and at the same time trapped by their own traditional culture.

For those of us who are Roma, or those who have had a chance of witnessing the intimacy of Roma community life – we know that the reality is much different.

Roma women are the fundament of Roma communities. Their role and influence are unquestionable.

As transmitter of culture they are also its re-inventors. In this sense, the very survival of the Roma culture depends on Roma women.

They are the backbone of the families and entire communities and the advancement of Roma as a people are to a great extent their doing.

I also think that it would not be an overstatement to say that Roma women are among the first emancipated women in general. At the time when non-Roma, white women were at home caring for children until relatively quiet recently – throughout this time, Roma women have been searching for means of subsistence, engaging in different types of economic activity and engaging in social interactions outside of the confines of their homes.

Still, Roma women live in a patriarchal culture. Indeed, Roma society is organized around gender – just as the mainstream society is. The oppression and inequality that women throughout the world face is all too familiar to the approximately 6 million of Roma women in Europe.

They have to deal with multiple and intersectional discrimination - as women, members of a stigmatized ethnic minority, at higher risk of social exclusion and poverty. Their daily struggle with these intersecting dimensions of inequality pushed them to creatively challenge patriarchal and racialized oppression. Like in the case of other women of color, the every-day struggle of Roma women became a foundation for the gradual emergence of Roma feminism as a movement against injustice.

The European Romani women’s movement emerged as a response to the perceived lack of representation. Indeed, the “white” feminist movements were not inclusive or representative of Romani women sensibilities; the feminist agendas of mainstream women’s movements did not include the perspective of *Romnina* specifically either.

Drawing inspiration from other minority women struggles, Roma women sought their own voice and became self-conscious of their agency. As famous African-American feminist scholar bell hooks argues, “oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story”(bell hooks, “Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black”, 1989, p. 43). For Roma women too, the process of self-empowerment is rooted in the demand for freedom to articulate their own worldviews, to express the intersecting sexualized and racialized oppression and develop individual and collective ways of opposing them.

This double exhibition “Roma Women Weaving Europe” is inspired by this history of Roma women struggle, survival, overcoming and pride. A history that is often overlooked and that – we are convinced – can and should be a source of inspiration to all women across the world.

Roma women artists are particularly outspoken in articulating passionately and powerfully the perspectives of contemporary Romani feminism. The double exhibition “Roma Women Weaving Europe” aims at showing how strategies of gender and racial injustice are materialized, embodied and represented through art.

We invited Roma women artists – and one man, George Vasilescu – to provide insight into perspectives of Roma feminist, their approaches and worldviews.

As you will see in this exhibition, Roma feminism has many facets. There are multiple, diverse and complementary strategies. In “Roma Women Weaving Europe” we wanted to give space to primarily two mutually-reinforcing and interdependent strategies.

In the exhibition at the Romanian Cultural Institute in Berlin, the artists question and reject the sexualization, objectification and fetishization of the “Gypsy woman” under what can be dubbed as the “Carmen syndrome”. Simultaneously, they challenge the patriarchal structures present in their own communities, questioning traditional gender roles and re-inventing the meaning of being a Romani woman. In this sense, Roma women become rebels and revolutionaries, fearlessly challenging different forms of oppression. Their resistance is born from a deep sense of humanity and opposition to all manifestations of social and cultural injustice.

In the exhibition at ERIAC, Romani women artists deconstruct existing stereotypes by creating plural and dignified narratives of Roma womanhood, more in tune with how they see themselves. Inspired by looking inwards, into their own families and communities, they celebrate the women figures they admire. Through this strategy, the artists suggest a counter-discourse that replaces the stigmas associated with Roma women. They also recall symbolic and mystical figures that embody the power of Romani women, such as the figure of Sara Kali (*Black Sarah*) – the Catholic Saint widely recognized as the Patron Saint of the Roma people – or the Hindu Goddess Kali – tHE Mother of the Universe.

The artworks embody the global sisterhood of Romani women, created beyond the national, religious, linguistic or class divisions. And it is this solidarity and pride which can and should become a source of inspiration and a point for reflection for contemporary debates in Europe.

On behalf of ERIAC, I would like to thank those who made this exhibition possible:

- Romanian Cultural Institute who – as we did – understood this collaboration as natural and necessary, and who gave us freedom to create an exhibition from the Roma standpoint. We are looking forward to the series of events which will accompany the exhibition in the next weeks.
- To the Polish Institute for supporting the participation of Malgorzata Mirga-Tas
- To the entire ERIAC team who tirelessly worked in all stages of production for making today's event possible.

And most importantly – this exhibition would not be possible without the participation of the artists! I would like to invite here the artists present today at the opening:

Kiba Lumberg – Roma artists and writer from Finland, who agreed to make a unique on-site intervention at both venues.

Malgorzata Mirga-Tas – Roma artist from Poland

Ana Maria Gheorghe – Roma artista from Romania.

Thank you so much for participating!

I encourage the audience to approach the artists and explore with them their exceptional artworks. We will also have Mihaela Dragan and Ioanida Costache – two talented Roma artists from Romania who are treating us to a very special performance tonight.

Opre Romnia!