

## Oto Hudec & Emília Rigová in dialogue

Oto Hudec: First of all, I'd be interested to hear your opinion on the romanticizing of Roma folklore and history. Many Roma intellectuals are critical of negative as well as positive Roma stereotyping. The colonial and exotic view of researchers is often limited to the selection of certain attractive, incorrect or incomplete aspects of the Roma lifestyle, such as the nomadic life, the music, the independence, the magic. I have the feeling that when Roma intellectuals, many of whom grew up in households similar to those of the majority population in Slovakia, search for their (lost Roma) identity, they search for something original and elemental, and perhaps they look for something that sets them apart from the majority. You've gone through this process yourself. How would you characterize the Roma cultural identity based on your own experience? How is it similar and how does it differ from the above stereotypes?

Emília Rigová: Capsulizing the Roma cultural identity in some kind of uniform description or instructions on how to recognize it is extremely complicated due to the fact that a long list of other circumstances contributed to forming the Roma identity. Every Roma has a double identity based on citizenship and ethnicity, and it's difficult to know where one ends and the other begins. That's why I'm critical of the term Roma art. It takes away the artist's national identity (e.g. Slovak) despite the fact that he or she defines herself as a citizen of Slovakia or another country. When we were putting together a mono-thematic issue of the magazine *Enter*, one of the things that interested us was identifying how the political or social dimension of an artist can lead to the classification of his/her work as Roma and the political motivation and results of such classification. The criticism by the Roma intelligentsia aims to tear down the dominant stereotypical attitudes and negative media depiction of Roma. These days we are involved in a very important joint discourse on who we are and what specifically constitutes Roma cultural identity. And it's impossible to answer these questions in a simple sentence. How should I declare my Roma identity? At this stage we're trying to debunk stereotypes. This is an extremely necessary phase which could have healing results for both sides. It's not just necessary to debunk the stereotypes held by the majority population but also those held by Roma themselves. As a result of assimilation, we will be able to examine the process of the erasing or to put it dramatically, the theft of our cultural identity. A huge generation of Roma living on the territory of former Czechoslovakia "chose" to not use their Roma mother language based on the belief embedded in the assimilation programme connected with the "common working class." Most of them did it because they believed that they were securing a better life for their family. What comprises the cultural construct of Roma identity? Answering that question would be like gathering together the pieces of a shattered mirror and trying to put them back together to form the image that appeared in the mirror before it was shattered.

Oto Hudec: It's interesting that you used this symbol from the story about the shattered mirror. The separation of Roma in their journey from India can be compared to a mirror that was shattered into many pieces, one of which remained with each wayfaring group. The goal is to put those pieces back together again. When I try to understand Roma in their different communities I sometimes have the feeling that this fragmentation, and not unity, is a typical feature. And this is not only demonstrated by the fact that Roma haven't been able to form their own political representation supported by all of them; it is also true for the historical and cultural spheres as well as relations between individual communities here in Slovakia. The classic example is the cultural differentiation between the Vlachi Roma and Romungro. Cultural identity, like national identity, is a construct which makes me wonder if it's possible to put the mirror back together. And are the terms national identity and (unified) cultural identity applicable to the Roma community? How do you see the function of a museum as an institution focused on history, and its meaning for individual Roma? Is a museum, as a concept arising from European cultural and colonial principles, applicable for the needs of Roma?

Emília Rigová: The institutional and discursive dimension of policy had and still has a strong position in forming Roma identity, and from this point of view, the concept of a museum of Roma culture is very important. My idea of a Roma cultural museum is an institution which presents in visual form the collective identity of Roma, which I understand as a common origin, which we can search for in the roots of the Roma language, localized geographically as Indo-European. The shattered mirror metaphor perfectly illustrates the foundation of our common story. It's like looking for one's own original image. The specific socio-cultural status of Roma scattered throughout Europe (Vlachi, Romungro, Sinti, Bergitka, Serbika, etc.) is closely connected to the non-acceptance of certain specific cultural differences in terms of the majority population vis-à-vis Roma or vice versa. From this point of view the representation of specific cultural differences and their possible imprints on European culture are just as important. A good example is Roma dance, which in certain European locations merged with the majority folk culture (e.g. Spanish flamenco). Another hindrance to Roma culture and its interpretation is the fact that original customs are only anchored in oral tradition. I don't believe that the concept of a Roma cultural museum should be viewed as an institution that is only created for the needs of Roma. By creating and presenting a united cultural identity we can make Roma proud again. From my point of view, the inferiority complex is the symbol of that which unites Roma. From one of the basic identifying signs

arising from cultural identification "Who am I?" we can follow a long list of subsequent problems that currently accompany Roma. In terms of Roma in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, in the last ten years, Roma themselves are beginning to feel the difference between the words Rom and Cigan. However, many still don't understand that Cigan and Gypsy are derogatory words used by the majority population. This has led to many bizarre situations in which Roma themselves have identified with these derogatory terms. What does it mean? To me, it means that it is extremely important for Roma to finally begin to write their own history. The current generation of Roma intellectuals has been productive in all the artistic spheres – literature, film, drama. And this is a huge difference from the past.

Oto Hudec: The fact that the current generation of Roma intellectuals is active in all fields of culture, including art theory and history, is a good sign. In the last ten years the growth of the Roma intelligentsia has been significant. This growth was not due to outside assistance, but to their own endeavours and activities. Even in neglected communities the wheels of change are turning, albeit slowly. Is it possible to see a difference in the attitudes of Roma intellectuals and Roma living in excluded communities regarding the words Rom and Cigan? In these communities, at least outwardly, in relation to whites, Roma often identify with negative stereotypes. How can Roma intellectuals help people from these communities escape isolation and feel proud of their heritage? Do you believe that one of the roles of successful Roma is to return to their communities and inspire or become activists?

Emília Rigová: To be honest, I think that the more important role is to change the attitudes of the majority population regarding Roma. Change must come from deep within. Cosmetic adjustments won't help at this stage. It's enough to observe the generally accepted image of Roma today. How are Roma valued in this society? Are they considered equal? I can't think of any other ethnic group that has been as hated and banished to the absolute margins of society for so long. If we want to bring about real change, the entire system will have to be changed. The growing tensions within society are mainly due to increasing poverty and the poor economic situation within the majority population. However, Roma have experienced this complicated situation for hundreds of years. Naturally, this has to be reflected somewhere. If we want them to emerge from isolation and be proud of their heritage, several things have to change. For example, we need to take the opportunity to learn about our own history, the history of our origins and to point out positive role models. This isn't a small thing. Take, for example, the fact that Roma participated in the Slovak National Uprising... and that's just a minor example. Becoming familiar with Roma personalities and important historical events is as important for building a positive Roma identity as changing the general attitude of the majority population towards Roma. For me, it makes sense to examine various studies on the traditional form of expression of Roma, especially in connection with certain Roma expressions that I picked up as a kid at home. Only now am I able to understand what they meant and to re-interpret certain connections that I didn't understand as a child. On the other hand, I'd be interested in hearing about your perceptions of the importance of the emancipation of Roma art and culture. How do you, as a non-Roma, explain that the real emancipation has yet to come? When I talk about similar topics, with (non-Roma) people they are often incredulous. When we presented *Enter* at the LIKE festival in Košice, no one could believe that it was the first publication to focus on Roma art that was not published by a Roma organization or ethnically oriented research, but a publisher dedicated to contemporary art forms. Although I have a problem with the term Roma art. What kind of picture related to this term should come to mind? I'm beginning to understand that it's necessary to work with this term. However, I believe that the day will come when we won't need it, and Roma artists will simply make art: without labels. I see their participation in this discussion as artist who comment on topics that interest them, who comment whenever and however they want. How do you, as a non-Roma, see your contribution to this emancipation? In my opinion, it won't work without a common, active dialogue.

Oto Hudec: I wouldn't dare to evaluate anything more than our region. I think that for a really long time now Roma culture has operated on a folk level. Many talented musicians, dancers, painters, storytellers, actors and others were uneducated and stood completely outside the academic world, outside the world of cultural institutions. That culture lived. In my opinion, the world of cultural norms and organizations has been to a great extent a matter for the elite, which the ordinary Roma considered and even today considers as the typical world of non-Roma people. It wasn't until after the war that the Roma intelligentsia developed. Since Roma often came from very difficult social situations, I think it was quite natural that the activity of these educated Roma, who felt the need to help the community from which they came, was directed toward the social sphere. The codification of the Roma language was perhaps the first step relating to culture and emancipation. The next step was the establishment of a Roma newspaper. The fact that this process took so long can be attributed to the roles played by non-Roma and discriminatory policies. Due to racism, things that existed under the surface and feelings of inferiority took root within Roma and because of the violent pressure to adopt a different lifestyle, the sense of Roma untrustworthiness was crystallized within the world beyond their own community. Roma culture remained marginalized and was considered as inferior to that of the majority. Milena Hübschmannová used the term ethnocide to describe cultural assimilation under socialism: "As I said, I had a feeling before I knew it that the loss of language, to which all of the day to day verbal creation was linked, and the retention of these human values and the collapse of the community that watched over it to ensure

adherence to respect and ethics, would drive the Roma into a cultural and ethical vacuum from which the road didn't lead anywhere but to prison. The withdrawal from one set of values does not lead to the automatic acceptance of other values as the socialist ideologues imagined. Over time, Ilona [Elena Lacková, Roma writer, ed. Oto Hudec] and I started to see and understand that the ignorance of non-Roma people regarding Roma culture was not a question of individual unawareness but the ideological aim of the system, the socialist programme, the planned ethnocide regulated by public and secret directives."\* I don't think that this ethnocide took place only during the socialist era. Sometimes it's more hidden, sometimes less, but it's always there. The change in the social system took place on the economic level. Even without any hidden racism, those who grow up in poverty and neglect do not have the same starting point as the majority in terms of achieving financial security and establishing oneself. "Equality of opportunities" is just the illusory mantra of the upper and middle classes. Escaping from poverty and neglect takes an unbelievable amount of strength in each individual. I don't think it's a coincidence that many educated Roma come from families who live in an urban environment included in the majority. For the most part, the second or third generation of integrated Roma families are the ones who started to take an interest in their own cultural identity and emancipation. You mentioned the need for a dialogue between the majority and Roma. I like the word dialogue because it suggests communication, when both sides listen to each other and respect each other without any hierarchy. How do you imagine this dialogue in the areas of culture and art? What kind of dialogue will help Roma cultural emancipation?

Emília Rigová: That question really hit me. I imagine it as a mutual act of two activists. Like synergy.

Oto Hudec: This question relates to the exhibiting of contemporary Roma artists' work in institutions exclusively oriented on Roma culture. I know that you spoke about this with other artists in *Enter*. However, I'm interested in your opinion. I completely understand Roma artists who object to the Roma "label" that they must carry and that will not take them further than a subcategory of art, even though they often deal with broader topics, not just as Roma, but as citizens of their country. On the other hand, the institutions that map Roma culture but leave out contemporary art strive to celebrate the past. How can you deal with the portrait of today from a distance without contemporary art, how can you talk about problems and difficulties that young Roma have to deal with? And without contributing to a cultural institution that lacks the presence of contemporary artists (from all fields), but is just based on the stereotypical view of Roma as socially excluded and working in low paying professions?

Emília Rigová: The stereotypical image isn't created by a cultural institution, but by some individual authority who interprets the content of the institution. This happens in all directions with equal contributions of curators and the artists themselves. Even in the case of cultural institutions which combine sociological, anthropological and ethnic studies, it can be a dis-interpretation rather than an interpretation. This very thing happens to artists, contemporary visual artists who enter this dialogue through their perspectives and works. To use a dramatic image, it's like a land mine. At the beginning of the summer, the Volkskunde Museum in Vienna presented the exhibition entitled *Millionaires of Time*, a photographic essay by Anja Schäfer and Elisabeth Putz. Part of this exhibition became an independent exhibition entitled *Glücksmuster* by Robert Gabris and curated by Amelie Brandstetter. Despite the fact that the exhibitions were clearly separated and everything was clearly marked, in some of the reviews Robert as the artist is totally ignored, or mentioned as part of the *Millionaires of Time* project: not as an author or artist, but as an example of the creation of the "local colour" of Luník IX and its residents. This type of dis-interpretation and suppression of the artist's concept is the most burning issue for Roma artists. And even when they create a picture or enter into a dialogue regarding the Roma problematic, they become part of the pre-defined context and view of another authority or interpreter. Once again, I return to the concept of a museum of Roma culture. Today, the meaningless but interesting coincidence of two acronyms of MRC occurred to me: Marginalized Roma Community and Museum of Roma Culture. One can't escape the markings of a ghetto like Luník IX or Brno – Brno's Bronx –, the other can't escape the institutional nature of the interpretation of Roma culture. You ask how can the problems and difficulties that Roma youth deal with be portrayed without contemporary art. It also seemed to me to be like a pre-defined strategy or recording of the life of today's generation. This interview is difficult for me on several levels. I would like to stress that my positions and opinions on the topics that we have discussed are primarily processed through my visual statements. I work on them with motifs that are related to Roma and their interpretation. I don't want to say that it's about simple provocation, but that's part of it. I don't put myself in the role of Roma leader or activist who understands and knows the solutions.

\* Milena Hübschmannová, In: Lacková, Elena: *Narodila jsem se pod šťastnou hvězdou*. Prague: Triáda, 2010.