

Bojana Pejić

**Nihad Nino Pušija: FIRST-HAND / ANDARO ANGLUNO VAST**

Curated by Zsófia Bihari

European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC), Berlin

*Speech delivered at the opening of the exhibition on 25 September 2020*

In her outstanding book, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, published in 2008, Israeli photography theorist Ariella Azoulay writes: “Photography is an apparatus of power that cannot be reduced to any of its components: a camera, a photographer, a photographed environment, object, person, or spectator. *Photography* is a term that designates an ensemble of diverse actions that contain the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of the photographic image. Each of these actions involved in the photographic event makes use of a direct and an indirect force – taking someone’s portrait, for example, or looking at someone’s portrait”.<sup>1</sup> This is to remind you that we, the spectators, who will view some 70 portraits shown in this exhibition, are part of the photographic event. The act of photography is always *a joint action, a multi-participant action*. Later in the book, Azoulay states: “Without photographs, one can go insane”.<sup>2</sup> I don’t know about you, but I am sure that *without* photographs, Nihad Nino Pušija, a photographer, would definitely go crazy.

**In the beginning was DULDUNG**

One reason I, a Gadji, am invited to open this exhibition is because Nino and I have a common past. We met around 1996, when the working group of Roma and non-Roma individuals, or “post-Yugoslavs”, was developing the project entitled *DULDUNG – zum Leben der Roma in Berlin*, which concluded with an exhibition held at the NGBK in 1997.<sup>3</sup> The group, with members: Lith Bahlmann, Nadya Derado, Drago Garić, Alen Hebilović, Aleksadar Saša Kuzman, and Nihad Nino Pušija – carried out research about the Roma refugees who were exiled to Berlin due to “our” post-Yugoslav wars, and were living here under the German legal regulations, “*Duldung*” (“toleration”), which referred to the asylum-seeker as the “temporary waiver of deportation”. The project comprised both visual and textual elements: the visual part consisted of photographic and video/film documentation about Yugoslav Roma and their life “in the West”; the textual part was based on “oral histories”, i.e., the interviews Drago Garić carried out with the Roma refugees, which are published in

the catalogue of the exhibition, while some extracts from the interviews were written on transparent sheets throughout the exhibition space. I was a member of the group, invited to write something.<sup>4</sup> I wrote about “Roma” and tried to situate the subject in post-colonial theories.

The *DULDUNG* exhibition was held in 1997. Just two years later, in 1999, the Kosovo war took place, during which time very few people were interested in the condition of the Kosovo Roma, some of whom also came to live as refugees in Berlin. Pušija photographed some of them in his publication, *DULDUNG DELUXE* (Berlin 2012), which dealt with the deportation of young adults from Germany.

Zsofia Bihari, the curator of this exhibition, has asked for an opening speech of about 20 minutes, while Nino, the artist, said, “better shorter”. I plan to focus on **three points**:

### **First point: On the Subject of Elephants**

Let me start with stereotypes by telling a joke. Starting this talk with a joke, I am aware that I am walking on slippery ground, given that, as some historians point out, “humour so frequently relies on reinforcing, rather than breaking, existing stereotypes”.

There is an old Jewish joke about a zoology course at a distinguished university, in which the students were requested to write a term paper on the topic of elephants. The French student writes a paper with the predictable title, “On the Sexual Habits of the Elephant”; the German student submits a Teutonically comprehensive “Introduction to the Bibliographic Sources for the Study of the Elephant”; the American student submits a paper on the topic of “Breeding Bigger and Better Elephants”; and, finally, the Jewish student chooses as his theme – what else – “The Elephant and the Jewish Question”.<sup>5</sup>

Eric Santner recounted this joke at a panel “Mourning and Melancholia in the Post-Holocaust”, and presupposes that the listeners of the joke accept stereotypical national and ethnic characters: a French preoccupation with sex, a German fastidiousness and seriousness, American pragmatism and entrepreneurial orientation, and a certain Jewish self-absorption and obsession with the fate of the Jews. In analysing this story, Santner assumes that this is really a Jewish self-conceptualisation, without inquiring whether the joke is perhaps an inimical representation invented by an anti-Semitic teller, which may also be the case. About the typecasting of the Jewish student, he says: “The Jewish national character trait stands out as something of an anomaly in the context of the index provided

by the joke. For one could say that, according to the joke, what marks the Jew as a Jew is a preoccupation with the dilemma and difficulties of being marked as having a national character in the first place. The joke positions the Jew as one for whom the very experience of being stereotyped constitutes his type”.

Had there been a Roma student present in this zoology course, this person would have good reason to deliver a paper with the title “The Elephant and the Roma Question”. The Romani genocide, or the Romani Holocaust—also known as the *Porajmos* – is an issue addressed by a younger generation of Roma historians and artists belonging to the “generation of post-memory”, like Alfred Ullrich, for example, whose portrait is also featured in this show.

Had there been a Roma art student present in this zoology course, what could this person have written about? S/he could have delivered a paper about her/his performance, entitled “How to Steal an Elephant and Get Away with It – Instructions for a Re-enactment”.

As far as I have followed the Roma textual and visual discourse, I have come to understand that for some thirty years now, a number of contemporary Roma visual artists, historians and theorists have been seriously engaged in bringing into being “Roma knowledge” and deconstructing the century-long tradition of constructing the “othering” of the Roma population by stereotyping them.<sup>6</sup>

I will present here some old-fashioned stereotypes from the book by Polish poet, writer and translator of one of the Roma dialects spoken in his native Poland, Jirzy Ficowski (1924-2006), published in 1989, i.e., before we started to swim in the ocean of postcolonial theories. His book offers a selection of a great number of reproductions of paintings and photographs made in Poland from the 16th century through the 1980s. He claims that representations of Gypsies (in Poland) have stubbornly maintained three views:

*a “demonic”* view = arose from a fear of the Devil, and sees Gypsies as a tribe of sorcerers with supernatural powers, arousing superstitious fear.

*a “criminal”* view = treats Gypsy society as a collective of organised professional criminal groups.

*an “operetta”* view = holds the Gypsies to be romantic nomads living by music and love for nature.<sup>7</sup>

Are these views *passé*? Hardly. Just watch the idiotic films by Emir Kusturica, so celebrated by the Western film community, in which his essentialization of the Roma “soul” was informed by exactly the three mentioned stereotypes.

In his discussion with Maria Hlavajova, Roma artist and theorist Daniel Baker asserts that the “stereotypes are imposed from the outside. For example, some enduring stereotypes include association with “threat, danger, and dishonesty”.<sup>8</sup> (Minus the operetta view.) One should start, he says, “imagining things otherwise”.<sup>9</sup> But how to do so? How to translate the Roma’s history and experiences of nomadism and forced displacement, never forgetting the catastrophic conditions the Roma population experiences in the European Union *nation states*, and even more so, the states beyond the borders of the EU. In their performances, held in 2013 in Berlin, two Roma artists focused on Roma identity and difference: Ethel Brooks performed a palm reading, and Daniel Baker a Tarot card reading. The question of self-definition and its deconstruction has been raised by many Roma artists since these performances triggered a tsunami of negative reactions online from Roma artists and/or activists, partially published in 2015.<sup>10</sup>

As for the Roma as photographed subjects? Taking pictures of Gypsies/Roma in the service of the sciences such as anthropology and ethnography is notorious, and as often as not, had been tinted with overt or covert racism. In parallel, there has been photojournalism, and of course the visualisation of Roma individuals or groups in high art photography.

In her book, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Ariella Azoulay explores the productive possibilities of photography as a mode of political contestation, domain of argument, and site of ethical engagement. She proffers a radical view of liberal democratic citizenship and claims that photography offers resistance against the whims of an abusive state of sovereignty and state violence. “The initial deployment of photography on the part of the modern state contributed to the perpetuation of the social power relations of power, turning weak, disadvantaged, and marginal populations such as ethnic minorities, criminals, and the insane into utterly exposed objects of photography. [...] These groups served as guinea pigs for the mass utilisation of photography by the modern state, which quickly turned the entire population into an object of photography, albeit in conformity with a predefined set of rules – various types of identification cards, personal documents, and so on. [...] To this day, however, weak populations remain more exposed to photography,

especially of the journalistic kind, which coerce and confine them to a passive, unprotected position".<sup>11</sup>

### **Second Point: The Politics of the Skin**

In the late 1990s, when local skinheads attacked a Roma boy in Belgrade, and the local press declared such an act as racist, one Serbian rock musician asked, "Why is everybody here talking about racism, when we do not have any blacks in this country?" This comment indicates that "true otherness" is *still* associated solely with Black skin.

In 1961, Socialist Yugoslavia became one of the founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement, which during the Cold War, inserted itself between the Western and Eastern blocs. In today's view, it is considered to be "globalization *before* globalization". The first conference of the Movement was held in Belgrade in September 1961, and for that occasion, the Belgrade municipal authorities constructed a number of "Potemkin villages", hiding the Roma settlements behind huge wooden fences, hiding the fact that our otherwise "progressive" socialist state also induced poverty. Due to the Non-Alignment policies, Yugoslav universities hosted the students coming from freshly decolonised African and Asian countries, including those in Central Africa, who came to study at our Marxist universities (and learned Serbo-Croat), and not in the "capitalist" West.

During the late 1960s and 1970s, when my grandmother saw a Black person for the very first time in her life, our Gypsies had been our only "darkies," our "intimate others".

There is a joke about two Gypsy youngsters walking in downtown Belgrade, conversing about Black African students they saw in the street:

Brother, do you see how black they are?

Yes, they are really very black.

Brother, can you imagine how black are *their* Gypsies?

I mentioned this joke in one of my articles, but the American proofreader protested since he recognised it as a racist joke. It is true, the joke offers a layering of "othering": our European Roma "other" is engaged in "othering" those who live on the "dark" continent.

In that sense, the joke takes a Eurocentric point of view. But is that really true? First of all, isn't it a human reaction to imagine that in every corner of the world there is someone who is darker than yourself and less privileged than yourself? I hold that this joke touches upon the "knowledge/power" model as it was developed by Michel Foucault, and I like to

understand in that way: it is *about access to knowledge*. Whereas our Roma had been obliged by Yugoslav law to attend and hopefully complete primary school education, the Non-Aligned states had sent their students to gain their university education abroad, in order to apply the knowledge they acquired from “us” and disseminate it in their home countries. This joke also recalls a statement issued by feminist theorist and filmmaker, Trinh T. Minh-ha, which I read much later: She once stated: “...there is a First World in every Third World and a Third World in every First”.<sup>12</sup>

To return to this exhibition, Nihad Nino Pušija represents the Roma with some 70 contemporary Roma artists, activists and musicians, the majority of whom are visual artists who practice various media, photography included, traditionally regarded as High Art, including art made by autodidacts. Pušija tells me that at least 90% of them received their academic education at art academies either at home or abroad, where since the beginning of the post-communist era, i.e., from the 1990s, they could have access to various forms of visual knowledge. During their studies, they should have learned how to prepare themselves to join the neoliberal universe, i.e., the neoliberal market, whose task is to sell “cultural diversity”.

In the history of the genre of portraiture, which could be executed as a painting, a drawing or a photograph, Pušija’s portraits belong to a sub-genre called “occupational portraits”, practiced since the invention of photography, dating back the 1830s. In a way, Pušija’s series reminds me of the modernist works by German photographer August Sander, *Faces of Our Times/Antlitz der Zeit*, published in 1929, which has been considered a kind of compendium of the German society of the Weimar Republic, in which Sander categorised various professions, including artists.

But what is, in fact, a photographic image?

Vilém Flusser, in his valuable book, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, published in 1984, where he discusses analogue photography, writes: “Images are *significant surfaces*. Images signify – mainly – something 'out there' in space and time that they have to make comprehensible to us as abstractions (as reductions of the four dimensions of space and time to the two surface dimensions)”.<sup>13</sup>

Let’s stay for the moment with the notion of the *surface*, but now focusing on the practices of visibility and representation as had been practiced in the Western tradition. In an interview published in 1990, Edward Said talks about representation, “or more

particularly the *act* of representing (and therefore reducing) others, almost always involves violence of some sort to the *subject* of representation, as well as a contrast between the violence of the act of representing something and the *calm exterior* of the representation itself, the *image* – verbal, visual, or otherwise – of the subject. Whether you call it a *spectacular image*, or an *exotic image*, or a scholarly representation, there is always this paradoxical contrast *between the surface*, which seems to be in control, and the process which produces it, which inevitably involves some degree of violence, decontextualization, miniaturization, etc. The action or process of representing implies control, it implies accumulation, it implies confinement, it implies a certain kind of estrangement or disorientation on the part of the one representing”.<sup>14</sup>

As a photographer, Pušija must be aware that his act of photographing implies the power of the artist, though he says that this series is his “visual communication with his friends”. The friends pictured in the series are all Roma creative individuals. How does he manage to represent the “group” to which he belongs?

### **Third Point: The “Roma Terminator”**

Let us see now whether Pušija’s photographic series, entitled *FIRST-HAND*, with his occupational portraits of Roma artists, musicians and performers, contributes to the issue of “Elephant and the Roma question”, or not? Does this body of work continue to manufacture the cultural clichés, which have been historically formulated, as well as pictured by both Roma and non-Roma photographers either doing journalism or making art? In other words, these pictures of Roma are neither spectacular, nor are they exotic images. These photographs of individuals, all of whom practice a certain profession, subvert the clichés and stereotypes: the images do *not* confront us with discomfort, drama, pathos and/or an “operetta view”, though the photographs do emanate a certain melancholy.

The “Roma Question” is approached by way of so-called *positive images*. This may trigger yet another question: does this exhibition, which I would call a “Who is Who in the Roma Art World”, proffer a romanticised, and even elitist view of those Roma who “made it” in the field of High Art? Scanning the faces exposed to the camera, how can we really be sure that we are viewing Roma individuals? In spite of the conviction, which most photographers (Pušija included!) share, trusting that the photographic picture – a “mute image” – is enough, Alan Secula maintains: “Meaning is always directed by layout, captions,

text, and site and modes of presentation”.<sup>15</sup> Simply put, each picture is “framed” by a “linguistic supplement” – a caption. This includes the name of the author, then the name and the profession of the artist, the site where the picture is taken, and the information about the time/year when the photographic event took place. Indeed, Pušija started to make the portraits in 2007, and the majority of them are taken in Berlin at, or during, their exhibition held in the German capital, a Mecca for Roma artists.

Some twenty portraits are presented as larger “classical” portraits, framed and matted in passe-partouts. There is no action here, but the stillness required by the genre of portraiture. They are based on mutual trust or a “contract”, as Azoulay called it: “The contract is one between the partner-participants in the act of photography”.<sup>16</sup> The majority of the series consists of “contextual” images: Pušija photographed the artists in front of, or in the vicinity of, their occupation; some of them are even shown with the tools they employ while working (a photographic camera, a musical instrument, a theatre set, etc.). The pictures do not capture the artists while performing their profession, like painting, sculpting, or photographing, however. The artists shown here simply *pose*: they are staged by the photographer, or self-staged as artists. In art history, this posture is not unusual if we remember that hundreds of photographs picturing Marcel Duchamp never show him making art! Marcel, the artist, does nothing; he simply poses!

*FIRST-HAND* is conceived as an open-ended photographic series. Why? Vilém Flusser answers: “No single photograph, but only a series of photographs, can show the photographer’s intentions. No single photograph is really ‘decisive’, [...]”<sup>17</sup> Any series is constituted during the *post-apparatus gesture* of choosing single photographs, which is exactly what our photographer did. As far as his intention is concerned, I believe that he intended to produce one particular effect: the effect of belonging. Certainly, this belonging is extraterritorial, since the artists represented in the series are born or live today in 18 different (nation) states. The series promotes a “politics of friendship”, and depends upon affective or professional bonding. This is quite similar to the production of a family album. Anette Kuhn writes: “In the process of using – producing, selecting, ordering, displaying – photographs, the family is actually in the process of making itself. The family album is one moment in the cultural construction of family”.<sup>18</sup>



Finally, a couple of words about the label “Roma Terminator”. Let’s look at the self-portrait of the artist, in which he self-staged himself not with the photo camera, which is a tool he uses in his profession, but with a gun.

What is Nino Pušija doing here?

Is he reproducing the stereotype of Roma men as criminals here?

Does he make a reference to Susan Sontag, who, writing on photojournalism, asserts: “There is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera”.<sup>19</sup>

Or is he simply posing here as a “Roma Terminator”, which, as reported by Romanian producer and film director, Cristinela Ionescu, was the nickname invented by the Roma subjects standing in front his camera. It’s a pun. The meaning brings us to the English language: “taking photographs” and “shooting photographs” are synonymous expressions.

This particular picture – among many others – is based on an artistic procedure I highly respect: *a (self-)ironic subversion of cultural clichés through laughter*. What would Mikhail Bakhtin have to say about this? *“Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically. As it draws an object to itself and makes it familiar, laughter delivers the object into the fearless hands of investigative experiment – both scientific and artistic – and into the hands of free experimental fantasy”*.<sup>20</sup>

BRAVO MAESTRO!

Berlin, 25 September 2020

---

<sup>1</sup> Ariella Azoulay: *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), pp.85-86.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.411.

<sup>3</sup> *DULDUNG – zum Leben der Roma in Berlin*, NGBK, 02.02-02.03.1997.

<sup>4</sup> Bojana Pejić: “Mythen von Anderen, Mythen von der Kultur – und das Wahre Leben” [Myths about Others, Myths about Culture – and Real Life, published in German only], in: *DULDUNG*, cat. [*Ibid.*], pp.115-120.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Santner: “Postmodernism’s Jewish Question: Slavoj Žižek and the Monotheistic Perverse”, in: *Visual Display*, eds. Lynne Cooke and Peter Wollen (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), pp.237-253, here p.237.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, *We Roma: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, eds. Daniel Baker and Maria Hlavajova (Utrecht: bak, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Jerzy Ficowski: “Introduction”, in: *The Gypsies in Poland - History and Customs* (Warsaw: Interpress Publishers, 1989), no page. Published in Yugoslavia!

<sup>8</sup> *We Roma: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, *Op.cit.*, p.15.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

---

<sup>10</sup> See *ArtLeaks*, Wall Newspaper #1, made for the exhibition and conference, “Inside Out – Not So White Cube”, held at City Art Gallery, Ljubljana, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *Op.cit.*, pp.116-117.

<sup>12</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha: *Woman/Native/Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p.98.

<sup>13</sup> Vilém Flusser: *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (Göttingen: European Photography, 1984), p.6. Italics added.

<sup>14</sup> “In the Shadow of the West: Edward Said”, an interview with Phil Mariani and Jonathan Crary, in *Discourses – Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture*, eds. Russel Ferguson et al. (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, and Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1990), p.94. Italics added.

<sup>15</sup> Alan Secula: “Reading an Archive – Photography between labour and capital” [1986], in: *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (London and New York; Routledge, 2003), p.445.

<sup>16</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *Op.cit.*, p.20.

<sup>17</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Op.cit.*, p.27.

<sup>18</sup> Anette Kuhn: “Remembrance” (1991), in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells, *Op.cit.*, p.399.

<sup>19</sup> Suzan Sontag: *On Photography* (New York: Penguin Books, [1973] 1977), p.17.

<sup>20</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin: “Epic and Novel”, in: *The Dialogical Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981/2002), p.23.