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Culture Work as an Opportunity?

Possibilities of Having a Social Impact in the Field of “Sinti and Roma Art and Culture”

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Art is here to provide individuals the freedom to express their own feelings, views or identity without having to heed too much to social conventions. Yet when it is about the art and culture of Sinti and Roma, the situation seems to be a bit more complex. Here there are a number of prejudices, stereotypes or simply certain expectations that come to bear, be it on the part of the majority society or that of members of this minority itself. They influence not only the everyday life of many Sinti and Roma, but also, possibly their artistic production, be it only through the compulsion of having to react to and reflect on it.

In order to be able to assess the social effect that the art and culture work of Roma and Sinti has it is necessary to first take at least a cursory look at the situation of the Sinti and Roma in Germany. This, however, proves difficult since there are no official studies on the situation of the non-German Roma in Germany. The following information is



Exhibition *The Roma Image Studio*
Photo: Nihad Nino Pušija / fotofabrika.de

thus based on two studies that focus only on the situation of the German Sinti and Roma. It can be assumed that the situation of the non-German Roma – in particular among the Roma who have moved to Germany from Romania and Bulgaria – is even graver especially in the field of education and in terms of economic and social factors. With regard to discrimination and racism, we can, by contrast, assume that the experience of the German Sinti and Roma is not much different from that of the non-German Roma.

The representative survey of the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma on racism against the Sinti and Roma in Germany was carried out in 2006, with about 309 persons respondents. 76 per cent of the participants responded affirmatively to the question on whether they had been discriminated often – in the workplace, by neighbors, in restaurants or in other places. 40 per cent of those interviewed believed that their children or grandchildren were not sufficiently supported in school. The study also drew attention to the discriminating practice of the media in reports when references were made to delinquent or criminal acts being committed by a member of a minority. 90.3 per cent of the respondents affirmed that this media coverage elicited a fear of prejudice among them as members of a minority.¹

The more recent study on the present-day education situation of German Sinti and Roma, carried out by RomnoKher GmbH between 2007 and 2011, questioned 275 German Sinti and Roma

¹ Representative survey of the Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma über den Rassismus gegen Sinti und Roma in Deutschland, zentralrat.sintiundroma.de/content/downloads/stellungnahmen/UmfrageRassismus06.pdf (Dec. 26, 2012)

from three generations about their educational situation. Compared to the older study, the findings here are even more shocking. 81.2 per cent of the respondents had personally experienced discrimination. The study concluded: "Experience in school is strongly informed by open and hidden discrimination in the form of every day anti-ziganist insults and prejudices on the part of other schoolchildren. The teachers here do not seem to intervene in a professional way."² Moreover, according to the study, 13 per cent of those interviewed did not attend any school, with this percentage among the majority population probably being lower than 1 per cent. 44 per cent of those questioned have no school diploma (as opposed to 7.5 per cent among the majority population.)³

These two studies show not only the current situation of the Sinti and Roma in the field of education and the widespread racism. They also elucidate two important ways culture and artwork by or with the Sinti and Roma can have as social impact. First, culture work represents an opportunity for the Roma – in particular the Roma youth – to develop personally. It enables them to acquire new skills and experience success. This way a contribution is made to making them interested in (non-) formal education and including them in meaningful, positive activities. Second, art and culture work has the potential to reach a larger public, i.e., also the majority population, to refute the images of Sinti and Roma that are common in the media,

and to thus reduce prejudices and stereotypes and counteract exoticizing representations.

Taking these aspects into account, I would now like to take a closer look at several Roma art and culture projects.

André J. Raatzsch: The Roma Image Studio

The case of the first, and probably most topical, project is an exhibition and long-term photo-platform. The project was curated by André J. Raatzsch in collaboration with Lith Bahlmann and Emese Benkö and opened at the Galerie im Saalbau in Berlin-Neukölln in 2013. "The Roma Image Studio is an artistic and critical platform which links the representation of the European Roma with the re- and deconstruction of Roma-identity, taking into account photography, photo-archives and the related photographic discourse. [...] On the basis of iconographic imagery from international photo-archives and collections, photo albums and artistic photographs, the exhibition initiates the over-due inter- and transdisciplinary discourse on the de- and reconstruction of the historical and social memory of the European Roma."⁴

Raatzsch sees his art as an instrument to de-exoticise and de-romanticize the "Sinti and Roma image". "In my artistic work I have been focusing since 2007, when I participated in the First Roma Pavilion at the Biennale in Venice, on the question of Roma depictions of the present. To this end, I

2 Strauß, Daniel: Zehn Ergebnisse der Bildungsstudie und Empfehlungen, stiftung-evz.de/fileadmin/user_upload/EVZ_Uploads/Handlungsfelder/Handeln_fuer_Menschenrechte/Sinti_und_Roma/06_zusammenfassung-bildungsstudie-sinti-2011.pdf (Dec. 26, 2012)

3 Ibid.

4 André J. Raatzsch: "Ein Interview mit mir selbst" (An Interview with Myself), eu-infothek.com/article/andre-j-raatzsch-ein-interview-mit-mir-selbst (April 6, 2013)



Nihad Nino Pušija: *Zyklus Roma Camps in Rom*,
45 x 30 cm, color print on FujiPearl, 2003,
Courtesy Nihad Nino Pušija / fotofabrika.de



Nihad Nino Pušija: *Zyklus Roma Camps in Rom*,
30 x 45 cm, color print on FujiPearl,
2003, Courtesy Nihad Nino Pušija /
fotofabrika.de

present contemporary photography and photographic archives as well as sculptures in performative artistic contexts which do not belong to the conventional romanticizing and exoticizing exhibition practice.”⁵ The goal of having an effect on the majority society clearly moves to the foreground here.

Moritz Pankok: Galerie Kai Dikhas⁶

The Gallery for Contemporary Art of Sinti and Roma artists from all over the world, which was founded in 2011 and whose artistic director is Moritz Pankok, is located in the Aufbau Haus in Berlin-Kreuzberg. As one can read on the website of the gallery: “Apart from the Roma Museum in Brno (Czech Republic), which is not only specialized in visual art, there has been no permanent institution to date which is dedicated to studying, disseminating and presenting the art of Sinti and Roma to a larger public. The Galerie Kai Dikhas helps to remedy this situation.”⁷

Moreover, it has created a new free space, which enables Roma artists to develop and present their talents and skills. “The Galerie Kai Dikhas contributes to an inner and outer emancipation of Roma culture.”⁸ The attempt to bring about changes and positive developments within the “Sinti and Roma art scene” is thus clearly expressed.

As the curator of the (probably) only gallery for visual arts by Sinti and Roma in Germany Moritz

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ On the Galerie Kai Dikhas see also the text *Place of Seeing* in this publication

⁷ Ort des Sehens/Kai Dikhas/Place to see, kaidikhas.com (Dec. 25, 2012)

⁸ Ibid.

Pankok describes his goal of presenting the heterogeneity of this area of art to a larger public:

“I think the gallery shows quite clearly that there is a very large diversity and very different ways of thinking within the minority, that there are people who make small, moving installations out of recycled materials, just as there are painters who make 2 x 3 meter large oil paintings that have absolutely nothing to do with, for example, a nomadic art.”⁹

Nihad Nino Pušija: Roma é Roma – Roma in Rome

For nine years Nihad Nino Pušija has been visiting the same Roma families again and again – families that live in camps around Rome, following their life situation. In the process he has found “young gladiators, proud adolescents, disillusioned persons and those full of life, trying under the most difficult circumstances to secure their survival.”¹⁰ His photos were shown at the Galerie Kai Dikhas in fall of 2012.

In the press release on his exhibition he explains that his goal is to deconstruct the clichéd and homogenizing image of Sinti and Roma: “There where I live and work, I trace microcosms, document changes on a small scale and capture inconspicuous things so as to create a more all-encompassing image of my surroundings with the series I have created.”¹¹

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Press release Nihad Nino Pušija. *Roma é Roma – Roma in Rom*, kaidikhas.de/de/exhibitions/roma_E_roma_1/text (April 6, 2013)

¹¹ Ibid.

Hamze Bytyci and Rafael Badie Massud: Romeo rennt

Romeo rennt (Romeo runs) is a theatre piece that was rehearsed by 14 young people at the akademie der autodidakten and performed at the Ballhaus Naunynstrasse in May 2012. “Following an odyssey from the Balkans to Berlin Romeo finally ends up in a circus: Here an impossible wedding takes its course, rituals go off kilter and the prism of perspectives keeps on turning.”¹²

The theater performance *Romeo rennt* was created together with young people who had the chance to give their input to the piece with their ideas and their personalities. An important aspect was the experience of success, which was additionally reinforced by the fact that the tickets for both performances were sold out. This is an effective method of non-formal education, which has the potential to influence the development of young people in the long term. Since the theater piece dealt intensively with the various “Roma traditions” and the stereotypes harbored towards the Sinti and Rima, it had an especially big impact on the audience.

Ivor Stodolsky and Marita Muukkonen: Perpetual Gypsy Pavilion

Perpetual Gypsy Pavilion is a “traveling pavilion” which was opened during the Venice Biennale in 2009. It was a spontaneous reaction to two things: the official Roma pavilion was canceled on short notice and at the same time Berlusconi’s govern-

¹² Ballhaus Naunynstraße: *Romeo rennt*, ballhausnaunynstrasse.de/index.php?id=21&evt=610 (Dec. 25, 2012)



Romeo rennt
Photo: Esra Rotthoff

ment seriously violated the rights of the Roma living in Italy.¹³ The Roma pavilion became part of ten national pavilions as part of the Biennale – it had the form of a “postcard from Venice” on which one could leave one’s own fingerprint.¹⁴

As can be gleaned from the interview with Ivor Stodolsky, the goal of the *Perpetual Romani-Gypsy Pavilion* was mainly to address the worldwide scene of contemporary art and to (re-)present the “Roma art” to this audience. “At that time in Venice it was very important that everything came out via e-flux. At the last moment we convinced e-flux to do it free of charge, and it was revealed that all of the curators were still there. The Hungarian pavilion was part of it, the Swedes, the Norwegians – altogether ten countries. This was the first time that ‘Gypsies’ participated in the international art scene within the other pavilions. [...] This Perpetual Pavilion was very political, directed against Berlusconi’s politics – people were being killed on the streets, in Naples children were found dead on the beach. The audience at the time was contemporary art, because it was the largest and most important event of contemporary art, all eyes were directed at Venice.”¹⁵ The intention was somewhat different than in the other projects, for the idea was not just to reach a broad public but above all to have an influence on the Roma representation on a high political level. This could be called the third possibility of a social impact of art and culture of Sinti and Roma.

¹³ *Perpetual Romani-Gypsy Pavilion*, perpetualpavilion.org (Dec. 26, 2012)

¹⁴ Interview with Ivor Stodolsky, April 20, 2013.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Cultural Identity and Self-representation

I would like to begin by raising the following question. Is there such a thing as cultural Roma identity?

The answer coming from the studies and interviews I did is clear enough. There is no *ONE* cultural Roma identity. There are various heterogeneous identities, which are composed of regional and individual elements.

What strikes me as especially important is the question of self-representation. The Sinti and Roma must – and would like to – be involved in the decision regarding how they are to be represented.

In the press release on the exhibition *Roma é Roma* by Nihad Nino Pušija, for instance, the widespread representation of the Roma by others is questioned and also his Roma background is highlighted as an important advantage.

“The photographic image of ‘Gypsies’ has to date usually been shaped by outsiders, not from members of the minority itself – usually without consent or against the will of the portrayed persons. Thus the same, classical stereotype of otherness is passed on and addressed, without probing behind the homogenous surface. Given his background it is easy for him to become part of the photographed scene himself and thus to approach the portrayed person so closely as hardly anyone else.

As a wanderer between worlds, Nihad Nino Pušija seeks new aspects in the reality of his minority, thus liberating the self-image of the Roma from outside influences, from the gaze of the other. The

medium of photography thus serves to process identity and to re-assimilate the self-image.”¹⁶

Moritz Pankok who does not have any Roma background would like, as curator of a Sinti and Roma gallery, to provide Sinti and Roma artists a space in which they can present themselves. “I do not want to influence too much my artists by any thematic rules. Rather, it should be a space that is available to them for presenting themselves.”¹⁷

Pankok goes even further in his reflection when he says: “It is not the task or the duty of a minority to worry about being understood in the majority but rather the majority society has the means in its hands to inform and to approach people and give them space in communication and the media.”¹⁸

When it is about the art or the culture of the Sinti and Roma, the tendency to folklore or kitsch and the homogenization of the diverse minority is often discussed.

André J. Raatzsch points out that there is folklore in all nations: “This folklore is shaped, continued, newly formulated, newly commented on by institutions such as museums, galleries, cultural centers, educational centers. In the case of the Roma this entire movement, this entire change has been happening since the 1970s. [...] And we also have to see very precisely that this movement is very slow. Why? Because the Roma as a minority only have very few instruments, institutions that

16 Press release Nihad Nino Pušija. *Roma é Roma – Roma in Rom*, kaidikhas.de/de/exhibitions/roma_E_roma_1/text (April 21, 2013)

17 Interview with Moritz Pankok, March 29, 2013.

18 Ibid.

can define this very precisely, cultivate and communicate this in the long-term. And I believe that in the future in Roma culture there will simply be a separation between folklore, contemporary art and regional or local art.”¹⁹



Folklore is thus a legitimate part of the “Sinti and Roma culture”, but it should not be reduced to it. Rather the point should be to fight against the tendencies that exoticize and homogenize “Sinti and Roma art.”

Moritz Pankok sees in art and the means that are available to art a possibility for addressing and eliminating stereotypes, for instance, through humor: “It is also so that art often also facilitates a humorist approach which, if when dealing with a theme such as racism in a scientific or media theoretical way, would be very difficult. [. . .] It would actually be very liberating. And precisely this is also the freedom that an artist has, for instance, in Damien Le Bas’ works where there are many very bad stereotypes. [. . .] But with the theme “dealing with clichés” one has to identify the intentions. As, for example, in Damien Le Bas one finds clichés again and again which are certainly used as a means of communication – but always with the goal of making them visible, revealing and breaking them. But that with humor.”²⁰



Exhibition *The Roma Image Studio*
Photo: Nihad Nino Pušija / fotofabrika.de

Again and again it is asked whether the name “Roma art” or “Roman artists” is not only used (or is abused) as a sort of “door opener”, a sort of “entrance ticket to the world of art”.

¹⁹ Jenseits von Folklore-Kitsch (Beyond Folklore Kitsch), dradio.de/dkultur/sendungen/thema/2063875 (April 22, 2013)

²⁰ Interview with Moritz Pankok, March 29, 2013.

Responding to the question of the senior producer of Deutschlandradio Kultur whether the “Sinti and Roma art” is “also a label which can be used to protect oneself or even for promoting oneself – hey, look here, here comes the art of a discriminated minority but you are definitively not allowed to be against it,” André J. Raatzsch answered as follows: “[. . .] To be honest, it would, on the one hand, be stupid if one wouldn’t use that, while on the other hand, it is important what one achieves with it, what one can ruin with it. How can you structure it so that the emancipation processes, that the protagonists who participate here as Roma and want to participate, can later achieve this, as, for example, what happened to Black Culture in the USA, that they are recognized today, established in the international art world.”²¹

Moritz Pankok’s response is not much different: “The people here are not being exhibited simply because they are Roma and take a brush in their hand, their art also has to convince me and that has a whole lot to do with artistic or aesthetic quality.”²²

Similar to Pankok, what is most important for Ivor Stodolsky is the quality of artistic production. Moreover, he also makes sure that the works selected by him also fit into the current artistic concept: “Yes it is a ticket. But I think there are so many tickets here! You also cannot say: I am the new Beatles – then you don’t have a ticket! *[laughs]* You also have to do something that has not yet been done.”²³

21 Jenseits von Folklore-Kitsch (Beyond Folklore Kitsch), radio.de/dkultur/sendungen/thema/2063875 (April 24, 2013)

22 Interview with Moritz Pankok, March 29, 2013.

23 Interview with Ivor Stodolsky, April 4, 2013.

Romanosmosesatellites

Notes from the project blog

The more egalitarian a society is, the bigger is the part that engages in activism for the emancipation of the group. But emancipation can be interpreted in different ways. The only common anchor that all emancipation subject-matter has is that the group which wants to emancipate itself no longer wishes to be the way it has been up until now. Nevertheless there are various efforts of emancipation. The emancipation effort of those who have internalized discrimination can be considered congruent with the effort of the predominant normality. Efforts to differentiate tend to place the emphasis on individuality, for example, one's own music, folklore, tradition, etc. It is a question of attempting to achieve equality through assimilation. The emancipation of the activists, however, aims at emancipation from discriminating attributions and implies for the most part characteristics of confrontation. It is a matter of affirming the role of protagonists and of an active participation.