



La Biennale di Venezia

59. Esposizione
Internazionale
d'Arte
Eventi Collaterali

ROMA MOMA GAZETTE

EUGEN RAPORTORU
THE ABDUCTION
FROM THE SERAGLIO
ROMA WOMEN | PERFORMATIVE STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE

ERAC
EUROPEAN ROMA
INSTITUTE FOR ARTS
AND CULTURE

THE ROMA EXHIBITION AS A SPACE FOR TRANSNATIONAL ALLIANCES

The notion of Roma art has provided the most important vehicle over the past five decades to speak positively about the Roma experience, to achieve visibility and momentum for the Roma political movement, and to fight anti-Gypsyism, say the Commissioners of the Roma Exhibition at the 59th Biennale Arte: *Abduction from the Seraglio*, Timea Junghaus, Executive Director of ERIAC, and Zeljko Jovanovic, Director of the Open Society Roma Initiatives Office, and Chairman of the Board of ERIAC.

Why is it necessary to have a Roma presence at the Biennale?

Timea Junghaus: Roma presence at the Biennale unveils the pedagogy of how inspiring, fertile and transformative it is to think beyond national representations. I believe it is very important for the Biennale itself to recognise how Roma revolutionise and contribute with a new vision to their institution. The Roma exhibition demonstrates how to create a space of transnational alliances, trans-border collaboration. It inspires self-definition of a transformative character to Europe, through which our widely dispersed and fragmented sense of belonging can transcend national boundaries and invite universal participation.

What is the significance of being Commissioner of the Roma Exhibition – *The Abduction from the Seraglio* – at the 59th La Biennale di Venezia, and taking part in the Opening Ceremony on 22 April 2022?

Zeljko Jovanovic: It is an immense honour to be part of an initiative where ERIAC, as a Roma-led institution, presents an exhibition 15 years after the first Roma pavilion opened here in Venice. I am walking in the footsteps of the previous generations of Roma intellectuals, artists and cultural producers who have shaped our artistic

and activist history. That history is a basis for *The Abduction*, a forward-looking reflection that itself makes history – at a time when Roma in European societies are increasingly threatened by populism and fascism, which exploit the deeply ingrained prejudice against the Roma. That prejudice is the wrong answer to the question of who the Roma are. This exhibition, on the other hand, is a first-person expression of our identity and creativity.

How would you regard the significance of the Roma community coming together at the Biennale in Venice – especially in connection with celebrating Roma Arts and Culture?

Zeljko Jovanovic: Exhibiting at the Venice Biennale is hugely important for us, as we can showcase our vision both of ourselves and of the world around us, in time and space alongside nation-states. We can prove here, as many Roma do in sports, that when the rules are clear and fair, and when we are judged not by the colour of our skin but by the richness of our talent, we can succeed just as well as any other group that has established a nation. Despite the fact that we do not formally have the same status at the Biennale, our artistic expression breaks through any social, economic or political bars that have been erected before us.

THE BIENNALE IS A RED CARPET FOR ARTISTS



Eugen Raportoru: *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, installation view, National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, August 2021.
Photo: Iliana Schilleru

Eugen Raportoru is one of the most important visual artists of his generation in Romania, graduate of the Bucharest National University of Arts, and the only Romanian artist of Roma origin to show his works at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, Vatican City under the aegis of UNESCO, the Ethnic Museum in Oslo, and in Stockholm through the Roma Party. Raportoru's work is regularly featured in exhibitions throughout Romania and is found in numerous private collections.

***The Abduction from the Seraglio* comprises a four-room installation and a series of paintings. What is the exhibition about?**

Eugen Raportoru: In my exhibition, *Abduction from the Seraglio*, I am recreating the space of my childhood, as well as an idealised space – not what was, but what I wished for it to be. The exhibition brought me the opportunity to create a space that builds around the story represented in the wall carpet, *Abduction from the Seraglio*, a love story that also has many similarities with my own. The theme of the abduction was the most famous of the series of wall carpets that were a central visual element of Roma homes, where religious depictions and those of nature were present. I also painted the themes typically depicted in the wall carpets, rendering them not only a decoration of my most intimate family space, but also of my artistic practice, making them more personal.

You are showing an installation and also paintings. Are all the paintings exhibited yours?

ER: All of the paintings placed around the wall carpet are brought from flea markets. These paintings were made by amateurs and belonged to the realm of interior decoration essentials of our homes. There was a specific way how wall carpets were positioned on a wall in a room. Above the wall carpet, there was a painting of *The Last Supper*, and the painting covered the upper portion of the carpet, while remakes of famous paintings were placed around it. I wanted to create an atmosphere of intimacy; I intended to recreate my childhood environment. Regarding my own paintings, they are the reinterpretation of the wall carpets.

How did the transition from painting to installation take place in your artistic practice?

ER: As far as I can tell, things never happen by accident. The idea of installation began with Roma Lives Matter, a march I intended to organise in 2020, but which never took place due to pandemic restrictions. I intended to organise a march of the Roma, where my paintings would also have participated, carried by two people – but we didn't receive the permit from the municipality. I decided that we shouldn't wait for any permit; we should do it anyway, and if necessary, pay the fine. These ideas fuelled my exhibition in August 2020 at the UAP (Union of Artists), that was also invited to the Museum of Bistrita for the commemorative events taking place on 8 September. This exhibition, entitled *My Childhood Room*, was acquisitioned by MNAC: National Museum of Contemporary Art. In *My Childhood Room*, I introduced family photos: pictures of my mother as a bride standing next to my father, pictures of myself with my twin sisters. Now my family is in the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest. Isn't that amazing?

When did you start to focus on your Roma identity in your work?

ER: It all happened organically, naturally. It came with my artistic maturity. When you understand that the time is right, you do it. Had I done it when I was 20 years old, it would not have turned out the same. I always felt I wanted to engage with my identity in my artistic practice. But when I was asked by the National Centre of Roma Culture to make thematic works, I would not. Impositions never worked for me. But when the time was right, when I was ready, it happened. Then I felt capable of working with own experiences. And I did not take it lightly. I also know I will be criticised and judged, and I am ready for it.

Eugen Raportoru's exhibition embraces marginalised perspectives and creates a platform for feminist artmakers. I believe that the depiction of the Roma woman as "the Other" is deconstructed by Eugen Raportoru in his paintings, and that his eyes bring a decolonised view of the Roma woman. Interview with Iliana Schileru, the curator of the exhibition, *The Abduction from the Seraglio*.

How did you and Eugen Raportoru first meet?

Iliana Schileru: Eugen called me before his exhibition in the Museum of the Romanian Peasant. He told me that his exhibition concerned a wall carpet which portrayed dancing women – women seen as objects of desire, objectified by the male gaze. The image and the object of the wall carpet was something I also had strong ties to. For me, it was a memory from my childhood, a decorative element that created a sense of familiarity, of belonging, and it brought me a sense of calm. In my work, I was focusing on the wall carpets that were handwoven by the women in the village where I had spent my childhood; so it struck me as odd when Eugen came with his proposal of using wall carpets and repainting wall carpet themes. What struck me was that these carpets were as much a part of my life as his. This is a phenomenon that connects us. I am non-Roma, and Eugen is Roma, and this is a token of commonality that we share, and I love it. It's something that brings us together.

Having this common interest and connection to the wall carpet, could you walk us through the process of how you came up with the curatorial concept for your exhibition in the Venice Biennale?

IS: In the wall carpets, women appear as seen by the male gaze, as sexualised, as "the Other", an image often projected onto Roma women. The displayed carpets offer an opportunity to open up discussion about these depictions. In his

paintings, Raportoru offers a reinterpretation of these images, by rendering them free of any photographic portrayal, turning away from the sexualizing depiction, and creating, in response, a free space to be filled in by the viewer's imagination. The installations that Raportoru brings to the Biennale recreate a space of intimacy, with furniture that bears the trace of time and an environment that invites the visitor to stay, to wander around, to inhabit the space. Inviting the two feminist performance artists and activists, Mihaela Dragan and Alina Serban, into this space transforms this exhibition into a platform where feminist versions of reinterpretation and reappropriation of the image of Roma women are performed. Visiting parts of the installation, they were triggered by it and could relate to it instantly. It seemed to be as self-referential for them as it is for Eugen.

The 59th edition of the Venice Biennale is a feminist exhibition, as its curator Cecilia Alemani has indicated. How does Eugen Raportoru's installation, *Abduction from the Seraglio*, fit into this strategy?

IS: I believe that Eugen Raportoru's exhibition brings in marginalised perspectives and creates a platform for feminist artmakers. I believe that the depiction of the Roma woman as "the Other" is deconstructed by Eugen Raportoru in his paintings, and that his eyes bring a decolonised view of the Roma woman. Other Roma artists consider Eugen Raportoru as a model, and they tackle issues of identity in their artistic practice. I hope that more Roma curators will also follow.

ROMA MOMA

CALENDAR 2022



Tamás Péli: *Születés (Birth)*, 1983 (detail), oil on fibre-board panel painting in four pieces, total: 460cm x 910cm. Installed at the Budapest Historical Museum (BTM) for OFF-Biennale 2021. Photo: ERIAC



Emília Rigová: *Kale bala parno muj*, 2021. Courtesy of Schemnitz Gallery



Manifesta 14
Prishtina 2022



documenta fifteen (Kassel) 18 June - 25 September 2022

Lumbung member OFF-Biennale Budapest will present the RomaMoMA (Roma Museum of Contemporary Art) project, co-curated by the OFF-Biennale team and the ERIAC curatorial team of Ethel Brooks, Daniel Baker, Miguel Aria Vargas, and Timea Junghaus. The project showcases the works of artists Daniel Baker, János Balázs, Robert Gabris, Manolo Gomez, Sead Kazanxiu, Damian Le Bas, Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, Omara (Mara Oláh), Otto Pankok, Tamás Péli, Selma Selman, Ceija Stojka, Emília Rigová, Marina Roselle, and Ornella Rudevics, in relation to the idea, question, and (im)possibilities of a Roma Museum of Contemporary Art. How can the uncanonised cultural heritage and contemporary art by artists of Roma origin be presented in an exhibition setting, when there has been no systematic attempt or institution dedicated to this task? How can one define – or should one define at all: “Roma”, “Roma art”, “Roma artist”, in this context? Are these even necessary categories? Within the framework of *documenta fifteen*, the RomaMoMA exhibition presents the untold past and the unfolding present through artworks and storytelling. The intergenerational artists, with their divergent artistic positions, are highlighted within an installation that both constructs and deconstructs the idea of a “RomaMoMA”, an imaginary, transnational space for the presentation of artworks by artists of Roma origin and identity.
<https://documenta-fifteen.de/>

Milan Triennale 15 July – 11 December 2022

ERIAC is Commissioner of the exhibition of Slovak artist, Emília Rigová: *And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other*, curated by Timea Junghaus, at the 23rd Triennale Milano International Exhibition.

Emília Rigová's *altar* explores and honours the oeuvre, career, success and life of her alter ego, Bári Raktóri. Her alias functions as a catalyst to narrate and embrace her Roma origins, leading the viewer into the dense groves of her personal and familial tales and experiences. The sculptural arrangement exhibits personal items, family reliquiae, found objects, photographs, multimedia projections and artworks, assembled on an altar-like wooden structure. In their heterogeneity, the aesthetic weave of these elements creates an evocative and transcendental illustration of the contingent incommensurability of Roma identity. The exhibition unfolds as a site-specific *Wunderkammer*, consisting of five additional sculptural assemblages developed in collaboration with members of the Milanese Roma community. These affective webs can be understood as the tangible materialisations of each of her collaborators' voices, displaying personal memories and stories.
<https://triennale.org/en/>
<https://emiliarigova.com>

Manifesta 14 (Western Balkans: Prishtina, Kosovo, and Belgrade, Serbia) 22 July - 30 October 2022

Within our partnership with the Manifesta Foundation and nine partners from the Western Balkans, ERIAC joins the Manifesta 14 Western Balkans Project: *Co-Producing Common Space and Shaping Formations of Solidarity in the Western Balkans and Beyond*, co-funded by the European Union. Within the project, ERIAC Serbia hosts a discussion on 16 May with the participation of cultural activists from the Western Balkans on the topic of culture as a vehicle of challenging negative narratives about Roma and building bridges with the majority society. In Prishtina, ERIAC presents the RomaMoMA Library within an exhibition of Kosovar painter, Farija Mehmeti, whose work will be also on view in the ERIAC Belgrade exhibition space.
<https://manifesta14.org/>
<https://eriac.org/eriac-serbia/>

ROMA WOMEN: PERFORMATIVE STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE

What are the performative strategies of resistance when Romani women (who possess knowledge) are violated, silenced in their capacity as a knower? To understand this epistemic injustice, I will borrow the conceptual framework coined by Miranda Fricker (2007) and explain through *testimonial injustice* and *hermeneutical injustice* in the case of Romani women. Based on her explanation, *testimonial injustice* takes place when the audience simply devalues the credibility of the speaker, and *hermeneutical injustice* happens before the testimony since there is an intellectual gap in collective interpretive resources to understand and make sense of their social situation. My presentation will bring some subversive strategies created by Romani women to challenge this foundational epistemic injustice.

Angéla Kóczé



ALINA ȘERBAN | ACTRESS

Alina Șerban is an award-winning Roma actress, playwright, director and ARTivist living and working in Bucharest and London. As a playwright, she is among pioneers of Roma feminist political theatre and is known for writing and performing plays on social justice, tackling sexism, racism, homophobia and various other forms of discrimination. She studied at the National University of Theatre and Film in Bucharest, the Tisch School of the Arts in New York and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London. In 2016, she researched, penned, directed, and starred in Romania's first play about Roma slavery, a taboo topic still not included in the country's textbooks. Șerban is the winner of the Best Actress Award at the German Actors Guild Awards in 2020 for her role in *Gypsy Queen*, a nominee for Best Actress of the German Film Award 2020 and was the representative of Romania at the Cannes International Film Festival 2018 for her leading role in *Alone at My Wedding*. In 2021, Șerban became the first Roma Director at Bucharest National Theatre with the play, *The Best Child in the World*.



ANGÉLA KÓCZÉ | SOCIOLOGIST

Angéla Kóczé, sociologist, is Chair of Romani Studies, and Academic Director of the Roma Graduate Preparation Program at Central European University (CEU) in Budapest, Hungary. In 2013-17, she was a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies Program at Wake Forest University in Winston Salem, NC, USA. She has published several peer-reviewed articles and book chapters with various international presses, including Palgrave Macmillan, Ashgate, Routledge and CEU Press, as well as thematic policy papers related to social inclusion, gender equality, social justice and civil society. In 2013, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC honoured Kóczé with the Ion Ratiu Democracy Award for her interdisciplinary research approach, which combines community engagement and policymaking with in-depth participatory research about the Roma. She is co-editor of *The Romani Women's Movement: Struggles and Debates in Central and Eastern Europe* (Routledge, 2019, with Violetta Zentai, Jelena Jovanović and Enikő Vincze), and *The Roma and their Struggle for Identity in Contemporary Europe* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2020, with Huub van Baar).



CARMEN GHEORGHE | ACTIVIST

Carmen Gheorghe is a Roma feminist, activist and scholar from Romania. She has been engaged in civil society for the last 19 years, her primary work focused on Roma women's and girls' rights through grassroots work, community development, gender issues, intersectionality, politics of identity, gender-based violence and reproductive justice. She is co-founder of E-Romnja Association, a Roma feminist NGO in Romania, building a new narrative about Roma girls and women in Romanian. She is also (co-)author of articles on Roma feminism, anti-racism for social justice, intersectionality and the labour market. Since 2019, she has developed an academic course on Roma feminism and the politics of identity.



DIJANA PAVLOVIĆ | ACTIVIST, POLITICIAN

Dijana Pavlović is a naturalised-Italian Serbian actress, activist and politician. Born in Kruševac (Serbia); she graduated from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts at the University of Belgrade. Between 1995-99, she participated in many international theatre festivals in the former Yugoslavia, Romania and Bulgaria. In 2000, she was the translator and interpreter for the show, *Sentiero color cenere*, which refers to unpublished poetry and prose belonging to Roma culture. In 1999-2000 she acted in Italian, in theatrical productions in schools, including the fable, *The Ugly Duckling*, and Moliere's *Il tartufo* and *Il medico per forza*. Over the years, Pavlović has promoted the culture and literature of the Roma, as well as playing the role of cultural mediator in schools. She was nominated for the City Council of Milan in 2006, on the United list with Dario Fo, and for the Italian Parliament in 2008 in the ranks of La Sinistra l'Arcobaleno; though she was not elected.



ETHEL BROOKS | SCHOLAR

Ethel Brooks is Chair of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and Associate Professor of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies and Sociology at Rutgers University. Brooks is a Tate-TrAIN Transnational Fellow at the University of the Arts London, where, in 2011-2012, she was the US-UK Fulbright Distinguished Chair. Brooks was appointed under President Obama to the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, where she served from 2015-2020. She is Chair of the Board of the European Roma Rights Centre and member of the Bavarlipe Academy of the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture, the RomaMoMA Think Tank, and the US

Delegation to the IHRA and its Roma Genocide Working Group. Since 2007, she is co-Director of the annual Feminist Critical Analysis course in Dubrovnik, Croatia. Brooks is the author of the award-winning *Unraveling the Garment Industry: Transnational Organizing and Women's Work*. Her current book project focuses on encampment, claim-staking, and Romani futures.



DELIA GRIGORE | WRITER

Delia Grigore is a Roma writer, researcher and activist from Romania, with a PhD in visual arts from the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore of the Romanian Academy. She serves as President of the association Roma Centre "Amare Rromentza", and has been working in the Roma movement for more than two decades. An author of three books and numerous articles and studies on Romani culture and literature, she edited *Romane Dikhimata (Romane Perspectives): Anthology of Romani Literary Creation* in 2018. A poet and writer, Grigore is a lecturer at the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Romani Language and Literature Section, and also member of the Writers Society "Costache Negri" in Romania.

MIHAELA DRĂGAN | MULTIDISCIPLINARY ARTIST

Mihaela Drăgan is a multidisciplinary artist with an education in theatre living and working in Bucharest and Berlin. In 2014, she founded Giuvlipen Theatre Company. Over the past few years, she has worked in Berlin as an actress for Maxim Gorki Theatre, Heimathafen Neukölln, Theater Aufbau Kreuzberg. She was one of six finalists for the 2017 Gilder/Coigney International Theatre Award from New York, an award which acknowledges the exceptional work of 20 theatre women around the world. In 2018, Drăgan was a resident artist in Hong Kong at Para Site Contemporary Art Centre, where she developed the concept of Roma Futurism, situated at the intersection of Roma culture, technology and witchcraft. The same year, she was acknowledged by PEN World Voices International Play Festival in New York as one of the ten most respected dramatists of the world. In 2019, she was selected for the acclaimed Royal Court Theatre International Summer Residency in London, where she wrote a science fictional play on a future utopian society of Roma witches who control technology and fight neo-fascist politics in Europe. The performance, *Roma Futurism* was showcased in the Museum of Contemporary Art Belgrade and at FUTUROMA at the 58th Venice Biennale. Her first video installation, *Future is a safe place hidden in my braids*, was exhibited in 2021, depicting futuristic rituals to heal the transgenerational trauma of Roma people and projecting a safe future for the community.

ERASMA VICENZINA PEVARELLO | ACTIVIST

Erasma Vicenzina Pevarello is a Romani Sinti activist born in Poiana Maggiore, Italy in 1927, whose story is told by Irene Rui in the book, *Erasma, Vicenzina, Pevarello, Story of an Italian Sinti Woman* (2012). Her husband, Renato Mastini "Zulin", was one of the ten martyrs of Vicenza killed on 11 November 1944 after the attack on the Ponte dei Marmi. Four of them, including Mastini, were Sinti. Through her personal narrative, Pevarello teaches about trauma and healing, hope and resistance.



DIS/HEARD: A THRENODY OR

UNDOING THE
ARCHIVE OF
PERSECUTION

+

RECONSTITUTING
ROMANI WOMEN'S
SUBJECTIVITY

VIDEO
INSTALLATION

Romani people's experience during the Holocaust, as a racialised group persecuted under the Nuremberg Racial Laws and targeted for extermination by the Nazis, remains one of the least known aspects of the Holocaust. Ignorance surrounding the persecution of Roma is so widespread that the epithet "unknown" or "forgotten" often accompanies any discussion of the genocide of the Roma during the Second World War.

For Romani people, this "forgotten-ness" has amounted to a trauma that does not receive due recognition in memorialisation and commemoration settings. The way in which dominant society has failed to bear witness to the persecution of Roma has resulted in a double trauma, as a failure to recognise past hurt feeds present violence and discrimination towards the Romani community across Europe; trauma that has been exacerbated by the pandemic, resulting in the scapegoating of Roma in ways eerily similar to their portrayal in the years leading up to the Holocaust. The specific experience of Romani women during the Holocaust is an even more marginalised aspect of the Holocaust that is often left out of dominant narratives, even when the genocide of the Roma is mentioned. Stereotypes about "Gypsy" women, as hypersexualised and primitive, meant Romani women were treated harshly in concentration camps; in testimonies, Romani women describe the horrors of rape, of forced sterilisation and harassment. This video installation seeks to shine a light on Romani women's experience of the Holocaust and connects it to the everyday intersectional discrimination Romani women face in Europe today. The work is guided by Spivak's *Can the subaltern speak?* in which she focuses not only

on the representation of the subaltern subject in grand historical narratives, but importantly on whether the "voice-consciousness" of the subaltern is audible in official documents of the State. Is the Romani women's subjectivity preserved in ledgers of names of victims of State violence inflicted on Romani women? Is their subjectivity preserved in photographs in archives across the world, that seem rather to preserve, recite and recirculate their denigration? The archive is filled with photos of Romani women being humiliated by Nazi soldiers forcing them to undress and pose with soldiers. The images are dehumanising, painful to look at—one wishes they could intervene to offer them concealment as redress for their violent exposure. This installation performs an undoing of the archive by generating a space of reclamation for Romani women's subjectivity, which has been distorted by the archive. In this video installation, flowers act as a proxy for the women's subjecthood, dignity and humanity, and the box grater as the violent instrument of the State's violence. In part one, the audience witnesses the annihilation of subjecthood, that is reconstituted in part two, through a process of healing lament. The soundtrack for the installation is a free improvisation by the artist, based on Roma folk songs.

A bed to lie upon
Stories to be told
The beauty of our bodies
Rituals that heal
The ability to stay in place
Books to read
Together
Ourselves
This is the Milk of Dreams

IOANIDA COSTACHE | ETHNOMUSICOLOGIST

Dr Ioanida Costache is a Romani violinist, filmmaker, writer and scholar. Costache completed a PhD in ethnomusicology at Stanford University. Her scholarship on Romani musico-oral traditions seeks to make audible the counter-histories embedded in the emotive, performative practices of Romani artists. Broadly, her work investigates the intersections of race, the performance/construction of identity, cultural memory, trauma, and history as they intersect in Romani musico-oral traditions and contemporary artistic practices. She traces the legacies and afterlives of Romani history, as well as de-colonial critiques of the present. Her writing has been published in *EuropeNow*, *RevistaARTA*, *Critical Romani Studies*, *Bridge Magazine*, *Barricade* and *Decât o Revistă*. She is the co-author of a children's book about Romani history released in 2022. Costache is a two-time Fulbright grantee, currently based in Bucharest, Romania.

I SET OUT TO RE-TELL THE ROMA STORY: ROMAMOMA INTERVIEWS MAŁGORZATA MIRGA-TAS

The project *Re-enchanting the World*, prepared specifically for the Polish Pavilion at the Biennale Arte 2022, is an attempt to find the place of the Roma community in European art history. Małgorzata Mirga-Tas transforms key images in European art history by inserting representations of Roma culture and reversing the stereotypical narrative.

The *Re-enchanting the World* project by the Polish-Roma artist for the Polish Pavilion at the 59th International Art Exhibition is an attempt to expand the Polish and European iconosphere and art history with representations of Roma culture. Adhering to the title of this year's edition of the Biennale Arte (*The Milk of Dreams*), the artist has created a magical world, constantly subjected to re-enchantment, proposing a kind of temporary and adventurous asylum to give viewers hope and respite. The exhibition is curated by Wojciech Szymański and Joanna Warsza.

The artist draws from images of key importance for European art history and visual culture, "appropriating" them and inscribing in them a Polish-Roma identity and vernacular historical experience. The project for the Polish Pavilion is based on the ideas of transnationality, cyclicity, and transforming oft-appropriated meanings, proposing a new narrative to describe the unending cultural migration of images and mutual influences between Roma, Polish and European cultures.

The title is inspired by Silvia Federici's book, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (2018), which proposes re-enchanting as a way of recovering the idea of community and rebuilding relationships with others, including non-human actors: animals, plants, water or mountains. As such, re-enchanting – a non-violent process in which women play an important role – reverses the unfortunate fate of the world, shaking off its evil spell and charm. Małgorzata Mirga-Tas has designed and made a series of twelve large-format textiles to cover the walls of the Polish Pavilion in Venice. The layout, form and motifs of the fabrics draw from the famous "calendar" fresco cycle of the Renaissance Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara.

Source: <https://labiennale.art.pl/en/>



Małgorzata Mirga-Tas: *Re-enchanting the World (March)*, 2022, textile installation (fragment), 462 x 387 cm. Photo: Bartek Solik

Plan your visit:

The Polish Pavilion is located in the Giardini della Biennale (vaporetto stop: Giardini).
Address: Giardini della Biennale, Sestiere Castello, 30122 Venice, Italy
Biennale Arte 2022 will be open to the public from 23 April - 27 November, until 25 September, 11am-7pm; from 27 September, 10am-6pm (except Mondays)
Please check La Biennale website for up-to-date information.

Your monumental work in the Polish Pavilion refers to the famous “calendar” cycle of frescoes from the Renaissance Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara, Italy. How was the idea for this project born?

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas: The project is an attempt to show the place of the Roma community in European art history. With the collaboration and support of curators Joanna Warsza and Wojciech Szymański, I was able to amalgamate and develop recurring themes in my work into this larger, more ambitious project, which has incorporated a great deal of time and effort. *Re-enchanting the World* combines my interest in reclaiming the Roma narrative, and documenting our history which has been marginalised in mainstream historiography, as well as revealing the quotidian life of contemporary Roma settlements. These three threads intertwine in the Polish Pavilion, following the narrative structure of the *Hall of the Months* in the Palazzo Schifanoia (Ferrara, Emilia-Romagna). The work consists of twelve pictures corresponding to the twelve months, divided into three horizontal bands. The upper band relates the story of the arrival of the Roma to Europe. The central band is the band of female strength and women’s power to enchant the world. The lower band depicts scenes from the life of Roma in Lesser Poland.

The upper band depicting the history of Roma wanderings in Europe refers to a series of prints by Jacques Callot, whose oeuvre you have taken as a departure-point before.

MMT: Indeed, Callot’s prints were the starting point for my exhibition last year, *Out of Egypt*, curated by Wojciech Szymański, serving as a visual example of how the act of the colonisation of the Roma was executed. Created in the 17th century, Callot’s etchings are riddled with anti-Roma prejudice and contributed to the Roma’s imprisonment in a conceptual ghetto – within imagery created by non-Roma for non-Roma on false premises. The purpose of my work was to reappropriate these Callot-appropriated images of Roma, which have had a profound impact on the way Roma are portrayed in Western culture. As an artist and as a Roma woman, I set out to re-tell the Roma story.

You call the central band the band of female strength, which intersects well with the context of the feminist message of this year’s Biennale.

MMT: This central band is an archive of Roma history built from a woman’s perspective. The women’s perspective and wisdom are very

important to me; I am inspired by the women in my family and my community. It happens that more women populate my paintings than men. I take ideas for images and scenes from my photo archive, and I continually catch myself gravitating towards scenes featuring women. There are simply more women in my photos, documenting family meetings or workshops I conduct in Roma settlements. You can spot, of course, an uncle from time to time. In the calendar, there is, for example, a funeral scene in which there are only men. However, these are the exceptions – although I do believe that men are also important and play an important role in our society. Nevertheless, as a woman, I recognise that women’s contributions often go unappreciated and unnoticed. Moreover, women coming from traditional communities like mine face more obstacles on their way to achieving their goals. I recognised this during a workshop on Roma heroines: while telling the children the story of Alfreda Markowska, a heroic Roma woman who saved many Roma and Jewish children from the Holocaust, I understood that the mothers who bring their children to the workshops are also heroes, fighting for a better future for their children. The central band refers to my ever-growing *Herstories* series, in which I present portraits of women who are important to me: heroines who have found their way into encyclopedias, and those whose heroism still goes unnoticed. In *Re-enchanting the World*, I combine images of real women with symbols borrowed from tarot cards and astrology, which makes the women presented here even stronger and increases their power to re-enchant the world. It was not easy for me to include all the women who have inspired me into this band – twelve months is not enough, but I will continue to work with women’s stories in my future projects.

The lower band of the composition depicts scenes from the lives of the Roma of Lesser Poland. This is also a recurring theme in your works.

MMT: This was the band that was most difficult for me to create, because in choosing the scenes, I felt the weight of responsibility associated with deciding which narratives were the most important and needed to be included in the work. For instance, I thought about a pig slaughter scene, but I decided that I did not want to show violence, and so this did not make it into the series. What I do show here is card-playing in front of the house and various social and family reunions; celebrating together is what makes our lives – it is the way I see the Roma people around me and would like to show them to others. My need to record scenes from the everyday

lives of the Roma of Lesser Poland is part of a larger project to change the narrative about Roma by counterbalancing the prevalent stories of the mainstream discourse, which is created by non-Roma and presents a one-dimensional and often harmful picture of Roma. On the one hand, it is about assuming authorship and telling the Roma story from our own perspective. On the other hand, the calendar formula emphasises the inscription of human life into the biological cycle of nature. The lives of the heroes and heroines of these pictures revolve in a circle of recurring events. Thus, it offers the impression of something that has no end and is eternal.

How do you understand the title, *Re-enchanting the World*?

MMT: I deploy re-enchanting as a non-violent process that is intended to change the world’s unfortunate events, undo the bad spell, and help to regain a sense of community and rebuild relationships with others. However, this will not happen with the touch of a magic wand. The formula of the calendar refers to the cyclical nature of our lives, and by documenting everyday life and small gestures, I try to show that everyone has the power to change the world. I am extremely pleased that, as a Roma, I was given the opportunity to create an exhibition for the Polish Pavilion. I see this as a chance to recover the narrative of Poland’s multi-culturalism, and I truly hope that the fact that I, as a Romani woman, won this competition for the exhibition in the Polish Pavilion will encourage other minority artists to apply for exhibitions in the national pavilions of the Biennale in the future.

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas is a Polish-Romani artist and activist. In her works, which comprise sculptures, paintings, spatial objects and large-format textiles, she addresses anti-Romani stereotypes and engages in building an affirmative iconography of Roma communities. She graduated from the Faculty of Sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow (2004). She has participated in many individual and group exhibitions, including the 11th Berlin Biennale (2020), the Art Encounters Biennial in Timișoara (Romania, 2019, 2021), 3rd Autostrada Biennale in Prizren (Kosovo, 2021), while her works have been shown at the Moravian Gallery in Brno (Czech Republic, 2017), the Center of Polish Sculpture in Orońsko (2020), Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (2020), and Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum in Cologne (Germany, 2021), among others. She lives and works in Czarna Góra, Poland.

RE-ENCHANTING THE WORLD: COLLABORATION INSTEAD OF COMPETITION

Interview with Wojciech Szymański and Joanna Warsza, co-curators of Małgorzata Mirga-Tas's exhibition in the Polish Pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale

What is the exhibition concept and the journey behind it?

Wojciech Szymański (WSz): On the one hand, with its title, the exhibition refers to Silvia Federici's book, *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (2018), which inspired us somewhat. On the other hand, the concept of arranging the exhibition itself, and the form it took, recalls the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara. The pride of the Palace is the *Hall of the Months*, with a series of twelve panels depicting, in calendar form, scenes from the life of the patron Prince, Borso d'Este, interspersed with images inspired by mythology, philosophy and astronomy.

Joanna Warsza (JW): Palazzo Schifanoia is where the art historian Aby Warburg developed his famous concept of iconology, putting images in perspective and in various contexts. He traced the migration of astrological figures from India, Persia, through ancient Greece, to the Renaissance. The Ferrara frescoes also inspired the Warburgian concept of *Nachleben*, or the "afterlife" of images. According to Warburg, an image is not something fixed, assigned to one culture or place. He reconstructed the long journey of some of the motifs appearing in Ferrara through space and time. As one might expect, his analysis lacked any mention of Romani culture, even though the Roma, who migrated from India to Europe, played a very important role in this transport of meanings. These omissions and blind spots are the starting point for our exhibition. Małgorzata Mirga-Tas (MMT) was inspired by Palazzo Schifanoia and its structure of meaning to re-activate the mechanism of the wandering of images and to revive symbols important to herself and to Roma culture, to perform an operation from cultural appropriation to cultural appreciation of the largest European minority. Reaching for this very important reference in art history is an attempt to add, to complement, to weave – in a literal sense, because it is a technique of working with fabric that MMT uses, often combining seemingly incompatible elements – threads of Roma culture into art history and into contemporary transnational art.

What was Małgorzata Mirga-Tas's process of working on this ambitious exhibition?

WSz: Inside the Polish Pavilion, MMT has built her own private "palace of images", as Ali Smith called the Palazzo Schifanoia. The structure

known from Ferrara has become a narrative machine for MMT, a kind of vehicle for telling her own stories. The exhibition is a kind of installation, consisting of twelve large-format pictures, created in the typical MMT technique of textile collage, and divided, like the original frescoes from Ferrara, into three horizontal bands. The upper band tells the story of the arrival of the Roma to Europe. The central one is the band of female strength and the feminine power to re-enchant the world, in which we find portraits of Roma women and friends of MMT separated by images of astrological signs. The lower part depicts scenes from the life of today's Czarna Góra, the artist's hometown. MMT used a recycling technique, making use of 15th century frescoes and Warburg's concepts, combining fabrics from thrift shops, materials donated by people and from Zakopane's Imperial Hotel, which housed the artist's temporary studio during preparations for the exhibition.

Can Małgorzata Mirga-Tas re-enchant the world – and how?

JW: Art can be a kind of a seismograph, and MMT's is a very sensitive one. Both Cecilia Alemani's curatorial concept and our Pavilion, although their concepts were born independently of each other, are part of the same conversation, the important topics of our time, such as women's and minority rights, the decline of the Anthropocene and its impact on the destruction of the Earth's natural resources, the place of native and vernacular art, and the paradigm of non-violence, among others. The art of MMT, who never separates her work in the field of art from her role as an activist, has always been politically engaged. This is evidenced both by her return to her hometown of Czarna Góra, despite the fact that she could live anywhere from Berlin to New York, and by her involvement with the Roma community, such as the creation of a monument commemorating the extermination of the Roma in Borzęcin. At the same time, MMT's involvement in highly visible art-world projects like the Berlin and Venice Biennales never stopped her from being active and involved in her community and practicing what scholar Ethel Brooks calls the feminism of minority, made from within one's – often patriarchal – community. MMT invariably positions herself as a deeply politically engaged artist, even if she does so in a very subtle, non-aggrandizing way. Her art is re-enchanting in the sense that it avoids confrontation mode, and is appreciated by people from all segments of

the political spectrum. This art is inclusive, and has reconciliatory qualities, just like the needle she uses as a tool that performs rehabilitation, that repairs and mends. MMT's patchworks are made up of elements that don't fit together and yet coexist and create another extraordinary dimension. These elements do not fit, and they do not have to, and this is their strength.

What is the relationship like between Małgorzata Mirga-Tas and the viewing public?

WSz: What is also important is that the work of MMT receives overwhelmingly positive feedback from a very general audience, people not necessarily interested in art and not connected to the art world. This art might seem easy and nice, but at the same time it is iconographically complex and packed with meaning and cultural associations. While still an artist just trying to make a name for herself, MMT was sometimes treated with disrespect by some people in the art world who saw this kind of figurativeness she has proposed and working with textiles as a risky, not contemporary enough artistic practice, or a sign of conservatism, and as a result MMT's artistic expression was orientalist and exoticised quite often. It is possible that those making such accusations were unaware that indictments like this were made until the beginning of the 21st century against many artists who rejected the post-conceptual, and post-minimalist lingua franca of contemporary art and did not use the artistic language of global north or global western art, forcing them to talk about their minority identity using the majority language. MMT, too, has chosen to reject this majority idiom: she has decided to speak her own language and has been very consistent in doing so over the years. This language has finally been heard, and hopefully it will also be received with understanding. It is an attempt to teach/introduce into the art world a certain polyphonicity, a certain multidirectional memory of images, using these images to then create new content. MMT is someone who, also outside the art world, has an unparalleled ability to performatively hack reality. I do not mean to say that MMT is a performer, but I mean that her way is to position herself in a broader context, in everyday life, where she provokes us to rethink, disenchant and re-enchant the world. On the one hand, MMT represents Poland at the traditional Biennale, which is a bit like the Olympics, with all the pomp of national representations, official delegations and pavilions. And it is great that a Romni represents Poland, being at the same



Authors of the *Re-enchanting the World* exhibition, standing against frescoes in the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara, Italy, 2021 (from left: Wojciech Szymański, Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, Joanna Warsza). Photo: Daniel Rumiancew

time the first Romni in the history of the entire Biennale to exhibit in a national pavilion. On the other hand, if we think of Roma as a transnational community, MMT's participation invalidates national representations and the notion of playing under one flag. This pavilion proposed by MMT belongs to everyone and invalidates the rules of the game that govern Venice as the Olympics of the art world.

What is the significance of featuring a Roma artist at the Venice Biennale?

JW: We don't treat the Biennale in terms of an Olympics. MMT's reinterpretation of Palazzo Schifanoia demonstrates the Roma's contribution to the European community. The Roma, despite their number – with 10-12 million in Europe, its largest minority – are one of the most discriminated and marginalised minorities, and their contribution to European culture is often erased. We hope that by showing the Roma as a transnational, proto-European community, not only Poles, Swedes or Ukrainians will be able to find themselves in this Pavilion, but all of us as Europeans. The re-enchantment that MMT has to offer is a vision of cooperation instead of competition, non-violence instead of building muscle. Showing that the majority culture can learn a lot from the minority, whose field of vision is often wider, which makes it possible to recognise phenomena unnoticeable from the perspective of privilege and stability. In the European context, MMT displays and embodies the issues of transnationalism, pacifism, nonviolence, feminism, and ecology, both in the values communicated, and in the stunning visuality, in the richness of the colours, that makes this art universally appealing. One builds a connection with this art, which captivates the audience without the need to

read a complicated curatorial text, and yet, if you were to write a PhD about it, the number of layers and topics is endless.

Ariella Aisha Azoulay, a scholar proposing to "unlearn imperialism", introduces the concept of potential history as an alternative to the common history based on violent logic and told mostly by the victors. Azoulay, speaking of potential history, looks at the moments which have not resonated, which have been erased from collective memory, but which could serve as a starting point for reworking, in a non-violent way, relations between the beings inhabiting our planet. One of our questions is whether a Roma refusal to engage in nationalistic and military operations and living a life of forced exile is such a moment of a potential history against the backdrop of the current Russian invasion in Ukraine.

WSz.: In this sense, it is this potential history, the never-told story of the Roma through the Polish Pavilion and MMT's exhibition, that is actualised in the present, and it is an attempt to hack it, to change the optics, to show that one can see the past differently – the upper band is the historical past – as well as the present, to look at completely different, new images/narratives generated by this palace of images. This is the most important question we would like to ask: how we can change the way we think about ourselves, not as self-determining entities, but as interdependent ones? We hope that the stunning richness of this exhibition will bring you closer to this emotional experience.

Wojciech Szymański, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Art History at the University of Warsaw, Poland. He is an independent curator and art critic; member of the International

Association of Art Critics AICA; author of the book, *The Argonauts: Postminimalism and Art After Modernism: Eva Hesse – Felix Gonzalez-Torres – Roni Horn – Derek Jarman* (2015; in Polish), as well as over 40 academic and 100 critical texts published in exhibition catalogues, art magazines, and peer-reviewed journals and monographs. He has curated over thirty group and solo shows and art projects, including several exhibitions of Roma contemporary artists and Roma art. His research interests include queer studies, Central European art history, postcolonialism, heritage and museum studies. He is co-curator of Małgorzata Mirga-Tas's exhibition in the Polish Pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale (2022).

Joanna Warsza is Programme Director of CuratorLab at Konstfack University of Arts in Stockholm, and an independent curator and editor, interested in how art functions politically and socially outside the white cubes. In 2021, together with Övül Ö. Durmusoglu, she co-curated *Die Balkone* in Berlin, the *3rd Autostrada Biennale* in Kosovo, and the *12th Survival Kit* in Riga (LV). She was Artistic Director of *Public Art Munich* 2018, curator of the Georgian Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale, and associate curator of the *7th Berlin Biennale*, among others. Her recent publications include: *Red Love. A Reader on Alexandra Kollontai* (co-edited with Maria Lind and Michele Masucci; Sternberg Press, Konstfack Collections, and Tensta Konsthall, 2020), and *And Warren Niesluchowski Was There: Guest, Host, Ghost* (co-edited with Sina Najafi; Cabinet Books and Museum of Modern Art Warsaw, 2020). Back in 2012, she realised the exhibition, *Project*, focusing on Roma culture at Wielkopolskie Rewolucje festival in Konin, Poland. Originally from Warsaw, she lives in Berlin.

EUGEN RAPORTORU

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ERiac has a unique and single mandate as the first transnational, European level organisation for the recognition of Roma arts and culture. The European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture e.V. (ERiac) is a joint initiative of the Council of Europe, the Open Society Foundations, and the Roma Leaders' initiative – the Alliance for the European Roma Institute. ERiac is an association registered under German law on 7 June 2017, in Berlin, Germany. ERiac exists to increase the self-esteem of Roma and to decrease negative prejudice of the majority population towards the Roma by means of arts, culture, history, and media. ERiac acts as an international creative hub to support the exchange of creative ideas across borders, cultural domains and Romani identities. ERiac aims to be the promoter of Romani contributions to European culture and talent, success and achievement, as well as to document the historical experiences of Romani people in Europe. ERiac exists as a communicator and public educator, to disseminate a positive image and knowledge about Romani people for dialogue and to build mutual respect and understanding.

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Courtesans (detail 1), 2021, oil on canvas,
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