

CuMMA PAPERS #2

CuMMA (CURATING, MANAGING AND MEDIATING ART) IS A TWO-YEAR, MULTIDISCIPLINARY MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAMME AT AALTO UNIVERSITY FOCUSING ON CONTEMPORARY ART AND ITS PUBLICS. AALTO UNIVERSITY IS LOCATED IN HELSINKI AND ESPOO IN FINLAND.

SUZANA MILEVSKA ARTISTIC STRATEGIES OF SOLIDARITY CHALLENGING POST-NAZI CULTURAL SPACES

The racialised relations in post-Nazi societies have been mostly challenged in social research and theoretical texts, along with critique of its historical and epistemological genealogy. There is an array of urgent reasons for such theoretically induced interests in postcolonial critique of hegemonic regimes of representation such as the visible and invisible representational hierarchies of nationalism, the vicious circle of victimisation and emancipation, the patronising over the “subaltern”, the tension between aesthetics and ethics, etc. In arts there are still not many cases of challenging post-Nazi culture, even less there are new artistic strategies for overcoming the artistic and theoretical traps of politically engaged art and anti-fascist activism. In fact I find problematic even the “post” in “post-Nazi space” phrase because there is so little to support the assumption that the “post” ever happened. Nevertheless, this text addresses the discontinuities and ruptures in post-Nazi society, as addressed by some artists who made visible the vicious circle of victimisation.

Paul Gilroy pointed to perhaps one of the most important issues with any critique of racism: that in racist discourse the society conceptualizes the subject (or group of subjects) that is perceived as the other, the different, both as *a problem* and as *a victim*.¹ As a problem because it disturbs the established order of sameness, as a victim because the compassion that accompanies the victimisation is a kind of redemption. “Racialized resistance” and solidarity, on the contrary, require an action towards getting away with the perpetuating cycle of problem and victim that is much more difficult to be realized than to state.

This is exactly what I see as the major problem with post-Nazi culture – the cycle of victimization is still not interrupted in most cases of criticism of post-Nazi culture and art. The fact is that very little is done in the academic and theoretical field of research of racist mechanisms and cultural phenomena related to race and racialization in the “white” spaces of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, where many ethnic minorities are treated as the “other” race, and not always based only on their different skin tone. I specifically refer to the events that we have seen in the recent years were the cases of violence over Roma and their expulsions, dislocations and depatriation in France, Romania, Hungary, Italy, Czech Republic, Slovakia etc.

The problem of understanding nationalism and racism in countries where racist outbursts became everyday practice is not only an issue of visual distinction. I want to argue that the relation between imperialism and racism was already tackled by Hannah Arendt in her seminal book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as a revelation of the materialist background of otherwise essentialistically conceived racism.² Racist outbursts and riots usually facilitate this process, which resonates with Arendt’s statement that racist ideology helped to legitimize the imperialist conquests of foreign territories and the acts of domination that accompanied them.

This is actually only excuse for the undertaken collective actions against the different for some aims of different background, mainly the economic and territorial interests rather than mystified hatred.³

Particularly important for understanding the recurrence of racism is the linkage between racism and the more recent well known neo-liberal appropriative methods: protocols for security measures, regeneration for tourism and creative industries, strict policies against travelers, refugees and *sans papiers*, etc., that all lead to certain disappropriations. In this particular text I want to focus on several art projects and artistic and/or research strategies undertaken by artists who recognised the urgency to react against racialisation of Europe and act in solidarity with the communities that are undermined, marginalised and even whipped out from their long-term lived territories (think of Roma all over Europe, Albanians from Serbia, even Serbs from Croatia). The unknown facts about Roma Holocaust, the wars in Yu-

¹ Gilroy 1991, pp. 11-12.

² Arendt 1962, pp. 503-4.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 504.

goslavia, secretive sterilisation of Roma and Sinti in Slovakia and Czech Republic or the Hungary National Guard are just a few of examples that have been tackled in some of the project in a vigorous and activist way.

However all these artists face many paradoxes both in their life and in their careers when it comes to making the decision whether to accept the national and ethnic categorisations and to act from within such categories because this usually comes with a certain limitation to their artistic careers and to the interpretation of their work. Therefore in this text I explore art projects that address the possible entanglements and causal relations between the long suppressed, forgotten and carefully regulated truths from the past and the new *protocols* that are issued and proliferated time and again by different governments and institutions and ultimately cause controversial present condition of Roma and other “racialised” minorities.

These artistic projects remind us how urgent is to recognise the reawakened conservatism, nationalism and racism that today obviously operate under the auspices of neoliberal capitalism and to tackle it through vigorous actions. Today the general state protocols seem to exclude Roma and other minorities and immigrant communities through similar strategy: by introducing new *protocols* that are constantly being issued specifically targeting certain communities. By so doing the neoliberal state produces a double bind action with which it first proclaims the targeted community as exceptional population and then creates exceptional protocols that leave these people outside of normality and common rule, as a kind of *sealing* of all stereotypes and prejudices.

Similarly to Hannah Arendt’s arguments in regard to the fraudulent “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” (forged around 1900) any protocols actually presuppose and project a kind of danger that gives way to a justification of the newer and stricter regulations.⁴ The controversial expulsions from France of nearly 1000 Roma to Romania and Bulgaria based on a personal memo from the French president Nicolas Sarkozy and following the French government’s orders based on the newly introduced strict security bill *LOPP-SI2*, are only one of the most recent obvious examples how protocols are put at work. Some of the artists that are discussed in continuation of this text not only critiqued but also tried to divert these laws and protocols and attempted to use them in an opposite direction, against racism itself.

These urgent social, economical and political issues put side by side with the effects of the contemporary state protocols such as displacements and evictions, property looting, unequal human rights, discrimination in education, etc. speak volumes. For example, Romany culture is diverse and full with contradictions on its own so it is difficult to define it under one umbrella definition and this is often used as an excuse for different policies, decisions and protocols designed for Roma by not-Roma that obviously wrong-

⁴ Arendt 1962, p. 360.

ly assumes that Roma are not capable of producing societal and political formations, structures and discourses. Therefore in this context I find important to focus on different protocols of communications and representations of Roma issues by focusing on the artistic discourses and productions of Roma artists.

The installation *What Remains..., 2000-2009, 2011*⁵, by Marika Schmiedt, includes a video and copies of documents that the artist collected in the course of her committed research to the unknown facts regarding Roma Holocaust “protocols” and particularly the destiny of her relatives killed in concentration camps to whom she devoted another work („Eine lästige Gesellschaft“, “An undesirable society“). Although all these documents⁶: lists of prisoners, transport lists, measuring cards, prisoner photos⁷, register files, police records, birth certificates/death certificates⁸, are preserved and kept in the archives, they are difficult to be accessed and retrieved. Thus the artist with her research-based work is making visible the existing evidences by putting the pile of these documents in front of our eyes in their frappant materiality: few thousand single copies of transport lists, prisoner lists, obituaries, inmate-staff cards, detention certificates, cash cards, or medical experiments were offered to the audience to take home and thus to keep the memory of these otherwise blacked-out events.

The main issue that Schmiedt explores in this and her previous work *VERMÄCHTNIS. LEGACY* (2010–2011) dedicated to the artist Ceija Stojka (a Roma woman painter, musician, and writer from Austria who survived three different concentration camps) is very similar to a question asked by philosopher Giorgio Agamben: *What is the juridical structure that allowed such events to take place?*⁹ While fighting historical amnesia, the documents and oral testimonials that the artist collected for many years warn us both of racism’s eternal return and of the aporia of the “proxy witness”: the survivors’ testimony as “a potentiality that becomes actual through an impotentiality of speech [...] an impossibility that gives itself existence through a possibility of speaking.”¹⁰

Crazy Water Wheel by Alfred Ullrich, consists of two videos.¹¹ The first one is showing only a loop of a turning wheel of a watermill. The wheel brings to mind the Romani flag that also has a wheel. This video comments therefore on the old stereotype of Roma people as exotic creatures full of wanderlust, genetically incapable of leading sedentary lives, in a house without wheels. The filmed watermill lies in vicinity of the Nazi extermination camp of Dachau so the wheel also refers to the eternal recurrence of racism. The repetition is not perfect and sends ambivalent message because the artist allows subtle details to transform the scene thus perhaps pointing out to the slow change of Roma situation.

Side by side with the watermill wheel there is a documentary showing an

⁵ DVD-Loop, 20-30 min

⁶ memorials, Auschwitz, Dachau, Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, Mauthausen, Ravensbrück.

⁷ Bundesarchiv Berlin.

⁸ Federal Police Directorate Graz, community Kirchstetten Nope, various parishes.

⁹ Agamben 1998, p. 166.

¹⁰ Agamben 1999, p. 146

¹¹ Two-channel video installation, 18’ 38”.

informal private performance of the artist commenting on the traffic signs *Landfahrerplatz kein Gewerbe* warning that itinerants are not allowed to trade or peddle in the area. Such signs are still in use in Bavaria. The artist is recorded how he questions and crosses out the inscription on the street sign with holding three signs one after another: a question mark, a cross and a sign suggesting a new term: Rastplatz instead of the old one. His simple action highlights how seemingly neutral regulations in fact enforce the segregation of Roma travelers from others so discrimination on the basis of ethnicity is preserved through language and visual public memory, and even through simple traffic “protocols”. By crossing out the sign the artist actually proposes “renaming” in order to discontinue the racist signs, names and terms that are so long time around that we have internalized them and learned to live with them without ever asking why they became so comfortably embedded in our visual cultures.

Another older work by Ullrich, a series of photographs, documents his original performance entitled *Pearls before Swine* which took place on 13 May 2000 in the Czech Republic, in front of the former Roma concentration camp Lety that was run solely by Czechs during WWII. Since the 1970s, the site has housed a swine farm. The artist threw pearls from a necklace belonging to his sister onto the ground through the farm’s locked gate and in front of the memorial stone in homage to his relatives and other Roma who were interned in various concentration camps.¹² The artist’s action and the title of the work point to the absurd and disturbing attempt by the Czech government to overwrite the history and existence of the Lety site, and to erase any public memory related to the concentration camp and the horrors that took place there by simply covering it up with a different kind of “dirt,” thus desecrating the memory of Roma who suffered there.¹³

Certain questions such as the following need to be asked here: Who has control over the means of representation and who has the power to reproduce and distribute certain dominant cultural and moral principles? Or to give a more concrete example, who has the freedom to erect a platform from which Roma artists and Roma in general could utter their urgent statements of self-determination and act as agents of empowering the Roma minority?

However, the internalization of the regimes of representation, identification, self-essentialization, and racism create a threatening vicious cycle, from which one most urgently needs to seek a way out. Some aspects were necessarily incited by the urgency to address recent cases of individual and collective displacements, evictions, and deportations of Roma citizens from their homes in many European countries. In light of the current neoliberal capitalist advance and its thirst for cheap or even free land, these political maneuvers should come as no surprise. Because most of the Roma do not

¹² Levy 2000, pp. 17-23

¹³ Huub van Baar 2008, pp. 373-385

possess legal property documents (even after having lived for decades on the same piece of land), their land is instead appropriated “legally” and becomes available for development and gentrification, “urban regeneration” in the neo-liberal parlance.

It is also important to point to the severe breaching of human rights that is occurring, and ultimately to search for new methods for recognizing and fighting against the contemporary racism that are re-contextualized through an evocation of certain racist contexts from the past. The expelled, the displaced, the ghettoized, the imprisoned, the war refugee, or any free but marginalized Roma are the speaking subjects in the previously explored projects: the Roma artist’s subjectivity is the witness, and he or she speaks for the ones who cannot speak.

If today the testimonials of the events of Roma genocide in Nazi camps sound unbelievable it is because we have learned to think that the past is far behind. However, perhaps one should remember and condemn together with these artists the Magyar Guard, for the setting on fire of the Roma camps in Italy or the sterilization of Roma women as a kind of reminder to the remnants and testimonies that make the past part of our present. One pressing question to be asked today is how will Europe negotiate these newly formed Roma subjectivities when social and political functions are always already “marked by the split between the referent and symbolic,” to quote philosopher Julia Kristeva, and when speaking subjects are divided between a past overburdened by annihilation and obliteration and a yet-uncertain future.¹⁵

The Roma artist and educator-activist Tania Magy was most directly affected by French’s strict policies directed against Roma. Her on-going project *Caravan – Roma Museum on Wheels* (2004-present), that is her home in which she lives and travels and simultaneously presents works and exhibitions by Roma artists, has recently been put under threat. It has now become a question of whether the caravan will continue its unique activities that are affiliated with the non-governmental Association Art Rom, de Voyages. The caravan functions as a kind of alternative institution whose art collection consists of Magy’s own art works as well as paintings, sculptures, photographs, videos, and films by other professional Roma artists (including Gabi Jimenez, Gérard Gartner, Bruno Morelli, Tony Gatlif, and Laura Halilovic). Magy’s colleagues contribute their works to this participatory project as an act of solidarity and in support of its educational, but also cultural, social, and political endeavors. For the last seven years Magy has been committed to organizing different art, educational, and curatorial activities and other events for the communities hosted by her caravan; these include informal classes for Romani children on the representation of Roma in the arts as a kind of institutional critique of art history.

¹⁴ Agamben 1999, p. 146

¹⁵ Kristeva 1985, pp. 212-213

In the course of the dramatic political actions in France in August 2010, the artist became an immediate eyewitness to the overnight deportations and destruction of Roma communities. Magy's Association Art Rom, de Voyages and the caravan's movements were subsequently subjected to strict controls and ultimately forced to suspend its activities. The political actions of French government highlight how seemingly neutral regulations in fact enforce the segregation of Roma artists and cultural workers from the others who use the term "precarious life" in much milder contexts. Discrimination on the basis of ethnicity and way of life is justified and reinforced by the already existing stereotype of Roma as "exotic" people who cannot live sedentary lives..

Finnish Roma artist Kiba Lumberg (with Kaarina Majander, Free Zone/Vapaa Vyöhyke) recently created the comic strip book *Crazy Artist Diary* (2010–2011) in direct response to the double bind and troubled relation of the artist towards the representation of Roma in contemporary Finnish society but also towards Roma self-representation.¹⁶ In a rough, ironic, and often sad way her work touches upon the issues that a Roma woman artist faces when her lifestyle, sexuality, and appearance do not fit into expected rules of behavior. On the one hand she is not accepted by her own traditional Roma community for being too liberal, and on the other hand she cannot fulfill the expectations of the Finnish cultural context because she is perceived to be overdetermined by her Roma background. In both cases "crazy" is the adjective that is often assigned to her and it sticks all too easily. The artist's gender and sexual orientation, underscored by her profession as an artist and her culture, are interwoven and create a manifold identity full of inner contradictions. Yet life on the edge of these two worlds could be exactly the space where a new subjectivity is born, a loudly speaking subject who testifies about her disenchantments, while simultaneously constructing her singular destiny with confidence.

In her versatile and provocative oeuvre, the Serbian feminist performance artist, Tanja Ostojić addresses various instances of racism in transitional and capitalist societies. She created a unique exemplification of the precarious position of Roma women and their frontal discrimination by the state and transnational powers. Aiming for a profound reflection on the biopolitical limits of humanity in the Balkans, she exposed the consequences of genocidal bio-power and hate speech. For example, *The Roma Question* (2006) is Ostojić's research based art project, an interdisciplinary installation that deals with the destiny of Roma women that resulted from several weeks of research conducted in Bratislava. She chose to deal with the Roma issue following the petition from ERIO (European Roma Information Office, Brussels) for the removal of the Dutch politician Eric Van der Linden from the position of the head of the EU delegation for Slovakia in May 2004, when

Slovakia joined the EU. The installation sharply criticizes Eric van der Linden who proposed that Roma children in Slovakia should be “forcibly separated from their parents” and to be brought up in boarding schools in order to become “more useful members” of the dominant society. Eric Van der Linden’s proposal caused a scandal with his openly racist ideas. Ostojić interlaces interviews with women activists, pedagogues, Roma policy analysts, social workers, artists, philosophers and regional journalists with original material from Dutch and Slovak TV and EU press briefings at the time and after when the case was officially closed as an ‘unfortunate choice of words’. In the installation of the work, she displays these collected comments as a kind of a unique critical “monument” to contemporary racist ideas.

Van der Linden’s racist ideas are far from unique. In the 1970s the Roma women were targeted by the Czechoslovakian government for forced sterilization, and this policy continued until the late 1990s in the Czech Republic. Ostojić’s art evokes a *femina sacra*, and the entanglement of nation, ethnicity, class, race and gender and transforms these into a powerful image of defiance.¹⁷ Woman, due to her sexual vulnerability and her function as a vehicle of class, gender and ethnic marginalization, becomes this ‘femina sacra’, a female version of Agamben’s notion of homo sacer.¹⁸ Ostojić boldly enters a realm of bare life herself to produce these new conditions of life, taking issue first and foremost with the ignorance of gender specificity in Agamben.

The return of the biopolitics of “whitening” well-known in political contexts elsewhere (e.g. the Aborigines in Australia) as well as the earlier sterilization programmes make it clear, “biopolitics is sexist as much as it is racist”.¹⁹ Due to the fundamental link between birth and nation (deriving from nascere - to be born), the intersection of state racism and state sexism means that women, the ‘producers’ of future generations of racially “inferior” collectives, are always-already excised from civil society as impure. The uncritical radicalisation of the treatment of the woman’s body that births nations in this case symbolizes the demarcation of territories controlled by the state. The intersection of state racism and state sexism means that women, the ‘producers’ of future generations of racially “inferior” collectives, are “always already” banned as impure and control over their bodies and even children are in somebody else’s hands.

Agamben’s “right to be sacrificed” is not what this amounts to today: it is rather the right to live your life on equal ground with the majority regardless of one’s ethnic, racial, gender, sexual, or cultural background.²⁰ Even if one may not be capable of transcending racism (as political geographer Arun Saldanha has argued²¹, or of unraveling all inherited contours and inflexions of representation, one should make good use of the rights and responsibilities to utter one’s own testimonies against injustice and discrimi-

¹⁷ Lentin 2006, pp. 463-473.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 465.

¹⁹ Milevska and Saldanha 2009, in print.

²⁰ Milevska 2009, pp. 25-29.

²¹ Saldanha 2006, pp. 9-24.

nation.

But we must also take on board the responsibility to decipher and unsettle new instances of racism, in all its disguises, to denounce them loudly and use any possibility to call for radical action that affirms solidarity in difference, and cohabitation.

To go back to the issue of solidarity mentioned at the beginning, Gilroy suggests:

[...] in order to do effective work against racism, one had to in effect renounce certain ontological assumptions about the nature of race as a category, which cheapened the idea of political solidarity, in my view, because it said that solidarity somehow was an automatic thing, that it would take care of itself. But I believe that solidarity—as you, I think, believe—doesn't take care of itself that we have to do things to produce that solidarity.²²

Artists in most of the above discussed projects offer very specific artistic and research methods of solidarity combining art, activism and public media thus attracting the attention of general audience that is provoked to think seriously about racism in a more neutral and relaxed environment of the art context than while watching the politicised and gruesome news on TV.

Moreover the artists often manage to achieve much more, particularly when equipped with their artistic curiosity and fragile sensitive approach enter the highest realms of political hierarchy to fight the societal causes that they turn into an artistic project or other way around. They use the phenomenon that civil responsibilities when “advertised” through arts often sound as more urgent and provoke more attention simply because of the visibility that art enhances for the suppressed community issues of their troubled every-day life in post-Nazi social and cultural contexts.

Unfortunately contemporary art scene is still not ready to accept artists coming from different ethnic and underprivileged backgrounds and prefers to hear about all those issues “translated” through familiar voices (e.g. the inviting of non-Roma artists instead of Roma artists to perform at the opening of the Roma Pavilion at the 54 Venice Biennale, including even Tanja Ostojic) of already known and established artists who are perhaps more fluent in speaking the language of the majority on the art scene or have the “appropriate” national background and colour of the skin.

²² “Cosmopolitanism, Blackness, and Utopia”, 2009.

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CUMMA PAPERS #2

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*Artistic Strategies of Solidarity
 challenging Post-Nazi Cultural Spaces*

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 HELSINKI 2013

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