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The Politics of "Roma Inclusion" at the 52nd Venice Art Biennale

TIJEN TUNALI

For the last decade, the Venice Biennial, the world's oldest and largest international bi-annual exhibition has been including both transnational group exhibitions and national pavilions allowing a space for political exchange between the two models. In the 52nd edition, the Biennale's theme was: *Think with the Senses Feel with the Mind: Art in the Present Tense*. The Biennale, apart from the Italian Pavilion in the *Giardino* (biennial gardens), African Pavilion, which was incorporated that year in the *Arsenale*, and the Latin American Pavilion in the city center, featured another transnational exhibition, but this time it was an *ethnic* collective: the Roma Pavilion¹. Thus, the Roma's inclusion into the biggest international blockbuster exhibition with a separate pavilion as a "transnational nation" deserved a close attention.

Today, contemporary relationship of the avant-garde to the global socio-economic system during the political re-formulation of Europe and the post-socialist political structuring is as complex as in the 19th century, continuing to be both progressive and repressive at the same time. A critical analysis of the contemporary Romany

¹ The pavilion uses a politically correct term "Roma" the plural for "Rom" to represent the Romanese speaking populations across Europe. The noun "Rom" is widely used in the Central and European Countries as an umbrella expression. Central and Eastern Europe, many speak Romany influenced dialect of the language of their host country and others speak no Romanese at all. Romany groups sometimes claim links with other groups and at other times they deny them. The word "Gypsy" (or Gitan) is also used as an umbrella term, mostly in the countries out of the CEE. It comes from the word "Egyptian" because in the Byzantine Empire and later in Ottoman Empire those groups were thought to be coming from Egypt. The other branch derives from the Greek word "athinganoi" meaning "untouchables", a Persian faction of magicians and fortunetellers that came to Greece in the eight century. Later the term is used in Latin as "cingarus" in German as "Zigeuner" and Hungarian as "cigany" (pronounced tsigani). "Other versions used in Central and Eastern European languages are Cingari, Cigan, Cikan, Ciganyok, Cingene, Cigany etc. the term Rom [a] comes from Romany word 'Dom[a]'." In the 1980's Hungarian intellectuals started to use the term Rom when referring to anybody who was considered to be of Romany origin instead of the word *Cigány*, which was the term, used until that date. Although, *Gypsy* is now often considered a pejorative noun and replaced by this politically correct word, some groups reject the term "Rom" and use one of the other terms in their host county's language instead. In turn, the Roma call the non-Roma population *Gadje* (*Gazo*, *Gaco*, *Gaci*, etc.) that also has pejorative connotations. See Michael STEWART, "Deprivation, the Roma and 'the underclass'", in C.M. HANN (ed.), *Post-Socialism: Ideas, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*, Routledge, London, 2002, p. 149; David M. CROWE, *A History of Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1994, p. 2; Péter SZUHAY, "The Self-Definitions of Roma Ethnic Groups and their Perceptions of Other Roma Groups", in István KEMENY (ed.), *Roma of Hungary*, NJ, Atlantic Research and Publications Inc., Highland Lakes, 2005, p. 237; Zoltan BARANY, *The East European Gypsies: Regime Change, Marginality, and Ethnopolitics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2002, p. 4.

representation in the West's most prestigious art event must take into account the social underpinnings of its politics of "inclusion" after the collapse of command economies, the enlargement of European Union and the effects of the neoliberal capitalism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) where the majority of the Roma populations live. Since 1989, an improved situation for the Roma has become a key condition for the entry of the CEE countries into the European Union. New political interests focusing on this particular ethnic group have started growing as a result, and the rhetoric of "Roma inclusion" on the part of these states that have politically and socially excluded the Roma for centuries has taken a different turn¹.

It is therefore not surprising that for the last decade along with state institutions, international organizations, and human rights groups, research foundations, and the academic community have become very interested in "the Roma problem". Nevertheless, compared with political and other cultural institutions, the international art world community has been rather late to respond to the cultural productions of the Romany peoples across Europe and thus, has been quite ignorant of the historical developments in Romany art since May 1979, when the first Romany Group exhibition, organized by the Institute of Hungarian Culture opened in Hungary². Since then, Romany artists have succeeded to carve themselves a space in the European art institutions. The Museum of Roma culture opened up in Brno in Czech Republic in 1999 with a permanent exhibition. An exhibition dedicated to Romany experience in the World War II was called "Hidden Holocaust" and took place in the *Mucsarnok/Kunsthalle* Budapest, opening in March 2004; another one was a traveling exhibition titled "We Are What We Are: Aspects of Roma Life in Contemporary Art" first opened in the *Minoriten Galerie*, Graz, Austria in 2004, and traveled to CEE countries in 2006. In May 2005, *North and Sound Lab* in Vienna and *Camden Art Center* in London organized exhibition including Roma artists. Omara, one of the artists in the pavilion also participated at the Rijeka Arts Biennial. Other three artists Daniel Baker, Damien Le Bas and Delaine Le Bas have widely exhibited in England.

The sudden interest of the organizers of the biggest international art exhibition for the contemporary cultural production of the Roma populations has shed light to reveal the political and economic interests underlining such international mega art shows. The post-1989 developments, from the part of the governmental or non-governmental structures with an urge to get involved in the Romany representation in culture and politics, are not the consequence of a sudden and spontaneous humanitarian interest. They are the continuation of a complex set of political, economic, and discursive relations marked by the collapse of State Socialism and EU expansion which helped to institutionalize "Western" human rights discourses to frame "Eastern" ethnic conflicts and tensions in the process of the ongoing "liberalization" and "democratization" of

¹ EU's expansion has added approximately 1.5 million Roma to the EU population; the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007 added another 3 million. However, there are only two Roma members in the European Parliament. In 1999, the accession partnerships for Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia in the European Union specified "Roma integration" as a priority.

² During the research of this article, in the libraries and archives of the Central European University in Budapest, I have encountered many unpublished dissertations written on the Roma of Europe between 1990 and 2006 but none written on Romany Art, except the pavilion's curator Timea Junghous' Master Thesis. The handful published works in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Romania are also limited to Exhibition Catalogues.

the CEE countries. The question that concerns this paper is double: Did the Roma Pavilion in the 52nd Venice Biennial aim for negotiating the Roma's "particular political vocabulary" in need to be visible to Romany populations around Europe to build an alternative political solidarity? Or was this exhibition part of the institutional creativity aimed at the socio-political integration of the former communist Europe into the global economic circuits?

The Roma Pavilion's main sponsor was an international NGO based in Budapest, the *Open Society Institute*, which is a part of United States based *Soros Foundations* network¹. Other financial sponsors were the Alliance Cultural Foundation based in Munich and European Cultural Foundation based in Amsterdam². Georg Soros, the global financier and philanthropist is also the founder and chairman of the Open Society Institute and the Soros Centers of Contemporary Arts (SCCAs). In his interview with the collaborating sponsor, the *Allianz Insurance, Asset Management and Banking Group* George Soros, expressed his happiness with the professional cooperation "which extends much beyond the matching of funds" and adds that: "To tell the truth I am not a big fan of contemporary art. But I am pleased to see that the experts, the Biennale organizers have found the Roma art worthy of inclusion in this prestigious venue"³. Apparently, what art actually is does not interest those who fund it, but to whom it speaks, it definitely does.

It is important to note that those two sponsor institutions have been acting as the most powerful cultural agents in the postcommunist era in the Central and Eastern Europe countries. These institutions have been the sole organizer of annual local and international exhibitions as well as the major sponsor for publishing and disseminating the work of local art professionals and facilitating access to international art venues. As Maria Hlavajova asserts that the SCCAs: "have performed traditional governmental functions in relation to culture, including providing financial subsidies and selecting national representations at major biennials"⁴. Philosopher and cultural critic Miško Šuvaković's term "Soros Realism" best describes these developments. Šuvaković points out to the "similar new art" produced in the Eastern Block in entirely different and even incompatible cultures after the foundation of Soros centers⁵. According to Šuvakovic, the function of Soros institutions is: "to stimulate initiate, and provide transition processes abridging the gap between the East in transition and the West

¹ "Soros foundations are autonomous institutions established in particular countries or regions to initiate and support open society activities..." Statement found on the website of Soros Foundations: <http://www.soros.org/about> (accessed 29.10.2011).

² "The Allianz Cultural Foundation was established in summer of 2000 by the former Allianz AG, now Allianz SE as a public and legally autonomous foundation with an initial capital of 50 million euros..." Statement found on their website: http://www.allianzkulturstiftung.de/allianz_en/stiftung.htm (accessed 29.10.2011).

³ George Soros was born in Budapest, Hungary in 1930. He first immigrated to England in 1947 than to the US in 1956. In 1973 he found a private investment firm that evolved into the legendary Quantum Fund. "Soros is the founder and chairman of a network of foundations that promote, among other things, the creation of open, democratic societies based upon the rule of law, market economies, transparent and accountable governance, freedom of the press, and respect for human rights."

⁴ Maria HLAVAJOVA, "Towards the Normal: Negotiating the 'Former East'", *The Manifesta Decade*, Roomade and MIT Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 43.

⁵ Miško ŠUVAKOVIĆ, "The Ideology of Exhibition: On the Ideologies of Manifesta", *PlatformaSCCA*, no. 3, January 2002, p. 17.

in globalization"¹. Thus, this exhibition, sponsored by philanthropy in the corporate environment of a major art institution, presented itself with an immediate question: The EU's solution to the "Roma Problem" has produced "The Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015" supported by George Soros's Open Society Institute (OSI) and the World Bank and endorsed by the prime ministers of eight Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries in February, 2005. Was this blockbuster representation of the Romany culture a part of this political solution?

The emergence of Roma politics after 1989, embedded with the 19th century concept of "national awakening" also incorporated in the neoliberal doctrine of "freedom, democracy and wealth" (but for a few). Such politics were an immediate reaction of the Romany intellectuals to the approach of the command economies towards the "gypsy problem". After 1989, in attempts to be recognized as a minority, a re-constructed "ethnic identity" and an open "ethnic" discourse have been promoted by the cultural and political Roma élite and the state initiatives alike². However, the reconstruction of Roma's ethnic identity was often followed by the deconstruction of this identity with the recognition of the impossibility of such representation³. Not only the Roma is not a homogeneous nation and thus very hard to be represented, but also there are different types of Romany élite with clashing agendas⁴. Thus, the recent political initiatives like the *Roma Decade* and the *Declaration of Nation* have emphasized Romany/Gypsy identity as an ethnic and simultaneously transnational identity, as did the Roma Pavilion.

During the Communist rule, the Roma had improved their social situation by the means of their own labor without provoking public resentment. The communist governments in the region saw the Roma's long established deprivation and exclusion from the mainstream society as more a *social* than an *ethnic* problem even when ethnic "reasons" for it were given. Roma seized the opportunity to get higher education and got better jobs than the previous generation. Nevertheless, the postcommunist governments in Eastern Europe reversed this policy and regarded Roma issues as "ethnic" rather than "social"⁵. As prominent Roma scholar Zoltan Barany argues: "Since 1989 a number of Romany activists and their organizations marked the formulation

¹ *Ibidem*.

² See Will GUY, *Between Past and the Future: The Roma of Central and Eastern Europe*, University of Hertfordshire Press, Hertfordshire, 2001.

³ The social make-up of the Romany ethnic groups, even in just one country, is wide. For example, those who possess intellectual abilities, because of the educational opportunities during the Communist era, became urban dwellers and could secure a middle-class lifestyle. Musicians that work in the cities are the most respected. They are followed by dancers, antique traders and horse traders. Those groups seek to distinguish themselves from Vlach or Olach Roma (nomadic tent dwellers and speak a different dialect). See Péter SZUHAY, "The Self-Definitions of Roma...cit".

⁴ In contrast to other parts of Europe and Turkey, in CEE countries a new type of élite is created with the socialist policies of the previous regime. Therefore, today, alongside with the traditional élite there exist a well-educated middle class Roma with prestigious jobs. Nevertheless, problems occur when this new élite often acts as the representatives of their community. Elena MARUSHIAKOVA, Vesselin POPOV, "Historical and Ethnographic Background: Gypsies, Roma, Sinti", in Will GUY (ed.), *Between Past and the Future...cit*, p. 48.

⁵ See Will GUY, "Romani Identity and Post-Communist Policy", in IDEM (ed), *Between Past and the Future...cit*, and Zoltan BARANY, *The East European Gypsies...cit*.

and endorsement of their ethnic identity as the communities main task"¹. In spite of the diversity of Roma population, Romany intelligentsia formed their activism within the project of ethno-genesis "by which a social identity is transformed into a cultural, ethnic identity"². As the Roma scholar Will Guy argues: "Although Roma activism did not aim at the creation of the nation state, it adopted similar strategies for ethnic mobilization to those of previous nationalist movements in the region"³. Nevertheless, the war in the former Yugoslavia, triggered by ethnically motivated violence, had its toll also on Roma population, as a majority of them were unemployed and thus stigmatized as criminals. Thousands of Roma have been displaced and suffered tremendous pain including physical torture by both Albanian and the Serb side. Thus, this clearly demonstrates that political organization on the ethnic lines in the region, no matter on what ethnicity, is a highly dangerous act.

Since 1989, with the new laws and foundation of diverse political parties, Roma established hundreds of political, cultural and other organizations. However, despite the increasing political and social attention, the conditions of Roma in postcommunist states of Europe have worsened. In 1992 the unemployment rate among the Roma population in Hungary was between 60 to 70% in some regions and in rural areas the rate was between 80% and 100%⁴. "Human Rights Watch" reported on Czechoslovakia:

"Discrimination against Romanies had reportedly increased in housing, employment, and access to public and private services since the democratic changes in 1989. The common perception that Romanies destroyed better housing that they received during the communist era has led to severe discrimination against Romanies now seeking housing in non-Romany neighborhoods. The high rate of unemployment of Romanies has been exacerbated by the emergence of discriminatory hiring practices in both republics [Czech and Slovak], which go unpunished by government employment offices responsible for enforcing an employment law forbidding discrimination. State and privately-owned restaurants, pubs and discos throughout the country increasingly deny Romanies entry and service"⁵.

In postcommunist countries, "ethnic identity" has become the issue to gain Roma legitimization as a minority. Yet, the Roma identity politics in the EU has not been employed to unveil the reasons of increasing social inequality; instead it has been applied to define Roma as a distinct community, which, in turn, has triggered traditional prejudices on them. Thus, this indicates that, if their material conditions remain unchanged, Roma's political rights and cultural inclusion alone would do little to transform their social identity. Mirga and Gheorge warn about the underdevelopment

¹ Zoltan BARANY, "Marginality, Ethno-politics and the Question of Security: The Eastern European Roma", Unpublished Conference Paper, p. 23.

² Will GUY, "Romani Identity...cit", p. 21.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ "Gypsies in the Labor Market", *Amoro Drom*, v. 11, 1992, p. 9.

⁵ Helsinki Watch Report by Rachel TRITT, "Struggling for Ethnic Identity: Czechoslovakia's Endangered Gypsies", Human Rights Watch, New York, Washington, Los Angeles, London, 1992, p. 2. Also see Helsinki Watch Report, "The Gypsies of Hungary: Struggling for Ethnic Identity", Human Rights Watch, New York, Washington, Los Angeles, London, 1993.

and growing unemployment of the Roma: "There are dangers of it evolving into an ethno-class or underclass and thus further perpetuate marginality in society. Such a development could lead to deadly conflicts with the majority society"¹.

The Roma Pavilion in Venice clearly intended to counter romantic stereotypes and mis-conceptions about the Romany culture in need for a constructive reconstruction and representation of Romany identity. Hence, overall, the exhibition represented stereotypes ironically, at times running serious risks of reinforcing them. For an average visitor, the most shocking was to see István Szentandrásy's paintings in a small and poorly lit room behind the thick red velvet curtains. Szentandrásy is a student of János Balázs whose works are regarded as the quintessence of Roma painting. The exotic and mysterious figures and wild horses depicted in vivid colours with high contrast were literally the embodiments of the Romany stereotype of the 19th century art and literature. The works left the audience puzzled and confused but did not "shock" as usually is the expected case in such a contemporary art space. Szentandrásy's genre appeals to a certain orientalist gaze by showing the Roma as marginal populations that live a life of fantasy away from modern day material realities. While Szentandrásy's paintings established the Roma as a-historical subjects, some other works, like those of Mara Oláh (Omara), ground them in daily realities of Roma. Both approaches played on the idea of "difference" between Roma people; hence, while Szentandrásy showed the predominantly white art world the dreamlike world of happy Roma, Omara invited them to think the reality of difference along class lines.

Omara is the only self-taught artist who had six paintings in the Pavilion, all oil-on-fiberboard, and all painted in cobalt blue and white. These sincere and conversational canvases told the stories of tragic events in Omara's life. The text painted along with figures is in Hungarian and helps the viewer to realize once again that all those tragic events not only occur because of the larger society's xenophobic conceptions of Roma's distinct cultural practices but because of their distinct socio-economic condition. The heartfelt confessions and intimate personal experiences of a Romany woman were laid in a simple but very dialogical style. The dates and inscriptions put the Romany existence in Hungary in a historical context that called for a historical change to overcome the obstacles that Omara faced in her life as a lower class citizen. The incorporation of the text immediately broke the narrative, which could otherwise be interpreted as naïve, monochromatic, story-telling. Omara's paintings stood as historical documents to the real social existence of Roma as opposed to imaginary constructions of Romany existence as often was the case in the Romantic canon.

Self-segregation on ethnic discourses not only constructs an ill political agenda but it also obscures the common interest of disenfranchised Roma and their *gadje* neighbors. This only deepens the problematic relationship between ethnic identity and political power as experienced more recently in the region. Moreover, any political expression could be more easily suppressed if it takes the form of ethnic rather than class difference. Another artist that was aware of this was Delaine le Bas, who constructed a form of "physical segregation" in her work to use it as a metaphor to criticize the EU's language of "inclusion" that left the social condition of the Roma unchanged.

Delaine le Bas used the attic of the Palazzo Pisani for her installation called *Meet Your Neighbors*. The entrance of the small room was blocked by a piece of red ribbon.

¹ A. MIRGA, N. GHEORGE, *The Roma in the Twenty-First Century: Project on Ethnic Relations Policy Paper*, PER, Princeton, 1997, pp. 24-25.

On this threshold, the red ribbon stood as a reminder of an immediate reality of the division between this imagined space and the real sites of Roma existence that has been excluded from the laws of equal representation. The visitor could not trespass the threshold of this marginal space, which represented the sites actually occupied by Roma in the fringes of the cities. The jewelry boxes and jewelries, old dolls, used wedding dress, old family pictures and old pocket watches, presented themselves mysterious fetishes to constitute an imagined space of the world of the Roma. But when looked closely one also noticed more mundane items of everyday life like pencils, an old toolbox, worn shoes, cracked bottles and a desk clock, etc. The stuff, looking like stolen items typically found in underground gypsy markets, were mixed with non-exchangeable items like family pictures and half empty bottles of water. The imagination of the viewer was then forced to oscillate between constructed romanticism and the reality of dispossession in the world of Roma. Roma's marginal condition in Europe for 700 years is the result of external as well as internal social dynamics in multiple dimensions. The dominating logic of their segregation as "inferior" ethnic groups in the CEE countries extends from the local beliefs that Roma are not just ethnically distinct from other groups but "a sub-human species"¹. With the exception of Romania, where until the mid-19th century the Roma were held slaves, there was no institutional enforcement for the racism and discrimination of those populations across Europe as in the case of blacks in the USA and South Africa². However, negative and damaging stereotypes, violent encounters and hatred towards this diasporic population have been tied to local beliefs, prejudices, and ignorance that have persisted until today.

The First Roma Pavilion was titled *Paradise Lost*, deriving from the Bohemian desire of searching for an idealized world of the gypsies. As the curator Timea Junghaus explained in the exhibition's pamphlets and the press release: "If the terra incognita of exotic gypsies has been the target of escape since 19th century modernism for Europe, have we all lost our search for Paradise?"³. The non-European – the Roma, the Arab, the African and the Asian – played a critical role not only in the practices but also in the invention of the avant-garde. Nevertheless, the role of the Western avant-garde in the politics of race and discrimination has often been contradictory. At the end of the 19th Century in Europe, the European middle class *bohemians* developed an ontological language (a type of orientalist gaze that fetishizes the way of living of the "Other") utilizing the cultural practices of the "outsider" – the outcasts of the society. In order to deal with the alienation and the day-to-day chaos in their contemporary society and while they raised the public awareness on the social existence of these types of minorities by criticizing the social system, bohemians marginalized themselves from society as well.

¹ Will GUY, "Romani Identity ...cit", p. 4.

² Michael STEWART, "Deprivation...cit", p. 146. As Donald Kenrick argues, the Romany came to Romania from Byzantine territory and worked as casual laborers and traveling craftsmen but because of poverty they were forced to settle down in one place as serfs of the local lords. Soon from serfdom they descended to slavery because they were considered as inferior to the Romanian serfs. Donald KENRICK, *Gypsies: From the Ganges to the Thames*, University of Hertfordshire Press, Hertfordshire, 2004, p. 49.

³ Press Release, *Paradise Lost: The First Roma Pavilion*, 52. International Art Exhibition: La Biennale di Venezia, 2007, p. 2.

In the Paris Exposition of 1855, the fierce bohemian Gustav Courbet, artist known for his revolutionary political attitude and activism, in his *Pavillon du Réalisme* did not use the Roma/Gypsies as subjects like his contemporaries but responded to their bohemian subjectivity by placing his spatial remark in this colonialist exhibition space¹. Nevertheless, his voice was objectified as "another exotic display" and was legitimized as a part of the spectacle. Thus, his political style of bohemianism was converted into a mere artistic style within the space of cultural hegemony. Soon, bohemianism in Europe, as an aesthetic as well as a political stance, was converted into a mere artistic style in the dominant spaces of exhibition. 19th century European Literature also examined European Gypsies in terms of their romanticized societal and aesthetic roles. For example Alexander Pushkin was the precursor of such genre, which idealized romantic "nomadism," or "rebellious" bohemian existence, often obscuring how this type of identity were used to serve the interests and pleasure of Russian Aristocracy, or the interests of nation-states using nomad Gypsies for legitimizing the national boundaries. The statement of the curator Junghaus seemed like an invitation to the art world to include the Contemporary Roma Art in its realm – this time as subjects. Could this nostalgic call for "a search for Paradise" that re-constructs the 19th Century bohemian and transient Romany identity offer an alternative thinking for the equality of representation of the minorities in the EU, while omitting to fall prey to the multicultural discourses of EU politics and the international art institutions? The problem is best pronounced by Gottfried Wagner's question in the exhibition catalogue: "Are we creating an ethnicising, socially motivated 'special case', sponsored by philanthropy, in the hybrid environment of the art establishment?"².

Gabi Jimanez is a Flamenco Gypsy from Spain who produces colorful and joyful paintings of caravans and gypsies to invoke moments of joy in the collective memory of the Roma/Gypsies. The pavilion displayed five of his canvases that expressed graphic qualities with the endless repetition of human forms and caravans together. Interestingly one of the two works exhibited on the narrow corridor of the Palazzo was quite different. His oil on canvas work titled *Caravans and Cypresses* is an obvious homage to Van Gogh and to the *Salon* displays of the late 19th and early 20th Century. From a distance, the painting looks like an imitation of a Van Gogh's work with cypresses to which small caravans are seen behind the low hills. Jimanez's attempt to interweave the caravans into the impressionist space of one of the most celebrated avant-garde artists of the Western art is remarkable. The white caravans with colorful windows, showing Roma traveling through the European landscape, gradually disappear and then reappear behind the cypresses. A caravan is a major symbol in Roma identity both in Gadje (white) and Gypsy culture and also worked as a logo for the exhibition's public relations campaign. It signifies the Roma way of life almost like a flag of a nation. The humorous approach to the caravan symbol was the artist's imminent strategy for a cultural and political affirmation. Jimenez's inclusion of the prominent symbol of the Romany culture into the space of the impressionist

¹ Five years before the Paris Exposition Courbet declared his new summoned identity to his friend in a letter: "In our oh-so-civilized society, it is necessary for me to lead the life of a savage [...] To that end, I have just set out on the great, independent, vagabond life of the gypsy". Marylyn R. BROWN, *Gypsies and Other Bohemians: The Myth of the Artist in the Nineteenth-Century France*, UMI research Press, Ann Arbor, 1985, p. 4.

² Gottfried WAGNER, "The Roma Pavilion in Venice: A Bold Beginning", in *Exhibition Catalogue: Paradise Lost*, Open Society Foundations, Budapest, 2007, p. 36.

landscape on one hand, provokes the romantic/orientalist gaze of the 19th century avant-garde in a humorous way; on the other hand, it questions the political and cultural persistence of this gaze in today's cultural vocabulary.

Damian Le Bas, who himself is not a Roma but his wife is, covered the two walls of a room in the Palazzo Pisani with his humorous images of Roma on printed maps. With a cartoonist drawing style, Le Bas manipulated and re-made the map of England and of other parts of the world with exaggerated Gypsy facial features drawn on them. Some maps showed the travel routes of Roma and the geographic sites where they reside now. Le Bas's work engaged in a close critique of the "spatialization" of the Euro-centric discourses and 19th century state formations. It could also be interpreted as an ironic twist of the Romany existence, now being used to legitimize "transnationalism" and "borderlessness" of the neoliberal Europe and the contemporary politics of the EU, as opposed to legitimizing national borders by using the nomadic Romany existence as an example, as was the case in the 19th century Europe.

Hitherto often labeled as "kitsch", "decorative" and "naïve" by the art critics in the hubs of the institutional art world in Europe, some Romany artist in this Pavilion chose to ignore such labeling. On the paintings of Gabi Jimenez and Kiba Lumberg, in Delain Le Bas's installations, and Nihad Nino Pusija's photographs, decorativeness and kitsch became the common stylistic language of the Romany art. On the other hand, works such as András Kállai's sculpture *Fat Barbie* (2006), Dusan Ristic's installation entitled *Global Warming* (2007), Jenö André Raatzsch's mixed media work *Sommersault* (2005) and Mihaela Ionela Cîmpeanu large scale sculpture *Wings* (2007) adopted the universal form of contemporary visual language; thus, making no reference to Romany culture stylistically or conceptually.

Tibor Balogh's installation *Rain of Tears* in the main room of the first floor in the Palazzo Pisani was attributed to the Nazi Holocaust. This installation was the continuation of the work the artist did for the Roma exhibition, which took place in the *Mucsarnok/Kunsthalle* in Budapest three years earlier. In the 1930s in Germany, the Roma were made the objects of pseudo-scientific racial research alongside the Jews. During the World War II, the Roma were also subjected to massive deportations and annihilation: an estimated 500 000 Roma were killed during the Nazi Holocaust. In the *Mucsarnok/Kunsthalle* Balogh constructed a booth and covered its wall with documents, articles and photos of the Holocaust of the Roma. He also placed hundreds of test tubes outside the booth and encouraged the viewer to go inside the booth with a test tube. The viewer, after having seen the incredibly devastating evidence of the Holocaust could collect his/her tears in the test tube. Hundreds of those test tubes were hung off the ceiling of the main salon in Romany Pavilion. The artist, then, hung them up around the booth. Indeed, it was the reflection of the viewer that not only gave the work its meaning, but it also literally materialized the installation itself in this exhibition. The test tubes hanging down like glass raindrops created an eerie feeling that, from the days of Nazi holocaust, not so much have changed when it comes to social condemnation of the Roma in Europe.

The stylistic and conceptual challenges that these artists successfully proposed, was lost in the curatorial shortcoming of the Pavilion as a political gesture of existence and artistic visibility. This important art space missed the difficult but possible task of challenging the canon by strategically defining itself in it. It failed to take a critical position but oscillated between deviance and romanticism, heterogeneity and homogeneity, segregation and integration, Self and Other, which has often been the case in many corporate sponsored exhibitions in the international Biennials around

the world. It has widely been argued that the international biennials that proliferated after 1989 have been intrinsically linked with corporations that are interested in "specific cultures" and have often exhibited those aspects of each culture that open the ways to their consumption. On the other hand, the cultural products of "ethnic minorities" have been pushed into international art markets which, in turn, gained credibility to certain political and cultural institutions behind these exhibitions.

It has been common in the hegemonic institutions of art and politics that the group consciousness or self-recognition becomes the domain of a small circuit of cultural and political élites of the group, while those marginal groups themselves are often being even more marginalized from those institutions. This exhibition space, created by the Romany intellectuals and sponsored by the Soros foundation, existed in a delicate zone between the "politics of inclusion" of Roma as the cheap workforce of Europe and "Roma nationalism". Nevertheless, the alarming issue that this exhibition made visible was that Roma nationalism has been sustained mostly within the élite-level that hinders democratic control of the rest of the Roma people. Today, the danger of the identity politics of the Romany élites lies in its appeal more to the CEE nationalists who believe that Roma is a distinctively alien population than to diverse Roma communities with different socio-political needs, capabilities, and interests.

No matter what kind of double edge sword of identity politics it stood on, the exhibition presented an important step within the "second wave of Roma Cultural Movement" – as Junghaus calls it – that seized the opportunities for contemporary Roma artists to be included in international art events as the continuation of the "first wave" of multicultural decade. Marked by Jean-Hubbert Martin's exhibition *Magiciens de la terre*, a paradigm shift in the Western art-world began taking place in the late 1980's demanding the international art world to embrace an "inclusive" approach towards the misrepresented or under-represented groups. Nevertheless, this wave of multiculturalism did little to expose the structures of power that have marginalized those cultures, and often the spaces of affirmation of diversity continued to be within the center.

The Roma Pavilion in the Venice Biennial of 2007 does not disappoint the international curators, critics, dealers, collectors, media and philanthropists that it speaks to. It certainly displays a modern and cosmopolitan Roma identity and sends out appropriate signals for cultural progress. It also supports the efforts of the project called *the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015* founded by Open Society Institute of Soros foundations, the World Bank and the European Commission (who are also the supporters of contemporary Roma art in the international scene). The politics of the Pavilion with its curator, funding, and marketing based in Budapest, should be taken into account in the light of SCCAs power in the former Eastern bloc.

Although the Pavilion's curator was announced as Timea Junghaus, who works for the Open Society Institute in Budapest, curatorial decisions were made by a diverse group of international curators and intellectuals among them Viktor Misiano, art historian, the curator of international arts exhibitions, among them that in the Central Asian Pavilion of the 2005 Venice Biennale; Thomas Acton, professor of Roma studies at the University of Greenwich; Barnabás Bencsik, curator, director of ACAX-Agency for Contemporary Art Exchange; Dragan Klaić, cultural analyst, a writer in the field of cultural policy; Marketta Seppala, director of Frame Foundation, commissioner of the Scandinavian Pavilion at the 2007 Biennale; and Katalin Székely, art historian and critic. The curators and organizers fulfilled their goal as to prove that even if their narrative might be different, the poetics of representation, expression,

and communication are compatible with other non-Roma contemporary artists. The Roma Pavilion also, without a doubt, boosted self-confidence among the Roma and partially achieved its goal to put Romany artists' feet in the international art circuits. However, the exhibition failed to raise timely questions, such as: how could the disenfranchised Roma groups overcome their systematic disqualifications from broader cultural and political representations, as well as direct participation in local and international politics, which was denied to them by the national, international as well as Romany elite? And, what could be the ways to establish systematic and effective social inclusion of Roma population alternative to self-ethnicization and nationalist right wing discourses?

In order to secure inclusion to this exclusive space of art, the pavilion compromised contesting the hegemonic formations of contemporary politics – in which this Biennial sits – that define, categorize, and legitimize the Roma existence. The exhibition did not attest the fact that the Romany identity – flexible or not – was a product of overarching power relations, nor did it reveal that the legislations and reforms on the "Roma problem" have been bound to conform to market norms. The most concrete way to discuss the issues of a specific ethnic culture should be not only to recognize it in terms of its differences from the dominant culture but also to understand its capacity of revelation of the structural and non-structural differences within the dominant culture and the logic that builds, perpetuates, and maintains this kind of diversification. The dissident voice of Roma/Gypsy existence has much to offer to other counter-hegemonic formulations in Europe and the rest of the world. Indeed, there are still a lot of lessons to be learnt from Roma and their historical opposition to the structures of European domination and the systems of capitalist modernity.