

From the fall of the Berlin Wall to the first Roma Pavilion at the Venice Biennale – from the world of Agnes Daroczi to the world of Daniel Baker

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Where did the “new Romani artists” come from? And why now?

When I first met the distinguished English Romani artist Delaine LeBas in the 1990s, she told me she felt guilty because she had not done enough for her own people. I always replied that the Romani people needed real artists and professionals in all fields; there were already professional Gypsies whose main specialisation was helping their own people. Since 2006 the “new Romani art” has moved centre stage in European Roma politics. What can this art do for the people? And in what sense, if any, does the new Romani art tell us about contemporary Gypsy/Roma/Traveller experience? I will suggest it can only do so if that is not actually its purpose.

Up until 1800 all, and till 1900 most, of the writing and pictures and music we have of Roma¹ are by Gaje (non-Roma), who represent Romani art as folk art. Only in the 20th century do we find the individual creative Romani writer and artist - making representations, but often criticised by Gaje as “unrepresentative”. The work of modern Romani intellectuals and artists is often contrasted negatively with something collective, traditional and repetitive called “folklore” or “naive art” as though anything produced outside of tradition must necessarily lack authenticity.

Perhaps the key figure who stands at the turning point between the folkloristic past and the contemporary Romani art of the 2008 Roma Pavilion at the Venice Biennale is Dr Agnes Daroczi in Budapest. Working as a young Romani woman graduate in the Hungarian Ministry of Culture, she was forced to “do culture rather than politics”,

¹ Who are Roma/Gypsies/Travellers? And why does the ontological and epistemological uncertainty besetting the identity of this range of groups lead to such a cumbersome 3-part label to bridge the political contestation of other simpler labels? The classical historical synthesis suggested by Fraser (1992) suggests a population of Indian origin started moving towards Europe from the ninth century onward, bringing with them an Indian language. They become fragmented because of persecution in the 15th and 16th centuries, so that populations of different sizes are more or less acculturated in different European countries. Where the Romani population is very small it has either been absorbed by, or failed to displace, a local commercial nomadic or “Traveller” minority. Some groups, such as the English Romanichal Gypsies, maintain both a Romani and a Traveller identity. The word “Gypsy” (from “Egyptian”) is theorized as a simple mistake about origins made by Europeans, and tolerated or accepted by Roma.

This synthesis has been challenged, both by Romani-speaking groups who do not call themselves Roma, such as the German Sinte, and by radical social constructionist academics such as Willems (1997) who argue that the whole of this synthesis is an ideology created from the work of Grellmann (1787) in order to racialise a disparate range of marginalized social groups to make them fit new state policies. This in turn is being challenged both by conservative linguists, emphasizing the core Romani language, and another less radical form of historical revisionism suggested by Hancock (2006) and Marsh and Strand (2006.) suggesting the core bearers of the Romani language were descendants of a multicultural 11th century Indian-led militia originally recruited by the Ghaznavids, who, when they arrived in Anatolia and the Balkans walked into Gypsy stereotypes already established by the Byzantines around earlier Indian immigrants, the Dom. Complexity, variety and difference of perspective are thus inherent in Roma/Gypsy/Traveller self-definition from the beginning, and any simplification of the above would simply mislead

but, given the assimilationist line laid down by the Ministry of Education at the time, had to organise exhibitions as if, by definition, all Romani art was “naive.” Not until after 1989 could she just call it “art” (Daroczi, 1989). But in her exhibitions, even after the fall of communism, Romani art was still just about Roma, a minority byway. Suddenly in the past four years Roman art has become about the world as a whole. It has the potential to become a “classic” contribution to world culture, overleaping boundaries of time, place and culture, like the Parthenon, medieval plainsong, the German romantics, or the Benin bronzes. Their appeal is not absolutely universal, nor do classics always remain classics, and everyone will make different lists – but some works of art, some representations work not just within the context of their own production, but somehow successfully illuminate a narrative about those who produced them for people of other times and cultures.

If we want to see how this happens, how some artistic productions, as systems, or bundles of interconnected meaningful symbols, catch on more than others, then we need to take account of both (a) the history of the development of any symbol system and (b) social context of current uses of the symbol system.

The discussion of Romani visual art is very much less well-established than the discussion of either Romani music, which has been theorised by Europeans since the time of Liszt (c.f Boros 2007), or Romani literature, which though less discussed than music has begun to attract critical analysis over the past 50 years (c.f.Djuric 2002). It is my hope that a brief discussion of how we can deconstruct European analyses of Romani music as reflecting a primordial ethnic essence, and replace it with an critical social model which relates musical agency to social function can provide a model for understanding the sudden flowering of Roma/Gypsy/Traveller visual artists.

There are three primary social contexts for musical performance: the domestic, the commercial and the religious. All human beings have domestic music of some kind: when you whistle while you work, or hum while you shower, you are making domestic music. Most human beings share this music with their families; the lullaby is a primal cultural experience. We recognise that some of us perform better than others; we will even pay to hear others, and thus professional music is born. Professional music and domestic music constantly interact; what we whistle while washing the dishes is as often as not a pop song we just heard on the radio. And professional composers are notorious for raiding folksong for inspiration. But besides these two motivations, to please oneself and to please others there is a third, which is to please God (or if her existence be denied, shall we say, to serve some transcendent cause.) This last motivation can lead to syncretic fusions and startling innovations, as we can see when Romani musicians from different traditions jam together at the great international Pentecostal Romani conventions to produce a human confrontation of the deity that is every bit as arresting as medieval plainsong or Haydn’s *Mass in Time of War* .

There are three broad geographically linked traditions of Romani performance music. We may classify these as

- 1) Middle Eastern and Balkan Romani and Domari music
- 2) Northern including: “Hungarian Gypsy” music. “Russian Gypsy” music and “Manouche Jazz”
- 3) Flamenco, both classical and “pop”.

All three reflect continuous traditions of professional musicianship passed from parent to child (usually father to son or nephew within the professional sphere, but sometimes mother to daughter) for some centuries. All tend to use instruments similar to local non-Gypsy musicians, though they may continue the use of these after they have fallen out of general use, and all have to find a paying audience among Gaje, or non-Gypsies.

Only the latter two of these excited European musical critical attention during the period of classical Romani Studies² in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and the explanation of the radical difference between them was that they were essentially re-presenting local non-Gypsy tastes to that paying audience. In the 20th century these professional musics were then contrasted unfavourably with the primarily non-instrumental folksong of poor “Vlach” Romani migrants who left Romania for the West after the ending of slavery. Traditional Romani Studies, up to the work of Kovalcsik (1985) tended to conclude that these represented the ur-spring of genuine Romani music in contrast to the artificial and commercial confections of professional Romani musicians.

This view is a category mistake, which neglects both history and sociology. The “Vlach” Roma do not present the original culture of the Hungarian Romungre Roma, and still less that of the Spanish Gitanos. In each case their cultural trajectories separated centuries ago (Fraser, 1992). The Vlach Roma’s musical traditions are domestic variants of the middle Eastern music of the Ottoman Empire, not the classically influenced style of Hungarian Romungre and Russian Roma musicians. There are many vernacular correlates of the latter, not least the Manouche Gypsy Jazz of which Django Reinhardt is the enduring inspiration.

Of course all of these musical styles are in constant interaction with those of the non-Gypsies surrounding them. They use the same instruments as are available generally (as well as those they have kept from other places and other times); they learn the styles that will let them earn from their non-Gypsy audiences. Does this mean there is no authentic Romani/Gypsy music, but only some kind of bastardisation of original national styles, as the nationalist cultural analysts of the 19th century averred? (Boros, 2007). By no means! There are no primordial national musics. Music is paradigmatically capable of appealing across national and ethnic boundaries. All creative musicians take motifs and techniques from wherever they find them. If you wish to respond to or represent the situation you are actually in, you will take whatever tools, whatever motifs work best, rather than stick to traditions, those motifs which be definition represent the past rather than the present.

This principle of creative re-assembly applies to literature as well as to music. Do we condemn Shakespeare because he coins into English words from a dozen other languages³ rather than sticking to the Anglo-Saxon vocabulary of Chaucer? Or because he lifts his plots from the chronicles of the ancients and the historians? No!

² Often referred to as “Gypsyism” by this writer and others within the parochial world of Romani Studies, after the name of the Gypsy Lore Society (founded 1888), the scholarly body which this writer has spent half a lifetime criticising for its failure to recognise its racist heritage, and of which he ironically finds himself currently the Secretary.

³ Including Romani.

Shakespeare is the magpie who takes the shattered mirrors from all the civilisations within his ken to build a glimmering collage which reflects our fragmented and inconsistent human nature back to us in a way that reconstructs our very souls. And this, the most eclectic of writers, is the one we chose to regard as the most English!⁴

Originality does not reside in newness of technique or material. Originality lies in the use of well-known methods and motifs to *say* something new, to give us something which we recognise as meaningful, but did not know before that we knew or would recognize. Roma/Gypsy/Traveller music, story and song are original and authentic because they address Roma/Gypsy/Traveller life, (and history forgotten by non-Gypsies) not because they stick to any purity of tradition, as Willie Reid (1997) and Donald Braid (1997) have pointed out against the Scottish folklorists who wished to reduce Scottish Traveller culture to a subset of their own. And if we look carefully enough, we can see the other chap's point of view.

I do not, therefore, claim any originality for the analysis of the contemporary Romani art movement which follows. I merely seek to apply the kind of sociologically informed analysis which has contested the meaning of Romani music for 150 years, and addressed Romani writing since 1945. And perhaps at the same time to celebrate my own good fortune, as a Gajo and an utter amateur in visual aesthetics, in having been in the right place at the right time for one crystallisation of that movement and its social vision in Greenwich in 2005- 2006.

If we look at the Roma/Gypsy/Traveller art from across Europe which was collected at the end of 2006 in the Open Society Institute's virtual on-line exhibition (c.f. Junghaus and Szekely 2006) and even more at the selection of those artists for the Roma Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2007, then we can see, and not be surprised that the dominant traditions of the last half-millennium of European visual art provide the semiotic material for contemporary Romani art, rather than some archaic folk-craft related to tent-life of past centuries,. The neo-classicism liberated by the renaissance in 16th century Europe exercises a continuing figurative influence through its embodiment in the tradition of socialist realism which dominated in the former communist bloc and has shaped many of the artists of Eastern Europe. The modernist reaction of late 19th century and early 20th century Europe produced a broad range of genres and styles which nonetheless are seen as an entity called "Modern Art", which is seen as opposed to classicism, and is still sometimes pilloried as inaccessible, degenerate or ugly not only by Communists and the more philistine Social Democrats, but also by Fascists and right-wing populists.

The distinction between the two traditions has been blurred since the fall of communism in Europe in 1989, and a contemporary *public* art has emerged within which a cautious rapprochement may be seen between them. Anthony Gormley and Tracey Emin can be accessible and still count as high art. The mutual engagement of Eastern and Western European Romani/Gypsy/Traveller artists can be seen as part of this process, and the creative tension between them as part of the way in which the method of the art is transcended in a common message – an emergent common

⁴ Of course, for the Germans, he is "Unser Shakespeare". It is no accident the man translates so well, or that he is the first English dramatist to be translated into Romani.

gaze – which addresses the situation of Roma/Gypsy/Traveller groups in Europe today.

Although there were only four artists in the 2006 *Second Site* exhibition at the University of Greenwich, they illustrated many of these tendencies, not least in the contrast between the figurative realism of the one East European Rom, and the modernism of the other artists. This exhibition grew out of planning for the 2006 London International Gypsy Film Festival (Acton 2006). Right from the beginning, the question of how far representations of the Roma/Gypsies/Travellers are controlled by non-Gypsies, even when Gypsies are behind the camera, was an issue in planning for that festival. The audience, the industry and the conventions of film all mean that unless a film at least deals with the stereotypes of Gypsies, it isn't recognisably a Gypsy film at all.

I suggested that individual visual artists who happen to be Roma/Gypsies/Travellers are not bound in the same way. They may address the stereotypes – but they do not have to. From this grew the idea of an exhibition by established artists who just happen to be a Roma/Gypsy/Traveller origin: not an exhibition of Gypsy art, but an exhibition addressing whatever issues and ideas the artists themselves wished to address. The artists selected were the Albanian Rom, Ferdinand Koci, two English Romanichal Gypsies, Daniel Baker and Delaine Le Bas, and an Irish Traveller also has some Huguenot heritage, Damien Le Bas, all of whose work I had long admired.

When I invited these artists to create an exhibition⁵ at the University of Greenwich I was determined that it would not be an exhibition *about* Gypsy/Roma/Traveller subjects. It would be an exhibition about whatever they saw as significant about the world in general. They were all professional artists who had made their way in the world despite the prejudice against Gypsies. Some of those who had bought their pictures did not know their backgrounds. They were *not* the beneficiaries of any positive discrimination; they had not jumped on a Gypsy bandwagon; they were no more “Gypsy artists” than David Essex, say, is a “Gypsy musician”. They were just artists who happened to be Gypsies.

Once they were together, however, it was evident there was a common experience which created a synergy between them. Daniel Baker came up with the title of the exhibition, *Second Site*, a play on words with connotations of stereotyping, fortune-telling, physical dislocation, and altered perception. The Romani title was *Avere Yakha* – or *Wavver Yoks* in the English Romani dialect - literally “Other Eyes”.

It was a condition of the funding that the artists carry out workshops with parties of local school children who visited, including Gypsy/Roma/Traveller pupils who were amazed to see Gypsies/Roma/Travellers like them as professional artists. The Roma Support Group in London also brought refugee Roma. Pressure from Traveller and

⁵ I should say that it was only possible to put on this exhibition because (a) the technical expertise of Kelly O'Reilly, then curator of the Stephen Lawrence Gallery at the University of Greenwich, and of Grace Acton (my daughter), now an arts administrator with Metal Ltd. and of Nathaniel Helpburn, curator of the gallery at Mascalls School in Kent, and (b) of the initial support of the Advisory Council for the Education of Romani and Other Travellers, on which I sit, to the tune of £935, followed by grants of £2,500 from the South Greenwich Cultural Opportunities Fund, and £4,900 from the Arts Council.

educational organisations in other parts of the country led us to get an Arts Council grant to take the exhibition and repeat the experience in Leeds at the headquarters of the Traveller Education Service, at Appleby during the largest English Gypsy horse fair, and at the Museum of East Anglian Life in Stowmarket, Suffolk.

The whole thing was a runaway success, the catalogues a collectors' item and almost immediately an international influence. Notes that I and others had written were anthologised as key texts to the catalogues of the OSI virtual international exhibition of Romani art (Junghaus and Szekely 2006), the catalogue of the Roma Pavilion of the 2007 Venice Biennale (Junghaus 2007) and the catalogue of the 2007 Prague Biennale (Acton 2007). What we had done on a small scale, the OSI did at a European level. Three of the artists from the Second Site Exhibition were among the seventeen at the Venice Biennale Roma Pavilion. They became part of the visual grammar of art in support of multiculturalism (Acton 2009).

The collection "Mapping the Invisible" shows a concatenation of images from across Europe, (and it could be the world) which shows the impact of a contemporary artistic imagination on the presentation of the Roma. Yet, in it, contemporary Roma art (represented by an interview with Daniel Baker, and a report of the Venice Biennale) is one third (alongside craft and architecture) of section 4 on "Creative Ingenuity", which itself is one of 5 sections (the others being History/Migration, Human Rights, Extreme Poverty, and Family Identity, the conventional themes within which Roma hit the media). But maybe the message of Daniel Baker's mirror pieces is that art can make Romani/Gypsy life abundantly visible. The fractured, defaced traditional motifs which crowd his silvered surfaces point the absence of human figures in traditional Romani decoration. But you can't take a photo of one without including your own reflection.

The fact is, these artists did NOT set out to be "Gypsy artists" or jump on a Gypsy bandwagon. The "Modern Roma Art" in exhibitions is often inaccessible to traditionally-minded observers whether Roma or Gaje, because it challenges them their expectations, instead of comfortably confirming them. There is no "innate Romani spirit" common to these artists; such rationalisations belong to discredited racist narratives of history and identity.

Roma artists appropriate what tropes and motifs they need. If a stereotyped Gypsy style does emerge, then anyone can Gypsy Kings-ize – or Gogol Bordello-ize it – but why not? There is, nonetheless, an interactive response to common experiences, and the new emerging common narratives built around them. They are part of re-casting the narrative after the fall of the Berlin wall smashed the old spatial order. What matters is the message, which is the art itself, not the messengers. In the end the ethnicity of the artists is unimportant.

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