

Building a new common gaze: lessons from the new English Roma/ Gypsy/ Traveller art.

Thomas Acton

To live together we need to understand each others' point of view. Philosophers tell us that rejecting solipsism is an act of faith; but only a psychopath actually acts as though the rest of the world is an illusion that can be re-dreamt to their own convenience. We assume that what I see in front of my eyes is what you see in front of my eyes, and when I speak of an object, or refer to a landscape, to a family, a home, you will know what I mean, provided we are speaking the same language, and even if we speak different languages, there is always a translator. We may say that beauty, (and duty, and honour) lie in the eye of the beholder, but the vast volumes of translated moral and aesthetic theory bear witness to our conviction that we can develop a common language to debate them.

Yet the wars and genocides of the 20th century give the lie to this easy assumption of common understanding, as the tortured reassessments of Bonhoeffer's Prison writings, Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, and Shusaku Endo's *Silence* bear witness in a way that makes us willingly forgive their earlier arrogance. T.S.Eliot put it most simply when in the last of the *Four Quartets* he implicitly recants his pre-war sympathy for fascism as "things ill-done and done to others' harm which once you took for exercise of virtue."

The collective realisation of how human groups have devalued each other's humanity through prejudices such as racism, have impelled us in the last half-century to deconstruct the stereotypes we find in earlier representations, and to seek new representations which embody the fruits, the understandings, gained from that deconstruction.

Up until 1800 all, and till 1900 most, of the writing and pictures and music we have of Roma 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.

It is obviously beyond the scope of this paper to give a general history of art; but to examine the social meaning of innovatory art we need a general theory of art and culture. This paper is an exercise in sociology, not in art criticism. I seek neither to evaluate, and still less in a Leavis-ite fashion to prescribe what should be regarded as classic or authentic. Rather I simply seek to use the recognition by large numbers of people of the meaningfulness of particular bodies of work to help us understand how those people pursue conflicts and co-operations in the business of living together.

It is indisputably the case that some ethnic groups at certain times seem to make a “classic” contribution to world culture, overleaping boundaries of time, place and culture? The Parthenon, medieval plainsong, the German romantics, the Benin bronzes – their appeal is not 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, or Romani literature, which though less discussed than music has begun to attract critical analysis over the past 50 years. 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 Studies¹ in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and the explanation of the radical difference between them was that they were essentially representing 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? (c.f. 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 languages² 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! 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

¹ 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.

² Including Romani.

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!³

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

³ 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.

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. 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 origin⁴: 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.

I first introduced myself to the LeBas, husband and wife, at an exhibition of “Outsider Art” in the early 1990s, drawn by a brief press mention of Delaine's Romani descent. Both glamorous recent art college graduates, surrounded by a crowd of young and flamboyantly dressed artists, they seemed at first sight far removed from the Traveller world I knew. Much in awe, I wrote to beg to be allowed to interview Delaine for a children's book I was writing (Acton 1997), and visited her at home with the photographer David Gallant. There and later I discovered that Delaine and Damien were creatures of two worlds, wild bohemians among the artists, sober Travellers among the Gypsies. Delaine had grown up among the large Ayres family from the New Forest Gypsies, with an implacable ambition to go to Art School. Every day she

⁴ 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.

went to the Art School, her father, a busy scrap-dealer, drove her to college, and was waiting outside for her after her last lecture, anxious that she form no unsuitable relationships with non-Gypsy boys. The family was pleased therefore to learn that she had met another Art School student who was a Traveller, Damien LeBas. They were less pleased when they found out his mother was an Irish Traveller, since like many English Romanies they were traditionally prejudiced against them. Damien, however, won them over, not only by his considerable charm, but by showing he could work the scrap business as well as any English Gypsy⁵.

After I had been interviewing Delaine for about an hour, she disappeared into a back room, saying she wanted to show me something. She emerged with a tattered A4 picture-book *Mo Romano Lil* which I had written in 1971, its cover missing, the line drawings coloured in. She had been given it when she was nine years old and attending a Gypsy Council caravan summer school in 1971. She said it had been one of the things that inspired her to become an artist. After that, as far as I was concerned, she could do no wrong.

When I met other Romani artists I always suggested they look at the work of the LeBas, and the way in with through a variety of paintings, drawing and soft sculptures it made an ironic commentary not only on the modern world, but on the forms of modern art itself, spearheading the “outsider art” movement to find art outside the traditional gallery.

I met Daniel Baker when he came to take my Romani Studies course at the University of Greenwich, and went on to take an MA in Gender and Ethnic studies, doing his MA thesis on the possibility of a gay Gypsy identity (Baker 2002). A quiet, reserved, profoundly un-flamboyant man, he had made for himself through his art and his studies an alternative way of being a Gypsy; he went on to become Chair of the Gypsy Council for three years. Steely in his determination to face down homophobia, never reacting to provocations, he almost single-handedly made being gay respectable among at least educated Travellers and then returned to focus on art. Although much of his work then was rather austere and abstract in comparison to the narrative richness of the LeBas’ work, both he and they show the influence of a century of the avant-garde in western art mediated to them by the training they all experienced in English art schools.

Ferdinand Koci, was the first Romani student at Tirana University. Born into a Romani family living in a village in communist Albania, he escaped into art from the everyday contradictions between socialist equality and age-old marginalisation. Whatever he was supposed to be doing, in the fields or at home or at school, he would start drawing on scraps of paper with pencils or charcoal, or on the ground with a stick if nothing else was available, and become absorbed, forgetting even to eat.

In the university, as in the village, he had to face the constant surprise of non-Gypsies that a dark-skinned Rom should be where no Roma had been before, but a his overwhelming talent allowed him to sidestep prejudice and create his own world, a detailed, painstaking but transformed reflection of the real world around him full of

⁵ Both he, and his son Damien LeBas Jr. who gained first class honours at Oxford in Theology, and is also an artist and writer, continue to keep their hands in at scrap collecting. Multiple sources of income continue to represent security.

the beauty and sometimes the cruelty and pathos that we do not notice until an artist draws them to our attention. His work is profoundly realist, and although, especially after he became involved with the work of the Romani Baht foundation, it was put to the service of the Romani people, illustrating children's books and political pamphlets, it continued to use the visual language common in the ex-socialist countries.

Koci's subject matter came first from the life of the Albanian countryside, with peasants and Roma who recall the stereotypes, but are in this instance, the real thing seen from inside their own culture, but marked by his training as an artist. First the formal academicism, inherited from the communist years of socialist realism, gave a kind of gloss from the stereotypes. This has since been gradually deconstructed as life became more difficult after university. His work was taken up for use in a variety of causes, as he became that most desirable object of political exploitation, the token minority member with genuine ability. A bursary to study further in France was lost because of visa problems. The realism became marked by irony, and sometimes even, in caricature, a genuine Gillray-like savagery where Koci perceives arrogance or hypocrisy. I met him when he came to London after marrying an Australian Romani teacher who had done voluntary work in Albania.

When I invited these artists to create an exhibition⁶ 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 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 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

⁶ 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.

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.

The exhibition also had an effect at national level. The co-ordinator of the Leeds Traveller Education Service, Peter Saunders, (who had hosted the *Second Site* visit to Leeds) put forward a proposal for a national Gypsy Roma Traveller History Month (GRTHM), modelled partly on the successful Black History Month, which had an art competition and art workshops built around themes from Gypsy/Roma/Traveller history. The artwork of children who attended the workshops became the foundational activity of GRTHM. This ran with support from the UK government Department of Schools Children and Families, with an English Gypsy graduate, Patricia Knight (the heroine of *Firle*)⁷ as the national co-ordinator, ably supported by the English Romani journalist Jake Bowers, and many others. After its first run in 2008, it was funded for 2009 and 2010. All the artists from the *Second Site* exhibition were deeply involved.

How can we understand the formation of this art movement in terms of the model of domestic, profession and transcendent contexts of artistic production that was presented at the beginning of this paper. We have to understand it as a new stage in the cycle of interaction between domestic and professional contexts. The new Romani artists are consummately professional; they have paid their dues in terms of art school, laborious exhibitions attended by fewer people than hoped for, wrangles with agents and gallery-owners, competitions and residencies; but they are also, especially as they influence each other, drawing deeply on motif and crafts from their own people. But as they put on a good show, they have drawn an inspired response from ordinary people, a sense of new possibilities. A security officer of Welsh Romani heritage at the university, who was on duty during the exhibition immediately went to enrol on an art course at a local Adult Education College. At the Appleby Fair exhibition, no less than 4 visitors told us that they were themselves Gypsies/Travellers and artists, and were given contact information, and one group of visitors told us they were themselves planning to seek Arts Council support for an International Gypsy Art Festival.

⁷ *Firle* was a small village in Sussex whose villagers, led by the local nobleman, burnt an effigy of a caravan with Travellers in it on "Bonfire Night", not knowing one of the villagers watching with her children was a house-dwelling Romani woman. Patricia Knight complained to the police under the Race Relations Act, and eventually 12 villagers were arrested. She braved the subsequent furore, and after finding support and making the villagers understand what was wrong, continues to live peacefully in the village. In consequence she brings enormous moral capital to the role of GRTHM co-ordinator.

The boost to amateur art among Gypsies/Roma/Travellers led to an exhibition *No Gorgios* in 2007 organised by Daniel Baker. (“Gorgios” is the English Romani word for *Gaje*, non Gypsies.) It took place in the gallery maintained by Novas, a large housing association which runs a number of Gypsy caravan sites (not without some complaints, which further made the art relevant to social controversy). “No Gorgios” says the catalogue (Baker and Ryan, 2007) “refers to the “No Travellers” signs that used to be commonplace .. in pubs,..intended to dissuade any passing Gypsy or Traveller from entering.” Explicitly setting itself the task of replacing myth by reality and seeking culturally visibility, it mobilised both professional and amateur artists, including several of Daniel Baker’s relatives. In a way, Baker has moved from defining himself as the queer outsider to becoming the heroic insider, regarded by his kin and acquaintance network not any more as an eccentric to be tolerated, but as a remarkable and admirable achiever, and as one of his nieces told me, an educational role model. But he can do this partly because he has a vibrant artistic peer group, at an international and not just a national level.

Let us make the analogy with music a little clearer. Django Reinhardt was not only a universal genius who laid down tracks that people of all culture will listen to as long as audiotechnology endures; he was also the person who inspired hundred of teenage Manouche and Sinte Rom to take up the guitar in their own caravans, and to bring them to the tents of the Pentecostal revival where I heard Django’s widow declare “If my husband were still alive he would be with us today.”

At Appleby Fair there was a steady stream of visitors to *Second Site* off the street, some 40 – 50 of all ages per afternoon. Probably about half were Roma/Gypsy/Travellers staying at the fair, and half tourists, of whom one or two also turned out to be of Romani origin, and who, as well as being inspired by the exhibition, were grateful for information about Traveller Education and the Romani and Traveller Family History Society.

Among important Gypsy elders who came to look at the exhibition when it visited Appleby Fair were leaders of the Gypsy Evangelical “Light and Life” mission David Jones and Hubert Clee, and with them some other very well-known men in late middle age who are not members of their church (as well as several who were). Clearly even before attending they had been debating with some passion what the relevance of art might be to English Gypsies, especially modern art where their reaction was sometimes the not uncommon one “my kids could draw better than that!”.

When I showed them round, the work of Ferdinand Koci was the most immediately accessible – it was beautiful, it showed “real Gypsies” – but they were foreigners. The internationalist evangelicals felt that it was good they were learning about foreign Gypsies; the unconverted wanted to know what it had to do with them. It was at this point that the work of Daniel Baker (and the explanation he gave in the catalogue) came into play. His mirror paintings of fractured and defaced cultural motifs from Gypsy decorative styles, are an ironic commentary on the absence of any contemporary representation of English Gypsies as they are today (as opposed to stereotypes of how they were in a supposed Golden Age) in the decorative art with which they surround themselves. If you are a Gypsy and you look at one of Baker’s

mirror paintings, then there is a Gypsy in the picture, and that Gypsy is you. You can't take a photograph of one of them without putting yourself in the picture.

This simple piece of visual rhetoric, and the important social point behind it, immediately caught their attention, and made them re-examine the pieces. From there it was easy to move to showing how both Baker and Delaine Le Bas are holding up visual motifs of Gypsy culture for re-examination (in Delaine's case with found objects from the Fair added to an installation) and how the work of both Delaine and Damian Le Bas have implicit stories built into them – which not surprisingly are very similar to the stories built into some of the Koci paintings (and even more so, the drawings and monotypes). After the explanations, about half of this group of men, some 6 or 7, bought catalogues, a sign perhaps that those who had come either from scepticism, or else from mere good will, had indeed had their imaginations stirred. It helps also, in presenting the work to Travellers, that the Le Bas and Baker evidently are Travellers. Among Travellers they behave “Travellerified”. They can *rokker* (speak the English dialect of Romani) and their families are locatable in a Traveller context. They are living refutations of the atavistic notion that a Traveller couldn't be a modern artist.

As it became apparent that the story and social situation represented in the works of art were bound up with understandings of Romani history, a discussion began about the origins of the Romani people. One man challenged the present writer as to his beliefs, and when I presented the conventional wisdom that the Romani language at least is clearly of Indian origin, almost immediately contradicted this asserting his belief that Romanies are of Egyptian origin. His primary grounds for this were Boswell family tradition, (c.f. Boswell, 1970) but he was able to draw support from the fact that in Albania (which Koci's painting represent) there are also Gypsies who claim fiercely that they are Egyptians, not Roma (and didn't the characters in Koci's paintings look curiously Egyptian?).

Debate over this raged for more than half an hour. Some of the evangelicals felt there was theological and biblical support for the idea of an Egyptian origin. Other more widely-read evangelicals supported the academic consensus that Romanies are of Indian origin, and adduced their practical experience of sharing vocabulary with Punjabi and Hindi speakers as evidence. In between attending to other visitors I tried occasionally to refer to various writers who had expounded positions relevant to their arguments, but found it difficult to get a word in edgeways. Although the participants were evidently repeating a debate that they had had many times before, I think it was prolonged partly because they were able to use some of the paintings to make points, and partly because the different styles of the paintings showed how human beings can take control of their own representation, so that the issue about history is not only what it was, but how people came to know and say what it was. In short, both positions in the debate were problematised by the awareness of the subjectivity of representations brought about by the exhibition. The debate burnt itself out only just before closing time, and a number lingered to take another look until we locked up, when they left with warm invitations to bring similar work to the huge Gypsy evangelical conventions they organise every year.

This paper has tried to present a model for understanding the social dynamics of cultural development through the interaction of the different functional contexts of

cultural production: domestic, professional and religious, which seem to present a less arbitrary set of explanations for cultural change than the value-laden typologies of high, low and 'folk' culture, with their *a priori* judgments of quality. Whether this is a legitimate intellectual enterprise is of course open to doubt. At a seminar of the Roma Educational Fund held in Venice during the 2007 Biennale, one distinguished linguist frowned at me, remarking that some so-called scholars carry out political projects, and then pass off their reports on the success - or more usually failure - of the projects, as academic research. If this cap fits anyone, it fits me; and yet, political relevance does not in itself disprove an argument or invalidate a project. To me the artists with whom I have worked seem like rock stars; that they should accord me respect just because I once beavered myself into a professorship, an unexpected grace. Is what I have just written a rigorous piece of academic critical scholarship? Or is it perhaps a piece of star-struck hagiography spiced with more than a dash of celebratory self-promotion? Or is it possible that a text may be a manifesto and still contain serious analysis?

The work of Delaine LeBas and Baker, like the other artists at the exhibition at the Montehermoso Cultural Centre, are key points of reflection for the business of living together, the theme of the exhibition. They and the other new Roma/Gypsy/Traveller artists have made a genuine break-through in the reconstruction of the representation of the place of their people in the contemporary world. In challenging the too-easy understandings of the past, they are creating new understandings which in turn become part of the fabric of a new multi-cultural mutual understanding. This is one project where the proof of the pudding really is in the eating. It has been an immense privilege to be involved at the start of it.

References

Acton T 1971 *Mo Romano Lil*, Oxford: Romanestan Publications

Acton T and Acton G. Eds 2006 *Second Site* London: Advisory Council for the Education of Romany and other Travellers

Acton T. 2006 *Report on the Organisation of the Second Site Exhibition* London: Advisory Council for the Education of Romany and other Travellers /University of Greenwich

Acton T. 2007 "Refusing Exclusion" in G.Politi, C.Sharp, K.Uhlirova, L.Foltyna & C.Gute eds. *Glocal and Outsiders: Connecting Cultures in Central Europe: Catalogue of the Prague Biennale 3*, Giancarlo Politi Editore, Prague, pp 393-4

Acton T and Gallant D. 1997 *The Romanichal Gypsies* Wayland, Brighton, 1997

Adorno, T. W., 1973 *Negative Dialectics* tr. E.B.Ashton, London : Routledge and Kegan Paul

- Baker D. 2002 *The Queer Gypsy: an examination of the dual invisibility of gay Travellers*, M.A. Thesis, University of Greenwich
- Baker D. and Ryan P. eds. 2007 *No Gorgios* London: Novas Gallery
- Bonhoeffer, D. 1967 (3rd Ed.) *Letters and Papers from Prison* London ed.Eberhard Bethge ; tr. Reginald Fuller revised Frank Clarke London: SCM Press
- Boros G. 2007 *Gypsy Music: The Musician Rroma (Romungre) of Hungary and the "Onslaught" of the Second Reform* M.A., .Thesis, University of Greenwich
- Boswell, S.G. 1970 *The Book of Boswell*, London:Gollancz
- Braid D. 1997 "The construction of identity through narrative: folklore and the Travelling people of Scotland" in Acton T. And Mundy G. Eds. *Romani culture and Gypsy identity* Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, pp 38-66
- Eliot, T.S. 1986 *Four Quartets*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Endo, Shusaku, 2007 *Silence* (tr. W.Johnston), London:P.Owen
- Fraser, Angus 1992 *The Gypsies*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Grellmann, Heinrich 1787 *Die Zigeuner: Ein historischer Versuch über die Lebensart und Verfassung, Sitten und Schicksale dieses Volks in Europa, nebst ihrem Ursprunge*, 2nd ed. Göttingen: Johann Christian Dieterich. (1st ed. 1783, Leipzig).
- Hancock, Ian 2006 "On Romani Origins and Identity: Questions for Discussion" in Marsh and Strand, 2006, below
- Haydn, F.J. 2003 *Missa in Tempore Belli* Oxford: O.U.P.
- Marsh Adrian and Strand Elin eds. 2006 *Gypsies and the Problem of Identities – Contextual, Constructed and Contested*, London: I.B.Tauris
- Junghaus T. and Szekely K. Eds. 2006 *Meet Your Neighbours: Contemporary Roma Art from Europe* Budapest: Open Society Institute
- Junghaus, T. Ed. 2007 *Paradise Lost – The First Roma Pavilion* Budapest: Open Society Institute <http://www.romapavilion.org/index.html>
- Kovalcsik K. 1985 *Vlach Gypsy Folk Songs in Slovakia*, Budapest, Institute for Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.
- Reid, W. 1997 "Scottish Gypsies/Travellers and the Folklorists" in Acton T. And Mundy G. Eds. *Romani culture and Gypsy identity*, Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, pp.29-37
- Willems, Wim 1997 *In Search of the True Gypsy: From Enlightenment to Final Solution*. London: Frank Cass.