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Challenging Stereotypes Is Not Enough: A Dialogue with Roma Art

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ABSTRACT

Public representations of Roma, Gypsy and Traveller people still tend to homogenise and typecast 'the Gypsies' with visual representations a mainstay of racist tropes. Whilst academics have worked to challenge stereotypes through deconstructing age-old tropes, pointing out their historical fallacies and inherent (often hidden) modes of practice and persuasion, visuality has often been glossed over. Furthermore, academic work has not yet changed the ideological system that still racialises and excludes 'Gypsies'. This article considers what we might learn from a focus on the visual, considering the increasing visibility of artists and activists from various Roma heritages who produce evocative images of their reactions to, and experiences of, damaging stereotypes. Using visuality as a lens, and focusing on Roma artistic and activist production, i.e. looking at what happens when Roma people become the image-maker, this article brings new insights into the ways of challenging stereotypes. Three preliminary observations are drawn from contemporary Roma Art and activism that can form a paradigm shift from old modes of deconstructing. Rather than solely deconstructing misrepresentations, contemporary art and activism take up familiar tropes associated with 'the Gypsies' and transforms them. Rather than just challenging through deconstructing, the artists and activists *denaturalise* age-old misrepresentations by unsettling the supposed stability and fixity of those stereotypes.

Keywords: anti-racism, 'Gypsy', visuality, Roma Art, stereotype

INTRODUCTION: WHAT'S WRONG WITH DECONSTRUCTING?[1]

Whilst there are huge diversities and hybridities across people from Roma heritages (or associated ethnonyms, e.g. Gypsy, Traveller, Sinti, henceforth 'Roma' as an umbrella term[2]), public representations of these groups still tend to homogenize, with stereotypes permeating all areas of society, from media to education, policy formation and everyday discourse. Challenging stereotypes through deconstructing – making explicit the ways representations have been created in order to illuminate their pathological and damaging prejudice (utilising decolonial, intersectional, queer theorising) – has been a useful way of revealing the often pervasive, negatives discourse on Roma people.

[1] Many thanks to the two anonymous reviewers who offered many constructive comments for the re-writing of this article – both felt more like dialogues than reviews, for which I am most grateful. I also really appreciate the feedback from Dr Lucie Fremlova who kindly commented on an early draft.

[2] As an umbrella term 'Roma' can be useful to draw together voices and experiences to tackle racisms and inequalities. At the same time, it is also inadequate at expressing the diversities and hybridities of the people who might be affiliated to such a term (Surdu, 2016). It is used here as a broad label in an act of strategic essentialism, not as a process of abstracting and simplifying (Harris and Rampton, 2009: 116).

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However, recent debates in academia questions whether deconstructing is enough. Mirga-Kruszelnicka, in discussing new critical approaches to studies about Roma communities, emphasises the old "homogenizing academic narrative" (2018: 16) that has plagued the history of Romani studies (see also Acton, 2004: 109, 2016). At a recent conference on *Racism and Romani studies* (ERIAC, Timisoara September 14th – 15th 2023), the role of academia in constructing a fixed view of Roma ethnicity was emphasised, and the damage of further victimizing Roma by over-emphasising exclusion was highlighted. Might the way we focus on deconstructing negative stereotypes also end up just emphasising exclusion, reifying those very representations we are trying to challenge? Even if offering 'new' or 'alternative' representations, does this just end up creating more representations, leaving the old, misrepresentations still with their power?

Furthermore, has the work of deconstructing representations become a field too used to itself – taking for granted the constructivist/deconstructivist approach that it is good at unpacking, but not necessarily effective in pushing for change (except in pointing out what not to do)? This paper is not about rejecting current approaches (there is still so much we need to learn about the ways representations work, Tremlett et al. 2017: 643), but to look to invigorate this academic area by drawing on other ways to tackle racist tropes.

The first section to this article argues that visuality as a lens can offer potential to go beyond the dominant approaches of deconstructing misrepresentations. This section shows how racist practices are historically intertwined without one necessarily preceding the other, but in an uneven, ambiguous dialogic relationship.[3] This sets the scene for the article's call for a deeper focus on visuality, currently seen as a 'black hole' in our knowledge on Roma histories and practices (Junghaus, 2021a). The second section then gives an overview of how 'Roma Art' is being conceptualised and the theoretical backdrop to studying representations and how this can be applied to developing understandings of visual representations and Roma people. The choices of images used in this article is also explained.

The third section then turns to an analysis of images, divided into three parts, which form three observations derived from these images that can help inform ways of resisting and transforming age-old stereotypes. First, artists and activists work to reconfigure who 'the Gypsy' is by using their bodies in juxtaposition with various objects and dress to question the mechanics of their own objectification. Second, the hypervisibility associated with 'the Gypsies' (as in they are often 'seen' but not engaged with or listened to) is made obvious by artists' use of space, setting their own rules about what is manifest and how. Third, both activists and artists question the very idea of 'the Gypsies' whilst reinforcing their (ethnic) existence and presence. In this final observation, we can see that contesting, or even destroying, the object domain is shown as a means to free the narratives that have controlled and restricted Roma people.

This article invigorates the role that deconstruction has in challenging stereotypes, considering visuality as a paramount to advancing knowledge in this area, contributing to a wider call to decolonise Romani Studies (Brooks et al., 2022). The aim is to achieve this through creating a dialogue with art, echoing cultural theorist Stuart Hall's interest in the ways that Black British art created certain 'moments' (2006: 3). Hall said that in these art pieces, 'enormously profound ideas and indeed concepts are at work, that art is a kind of thinking also; it's a way of feeling and a way of looking, but it's also a kind of thinking' (Hall in Dibb and Jaggi, 2009). This paper calls for a critical understanding of visuality as central for breaking down this idea of the seemingly immutable, entrenched stereotypes of 'the Gypsy' that have dominated discourses and practices over hundreds of years.

SECTION ONE: VISUALITY, RACIST PRACTICES AND 'THE GYPSIES'

We must first consider an ongoing debate on visuality, identity politics and representations of Roma people. How can we justify a focus on the visual, when it is shocking structural inequalities, poverty, exclusion and virulent, often violent racism that affects people's everyday lives? Is trying to understand the visual an indulgence? Is it deflecting from the 'root causes' of discrimination and exclusion as mainly socio-economic (see Magazzini, 2016: 66-67; Ryder and Taba, 2018; Ryder, 2019; van Baar and Vermeersch, 2017)? This first section argues that understanding the 'visualness' of misrepresentations of Roma is vital for challenging stereotypes effectively. Here we see how visuality has been used as a means to suppress, commodify and abuse certain communities which then serves as a warning to others. This purposeful visual misrecognition has enabled wealth and power to remain or be redirected to the ruling elite. Thus a focus on how the histories of visualities work to maintain this power and order forms the backdrop to this section.

As 'Roma' is an example of a large group of ethnonyms with outsider ascription (often at odds with how people self-define) it is hard to pinpoint when these communities became established in Europe. However, it is generally understood that minorities connected to such terms had already been living in the European parts of the Byzantine

[3] In this article, visuality is understood as "encompassing more than vision", as images can also be produced by texts to legitimise authority, "aestheticizing the status quo" (van Baar et al., 2020: 21).

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Empire before the 13th century. The ethnonym 'Gypsy' came about as a particular truncation of 'Egyptian' as the mistaken origins of various travelling migrant groups to other parts of Europe dating at least from the 11th century (Fraser, 1995: 45-83). Two female figures in Hieronymus Bosch's *The Haywain Triptych* (1512-15) – a biblical metaphor for humankind pulled along by sin - are said to represent 'Egyptians' and are considered some of the early representations of 'Gypsies' that follow themes of fortune telling, deviance and trickery (Carmona, 2018: 148-150; Pokorny, 2009). Such paintings formed part of a new interest in European Renaissance art, depicting nature, the world and its people. Orientalism, darkness and criminality – also vividly shown in Jewish iconography and images of Muslims (repeatedly called *Saracens* as a derogatory term) formed the 'other' to whiteness, Christianity and innocence (Koerner, 2016). This was the beginning of the formation of the visuality inherent in the discourse of "racial Europeanization" (Goldberg, 2006) in which ideas about 'the Gypsies', along with Jews and Muslims played a significant role (Heng, 2018: 417-456; Marsh, 2008: 75-78).

We can follow examples in European history of different regimes utilising 'the Gypsy' and their supposed visual difference to assert power and authority on different communities. A stark example (which is not widely discussed, even in Romania where it occurred) is the forced bondage and slavery of 'Ţigan' people (a word that specifically referred to Roma slaves) in 14th – 19th century Wallachia (modern day southern Romania) (Achim, 2004, 2021; Furtună, 2019). The 'Ţigan' were visualised as racialised others with 'black skin' and 'deformed mouths', drawn from a 16th century hagiography, found in two texts in popular circulation in the 19th century, a religious text entitled *History for the curse of Gypsies when they became black* (1814) and *Why Gypsies are not Romanians* (1839) (Matei, 2022: 312).

The 17th – 18th centuries saw swathes of legislation passed right across Europe, coinciding with an era of the development of modern states in which the anxieties of early state formation were mixed with the fear of invaders, with those wanted power utilising racializing narratives of Muslims, North Africans (referred to as 'the Moors' in a frequently pejorative manner), Jews and Roma to pursue the desire for legitimacy, power and territory. This occurred hand in hand with the rise of Protestantism (Taylor, 2018: 66-86). In Spain, on July 30th, 1749, a massive undercover organised raid on Roma people, authorised by King Ferdinand VI, was set in motion simultaneously across the country, resulting with the arrest of most Roma people and the attempted genocide (the word 'extermination' was used) of an estimated 12,000. Known as 'the Great Gypsy Round-up', its justification was "to root out this bad race, which is hateful to God and pernicious to man" (Ferdinand V's Jesuit confessor, cited in Crowe, 2007: 45), a racialization that was already weighted in visual difference, noted in the early 17th century writings of Cervantes (Pym, 2007) and theatrical performances such as *The Spanish Gypsie* (Ndiaye, 2020).

In other parts of Europe, a drive to 'civilise' was underway with the 'look' and 'sound' of Roma (skin colour, dress, cultural practices including language) denoted as 'uncivilised'. There were also measures to 'civilise' Roma people which attempted to erase their culture, lifestyle and language. In Austro-Hungary, for example, measures were brought in with a focus on removing their visibility as both ethnic others and criminals:

> In diet, apparel and language [Gypsies] were required to follow national usage, eat no dead cattle, sport no multi-coloured garments, and refrain from speaking their own tongue. They should no longer let themselves be seen in mantles whose only purpose was to cloak stolen goods. (paraphrased from one of Joseph II's imperial-royal decrees 1782, cited in Willems, 1999: 30 and Taylor, 2014: 102)

Many countries radicalized their legislation so the mere presence of 'Gypsies' (also conflated with 'vagrants' and 'bandits') was a crime that could result in the death penalty (Lucassen, 2008). The creation of an iconography that stigmatised Roma, whilst ignoring their actual presence and contributions to societies, paved the way for such normative discourses of their otherness.

The 19th century obsession with romanticism and freedom from the rapid industrialisation that radically altered rural landscapes and societies then gave rise to another version of Roma people's visual otherness and alterity. The rise and influence of Bizet's opera Carmen on the romanticised and sexualised visualisation of 'the Gypsy' in 19th century western Europe is well documented (Bennahum, 2013; Charnon-Deutsch, 2004; Christoforidis and Kertesz, 2019; Langham Smith, 2021). Carmen became a symbol of bohemian freedom and defiance of conventions, whilst always at risk from her dangerous (titillating) sexuality, leading to criminality and violence. The figure of Carmen is complex, representing the "good, evil, sacred and demonic" (Bennahum, 2013: xvi) with diverse iterations and reinventions, yet this complexity is often reduced to a very repetitive visual 'frozen' form (Charnon-Deutsch, 2004: 10).

With the advent of photography and 20th century politics, visual representations became a means to provide scientific evidence for the justification of racist practices and genocide. Prior to and during the First World War, restrictions were placed on Roma people across Europe, but particularly by German states (Crowe, 2008: 137-148; Matras, 2014: 172-174). 'Gypsies' and 'Sinti' were then subjected to the Nuremberg Race Laws after 1936 and became targets for fascist politics and far-right movements across Europe. It is estimated that half a million Roma people from central and Eastern Europe were murdered during the Holocaust in the Second World War, a likely

under-estimation (Bársony and Daróczi, 2008; Kenrick and Puxon, 2009). Visuality formed a part of the racist practices of the Nazi regime and elements from this era are still used in modern-day discourse and even policing practices (Bogdal, 2011; End, 2019; Rosenhaft, 2008).

After the Second World War, communist visual cultures were intrinsic to Soviet expansion and ideology (Skrodzka et al., 2019) with 'Gypsies' seen as a social stratum, a part of enforced proletarianization that used visual images to rehabilitate them to normative ideas of the proletariat (in 'white' terms as 'romantic folk'), which in fact objectified them further (Piotrowska, 2022; Shmidt and Jaworsky, 2021). Films, performances and Roma-produced cultural artefacts (e.g. newsletters) from these periods are important resources for showing the inherent ambiguities in communist visual cultures and 'Gypsies' (IImre, 2009; Kürti, 1993; Mladenova, 2016; O'Keeffe, 2020).

The 21st century has seen both a growing awareness of the devastating consequences of the systemic racisms against Roma minorities, as well as a trend for the 'normalisation' of racism against Roma which have included horrific murders of Roma people and children (Amnesty Report, 2014). This has coincided with the rise of populist, right wing politics and surveillance cultures that bolster their populism through demonising Roma minorities. This trend uses particular visualities that make use of strong symbols and repetitive images: from Italian politician Matteo Salvini's iconic bulldozer image to symbolise the 'cleaning up' (i.e. destruction) of migrant Roma homes in his 2015 European election campaign (Cervi and Tejedor, 2020); to media reporting that points to criminality without showing the faces or voices of Roma people or the continual repetition of images of fecklessness, criminality and decadent lifestyles in documentaries or so-called 'reality shows' (van Baar and Ivasiuc, 2020).

Visuality is only recently emerging as a serious category of analysis for the study of the histories and representations of Roma people. This section has given a broad overview of the ways visuality has been inherent in the ways Roma people have been treated by political systems. The next section now moves onto what we can learn from the visualities produced by artists and activists from Romani heritages.

SECTION TWO: VISUALITY AS A LENS: ROMA ART

There is now a growing literature on the art and activism from people of Roma heritages, spear-headed in recent times by curator and art historian Timea Junghaus and through the European Institute for Roma Arts and Culture (ERIAC) that she heads (Junghaus, 2021a, 2021b, see also Baker and Hlavajova, 2013; van Baar and Kóczé, 2020, particularly 3-68, 257-334). This section gives a background of the recent history of Roma Art, the theoretical approach used in this article and a justification for the images used.

The 1970s is seen as an informative time for a growing awareness of the connections and solidarity amongst diverse people with Romani heritages across Europe. The first World Romani Congress was held in 1971 in London at which the idea of an international union was also considered, and formally founded in 1977 (Acton and Klimová, 2001: 159-160; Klimová-Alexander, 2005: 13-29). The Congress, which had taken years of concerted efforts from Roma organisations across Europe, is seen as foundational for modern-day activism and indeed contributing to a growing recognition of Roma visual artists as a collective group (Junghaus, 2014: 28).

The recognition of Roma artists occurred in parallel to the efforts of Roma activists who formed or resurrected organisations and collectives after the Second World War to denounce the horror of Roma persecution and murder during the Holocaust and to rebuild communities. Examples include *Romani Nomenklatura* in the Soviet Union and their *Teatr Romen* whose performances were both challenged by and challenging of the contemporary political forces (Lemon, 2000); the creation of *Études Tsiganes* in France in 1949 under Roma writer Matéo Maximoff (who himself had been in a Vichy concentration camp) (Barrera, 2022); and the voices of Roma people and activists in Roma-led newspapers in Romania from the 1930s onwards (Negoi and Necula, n.d.). Summer camps were organised by such activists to bring (particularly young) people together to give them a chance to develop skills and to nurture future leaders. Such camps included art and music from Roma artists that were otherwise ignored by mainstream – for example in Hungary huge murals by incredibly talented Roma artists were used to adorn the canteens of these camps, which only today are more widely recognised for their artistic value and cultural worth (György, 2022: 37-42).

Summer camps specifically for Roma artists were also organised. Whilst Roma artists and activists were often involved in such camps, there was a wider interest from non-Roma art curators who believed they were 'discovering' something authentic, primitive and unique. This linked to a wider cultural movement in the 1970s that wanted to break free from the constraints of formal 'high' art and celebrate art from everyday life. Roma artists did not always benefit from this interest - they often found themselves being pigeon-holed as 'naïve' which meant they weren't offered formal training (in order that they remain 'naïve'), putting them at a disadvantage in the wider art world as well as disallowing artists to choose and fulfil their own potential (see the experiences of artists Márta Bada and Brigitta Milák in Museum of Ethnography Budapest Films, 2001). The 1st National Exhibition of Self-Taught Artists in Budapest, Hungary (1979 – organised by long-time Roma activist Ágnes Daróczi) was first held

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at a community centre and later at the Museum of Ethnography (Folklore) rather than an institute of contemporary art, "as if the exhibits were the exotic objects of an alien civilization" (Junghaus, 2006: 8).

A new wave of Roma Art was identified with the creation of the Museum of Romani Culture in Brno (1991) headed by Roma intellectuals. The 1990s were said to form a 'cultural turn' in discourses on Roma minorities. By the early 2000s, Roma intellectuals, activists and artists were becoming more visible in public institutions. The first Roma Pavilion at the 52nd Venice biennale, *Paradise Lost* (2007) was a significant step in giving contemporary Roma culture an audience it deserves (Junghaus and Székely, 2007). The creation of the European Research Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC) (2017), based in Berlin and funded jointly by the Council of Europe and the European Union with support from the philanthropist George Soros, gives a platform to a range of Roma artists and activists working in different mediums and energizing the debates on identity, authenticity and inclusion, whilst also committing to archive Roma art, culture and heritage.

Theoretical Framework: Decolonising Romani Studies

Curator and intellectual, Timea Junghaus, writes about 'Roma Art' using specific 'Roma decolonial approaches' including ideas of epistemic disobedience, epistemic de-linking and epistemic reconstruction:

> Roma Art demonstrates that in order to step out and write ourselves out of the hegemonic narratives and viewpoints we have to manifestly redefine "our spaces", to re/configurate diasporic gazes into subjects and to invite ourselves to be viewers; to uncover the colonial discourse inscribed in us and to depict it in exhibitions so that it is quasi disenchanted; in order to unmask the Western master-discourse as a historical legend. (Junghaus, 2014: 41)

Such a theoretical framework has become increasingly popular – the journal *Critical Romani Studies* (established 2018) is seen as an emblematic shift from the Gypsy Lore tradition (Bogdan et al., 2018; Ryder, 2019). This article aligns itself with the decolonial, intersectional, queer theory discussions in Critical Romani Studies, similarly drawing on wider literature on visual culture and 'race' (Hall, 1993, 1997, 2006; Hall et al., 2013; Sealy, 2019), and acknowledging the ways visuality is connected to structural violence and racism (Berents and Duncombe, 2020). Contemporary policies and practices are influenced by this continued circulation of a certain racialised hypervisibility (Messing and Bernáth, 2017, see also Breazu and Machin, 2018; Catalano, 2012; End, 2017; Fremlova, 2021; Mayall, 2004).

The history and effect of such images, and then what happens when Roma people do become the image-makers, is a nascent but emerging area. There is a growing field of critical approaches to research on/with Roma people to break such an impasse, including use of reflexivity, intersectionality, queer approaches, post-colonial thinking or superdiversity (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2018). My work has always been influenced by such theoretical approaches (particularly from Black British Cultural Studies that writes from a post-colonial, anti-essentialist standpoint) as a means to describe and analyse ethnographic observations from my fieldwork (Tremlett, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017). In this article I also draw on Mieke Bal and Gayatri Spivak's work in seeing images as performances of the theoretical. Rather than trying to impose a framework, this approach looks to the visual representations themselves as formative of an approach, "because seeing is an act of interpreting, interpretation can influence ways of seeing, hence, of imagining possibilities of change" (Bal, 2003: 21).

Methodology

The images chosen for this article come from accessing various online sources that have burgeoned in the past decade to form an impressive resource on art and activism produced by Roma-heritage artists and activists. This activism and creativity started to change Roma artists' relationship with the art world. The establishment of the European Roma Institute of Arts and Culture (ERIAC) in Berlin in 2017 has been one of the biggest funded cross-European ventures about Roma minorities of recent times. ERIAC is a major source of the artworks surveyed for this article, not only in its thematic sections but also as host to RomaMoMA, a contemporary art project initiating a forum for collaborative reflection on a future Roma Museum of Contemporary Art. RomArchive is also a rich digital resource that documents and therefore makes Romani cultures and histories visible. Furthermore, the websites of art galleries and institutions (often heavily featured on ERIAC or RomArchive) have also been perused, such as Kai Dikhas (Berlin), Gallery8 (Budapest, Hungary), Romani Cultural & Arts Company (Swansea, Wales), Museum of Roma Culture (Belgrade, Serbia), Museum of Roma (Brno, Czechia).

The Venice Biennale has housed Roma Pavilions (2007, 2011, 2019, 2022, also all featured in ERIAC's website), whilst Małgorzata Mirga-Tas was chosen as the official Polish representative at the 59th Biennale in 2022 – the first Roma artist to represent a country. Documenta15, the influential art show in Kassel, Germany, displayed its first group exhibition of Roma art, entitled *One Day We Shall Celebrate Again* in 2022 (via the collective art project RomaMoMA). As the limitations section following emphasises, this article does not attempt to give a summary of all of the artworks or artists available from these sources. I encourage those who are not yet familiar with Roma

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Art to utilise these resources and discover the richness of the tremendous effort to record Roma cultural histories and to build a genealogy of Roma arts and culture (Junghaus, 2021).

Limitations

In this paper I am using certain representations from artworks and campaigns in order to understand how to build an approach to visuality and Roma people that does not fall into the trap of same-old representations. When surveying the artworks online (as well as at some exhibitions), I have looked for artwork and activism that quite obviously challenges racist tropes. What I am also not doing is considering the trajectory of all Roma Art, or artists or activism in their own right that also extends beyond static images e.g. online activism, broadcasting, protests, performances, theatre, community events and so on. The justification I have for the limited focus of this paper is that there is so much to say, but not so many ways to say it – we are still in the infancy of articulating the ways visuality interacts and affects, and this paper is just a start. This is why the analysis section is a series of observations. It does not profess to present an analysis of all Roma Art and activism.

SECTION THREE: ANALYSIS

Observation (i) Reconfiguring the Object/Subject: Bhabha's 'Seriating'

The first observation sees the ways that objects are positioned in art and activist images create a relationship between 'old stereotypes' and 'alternative narratives' which brings something new. The first two examples are activist projects using images created by and of Romani students and intellectuals from across Central and Eastern Europe (both first devised and exhibited in Budapest, Hungary). The first is from an exhibition *Accessories* produced by Roma students on the Central European University's Roma Access Program in collaboration with photographer András Jókúti (Central European University, April 2014[4]). The second is from a series of portraits *No Innocent Picture* with photographs by Miklós Déri (from a larger project called 'Roma Body Politics', Gallery8 Budapest 2015[5]). Images from both exhibitions utilise a close-up of individuals who are looking straight at the camera with various additions: either objects (a guitar or violin, fortune telling paraphenalia, a knife, even a baby) or dressed up in clothes that infer criminality, delinquency or exoticism. The effect, alongside the captions in *Accessories* and a contrasting portrait in *No Innocent Picture* (in which the second portrait shows the model in their 'normal' clothes), is to show that the people in the photographs do not represent or perform the characters that their accessory or dress infers, and their gaze is back onto us, the viewers, to ask us to think about the restrictions of these accessories.

The juxtaposition of the captions in *Accessories* or the second portrait in *No Innocent Picture* also open up possibilities– what else might these people be? In one, a young man is revealing a line of watches on his wrist. He looks like a man in a pub or on the street selling stolen goods. Yet the caption reads 'I like collecting watches'. Not a criminal, then, but a horologist. In another, a woman is pictured with a guitar obscuring her face 'My life does not hang on these strings' reads the caption. Here the refusal of music as central to the model's identity might be seen as controversial, questioning the prominence given to 'Gypsy music' as the most positive contribution of these minorities to European culture (Dobai and Hopkins, 2021; Silverman, 2013). The exhibition thus makes a stand against narrow-mindedness and confinement of restrictive stereotypes – even 'positive' ones.

The contiguity of different materials and objects to disrupt accepted normative thinking can also be seen in artists' work. Małgorzata Mirga-Tas – the first Roma artist to be the chosen artist for a national pavilion at the Venice Biennale – stitched together huge tapestries in her exhibition *Re-enchanting the World* for the Polish Pavilion to tell the stories of Roma in both a broad, global context and a very personal one. Inspired by the famous allegorical Renaissance frescos from Palazzo Schifanio in Ferrara, Italy, Mirga-Tas uses personal items such as material from clothes from her friends and family, jewellery or a rosary to make their presence in her work very real, these objects functioning as "relics, remnants and traces" that give a "tactile and palpable presence" (Szymański and Kusek, 2022: 67).

Thus different materials (objects, photographs, dress, tapestries) are brought together to make us 'read' the human experience differently – disrupting the familiar to recognise the presence of Roma people who have often been ignored or written out of collective cultures and histories, a technique Homi Bhabha calls "seriating" (Bhabha, 1994: 22, discussed in Bal, 2008: 117). The visuality itself becomes the practice of resistance. The effect of using materials – whether objects, photographs, tapestries - in different ways, Bhabha's seriating, is to complicate the object/subject relationship, revealing the "racialised regime of representation" (Hall, 1997: 247) and emphasising the politics of the gaze.

[4] Available at: https://www.ceu.edu/article/2014-04-08/international-roma-day-celebrated-ceu (Accessed: 10 October 2023).
[5] Available at: http://gallery8.org/romabody (Accessed: 10 October 2023).

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Observation (ii) Asserting Agency Through Use of Space and Presence

These artworks and activist exhibitions bring to the fore the need to dislodge master narratives and make alternatives visible. Hence the problems inherent in hyper-visibility is made visible through the ways 'the Gypsies' are constructed. The activists and artists challenge the spaces (taking the meaning of 'space' from geographical writing that looks at physical space as well as emotional or psychological place, Agnew, 2011) that are usually afforded to 'the Gypsy', but which have obliterated the possibilities for themselves. In this second observation, we see how the stagings of artworks form an important conversation about the possibilities of engagement and inclusion, alongside resistance to and transformation of racist images and practices.

It is noticeable how much physical space is used by some Roma artists. For example, the aforementioned artist Małgorzata Mirga-Tas exhibited at the 2022 Venice Biennale floor-to-ceiling hand stitched tapestry panels depicting women who have cared for her and inspired her, 'astonishing' viewers with its 'monumentality' (Tumbas, 2023: 12) that also celebrates everyday life - Roma women are shown meeting, singing, drinking coffee, out in fields gathering potatoes, the figures stitched in fabrics taken from their own clothes. The size of the work highlights both the space that these women occupy in the artists' life, as well as giving a message about the space not normally afforded to such representations. Artist Nihad Nino Pušija (originally from Sarajevo, with Roma and Bosnian heritages) also offers some huge images in his work Gladiators (2011) – but rather than Mirga-Tas' celebration of community and Roma women, in this work Pušija reveals a vulnerability to his male subjects, as the unwavering gaze of these enormous photos of solo young Roma men in gladiator costumes is offset by the seeming vulnerability of their young bodies in warlike costumes, pictured alone.

The politics of space is also highlighted by British Traveller/Romani artists Delaine le Bas and Damian le Bas. Building on a previous article based on an interview with both artists (Tremlett and le Bas, 2020), here I push the analysis further, asking not just how artists utilise space, but also how they reconfigure the idea of 'space'. *Safe European Home?* (the title taken from punk band The Clash's record about the safety of 'whiteness' in Europe), was first created in 2009, shown as an installation positioned outside the parliament building in Vienna in 2011 and has subsequently been installed in various forms in Berlin (2017), Copenhagen, Dublin, Hastings and Thessaloniki and Worthing (2018) (Gypsydada.com). Through exhibiting artworks they are known for (Damian le Bas' cartography, Delaine le Bas' cross-disciplinary art with varying media) alongside creating artworks in the moment from contemporary politics and local materials, the travelling installation asks: what constitutes a 'safe space' in the current political and economic environment?

Their use of space as discursive, performative and evolving (concluded the 2020 paper) acts to defy normative discourses on the 'integration as inclusion' in policy discourses. Instead of attempting to show how 'the Roma' can be included, instead, it asks 'is Europe a safe home for Roma or anyone?' and offers creative sites for dialogues on anti-racism and social change – thereby creating space for a critical discussion on what 'inclusion' might mean (Tremlett and le Bas, 2020).

To push this analysis further, I ask what this, and other artworks, offer in the reconfiguration for our understanding of 'space' and anti-racism. Theorist Gayatri Spivak, on visiting *Safe European Home?* in Vienna, wrote a critical essay on her impressions, calling the exhibition a "theory of theatre":

> Delaine and Damian Le Bas' staging of the question mark in *Safe European Home?* is to be on a grid of theorizing, rather than caught in a theory-practice or theory-material opposition. I hope this will be clear—theorizing is an activity—[…]. In some ways then, the way we look at theory or theorizing is a sabotaging of the classical Greek European model. (Spivak, 2012)

If theorizing is the activity, then the practice of that theory is **presence** – both Delaine and Damian were well known for their physical presence at their exhibitions. But in fact, all artworks in this article are centred on presence, even if without physical presence. This is an extension of the first observation, showing the artworks as not just 'encounters with Roma', but rather visuality and presence *is* the encounter.

Artwork as encounter is sharply crystallised by the centrality of the artist or activist. At the opening of the first ever Roma Pavilion in Venice (2006), Hungarian Roma artist Omara handed over her glass eye to the billionaire George Soros as a gesture of gratitude (Junghaus, 2011). Omara (Mara Oláh, 1945-2020), one of the most prolific Roma artists of her generation (despite only beginning to make art at the age of 43), is also (belatedly) recognised as one of the most important, seen at the intersection of feminist and decolonial thinking with (often heartbreaking and disconcerting) portraits of her experiences of being a woman and 'cigány' (Gypsy), of racism, ageing, motherhood and illness (Junghaus, 2013).

Omara's artistic practice included forthright communication with audiences: her frequent inscriptions on her paintings criticise local politics and racism (*Immediate disciplinary procedure* (1998)*; Mara and the policeman* (1972[6])), whilst she depicts her home in a small village as a 'luxury shithole' ('luxusputri'), digging out a swimming pool

[6] Available at: https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/mara-olah-omara/ (Accessed 10 October 2023)

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herself and depicting it in paintings[7]. She also showed no qualms in aligning herself with or challenging authority – calling everyone (whether her neighbour or a politician) 'diamond', her paintings depicted herself alongside various famous people. Omara set up her own rules for entering the art world, and it is argued that her "artistic actions, hysteria, scandals, protests, and political statements" should be seen as intrinsic to her artwork (Junghaus, 2013: 310, cited in Molnár, n.d).

The artworks observed in this section have an insistent presence in physical spaces (whether in person and/or through inscriptions or performances) whilst revealing a breadth and intensity of experience. The artists' desires to manifest presence creates new spaces out of old places – thereby radically asserting agency. Yet there is a danger to such presence – as Jones points out after visiting Marina Abramovic' exhibition *The Artist is Present* (2010), such availability can end up destroying the notion of 'being seen' – what the Hungarian press called the 'extreme personality' of Omara, subjecting the artist to scrutinization to the point of exhaustion, a "spectacularization […] of a "body" and a "body" of work" (Jones, 2011: 18). Nonetheless, such contradictions also reflect the instability of spaces which is where new configurations can occur. To borrow from geographer Doreen Massey, space is a "pincushion of a million stories" (Massey, 2013, in Haas, 2023: 4) and so creating something different in spaces that do not normally tolerate (or simply ignore) alternative visions of 'Roma' can give prominence to other stories, potentially creating spaces of possibilities for "alternative imaginaries" to emerge (to borrow from Newman and Clarke, 2015: 106).

Observation (iii) Destroying and Reclaiming the Idea of an 'Object Domain'

In the previous two observations, we saw how artists and activists can put themselves as central to visuality, but without defining themselves in restrictive terms of 'Roma'. In this third and final observation, we look at what this means for something or someone being labelled as 'Gypsy'. Even amongst academics, the question of who is defining who and why is termed "the work of Sisyphus" – a continual debate that is never resolved (Tremlett, McGarry and Agarin 2014, also used as the title of Rostas' book 2019). What do we mean when we (or others) use the term 'Roma' or 'Gypsy' or 'Traveller'? A particular group, an individual, an umbrella term? And how are they defined? And what for? – who has the power?

Such questions raise the bigger question of what the 'object domain' is when we are talking about Roma people. Norbert Oláh, an artist from Hungary, installed a brick wall outside of the former building of the Roma Parliament in Budapest (part of the OFF-Biennale Budapest, 2021). The piece, called 'Anxiety of the Roma Artist', is made of ordinary red bricks but with inscriptions of words and terms that become very loaded when related to 'Roma issues' in public discourses. Words (in Hungarian) such as 'conflict', 'fighting', 'history', 'skin' and so on are all printed onto the bricks which gives them each a self-enclosed, seemingly permanent space to exist. Yet the wall has no discernible function as a 'wall' and its appearance on a pavement in front of the former Roma parliament appears disconcerting. Is it a statement about Roma politics? Or politics in general? Or just a plea to save some space? It is well known that Roma people have had a history as brick makers and builders in Central and Eastern Europe, and the fact that the artist built the wall with his father, further adds complexity– what are we seeing/not seeing in this wall? Is it meant to be about tradition? Or collaboration? Or exclusion? But how can we tell? The actual focus of the piece is the appearance of the wall itself – it's not necessarily its existence (it's just a brick wall), but its very manifestation in this particular moment in this particular spot (in front of the former Roma Parliament) changes the public space and makes us consider what it is doing there. This is not a representation *of* Roma people (McGarry, 2014) but a representation *and* Roma – an important distinction made by Bal when discussing artworks and refugees (Bal, 2022).

In a different example of art *and* Roma, British artist Daniel Baker's artworks centre on visuality as materiality. His artworks employ elements of what he describes as a 'Roma aesthetic' – a mode of making, "the collective qualities embedded in objects and artefacts that originate from, or circulate within Roma communities" (Baker 2017: 744, Baker 2020). Baker thus sees Roma aesthetics as a practice of everyday life, rather than an essentialised form of 'ethnic art'. His work with mirrors (e.g. *Anagram*, 2007, *Mirrored Library*, 2008, *Stack*, 2022), wheels (e.g. *Mobile Surveillance Device*, 2015), colourful textiles (e.g. *Swarm*, 2013) integrate the experiences of Roma people through materiality - foregrounding objects whose existence is motivated by their visibility.

Baker asks what visibility means for Roma people, "the ways in which Roma visuality might continue to both reflect and inform the lives of Roma people", Baker, 2022: 9) whilst also considering his approach as forging a 'Queer Gypsy' subjectivity concerned with Roma invisibility (Baker, 2022: 8, see also Fremlova, 2022). Things that have a particular visuality or visual quality address the social constituencies interacting with them (Bal, 2003: 6).

Many of Baker's art pieces consider everyday items connected to 'the Gypsy' as a statement of existence in an active, intimate, community or familial setting. Selma Selman's art (a Roma artist from Bosnia and Herzegovina) also focuses on the ways materiality have shaped Roma people's lives. A painting of the artist with her family

[7]Available at: https://index.hu/video/2011/04/24/omara/ (Accessed: 10 October 2023).

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breaking up a car for scrap metal (*Untitled*, 2014) shows the physicality of that aesthetics. This is continued in other works: in her performance *Platinum* (2021) at the National Gallery of Sarajevo, Selman extracted precious metal from catalytic converters pulled from scrapped cars and created a tiny platinum axe, both "defying the worn-out cliches of Carmen as femme fatale", and emphasising the hard labour typically carried out by Roma people, whilst also creating something very precious and beautiful (Tumbas, 2023: 4). Selman has become a celebrity, posing for *Elle* magazine in Spring 2021.

In all these artists' work there is no assumed expertise or authority over the 'object domain'. Rather, the object domain is questioned through materiality and visuality. In this way the terms 'Gypsy, Roma and Traveller' are taken out of the essentialisms that have plagued their traditional counterparts (to borrow a phrase from Mieke Bal, 2003: 7).

CONCLUSION – FROM DECONSTRUCTING TO DENATURALIZING

The aim of this article is to develop new ways of challenging stereotypes of Roma people. Analysing a range of artworks and activisms for this article has allowed a deeper understanding of the potential role of visuality in breaking free from essentialisms whilst remaining attentive to their very real political effects. The images do not just challenge stereotypes through deconstructing them, but use practices of denaturalisation, exposing an ideological system that is so frequently hegemonic, ubiquitous and taken-for-granted. Three observations made of these images in this article highlight these denaturalising practices:

1. **Reconfiguring 'the Gypsy':** images achieve this by performing Bhabha's 'seriating' through incorporating and subverting objects connected to racism and misrepresentation.
2. **Asserting agency through space and presence**: the use of space and presence uncovers the agendas of hypervisibility. Roma people are depicted as agentive, diverse humans, with images not having to be a certain 'Roma way' – i.e. there is not the need for detailed ethnicised biographies of artists or artworks, whilst there is still a strong focus on Roma identity and experience. Presence is activism in itself.
3. **Visuality as the object domain:** still having notions of 'Roma' 'Gypsy' and 'Traveller'– thereby not destroying the 'object domain' *per se* but instead, destroying the idea of having to have a particular 'object domain'. Thus visuality becomes the object of study.

In academic work on representations, we might draw on these observations to think about visuality having its own effects in the role of representations – as Alloa says we cannot reduce an image to a copy (i.e. the image cannot represent something that already exists independently of the image), rather it is the very appearance of images that is the point of interest. This understands visuality as not only concerned with referentiality and 'aboutness' but rather prioritises "an analysis of how something appears in a given instance" (Alloa, 2021: 4). Using the words of Bal, this is about questioning the ways representations are 'of' something' (Bal, 2003). We cannot reify a picture as being representative '*of* Roma'. The point is to understand its "constitutive phenomenal suchness" (Alloa, 2021: 5) – how it came about, why, who has the power, who benefits and who loses out?

We can get stuck in a loop with challenging stereotypes – an endless cycle of deconstructing that holds the danger of relying on or reifying the stereotypes. Continually pointing out and deconstructing unfair representations is not enough - in fact, this might just work to support and concretise the ideological system that keeps old hierarchies and racisms in order. In this article, using visuality as a lens and observing what kinds of images are produced by artists and activists from Roma heritages, we can see how age-old associations are not just challenged but engaged with and thus denaturalised. These practices of denaturalization are an agentive response to systemically unfair histories. We need to think about how we can use such practices in academic work, for examples: not just deconstructing misrepresentations, but also pointing out the (historical) fallacy of stereotypes in the first place; engaging more with the ways Roma people already have resisted and continue to resist unfair practices and misrepresentations; juxtaposing misrepresentations with other ways of representing Roma, such as in art, activism and through self-representations.

The practices emerging from Roma artists examined here are examples of how Roma people have navigated and resisted stereotypes, which unsettle the supposed stability and fixity of those stereotypes. Only this way might we disrupt the authority of those histories and the tropes that are attached to them.

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