

“Romani art is not confined to flowers, embroideries and traditional music,” says curator Tamara Moyzes.

Hate Free

author: Adéla Gálová, translator, scholar of Romani and Hungarian cultures

“The situation here is slowly starting to gain momentum, the Romani holocaust is entering general awareness. It is of highest importance that the happenings related to it will be undertaken by Romani people. So, they will accept this agenda as their own,” Tamara Moyzes ponders. Shortly after the recession of the pandemic crises she acted as a curator of the exhibition Revive/Purano Hangos (Reviving Old Voices) in which the main source of inspiration is old score recordings of already perished Romani compositions, from which the author chose as the central song Aven aven o žandára (The Cops Caught Us). The multimedia project with an extraordinarily complex idea interweaves the old with the contemporary, Romanies with Non-Romanis and a historical injustice with historic responsibility. By means of a challenge the project wants to lead towards the creation of a collection of musical recordings where Non-Romani artist interpret old Romani compositions the content of which is often tragic. The author of the project, Emília Rigová, is a respected artist and laureate of the most important Slovak award for visual artists, the Oskár Čepan prize. “The Slovak and Czech art scenes today feature many good quality contemporary Romani artists. Their breakthrough into the majority scene is clearly documented by singular prizes, awarded to these artists,” comments the rise of art created by Romanies Tamara Moyzes in who is convinced that – like in the case of Afro-Americans in more distant past – it will first here be necessary that this art becomes perceived by the public as a natural part of art generally. “Only then the moment will come, when we will not find it strange a Romani woman, for example, creates electronic music, and we will focus on the work itself,” the curator adds.

Your exhibition has a relatively complex concept and overlap, a lot must be “explained” in the accompanying text. How did this emerge: did the author look for a suitable format for the theme of Romani holocaust, or did she first come with the concept on which a theme was grafted afterwards?

The concept really is deeper, has multiple levels, yet we luckily did not have to do any grafting. The whole ideal emerged in 2018, when Emília won the Slovak Oskár Čepan Prize, which is an analogy to the Czech Jindřich Chalupecký Prize. Part of the prize comprised an internship in New York, where she was to create an artwork, which in turn became a part of an exhibition in Kunstahalle in Bratislava. Emília was leaving for New York with an issue of the Romani quarterly Romano Džaniben in her hand. It came from 1989 and featured reprints of a music score of a Romani song from 1957, put down into notes by the Slovak theoretician of music and choirmaster Bohuslav Valštan. From them the two of us chose the central song Aven, aven o žandára, which plays a main part in our project. Back then we already knew we wanted to process the theme of the Romani holocaust and that the resulting

exhibition should end with the symbolic date of August 3rd which is its anniversary. We joined with the collective AraArt, which last year for the first time organized a pieta of the Romani holocaust in Prague. The exhibition as such was originally meant to look completely differently than it does today. Emília visited Auschwitz and recorded a video, which was to be its main component. Yet then the pandemic set in and suddenly it was necessary to adapt the format of the exhibition to the situation. We wanted to put more emphasis on the online possibilities, that is why a page with the hashtag #Puranohangos came to existence, where we send the recordings from the artists engaged.

Are not the conceptual factors too many? Does not the spectator get lost in all these perceptions?

I am convinced, that despite the multiplicity of meanings, our message is very clear and easy to grasp. The exhibition consists partly of a special piano, which mechanically replays the song of the halgató type mentioned above. By the fact, that the song is being mediated by this imperfect technocratic form, it evokes the technocratic character of WWII. The fact, that is completed by a monument, in the resulting effect helps the visitors to live through the situation. Into the audio-track we play another sound recording, in which the artist-sculptor knocks the stone with a chisel and builds a monument. After the exhibition vernissage I was told by many it was easy for them to “feel-into” the situation.

Part of the outputs should consist of musical units by non-Romani musicians, created from musical scores of Romani melodies. Have you gotten any yet? How did their creators feel – do you have any reports about it?

The project from the beginning is meant to be ongoing and gradually growing. This should be reflected by a growing number of recordings and other emerged works. Emília, as the author, experienced one important moment for her, when after her friends recorded the song Aven aven o žandára, they underwent a certain transformation. Up until that time they were used to usually use the term “gypsy”, yet after the through such a sad song they absorbed the Romani language, they spontaneously moved on to using the term “Romani man/woman”. It was a very emotional experience for her.

How did the visitors at the opening react to the artifacts? From your point of view, have you succeeded in sucking them into that deeper thematic dimension, or were they mainly attracted to the attractions?

From my viewpoint it worked very well, I encountered many reactions in the sense that it is a very powerful installation.

The text accompanying your exhibition operates with the bias of Romanies as a nation with “music in the blood”. What do you think about it? Does not some

other – specific – way of working with musical themes and means some normal anthropological/musicological explanation?

This would perhaps rather be a question for the ethnomusicologist Zuzana Jurková with whom we also collaborated and consulted. From her I for instance got to know that before WWII songs of the halgató type were used as a means of complaint, lament sung by a Romani woman to her man. It was somehow a homely, intimate format, as opposed to čardáš, which involved collective dancing. WWII and its impact on Romani population and specific experiences of persecuted persons brought with them the consequence that already existing halgató melodies were used for new texts, e.g., about concentration camps.

Stereotypes are really something what bothers our work really: both me as artist and curator and Emília Rigová and other Romani artists, we all are striving to break the common stereotype about Romani art as solely traditional and folklore. We are not limited to flowers, embroideries, and traditional music. Nowadays, Czech, and Slovak culture has many high-quality contemporary Romani artists. Their breakthrough into the majority culture is documented with many awards which have these artists already gained. We are also seeking to make a kind of synthesis; last time I invited to a vernissage young Romani AVU (Academy of fine arts) student Monika Kováčová, who plays contemporary electronic music, at another one I invited Romani musician Johana Keltová, who played Bach on violoncello. – By the way, I personally know plenty of Romani people who sing always totally out of tune.

Now a question comes on my mind – if this does not put a strain on some of Romani artists, especially the young ones? They would perhaps love to work with traditional motives, but they do not like to stay labeled as “folklore artists” forever. It may bother them somehow.

Yes, for young artists this might be a problematic factor. I see here a parallel to Afro-American art. There was also in first step necessary to break stereotypes and get on the broad scene. Only after that it is not strange for us to see a Romani woman dealing with electronic music and only after that we can concentrate on the work itself. And she can then start proudly playing something like halgató.

Who is the audience you want to get at the exhibition? Somehow, it seems impossible for a Romani and a “gadzho” person perceive it in the same way. For one of them it is a memento of his/her own people, for the other – what actually? Should it educate non-Romani people? Involve them? Initiate a consciousness of the responsibility of the Czechs, Czech nation, for some incidents related to the Romani holocaust?

I think that the installation is really made up so sensitively, that it is comprehensible for every visitor, regardless of his or her ethnicity. Of course, their perception would be different. Most Romani people in the Czech Republic are so called Slovak Romani – vast majority of those who stayed in Slovakia, did not survive WWII. Get in terms with the WWII trauma and with the fact that Romani holocaust has been for many years made taboo, that is enormously important. For instance, there is still not any

memorial of this historical event in our country. At present, the process of making a memorial in former Romani concentration camp in Lety is going on, recently I even get the information that there is already a design-draft, so things are changing, but very slowly. About the exhibition – you can approach it from any side, the main thing is put the topic on the table.

Take strong emotions, expressed with a song/composition, translate them in objective form of a score and let them revive by interpretation of someone “from the other side” – for me it is an extraordinary idea. It literally makes those who are involved, to translate and interpret the experience of someone else in their own emotional language. Was this your intent, this way to reconciliation, dialogue?

Art projects normally do not let enough space for individual interpretation. What you mention was an important part of the concept. The score, made by non-Romani people, are interpreting non-Romani people, who are somehow experiencing the event themselves. As curator of the exhibition and a person with family roots connected with holocaust, I do feel in the exhibition a strong aspect of historic justice.

How is it in the Czech Republic with the Romani holocaust? Why is it still perceived as “not so harsh” in comparison to the sufferings of Jews?

I think that after the WWII, only numbers did matter. Numeric data, it was purely technocratic. During the war, were murdered 6000 000 of Jews and about 500 000 Romani. After the end of the war, descendants of Romani victims got practically no voice. In western Europe, the process was going faster, in our region it was retarded due to forty years of the Communist regime. But even in our country things are going on, the Romani holocaust and is becoming more and more part of public awareness. Two Prague town halls rose last year Romani flag at the Romani Holocaust Memorial Day; fellowship AraArt started to prepare regular commemoration of that day; several years ago, there was a concert Requiem for Auschwitz by Romani composer Moreno Rathgeb in Prague Rudolfinum. It is particularly important for these events to be organised by Romanis; they should overtake this agenda.

You are talking about a slow improvement of the situation. Would you agree with me that all what we did mention are important, but still somehow sporadic events? They are visible, to a certain extent, but take place practically only in the capital? Do not Romani people rather wait for the moment, when the theme of Romani holocaust will be e.g., become part of school curricula?

I agree with you completely. I am convinced that this theme should be reflected in the education of children. Perhaps you remember the case of Lada’s book about the Mikeš tom cat, where are “gypsies” depicted as thieves. An initiative against using this book as school material then arose. It became a case... and the head of the initiative was finally made to resign. Even some Romanis stood up against him. It caused an immense indignation in public and a wave of hatred against Romanis.

Some people accused them, that they want to withdraw a national giant from schoolbooks. From my Romani friends I have heard stories about, how it is, to be as a Romani child in the classroom, where there is red this story about Mikeš. In the story, police are searching if there was not even a white child stolen by Romanis. What might be the reactions in an ethnically mixed group of children? There is no doubt that Josef Lada was an excellent artist. It does not even matter that it should be withdrawn from the curriculum. I am for this story to remain – but supplemented with a proper comment about the historic context.

The exhibition is open until 3.8. in Artist Lab gallery (Kampus Hybernská, Hybernská 4, Praha 1)

Side events

17.6. at 18:00h. old voices will be revived by the singer Pavlína Matiová accompanied with piano played by Jakub Tököly.

16.7 18:00h. projection of a film document about the concentration camp in Lety u Písku; discussion with the author of the document Renata Berkyová; Co-organizer: Romistic seminar, FFUK Prague

02.08. commemoration of the Romani holocaust and its victims at Náměstí Míru in Prague.

EMÍLIA RIGOVÁ (*1980, Trnava, Slovakia) is a visual artist, working primarily with objects in the context of installation, performance, or site-specific intervention. She studied at Sculpture department of the Academy of fine arts in Banská Bystrica and in 2011 she gained Ph.D. She exhibits her artworks and is also active as curator, educator, and publicist. She teaches various art courses focused on sculpture, multimedia, and intermedia in Banská Bystrica, where she works and lives. In 2018 she gained the Oskár Čepan Prize.

Tamara Moyzes (1975*) is a Slovak artist, curator and documentarist living and working in Prague and Israel. In her creative work she focuses chiefly on situation of minorities, xenophobia, racism, nationalism, queer topics and Near East conflict. She engages mostly in documentary works, videoart, new media, and curatorship. Tamara Moyzes is an advocate of feminism. She established women's art group 5. Kolona and the group Romane Kale Panthera /Romani Black Panthers. All these groups organize events related to political art and activism.