

Polish Roma Encampment Dwellers. History and Artistic Projects

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Encampments built by Roma immigrants of Romanian extraction began to arise in Poland in the 1990s. The Roma settled far from public spaces, on the outskirts of towns, where they built encampments under bridges from boards and old furniture they had found. Sometimes they moved into vacant, abandoned buildings. Ruined buildings had to be at some remove from the city center. Concealment ensured the community a minimal level of security and was their solution to the recurring problem the community had faced of physical attacks. The invisibility of the Roma meant that the city residents had no concept of their living conditions, the causes for their extreme poverty or the status of the community. During the 1990s, when Wrocław's Tarnogaj encampment and the one located in Warsaw un-

der the Grota-Rowecki Bridge were the subjects of public debates, those were initiated rather from the desire to effectively get rid of the Roma than from any intention of guaranteeing immigrants opportunities to exercise their basic rights: access to the labor market, education system, lodging and the health service. The majority community's only response to the presence of the Roma was forced resettlement and mass deportations, conducted brutally and without warning. Early in the morning, government officials, escorted by the police, arrived at the encampment areas and forced people to leave their homes. Buses were brought to take them next to Romania. Statements by witnesses to those events, documented and preserved in the archives of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, bear witness to the ruthlessness of the institutional solutions. In 1996, Jerzy Ficowski wrote: "On the Vistula, by the Grota-Rowecki Bridge, martial law has been declared at the local level. There was no transportation for the Gypsies' property, which was then burned. They were allowed to take only their hand luggage. I associate this with something bad."¹

Since then, the law has changed. Poland, as a member country of the European Union, is no longer allowed to deport Roma to their countries of origin. From the Roma perspective, however, almost nothing is different. One person living in an encampment in Poznań says: "I remember when my family and I were deported, I think that was in 1997. Border guards arrived and took us to be interrogated, shouting at us and packing us into buses. I was

¹ *Gazeta Wyborcza* 143/1996, 21.06.1996, p 2.

7 at the time. We could only take a single bag. We came back to Poland quickly, after a few months. Later they often chased us from place to place, but we moved into new places. An empty house across the train tracks in Poznań, an allotment, sometimes we slept at the railway station, sometimes in a tent. Sometimes we would rent a hostel, but only when we had money for it. When the police didn't chase us away, it was the municipal security. But we decided to stay anyway. In Romania life was too hard.”

After the overthrow of the Ceaușescu regime, Roma in Romania were afflicted by extreme poverty and discrimination. This is confirmed by, among other sources, reports by Amnesty International² that describe massive forced resettlements of Roma communities, for example to areas that formerly housed chemical factories, or illegal demolition of their settlements. Most of the Roma dwelling in encampments in Poland come from parts of the Romanian countryside, a great many of them from Transylvania. The fall of the Communist system and closing of state enterprises from the time of the dictatorship were very painful experiences for that region. Encampments in Romania are not essentially very different from the ones in Poland. Living conditions are extremely hard. Overcrowding is a prominent problem: huts with 10 square meters of space often house entire families. The residents of these areas do not have access to utilities. In winter, they heat the rooms with stoves they themselves have built, and bring water from nearby gas stations or watershed areas.

² *Mind the legal gap. Roma and the right to housing in Romania*, Amnesty International, <https://www.amnestyusa.org/sites/default/files/eur390042011en.pdf> (6.10.2016).

As citizens of a European Union member state, the Roma have the legal right to be on Polish territory. They cannot be deported, but they continually live “outside the system.” Due to extreme poverty, unawareness of procedures, and illiteracy, they are unable to register formally as residents on Polish soil. That is simultaneously an effect of the institutional segregation that operates against poor immigrants. For years Roma have been “invisible in the system,” a fact which creates the conditions for abuses. At the orders of both Polish authorities and private owners of the area occupied by Roma, encampments in many Polish cities have been demolished and burned down, after which they were again rebuilt by the Roma community, who did not wish to return to their country of origin.³ Local and national governments pretended in unison that those places did not exist. For several years the situation has slowly been changing, because activists from grassroots and non-governmental organizations have begun to stand up for the rights of the Roma. Due to cooperation between Roma and activists, the local governments have been forced to initiate a debate on the topic of Roma immigrant communities of Romanian origin, at the same time acknowledging them as legitimate residents of Polish cities, with full rights. The solutions that have been proposed nevertheless fall far short of Western

³ Archival editions of *Gazeta Wyborcza* from the 1990s contain descriptions of incidents of arson attacks on settlements in Warsaw and Wrocław which took place after the deportation of the populations residing there. In interviews with Roma for the project *Własnym głosem o sobie. Imigranci romscy w Polsce*, the residents of the Wrocław encampment mentioned stories relating to those events. Whole families returned, despite the danger, to Wrocław and other cities, building successive settlements. It should be remembered that the scale of arson and other attacks motivated by racial hate is unknown. What seems evident from the experience of the Wielkopolskie Stowarzyszenie Lokatorów in Poznań is that not until 2015 were there three attempts to burn down allotments inhabited by Roma.

models (which are themselves far from ideal). In Germany and France, Roma register as residents without much problem, so it is much simpler for them to obtain basic access to social services or register their child for school there. The non-governmental organizations in those countries adapt their services to the needs of migrants, offering information about places where they can sell scrap-metal, residential training programs and other forms of cooperation. In Poland, on the other hand, although Roma from Romania have been city dwellers for years, they do not represent part of a constitutional ethnic minority. Their local Roma communities are being forced out, driven[led?] by Roma from other groups– better assimilated, with Polish citizenship. But after all, most of their children were born in Poland and often the only document they possess is a Polish birth certificate. They justify their desire to remain in terms of their relatively strong knowledge of the language, as well as safety and, in spite of everything, better living conditions than in Romania. Their encampments have grown in size since they became relatively safe– thanks to the Roma community’s contacts with non-governmental organizations, it is now impossible to evict them.

Estimates by the interventionist research project Zachodni Ośrodek Badań Społecznych i Ekonomicznych⁴ inform us that the largest Polish encampments (Poznań, Wrocław, Gdańsk) are currently home to about 600 persons.⁵ At the national scale, taking into account all of the smaller encamp-

⁴ K. Czarnota., K. Siemaszko, *Raport z badań*, [in:] *Własnym głosem o sobie. Imigranci romscy w Polsce*, Gorzów Wielkopolski 2015.

⁵ *Ibid.* These data were gathered in 2015.

ments and places not found by researchers, the problem may affect roughly a thousand people. The data are fluid in view of migrations between cities or to other EU countries. In recent years the number of persons living at encampments has increased. Only a few years ago there were about 60 Roma living at the former allotment gardens in Wrocław on ulica Kamieńskiego; now about 200 immigrants reside there. In Poznań in the recent past only 20 people occupied the empty uninhabited building on ulica Krauthofera, while at present between 150 and 200 people live in the summer-houses located on the territory of those privatized allotment gardens.

A third generation of Roma (reckoning since the beginning of the transformation) live on the margins of Polish society. The universal rights of citizens of the European Union are beyond the reach of poor Roma. In 2015 a research project was conducted in Wrocław, Poznań, Warsaw, Gdańsk and Kraków,⁶ which diagnosed the consequences of the lack of a migration policy that took into account the poorest migrants in the EU. The final report based on the project sought to instigate nationwide discussion involving policy-makers and Roma and create a situation in which it would be impossible to continue ignoring the presence of immigrants.⁷ In the long-term perspective, another aim was for

⁶ The project was executed as part of the work of Zachodni Ośrodek Badań Społecznych i Ekonomicznych and its partner organizations, the Wrocław association Nomad and the Wielkopolskie Stowarzyszenie Lokatorów z Poznania.

⁷ In 2014 the Voivode's representative for national minority affairs, Patryk Pawełczak, during a visit by Roma to the Voivodeship Office taking place after the blocking of the illegal eviction of a Roma family of about 30 people, took the stance that the community has no rights in Poland and cannot demand that they be respected, because it is not part of a Polish ethnic minority. L. Łada, *Romowie przyszli do wojewody*, *Codzienny Poznań*, 2.04.2014, <http://www.codziennypoznan.pl/artykul/2014-04-02/romowie-przyszli-do-wojewody> (10.12.2016).

the Roma themselves to be empowered to fight for their rights without assistance from activists and NGO workers. The report sought to compel gradual local changes through social pressure.⁸ The Roma community's "emergence from out of the shadows" is not in itself so much a success as a point of departure, the beginning of debate in which the Roma must be included, with translators and adequate conditions for further cooperation guaranteed. At the same time, it's important to keep in mind that the situation of Roma immigrants of Romanian origin and controversies about begging or the occupation of residential spaces are not the result of unrelated, marginal conflicts, but reflect a long-term process of systematic isolation of the group.

Interviews and questionnaires carried out at encampments constituted the first situation in which the Roma evaluated the society in which they live. A question was asked about the actions of the Polish government and of police and border guards. The answers to that question were exceptionally emotional, very often characterized by astonishment, perplexity and fear of the consequences of making a negative assessment. Previous interactions between Roma and officials or public services often had an oppressive character that did not build a sense of trust. The Roma had come to terms with the fact of their rights being violated by the law in its majesty. Nearly two thirds of those interviewed reported that they had encountered

⁸ Among other things, providing garbage containers, portable toilets and connection to the water supply for the Polish encampment as a result of the intervention by a civil rights advocate, which then was the reason for public discussions, in which the Roma participated, based on the findings of the report.

aggression from Poles, nearly half that their place of residence had been the object of attacks. The foremost dreams of these respondents related to safety for their families, access to work and the possibility of equal treatment. "We want quiet, just like every Pole, to be able to go to work and have our children go to school," they said.

Roma from encampments represent one of the lowest positions among socioeconomic groups living in Poland: 82.3 % of the people living in the largest encampments state their occupation as begging. Practically all participants in the study said that while begging, they feel shame and humiliation, but that they have no other means of surviving. Only 32.2 % stated that they have done temporary black-market work.

Roughly a third of encampment dwellers are children. In recent times, action taken by non-governmental organizations and private individuals has ensured that the children are enrolled in schools. One obstacle is created by institutional barriers and the lack of preparation or cooperation from the administrations of educational establishments that do not wish to heed the fact that elementary-level education is both a right and a duty for all children under 18 living in Poland, regardless of their material status, country of origin, or the documents in their possession. Over the last several years, some dozen-odd children began attending public elementary schools in Wrocław and Poznań. An important role continues to be played by informal education, which has been provided in Wrocław for years. In

Poznań in 2013, in response to requests from Roma and the growing number of children living in encampments, activists affiliated with Poznań's Anarchist Federation and the Rozbrat squat organized the first workshops and meetings for Roma children and adults. They also undertook collaborations with local artists such as Barbara Prądyńska. From the moment that the encampment situation was made public, there has been an increasing number of artistic projects and workshops dealing with Roma life or involving cooperation with the Roma community.

Artistic Projects

Roughly 10 years after the change of system, educated Roma artists in Central Europe– the fruit of the Communist system's assimilation practices– demanded access to public space and new rules for interactions with non-Roma audiences. Their art is remote from what people generally associate with "Roma folklore"– something often referenced in order to relegate Roma communities to stereotypes of backwardness. It is notably internationalist, and emphasizes not their background and language but their experience of migration, stereotyping and exclusion. Contemporary Roma art belongs to the current of critical art, because it seeks to comment on the reality in which the largest European ethnic minority constitutes a kind of subaltern internal to Europe, and the living spaces assigned to it– intra-European colonies or heterotopies in the sense ascribed to the term by Michel Foucault. The voices of these artists are intended to jolt European societies which define themselves as democratic communi-

ties (or aspire to that label) out of their sense that enough has been done to protect the life of people functioning at the margins, to provide for their inclusion while preserving their inherent rights or negotiate spaces for them in which they can become “visible” as full citizens. The images employed by Roma creators of engaged art fulfill the criterion that Isabela Kowalczyk has established for forms of critical art: “they break down strategies of exclusion and are accountable to shifting boundaries, in consumerist culture as well, at the margins of which there appear bodies that do not conform to the ideal of the beautiful, healthy.”⁹ They thus take the ethical risk of appropriating the voice of the Other, but simultaneously introduce that Other into the context of the dominant culture. Their artistic projects play with slogans about “our common European home,” “respect for your neighbors,” and “openness to otherness.” Due to their interventionist aspect they appear in places where exclusion is happening, for example near the walls surrounding Roma settlements— in which case their work is based on appropriate placement of the frame, underscoring the visibility of marginalization, or on the contrary— in centers of the distribution of power, determining the maintenance or cessation of discrimination. These artists include: Daniel Baker, Damian and Delaine Le Bas, Mihaela Cimpeanu, Gabi Jiménez, Omara, and many others, as well as their spokespeople: Timea Junghaus, the curator of many exhibitions, including the First Roma Pavilion at the 52nd Exhibition of World Art in Venice in 2007, Roma scholars Thomas Acton and Ian

⁹ I. Kowalczyk, *Polska sztuka krytyczna – próba podsumowania*. Katalog BRITISH BRITISH POLISH POLISH: *Sztuka krańców Europy, długie lata 90. i dziś*, Warszawa 2013, p. 3.

Hancock – and, in fact, many devotees of Roma art whose roots lie outside the community but who study its specific language. Timea Junghaus, in an interview with *Czas Kultury* in 2007, repeated the statement she had formulated while organizing the Roma exposition in Venice: the Roma are the quintessence of Europeanness precisely by virtue of those attributes that are commonly used to underscore their non-Europeanness: cosmopolitanism, mobility, ability to adapt.¹⁰ In such a conceptual framing of Roma culture (and we should add that elsewhere, Junghaus has underscored that this must be art created by ethnic Roma¹¹) the most important strategy, probably, of this current of critical art becomes apparent: playing with stereotypes (perceived broadly as the *imago* or mental image of the Other) in a way that does not involve simple negation but rather kitsch exaggeration of and bringing into relief its self-destructive nature. Contemporary Roma art thus uses familiar strategies of post-colonial cultures: ambivalence, subversion and mimicry, based on such rhetorical figures as irony, grotesque, and collage (violating principles of *decorum*). The object of its attacks is the vision, established over the centuries in Europeans' collective consciousness, of "gypsy-ness": a certain cultural model whose attributes conflict with the "European model" (whatever that might be) and are a question of individual choices: reluctance to integrate within the larger society, nomadic lifestyle, language taboos, a need to live close to nature, a lack of

¹⁰ "Romowie w Wenecji. Z Timeą Junghaus rozmawia Jerzy Celichowski", *Czas Kultury* 3/2007, p. 120.

¹¹ See T. Junghaus, *Romska sztuka współczesna – rewolta podporządkowanych*, [in:] M. Weychert Waluszko (ed.), *Romano kher. O romskiej sztuce, estetyce i doświadczeniu*, Warszawa 2013, pp. 39–40.

historical memory, and so on. This phantasm – often internalized by the Roma themselves– is the strongest tool of marginalization created by Western European culture over the 600 years of Roma presence on the Old Continent. The catastrophe of the Second World War did not succeed in deconstructing it– but rather, for various reasons, ended up intensifying it by means of the seemingly endless and humiliating debate on whether Nazi crimes against Roma could be considered genocidal.

In terms of the means through which this art speaks to majority communities, and how it should stand out, Daniel Baker, in his attempt to conceptualize the Roma aesthetic model, underscores the following attributes that belong to it: “exterritoriality, aesthetic lightness (a free approach and flexible adaptability of the artistic means of expression), cyclicity, collectivism, areligiosity, fortuitousness (openness to chance events) and provizoriness [...]”¹² In the work of Delaine Le Bas, on the other hand, the following three artistic visions are manifested: 1. *bricolage*, the use of junk, odds and ends, salvage, garbage, recycling; 2. a recurring motif of home, building walls, creating one’s own space, resettlement/mobility (encampments), 3. a ready-made aesthetic, using artefacts of Roma culture. The deconstruction of stereotypical images of the Roma, the “subaltern revolt,” as Timea Junghaus called the participation of Roma artists in the Venice Biennial¹³ – can, by using such means, operate primarily on the plane of visual culture,

¹² D. Baker, *W sprawie prowizorki. Kilka uwag o estetyce Romów*, [in:] *Romano kher...*, pp. 52–53.

¹³ T. Junghaus, *Romska sztuka współczesna...*, p. 39.

by performative and sensory means. Literature “copes” in a different way, which nevertheless seems derivative, in the same sense that the synesthaetic aspect of Young Poland poetry is an attempt to capture painterly impressionism using verbal material. The function of this art is above all to render “visible” something or someone from which/whom our habitual way of life tells us to turn our eyes away; it also plays with visible strategies of exclusion.

In this context, the situation of Roma critical art in Poland looks far from optimal. Up to now, two major exhibitions or projects featuring such art have been organized: *Domy srebrne jak namioty* (Houses Silver Like Tents) at the Wrocław Contemporary Museum, a presentation in Zachęcie in 2013–2014 (curated by Monika Weychert Waluszko) and *Tajsa* at the Office of Artistic Exhibitions in Tarnów (curated by Katarzyna Roj and Joanna Synowiec) in 2014. The first of these gathered together many props and installations of the current in question, combining them with local artistic initiatives and with the images and texts of culture which in Poland have had the greatest influence on the construction of the concept of “gypsy-ness” mentioned above. In the second— as its creators underscore— the point was likewise to strike at the still-dominant ethnographic perspective, but with a change of operational technique: the replacement of “presentation” with performative art, action, “building relationships.” The problem that artistic initiatives oriented toward “contact” often encounter has to do with the disproportion, difficult to conceal, between the Roma and non-Roma contribution. Synowiec and Roj,

in an interview for the foundation Bęc Zmiana, speak of the necessity to move beyond the “pigeonhole of Roma art,” but it is hard not to notice that in the *Tajsa* project that occurs with a low level of participation by actual Roma. One sees a typical paradox in the curators’ line of reasoning: on the one hand, they underscore their “transethnic” (or extra-ethnic) orientation, while on the other— knowing that without the participation of ethnic Roma the planned “encounter” will not materialize— they seek access to local Roma and take note of their scepticism.¹⁴ When Synowiec declares: “The figure of a Roma can be something wildly contemporary, without roots, taking shape freely and creatively from cultural and linguistic goods”¹⁵ – she is not speaking about the Roma in Tarnów but about an image that it would be rather hard for them to identify with. As an inevitable result, the planned “contact” takes place primarily through mediated forms— photography, texts, and works by non-Roma artists who— like Karolina Freino in her work entitled *Śpera*¹⁶ – making use (still and all) of ethnographic knowledge, attempt to universalize the Roma experience (in this case, an operation that fails in its universality even within the Roma community, because *śpera* is a sign recorded by Jerzy Ficowski in use among the tabors of the Polska Roma,¹⁷ while the Roma population in Tarnów is composed primarily of members of the Bergitka Roma

¹⁴ *Nowoczesność pozbawiona korzeni*, interview with Katarzyna Roj and Joanna Synowiec, Bęc Zmiana, http://www.beczmiana.pl/538,nowoczesnosc_pozbawiona_korzeni.html (12.12.2016).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Karolina Freino, *Śpera*, Akademia Sztuk Pięknych im. Eugeniusza Gepperta we Wrocławiu, <http://www.asp.wroc.pl/?module=News&controller=Read&action=news&id=8698> (12.12.2016).

¹⁷ See J. Ficowski, *Cyganie na polskich drogach*, Warszawa 1965, p. 163.

who moved there in the late 18th and early 19th centuries). Initiatives of this type are certainly useful from the point of view of disseminating knowledge about the Roma group, but they lead neither to greater inclusion of the Roma community nor to transformation of stereotypes about it.

At a moment faced with a lack of charismatic Roma practitioners of critical art in Poland,¹⁸ that gap has been filled by non-Roma artists whose attention is focused on what is probably the “hottest” point of spatial negotiation between the Roma and the majority society– the encampment in Wrocław by ulica Kamieńskiego. These include: Aleksandra Kubiak’s project *Baraca 6* executed by BWA Wrocław in cooperation with Roma from the encampment as well as the Wrocław Ethnographic Museum (2012), the intervention *Wybaczcie!* (2013), the film *Królowa ciszy* directed by Agnieszka Zwiefka (2014) and the Stigma photography project by Adam Lach and Katarzyna Dybowska (2012–2014).

Baraca 6 involved moving one of the buildings from the encampment near ulica Kamieńskiego to the grounds of the Ethnographic Museum in Wrocław and having the opening there. The barrack stood on the lawn in front of the museum for two weeks. During the performance action a film was made (later shown in the exhibition *Domy srebrne jak namioty*, mentioned above). Kubiak played on the slogan officially used to promote Wrocław (“city of encounters”), and showed her audience that despite the city’s vaunted multiculturalism, it was difficult to obtain com-

¹⁸ A splendid exception is the work of Małgorzata Mirga-Tas.

mon consent to a Roma settlement in the center of town (for comparison, it is worth considering a similar story that occurred in Berlin's Kreuzberg area in 2011¹⁹). In an interview with *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Kubiak said that "I found it amazing that in a city where cultural pathways of many nationalities meet, there appears a new enclave – of Roma—a self-styled village within the existing structure of the city. Their way of life stirred up and continues to stir up a lot of controversy."²⁰ *Baraca 6* referenced the celebrated 2011 project by Delaine and Damian Le Bas entitled *Safe European Home?*, in which miniature Roma ghettos were created in central areas of several European cities. The installation was publicly inaugurated in front of the parliament building in Vienna and its opening featured the participation of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, one of the most prominent theoreticians of post-colonialism, who spoke of the kinship between the experiences of European Roma and colonized non-European populations. The project then moved to Thessaloniki, Berlin and Copenhagen as well as other cities, each time being newly created with materials found in the new site. "It can be read as a materialized form of political declaration, taking the slums– 'the gypsy ghetto'– to the center of one of the most important cities,"²¹ Delaine Le Bas explained. Using a provisory construction that resembles a barrack in one of the many encampments

¹⁹ See S. Dassler, T. Roy, "Ärger mit Roma im Görlitzer Park," *Der Tagesspiegel* 15.08.2011, <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/unmut-im-kiez-aerger-mit-roma-im-goerlitzer-park/4490708.html> (12.12.2016).

²⁰ A. Saraczyńska, *Romski folklor miejski przed Muzeum Etnograficznym*, *Wyborcza.pl* Wrocław, http://wroclaw.wyborcza.pl/wroclaw/1,35751,12222416,Romski_folklor_miejski_przed_Muzeum_Etnograficznym.html (12.12.2016).

²¹ D. Le Bas, *Od projektu obozu cygańskiego w Albie do Gypsylandu*, [in:] *Romano kher...*, p. 13.

found in the vicinity of cities in Central and Western Europe, the artist confronts the institution responsible for the safety of the citizens of a given country with the severe lack of protection for people living in such shelters. Aleksandra Kubiak enunciates a similar message when she speaks of the limitations of institutional ethnography, which though it could find many intriguing artefacts on ulica Kamieńskiego, does not wish to see them, because they break up its ossified framework. In an interview with Artmix, Kubiak clarified: “I regret that the staff of the Ethnographic Museum did not get more involved, because there were many opportunities for conversation, but the ethnographers stuck to the position of observers.”²² Kubiak also has an apparent fascination with the provisory, “recycling”-based construction; like Le Bas, she is interested in the Roma barrack as a form of “ethnological” architecture.

Agnieszka Zwiefka, director of a film whose main character is a 10 year-old deaf-mute girl from the camp near ulica Kamieńskiego, Denisa, consciously separates her work from the conventions of the “interventionist reportage.” “I knew I wanted to make an upbeat film,” she said in an interview with *Gazeta Wyborcza*²³ – and that aesthetic effect became possible through the use of the technique of narrative counterpoint. The viewer thus follows the story of a hand-

²² R. Demidenko, *Raj utracony. Rozmowa z Moniką Weychert Waluszko, Aleksandrą Kubiak oraz Katarzyną Wiącek przy okazji wystawy „Domy srebrne jak namioty”, Artmix*, 27.01.2014, <http://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/artmix/31221> (12.12.2016).

²³ K. Nowakowska, *Agnieszka Zwiefka: Gdy oznajmiłam wrocławskim Romom, że chcę nakręcić o nich film, mówili o mnie „dili”, co znaczy szalona, Gazeta.pl Weekend*, http://weekend.gazeta.pl/weekend/1,152121,17075984,Agnieszka_Zwiefka__Gdy_oznajmiam_wroclawskim_Romom_.html (12.12.2016).

icapped young girl from a Roma encampment, and the difficult everyday reality in which her family functions: some of the action takes place in winter, and extensive scenes in the film deal with begging, theft of clothing from containers, there is discussion about conflicts with the residents of local apartment blocks, including arson on the grass surrounding the encampment by committed by unknown perpetrators. Another narrative develops in the background, concerning a dispute with a magistrate over the future of the encampment dwellers which has destabilized Denisa's family situation to such an extent that she is finally forced to leave and head back to Romania. The second, more "up-beat" story was devised by Zwiefka as a variation on the tale of Cinderella and deals with Denisa's dreams of life in a fairytale reality. The quintessence of her fantasies is a fascination with a Bollywood heroine whom she knows from watching DVDs (implied to have been found in a dumpster). The story is about more than just dreams, however. In *Królowa ciszy* the "engaged" reportage fragments are interwoven with production numbers in which Denisa and a professional dance troupe perform choreography stylized à la Bollywood. That story, too, does not arrive at a happy ending – Denisa enters a dance contest but does not win. The idea of combining the aesthetics of Hindi cinema with the setting of a Roma encampment seems tempting for several reasons: firstly, it references the Roma's Indian origins, which they have increasingly been claiming and assimilating; secondly, it plays on associations with the caste society in a manner that fits the situation of encampment dwellers in Poland; thirdly, it works at the level of visual

kitsch, via the analogy between “gypsiness” as stereotypically grasped and the Bollywood aesthetic. We perceive it, however, as a risky tightrope walk on the borderline of the aestheticization of poverty. Denisa will never begin speaking and will remain subject to mockery as a “fool” in Roma circles, but in the world of her kitsch fantasies she will always be “the queen.” The convention of fairytale de-realization means that the viewer ceases to feel responsibility for a given space and the damage to the people residing there. A side effect, moreover, is the portrayal of the Roma from ulica Kamieńskiego as an exotic and non-European society, a portrayal that corresponds to widespread stereotypes and in no way serves inclusion.

Photography projects are part of a visual dispute over how to present “gypsiness” – to expose its “non-European” face or on the contrary, underscore what links it to other marginalized cultures – poverty. The essence of photography is that it creates appearances of participation and, as Susan Sontag wrote, constitutes the quintessence of voyeurism.²⁴ Pictures taken inside Roma homes or barracks and in encampments are simultaneously touristic and engaged; our imagined “gypsiness” manifests its ambivalence within them – being both theatrical, spectacular and romantic, but also evoking sympathy, being corporeal, real, closer to the essence of humanity. Adam Lach and Katarzyna Dybowska’s project entitled *Stigma* – composed of photographs of and statements by residents of the encampment by ulica Kamieńskiego – begins with

²⁴ See S. Sontag, *On Photography*, New York 2005, p. 7.

the motto: “There are as many cultures as there are Gypsies / We are Gypsies too, but different.” Thus the premise is the deconstruction of that very notion of gypsy-ness being interrogated by the creators of Roma engaged art. We are not fully convinced that the result was completely successful; the book certainly tells the history of many encounters, and possibly friendships. The photographer’s eye seizes mainly positive emotions: tenderness, concern, respect, compassion, anticipation, lightheartedness, as if to polemicize with the images of domestic violence that anti-gypsy discourse promotes. Lach documents everyday life in the encampment, he likes meaningful details, interiors of the barracks and portraits, but also does not shun a certain photographic orientalism, a certain “admiration for ruins,” and, here, garbage and poverty. That effect adds profundity to the quotations from Roma cited in the book, preserved in their original, “oral” style, with numerous error and typical inversions and repetitions:

*We don't like Polish gypsies. They don't want us here. When they see us on the street, they laugh. That we are poor, that we beg, that we are Romanians. They don't help. They are rich, they steal, they lie to others, and the blame always falls on us, because we are like Gypsies. [...] In this area people already know us, that we don't steal. They've even been helping us. They brought warm water, pampers for children, food, clothing, blankets they brought. And they've been helping us so we could build our barracks.*²⁵

²⁵ A. Lach, *Stigma*, Warszawa 2014, p. 11.

The author's premise was a certain faithfulness to the utterance, but at the same time the unaltered form adds to the sense of otherness. The errors are as ornamental as the garbage we see scattered about in the photographs, the carelessly hung laundry and other attributes of poverty. Though to be sure, that effect is difficult to avoid in such an exotic space as the interior of a Roma barrack represents for Polish viewers.

The last project is interventionist in character. The inscription "Forgive us," displayed in Roma settlements in Central Europe, is part of a slogan war in public spaces. It appeared in a prominent place in the Wrocław encampment by ulica Kamieńskiego, and earlier in encampments in Ostrovany and Košice in eastern Slovakia, where in 2009 and 2013 local authorities spent public funds on initiatives to erect walls separating the Roma majority from the non-Roma minority. The slogan, in Polish and Slovak respectively, is in some sense directed from the residents of the encampments toward the "natives" of Wrocław, Košice and Ostrovany. In Wrocław, the Roma were assisted in making the inscription by members of the Nomad association. One of the Roma artists explained its genesis as follows: "We are apologizing to people for the fact that we are here illegally. We also don't like living in these conditions, but as there is nothing for us to do, we have to live this way. If it's possible, we will be eager to do work."²⁶ In this particular commentary on the – fairly clear in fact – visual message,

²⁶ aolsz//tka, *Romowie: „wybaczcie”. Mieszkańcy: „za późno”*, Kontakt TVN24, 20.04.2013, <http://kontakt24.tvn24.pl/romowie-wybaczcie-mieszkancy-za-pozno,84304.html> (16.12.2016).

we see the belief among victims, familiar to psychologists from studies of violence, that the hurt they have experienced is somehow due to their own fault.²⁷ The answer that comes, though still faintly, from the mouths of the “natives,” including artists (not only in the context of Roma encampments), goes: “No human being is illegal.”

The history of Roma encampments in Poland and the artistic projects that have developed in connection with them deserves more extensive discussion and undoubtedly will receive greater consideration in the near future. The situation of these places and the people inhabiting them is uncertain: the trial over the eviction of the Roma from the Wrocław camp by ulica Kamieńskiego is ongoing, and the news has recently seen racist attacks on settlements in both Poznań and Gdańsk. An intensifying mood of xenophobia is not a good prognostic, but on the other hand, local initiatives are arising whose aim is to provide help. There can never be too many of those.

translated by Timothy Williams

²⁷ Monika Weychert Waluszko drew attention to this in her essay on the *Domy srebrne jak namioty* exhibition: http://muzeumwspolczesne.pl/mww/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/byscie_wszystkich_przyjac_chcieli_nota_o_wystawie_w_MWW1.pdf (16.12.2016).