

Wandering – EU-Roma Gypsies

Camilla Palestra and Gabi Scardi

From London to Greece passing through France, Italy and the most remote villages in Romania, the EU-Roma project was born as an attempt to map the Roma people across Europe, within a geographical, cultural and social frame. Mapping the Invisible¹ is the telling title of the book edited by Professor Lucy Orta, which includes research and reflections resulting from this two-year long project. Supported by the European Commission, it involved the London College of Fashion in a close collaboration with three European partners², besides the engagement with local Roma communities and other independent organisations. The journey conducted by the partners across Europe symbolically reminds of the restless wandering of Roma people from their migration from India or Egypt to Europe, over the course of 600 years or so. Still today, Roma communities are forced to move due to unpredictable circumstances such as the new urban developments for the Olympic Games in Athens or London, or to stringent immigration policies in Romania or Italy.

Despite the romanticised picture of gypsies wandering freely with their caravans, living free from any social restraints, still part of our collective imagination, this quite mythical freedom of movement has turned into a very precarious and extremely marginalised life. This reflection forms the departure for two main projects realised by Lucy Orta in the context of the EU-Roma project: the itinerant Roma Preview Pavilion and the video installation Wandering. Initially presented at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2008, then brought to the streets and squares in Bucharest and Rome, the Roma Preview Pavilion was composed of a series of dome-tents decorated with traditional, colourful floral Roma patterns. Installed, de-installed and re-installed spontaneously in the Giardini, readapting every times to the temporary space allocated by the 'official' National pavilions disposed to host them. A story that sadly and silently repeats with the Roma settlements at the edges of our cities.

Created by Lucy Orta during the EU-Roma workshops in London and exhibited in the TAMA exhibition at the Biennale de Lyon 2009, Wandering is a video installation composed of four large projections in which a woman dances to the notes of traditional Romany music. The wide lavishly colourful skirts with huge flower prints created especially by the artist in the Digital Print Bureau at London College of Fashion, happily whirl around in time to the instruments.

This is a subjective but culturally rooted act, a romantic ritual, bursting with energy, with a sense of joyous faith. Thus the work evokes a shared aesthetic and a collective ritual, the strong attitude of the Roma culture with regards to music and dance. What strikes are the gestures and concentration of circular, quick or slow, spontaneous or poetical movements, always changing without losing rigor; at times the motion of the dancer is ironically affected. They express the flowing, the virtually infinite meeting of courses, of acts, of destinies, of stories; narrating; time that passes and survives, the afterwards, beyond ruptures and discontinuity. But also modernity that does not erase tenaciously rooted habits. If the nomadism attributed to the Roma today tends to become a pretext to deprive them of the possibility of settling in one place and establishing bonds, seeing Wandering is like walking down the road, the history of the Roma people, repeating their wanderings by recuperating the most vital and fecund aspects.

Camilla Palestra is EU-Roma project coordinator and Professor Lucy Orta's assistant. She is currently studying on the MA in Curating at the Royal College of Art, London.

Gabi Scardi is an independent curator and art critic based in Milan, Italy.

¹ Mapping the Invisible. EU-ROMA Gypsies, ed. Lucy Orta, Black Dog Publishing, April 2010 ISBN 978-1-906155-91-9

² <http://www.eu-roma.net>