

INTRODUCTION

During early 2013, the deterioration of a historical building in Timișoara, Muehle House, was very present in the public life of the city. Several articles were written about it in the local press, there was a protest organised in front of the villa, a petition was addressed to the Ministry of Culture in which the expropriation of the villa is requested, etc.

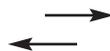
Muehle House was originally owned by an Austro-Hungarian imperial florist, but is owned at present by a Roma family. Its present owners removed the roof of the building during winter, allowing the building to be ruined, since the land on which the building is located is more valuable than the building itself. Neither the situation of this specific villa, nor the behaviour of its owners are unique, nonetheless this case raised a great deal of discussion, while other buildings with historical significance are degraded in silence or are torn down to make space for new, more lucrative buildings. The protests raised by Muehle House have a racist background, bringing together multiple stereotypical attitudes regarding the Roma as “law breaking,” “uncivilised” individuals, not worthy of the Austro-Hungarian history of the city.

A comment posted on a social networking site in the context of the Muehle House situation stated that the “Roma are people without a history.” This comment crystallises the ways in which the image of the Roma is constructed in the public sphere, an image made out of omissions and mystifications, out of the grotesque enhancement of some traits, out of exoticisation and erasure. The centuries in which Roma people lived alongside the majority are erased; the history of the Roma as slaves of the Romanian aristocrats and of the orthodox monasteries; the history of Roma tortured and killed during the Holocaust; the history of their “integration” during the socialist times, integration that didn’t abolish their marginal status; the history of their extreme precariousness during the transition period and until the present, when they found themselves evicted, left without any possibilities to find a job, and without education possibilities for their children.

The Roma culture is coded either as a culture that “borrows” all its elements from the culture of the majority, or it is exoticised as being characterised by a primitive “authenticity.” The histories of Roma women and men who manage to break through the wall of systemic racism and manage to make their voices heard are coded as being the exceptions, as being rare examples of intelligence and willpower. They are also presented as the proof for the legitimacy of meritocracy, of the neoliberal rhetoric which declares that anyone can succeed in life, no matter their economic or social background and, in consequence, anyone who fails is completely responsible for their failure.

The stereotypical image of Roma in the public sphere, an image that affects in the most direct ways the lives of individual Roma women and men, is the result of all these erasures.

Who determines which buildings are important and should be part of the cultural heritage of the city? Who decides which buildings should be erased and forgotten? How can we question the legitimacy of a cultural heritage that reflects exclusively the history of the ruling classes? Who writes the history? Who has power over their own representation in the public sphere? How many public monuments about the histories of Roma are there in Romania? How many Roma writers, artists, scientists and musicians are mentioned in school books? How are the Roma represented in the vast majority of the mass media? How are the Roma represented in literature and arts? What possibilities are there to change the ways Roma people live their lives generation after generation, in a situation in which they are always seen as the dangerous and ungrateful “alien” as being part of a “people without history”?



The writing that makes up this section of the website was conceptualised to be used in high schools. We wanted to create something that could serve as a starting point for discussions about the image of the Roma people in the public sphere, and to reconsider notions that are usually taken for granted, such as the legitimacy of history as a unique and unilateral narrative. One of the reasons for writing these materials (aside from how it relates to the increasing anxiety caused by the ubiquity of racist discourse in the public sphere) is constituted by our experiences as teachers.

Some of us work as teachers in different schools in Timișoara. These schools are attended by both privileged students and the most marginal ones. We teach all of these students, from the whole range of social and economic conditions, both “white” students and Roma students, a class called art education. According to the official guidelines of the Ministry of Education, this class should teach students to use their aesthetic sensibility in an intercultural context and to develop their creativity in order for them to use this creativity in the different working fields in their adult lives. We started our jobs as teachers being interested in finding possibilities to bypass the neoliberal rhetoric of interculturalism and creativity and, instead, to use art (and our experience as artists) as a method to explain the contradictions and to subvert the inequalities of our context. We were (and are) interested in finding ways to develop our students’ ability to formulate their own questions, to foster in them the ability to find alternative ways of questioning.

When working with students who are not marginal, art can be a meaningful tool to address these very relevant issues, although we constantly realise how difficult it is to find strategies and methods that manage to practically explain concepts and to inspire attitudes and gestures which are contrary to the mainstream, institutionalised racism, Christian formalism and political apathy. How can you explain to teenagers coming from middle class families about the dangers of consumerism, in a general context which constantly tells them that what they own defines them? How can you explain the generalised racism in the society, when they live in a climate where racism (more or less hidden behind the empty terms of “tolerance” and “diversity”) is the norm? Although these difficulties are always present, it is still important and necessary to discuss with these students, whose social condition is more or less the same as ours, about our own privileged situation, and about the system which needs certain categories of people to be left without hope.

But when we address exactly these people, the children and teenagers whose lives are characterised by extreme poverty, violence and hopelessness, we need to adjust our preconceived ideas about how to speak about the horrors of racism from our own privileged position. How can you develop meaningful work with students who sometimes lack the basic elements necessary for decent living conditions? These are Roma children whose parents are forced by their extreme precariousness to work abroad, and therefore sometimes miss school years when they move with their parents, who are constantly submitted to discrimination in most aspects of their lives. How do you deal with their internalised racism? With a fascination for consumerism which is even deeper because the objects of their desires are always out of reach? With an anger and violence that is fed by and mirrors the entire systemic violence to which they are constantly subjected? With their lack of hope and motivation? With our own preconceived ideas about how to use art in an emancipatory way, ideas that we developed from our own privileged standpoint of being “white”, of having benefited from higher education, of having an ordinary economic situation, etc?

From being in contact with these students and getting to know them, we realised once again that without direct experience, without the constant reconnection to the messy, unclear, disappointing, troubling reality, art and theory become only a web of self-referential metaphors. We think that we have to admit this and then start from there.