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MAŁGORZATA MIRGA-TAS

RE-ENCHANTING THE WORLD

In the life of every human being, there is a need for magic and enchantment, but not always: at certain moments, we should disenchant the world, moments, situations, negative emotions and paradigms. Selecting a few topics related to the representation of Romani people in a stereotypical and stigmatising way, I try to disenchant and demythologise them by reversing how we are being seen.

RE-ENCHANTING THE WORLD

MAŁGORZATA
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edited by
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RE-ENCHANTING THE WORLD

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Foreword

The opening of this Venice Biennale coincides with the war being waged in the middle of Europe, a brutal invasion of Ukraine unleashed by Vladimir Putin's Russia. Before our very eyes, an attempt is being made to break the spirit of the Ukrainian people, to trample on their independence and, more broadly, on the idea of a nation state. Civilians, children, women and the elderly are being murdered, disinformation and propaganda are spreading. The heroic struggle of the Ukrainian people to preserve their national sovereignty and identity is a tragic example of a great national spirit, born of the essence of human dignity and the inalienable right to self-determination.

This appalling war must be a time of reflection for the entire community of the free world, of reimagining the cultural priorities of the West, and of recognising the most essential values. Love, which generates genuine solidarity through compassion and selfless help, is the highest value and the deepest source of freedom, and therefore of human dignity, revealing its fullness only through liberty in its broadest sense. Art, on the other hand, as a sphere of selfless and essentially spiritual production, it is an extraordinary field for the expression of human dignity, founded on the right to unhindered self-determination.

The International Biennale in Venice is a place where artists and their art come to speak. Collected in national pavilions, the works address audiences, spreading new imaginary lands and new ideas before them. Among them is also the Polish Pavilion, this year presenting a work as peculiar as it is appealing to universal values. The jury, appointed by Prof. Piotr Gliński, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Culture and National Heritage, selected a project combining the world of universal ideas with a thoroughly personal narrative by Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, a Romani-Polish artist, for presentation in the Polish Pavilion at the 59th International Art Exhibition in Venice in 2022. Private stories of the author and the women dear to her, family events and facts deeply rooted in the genes of the local Roma

community, are brought to light in her evocative work. Filtered and artistically sublimated, projected onto multidimensional art, symbols identifiable by past and present generations of European artists have found their full expression in this monumental work. References to the Renaissance are presented in a visually attractive, figurative and chromatically expanded convention. The artist's installation filling the space of the Polish Pavilion consists of twelve large-format textiles, referring to the famous cycle of allegorical Renaissance wall paintings from Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara. The blend of historical ethnicity and multiculturalism creates a unique, coherent whole, at the same time vividly appealing to the viewer.

The curators of the exhibition, Wojciech Szymański and Joanna Warsza, wrote that 'in reference to the title of this year's Biennale (*Milk of Dreams*), [the artist] creates a magical world – a kind of temporary and adventurous shelter – an asylum offering hope and respite', meant to help people regain a sense of community and rebuild their relationships with others. In light of the terrifying war taking place in the centre of Europe, this is undoubtedly an important and relevant aim. It is being implemented unprecedentedly and on an unprecedented scale by the Government of the Republic of Poland and the people of Poland, who, guided by the law of love, have received and continue to receive an endless sea of Ukrainian refugees into their homes. On 21 March 2022, there will be over two million one hundred thousand of them in Poland. This providentially gives added depth to the meaning of the Polish Pavilion in Venice in 2022.

Janusz Janowski, PhD

Commissioner of the Polish Pavilion
Director of the Zachęta – National Gallery of Art

Re-enchanting the World!

For over twenty years, the project for the Polish Pavilion of the International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia has been selected in an open competition organised by the Pavilion's custodian, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art.

The competition panel, appointed by the Minister of Culture and National Heritage, is composed of critics, curators, representatives of the ministry, directors of cultural institutions involved in promoting Polish art, as well as artists and curators involved in previous editions and ready to share their practical knowledge on implementing the project in the pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Each time, within the very broad framework of the competition, a different jury has a chance to work out the final criteria on whose basis it selects one of the many fine projects to be presented. Each project conforming to the budget (it is financed from transparent public funds) and the technical and organisational capabilities of the Polish Pavilion is submitted by a curator whose name is not revealed during the deliberations. It is then vigorously discussed by a group of art professionals and enthusiasts, not only in terms of its artistic value, but also its potential to come about, and its resonance in times marked by social and political issues, sometimes in relation to the theme of the main exhibition.

At the autumn 2021 competition meeting – having familiarised itself with the submissions and after a long and thorough discussion – the jury, in an open two-stage vote, selected the project by Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, *Re-enchanting the World*, proposed by curators Wojciech Szymański and Joanna Warsza (emblem Bacht). The jury pointed out the unusually attractive visual form (opening the pavilion to a wide audience) combined with the original and mindful ideological construction, 'proposing a new narrative for the constant migration of images and mutual influences between Romani, Polish and European culture'. The artist's personal experience and local stories are creatively intertwined with, among other things, the tradition of Renaissance frescoes, while private iconography is combined with symbolism and allegory from centuries ago.

I would like to thank the jurors with whom we made this joint decision: Mateusz Adamkowski – director of the Department of State Patronage of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, Prof. Maciej Aleksandrowicz – director of the Centre of Polish Sculpture in Orońsko, Piotr Bernatowicz, PhD – director of the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, Prof. Jacek Friedrich – director of the National Museum in Gdańsk, Alicja Knast – director of the National Gallery in Prague, Agnieszka Komar-Morawska – director of the Department of National Cultural Institutions of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, Joanna Mytkowska – director of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Joanna Malinowska – artist representing Poland at the Biennale Arte 2015, Barbara Schabowska – director of the Adam Mickiewicz Institute, Sylwia Świsłocka-Karwot, PhD – director of the Wrocław Contemporary Museum, Prof. Andrzej Szczerski – director of the National Museum in Krakow, Jarosław Suchan – director of the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, Prof. Tomasz Wendland – director of Mediations Biennale Polska and Karolina Ziębińska-Lewandowska, PhD – director of the Museum of Warsaw.

I believe that this project, which is now materialising in all the richness of its aesthetics and content, of the exhibition, the catalogue, the activities and collaborations that have taken place along the way and have yet to take place, is capable of re-enchanting the world. Right here and now, for we need it badly. And for this faith and work I would like to thank those who have taken on this task: the artist, Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, the curators Joanna Warsza and Wojciech Szymański, and the whole team working with them.

Hanna Wróblewska

President of the Jury of the competition for the curatorial project for the exhibition in the Polish Pavilion at the 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia
Commissioner of the Polish Pavilion 2010–21

INTRODUCTION

WOJCIECH
SZYMAŃSKI

JOANNA
WARSZA

Re-enchanting the World is Małgorzata Mirga-Tas's manifesto on Roma identity and art, drawing inspiration from the Renaissance frescoes of the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara. The project attempts to expand the European iconosphere and history of art with representations of Roma culture. To this end, the interior of the Polish pavilion has been built as a kind of 'picture palace',[1] an installation of large-format textiles. Their structure, arrangement, forms and motifs allude to the famous astrological calendar frescos of Ferrara.

The symbolism of the interior of the palace, including zodiac signs, the decan system, allegories of months, cyclicity and the migration of images across time and continents – between India, Persia, Asia Minor, ancient Greece, Egypt and Europe – are the visual and ideological points of reference for the artist's new work. Referencing images of key importance for European art history and visuality, Małgorzata Mirga-Tas 'appropriates' and inscribes them in a specific Polish-Roma identity and vernacular historical experience.

The exhibition is based on the ideas of transnationality, cyclicity and the evolution of meanings, proposing a new narrative about the continuous cultural migration of images and mutual influences between Roma, Polish and European cultures. By constructing her own version of the Renaissance Palazzo inside the Polish Pavilion, the artist constructs a kind of temporary and chance asylum, offering the viewers hope and respite. The exhibition is also a potential place for establishing new, temporary relations, a refuge beyond time and space, in which – as in the Palazzo Schifanoia, described by art historian Aby Warburg – the paintings collected by the artist, when you listen to them closely, reveal 'beneath the manifold traces of their wanderings from age to age and from nation to nation, that a . . . heart still beats within them.'[2]

1 Ali Smith, *How to Be Both*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 2014, p. 40.

2 Aby Warburg, *Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara*, in idem, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, trans. David Britt, Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 1999, p. 584.

The entrance portal of the Polish Pavilion is covered with a decorative fabric depicting the Wheel of Fortune from the famous fifteenth-century Colleoni-Baglioni deck of tarot cards (after 1450). The advent of tarot cards in Europe at the end of the fourteenth century coincided with the arrival of the first Roma on the continent. The tarot game was especially favoured at the ducal court of Ferrara, where the cards were also used for fortune-telling.[3] Yet only in the eighteenth century did the cards become widely associated with magic and occultism. At that time, the Roma community also began using them for telling the future. The Wheel of Fortune on the façade of the pavilion opens and introduces the exhibition. The card symbolises cyclicity, changeability, transgression, it is both a beginning and an end.

The installation is made of twelve parts, corresponding to the months of the calendar. Each panel is divided into three (upper, middle and lower). The result is three sets of pictures, ringing the walls.

The upper band has pictures depicting the Roma people's past. It is the story of a mythical journey and the arrival of Roma communities in Europe. The starting point is a series of seventeenth-century prints by the Lorraine engraver Jacques Callot, entitled *The Gypsies/Life of the Egyptians*. The prints depict scenes from Roma life, accompanied by anti-Gypsy distichs. At the same time, they constitute evidence of a quasi-colonial, ethnographic view of the nomads, already being portrayed as the Other of Europe. The artist uses the prints as a basis for her own works, large-format collages sewn from fabrics and materials gathered at the Roma settlement in her native Czarna Góra. The gesture of appropriating portraits of her ancestors from 400 years ago is also an attempted operation on her identity, to recover her history and regain control over how the visual narrative

3 On the relationship between tarot cards and fortune-telling in fifteenth-century Ferrara see: Robert Klein, 'Les tarots enluminés du XVe siècle', *L'Œil*, no. 145, 1967, and Sergio Samek Ludovici, 'The Game of Tarots and the Visconti-Sforza Packs: Critical Examination', in *Tarots: The Visconti Pack in Bergamo and New York. Text by Italo Calvino*, trans. William Weaver, Parma: Franco Maria Ricci, 1975.

of the Roma and their identity in Polish culture are created. The disenchantment of images in Małgorzata Mirga-Tas's works is both a symbolic reversal of the fate of the world and an attempt to build what Ariella Aïsha Azoulay would call a *potential history*, as non-violent and anti-imperial.[4]

The middle band is a place where the re-enchantment of the world occurs through feminine power, joined with astrology and the tarot-card symbols. Portraits of Roma women are combined with symbolism from Renaissance cards and astrological signs and decans from the Palazzo Schifanoia. Combining images of real women with magic and astrology turns them into allegorical guardians of fate, goddesses and prophetesses. Here the artist creates portraits of women who have played an important role in her life, simultaneously building an affective visual archive of Romani herstories. Among the women who especially inspired her are artist Delaine Le Bas, activist Nicoletta Bitu, scholar Ethel C. Brooks, singer and composer Esma Redžepova, Romani genocide survivor and activist Krystyna Gil, Małgorzata Mirga-Tas's mother Grażyna and her grandmother Józefa, and artist Ceija Stojka.

The lower band of the piece consists of pictures of contemporary Roma life. Here the artist has depicted everyday life in her hometown, Czarna Góra, and in other Roma settlements in Podhale and Spiš, regions to which she is closely connected. The artist's vibrant, ornamental patchworks, sculptures, screens, chapels and collage-paintings often depict scenes from the everyday life of Romani settlements. They mainly present women, their relationships and alliances, and shared activities, though children and animals also appear. The portraits are created from the wardrobes of the people depicted. The skirts, kerchiefs and shirts are sewn from bits of curtains, drapes and sheets, becoming literal carriers of micro- and macro-histories, and ones that are closely tied to the body. The title of the project was inspired by Silvia Federici's book

4 See: Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, London: Verso, 2019.

Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons (2018). Its author proposes re-enchanting the world as a way of recovering the idea of community and rebuilding relationships with others, including non-human actors: animals, plants, water or mountains. As such, re-enchanting – a non-violent process in which women play an important role – reverses the unfortunate fate of the world, shaking off its evil spell.

The *Re-Enchanting the World* exhibition is accompanied by this book you are now holding in your hands. As we worked on it, our intent was to reflect the tripartite and tri-temporal structure of Małgorzata Mirga-Tas's installation. This idea materialised through the book's graphic design, as well as through its 'diction': the heteroglossia and multidirectionality of the texts within it. All of them were written from different perspectives, in prose, poetry, or essays, and deal with aspects and contexts vital to the artist's work.

The book opens with a piece by Scottish writer Ali Smith, in which she reveals a fascination for Ferrara's Palazzo Schifanoia, taking us inside this palace of pictures. Her novel *How to Be Both* was an inspiration for the exhibition, and she herself joins Aby Warburg and Małgorzata Mirga-Tas in the spotlight in another piece, written by Robert Kusek and Wojciech Szymański. It deals with the 'life after life' (*Nachleben*) of the famous palace and presents the idea of the wandering of pictures, fundamental to Warburg's interpretation and the work of Mirga-Tas. The next two texts are devoted to the artist's work *sensu stricto*. In the first of these, Joanna Warsza analyses Mirga-Tas's work in the context of decolonialising practices and a notion she borrows from Ethel C. Brooks, 'a feminism of the minority', calling attention to the collective process of creating large-format fabrics and, above all, their materiality and structure. The author of the other piece is Ethel C. Brooks, whose works inspired us while working on the Polish Pavilion exhibition. The remarkable, personal and poetic essay by this Romani-American scholar describes the interior of a 'palace built by an artist' in Venice and joins it to existing categories serving to provide a better understanding of Romani culture, as well as reflections by Silvia

Federici on the work of re-enchanting the world. Rounding off the book is a piece by Damian Le Bas. This British-Romani writer travelled to the artist's hometown of Czarna Góra in November 2021, visiting her studio, and was among the first to see her work being made for the exhibition. His report from his trip weaves freely with autobiographical motifs and an erudite essay on the art of the Renaissance and from the artist's native region; it is a meditation of sorts on her most important place on earth, Romani art and a wholly liberated imagination.

These essays are accompanied by shorter literary pieces by two Romani poets from Czarna Góra – the artist's uncle, Jan Mirga, and the singer Teresa Mirga. In their imaginations we believe we find motifs vital to the work of Małgorzata Mirga-Tas. Although she uses a different language and medium, her artistic identity was also shaped by her Romani home settlement. Some of the artist's statements published in the book are devoted to this place.

The visual material presented here is just as important. Apart from the photographs of the main works in *Re-Enchanting the World*, we have decided to print pictures documenting the process of their creation. As such, readers will find photographs of frescoes from the Palazzo Schifanoia taken during our study trip to Ferrara, the artist's sketches and cartoons upon which the fabrics were based, and photographs from her studio at Zakopane's Imperial Hotel, where she and her co-workers created a 'palace of pictures'.

Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to all those who contributed to this book coming together in its final form. We thank the authors of the texts: Ethel C. Brooks, Robert Kusek, Damian Le Bas, Jan Mirga, Teresa Mirga and Ali Smith; the translators and editors: Soren Gauger, Małgorzata Jurkiewicz, Ewa Kanigowska-Gedroyć, Dorota Karaszewska, Jerzy Kozłowski, Andrzej Mirga and Izabela Suchan; our photographers, Daniel Rumiancew and Bartosz Solik, and our graphic designer, Agata Biskup. Our gratitude also goes to the team at Zachęta – National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, with whom we have worked to prepare the exhibition for the past

six months: Joanna Andruszko, Ewa Mielczarek and Joanna Waśko. Above all, however, we would like to thank the artist, Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, and her co-workers, Halina Bednarz, Małgorzata Brońska and Stanisława Mirga, whose work truly has re-enchanted our world.

Jan Mirga
Dźidźipen

Ech dźidźipen, dźidźipen
Keci andre tu bangipen
He harmonia he mariben

Jekhvar ućes jekhvar tele
E sereja ande chmuri
Lebo ande kovle phuvia

Jekhvar phenesa jekhvar mangesa
Jekhvar daravesa jekhvar kośesa
Sovlahenca bio nav
He hohavipnasa śilale mujesa

Ternipnenca upre chmuri
Phuripnenca paśo grobi
Ande tute he bikamlipen he kamlipen

Bigodźakri jekh pal aver
Te oblel tut he te avel
No he te dźivel, dźivel, dźivel...

Jan Mirga
Life

Oh, life, life,
With all your complications
And your harmony and contradictions

First high up, then in the dumps
Head in the clouds
Or in the swamps

First a command, then a request
First a caution, then a threat
After nameless vows
Come stony-faced treacheries

Youth spent hovering over clouds
And old age spent hovering over the graves
And hatred in you, and Love

With unimaginable affection
To embrace you and exist
And to live, to live, to live . . .

ROOMS / MONTHS

(Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara
any time / anywhere)

ALI
SMITH

There's marvellous life in heaven. There's marvellous life on earth.

In between, in the space between the two, dividing the two, linking the two, like a conduit between them, there's something more mysterious.

I'm talking about the late fifteenth-century fresco panels that make the Room of the Months at the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara, Italy, where Duke Borso D'Este, to flatter his ego and to act as a kind of perennial advertising campaign for what a fine leader he was, commissioned a year's worth of images of his life to be made not just *round* the walls of this room, but because they're frescoes, as part of the very structure of the room. Artists congregated in the main hall in the late 1460s; half a millennium ago they set up their scaffolding and painted figurations of the months of the year on these walls from ceiling to foot, till the walls were covered in people, creatures, happenings real and imagined, actual and mythical, in a frieze that depicts life as a visually layered structure, tier upon tier upon tier. Above there's the heavens with their gods and goddesses. Below there's how we pass our days on the earth.

In between?

Something altogether other.

What's survived of this series of fresco works tells anyone standing in the warmth and life of this fine high room plenty about what it means to live socially, spiritually, imaginatively, and something of great significance about the passing of time, and something liminal that gestures to a place where the symbols and the realities in our lives can meet.

So come on, here we go, down a quiet, bright and often completely unpeopled street in the Italian city of Ferrara, a city that itself sits on a songline between ancient and modern. On this sunlit street behind a wide fine brick frontage and an imposing set of doors, with a ticket in your hand graced by the goddess Venus, go up the stairwell and through the curtained archway, into this warm high room, strangely welcoming, often near-empty.

It's a room full of life.

It's acutely full of life because some of its art is still here and some of it's disappeared.

You stand in it and the walls come to life round you. You see, by turning a full circle on your heel and looking at walls on which figurations of all the months once were (now only some survive, but even the ones that have completely faded are still part of the room in their gone-ness) how the brightness and the fading become the passage of not just a single year with its presences, its gaps, its losses, its stalwart and restored vividness, but of all the years, the centuries. You see how time will fade things not properly made, how time will honour things made well, and how time is a social thing, an imaginary, imagined, fantasised, beautified, cracked-in-three and fused-together past-present-and-future thing.

You experience time as a multilayered sequential revelation, one that moves backwards and forwards both at once, and even so how something sits still, calm and understood, at the core of it: an understanding of how we pass our time, of how time will pass us by, and of what will remain of us after it does. I mean *remain* in all the ways: socially, dreamingly, naturally, imaginatively, brightly, fadedly, memorially, historically, but above all vitally.

Being in this room is like inhabiting time itself in a thinking / feeling way both at once. It makes you crane your neck upwards, hold the back of it, aching, to make out the details in the pictures nearest the ceiling, especially on the brightest and most strangely magnetic of these walls, the far wall with the frescoes featuring the months of March, April and May, where the paradisical gatherings of beautiful eternals, gods and goddesses, swans, birds of all kinds, and maidens, lovers, newborns, geniuses, musicians, spinners, weavers of cloth and fate, gather round themselves in merry utopias.

Or you lose yourself looking straight ahead at the pictures at human eye level, where history unfolds round versions of the Duke in Ferrarese society which, yes, flatter him as he wanted, but look more closely, because they simultaneously satirise him, at least on this brightest and most beautiful of the walls. That dominant narrative he paid for when he commissioned the pictures of himself for this pleasure palace that'd celebrate his authority and reveal to all the people he ruled, and their children, and their children's children, just what a wonderful Duke he was? Everything is thrown into question, and the question's both wide-focus and close-focus, partly about the larger picture and partly about the gift of each and every tiny narrative detail.

The eye and the mind and something in the spirit of anyone in this room will stand in wonder at the central tier of the frieze, the liminal space, a strip of figuration featuring such strange and powerful gestural figures in a choreography that connects and blocks the earthly world from the upper world. It's a place where the *symbols* for the months and the seasons live. They're powerful, way more powerful than any Duke, and mysterious, and esoteric, and yet they're still as human as you yourself are, as mundane and real *and* eternal both as that little dog at the feet of, of, –

well, what or who is that man, in the central band for the month of April, with the patient and diffident little dog at his feet?

(Let's take just that one month and have a closer glance at it.)

What can such a figure mean? He's naked, except for the flow of a narrow sheet blowing in the air over his dark groin then under his arm and round the back of his head, and he's tusked, like something a lot wilder than a man. He's standing in front of a very real-looking pony or horse, sturdy, from tongue to fetlock. But in one hand the man is holding a lethal looking arrow, and in the other flat open hand – flat and open because it's as if he's happy to display its strangeness and fierceness, happy too to let it fly free if it wishes, though it's also as if it's happy to sit on his hand like a hawk – he's holding a live, winged, sharp-toothed dragon-lizard thing, with a tail like a snake. It's a creature that looks as fierce as he does. It's like there's an agreement between the creatures: horse, dog, dragon-lizard, man. They're ready for something. But what?

Next to this man and his creatures there's a booted and turbaned and also otherwise near-naked human being, and he's holding a large key and floating in mid air as if seated comfortably in mere air, above a bull that's lit all over its skin by stars then lit from below by a smiling sun.

Next to them? A longhaired and richly clothed and necklaced beautiful woman in red. She seems to be in the middle of a natural dance or conversation, some kind of sweet negotiation, with a small child, also in red.

The reds are made even more richly red by the deep blue which the artist who painted these frescoes for the months of March, April and May that cover this far wall of the room, used for this liminal band between heaven and earth.

Francesco del Cossa is the name of the artist who painted these figures and these three months on this far wall, by far the most arresting (as well as the longest lasting) of the fresco panels. But we only know this name by luck and chance.

Four centuries after this room was finished, long after the pleasure palace, in some disrepair, had become a tobacco store and a workshop and its walls had been whitewashed and nobody still living remembered anything about a room of the months, or a painted fresco frieze, one day some whitewash flaked off the walls. The people in the workshop saw faces appearing through the whiteness.

They cleaned the walls. They declared the room a rediscovered work by the great Ferrarese artist Cosimo Tura.

Then, some years later, a letter surfaced in an archive in Modena. It was addressed to the Duke who commissioned the room, and declared it was from the artist in charge of painting the months of March, April and May in the fresco frieze. He was asking for more money than the other artists in the room were getting, because, as he said, his work, at every level, was better than theirs. He was no mere jobbing apprentice but the real thing, he said, and more, he was using the latest fresco techniques and the best possible materials.

It was signed Francesco del Cossa.

The Duke had written on this letter in pencil:

Give him the same as everyone else.

It's one of the earliest proofs in existence of an artist asking for more. Or of aesthetic arrogance. Or of an artist asking to be paid their real worth.

Which of these is most true is immediately evident when you stand in the room and look round at the panels.

There's life in the work by del Cossa, and time, and satire, and an understanding that goes between humans and creatures, and mystery. There's grace. There's an understanding of what human worth is.

Stand under April's creatures and the planets and stars in the blue, its gracious and mesmerising wild man, gracious and mysterious key-holding man, gracious mother and child. Above them the goddess Venus gently overcomes the war-god Mars, surrounded by lovers, musician, graces, spring creatures, teeming fertility, moving forward in a heavenly chariot drawn by happy swans. Below them there's a day in the life of Ferrara in 1469, a town teeming with nobility and madmen, finery and prostitutes, games and politics, diffident people, solemn horses and dogs and fighting birds.

A horse looks back out at us, makes eye contact, resigned, gentle, reproving, knowing.

This is the knowledge with which we come away from the room of the months:

that a room like this one has survived the distances to treat us to such a knowing gaze,

that the months of the year make room for all of us regardless of where we are in time,

that time's the long game, and what's lost will be balanced by an inevitable and wondrous process of discovery and rediscovery,

that the mysteries we encounter when it comes to reality and imagination, history and myth, will always be layered into us; more, they'll be what form us,

that there's an art to revealing time's dimensions and our own false and true hierarchies,

that the months *are* the rooms we inhabit, that these rooms are teeming with life, that what we do with that life, its mystery, and with our own rooms and months, is key to the spirit by which something survives of our worth against the odds,

and that a room like this, an art like this, then, now, or in the future, unites us all.


TICIA

LIFE AFTER LIFE

Aby Warburg, Ali Smith, and Małgorzata Mirga-Tas in the Palazzo Schifanoia

WOJCIECH
SZYMAŃSKI

ROBERT
KUSEK

This is the story of three afterlives of the 'picture palace', the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara, and the Renaissance frescoes that it houses.

THE FIRST AFTERLIFE

At the turn of 1910 and 1911, Aby Warburg went on a trip to Italy that took him to Venice, Bologna and Ravenna, though his real destination was Ferrara. By no means was this his first Italian journey; he had been making pilgrimages there since 1888, when he took his first trip as a student of art history. This first stay had some serious consequences for Warburg's private life – while in Florence he met his future wife[1] – yet the 1910–11 journey was also about to revolutionise art history, both as an academic discipline and in methods of 'reading' pictures. During this time, Warburg did not discover any paintings for art history, hidden under the layers of plaster or in the nooks and crannies of an antique shop. He achieved something else: he shed *new* light on existing and well-known images, i.e. the frescoes in the Hall of the Months (Salone dei Mesi) of the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara – a series of twelve mural paintings, only seven of which survived until Warburg's day. In this way, he announced

1 Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, London: Phaidon, 1986, p. 44.

a new way of seeing pictures, a new method, which he called iconology.[2]

When Warburg visited Ferrara, the Palazzo Schifanoia and its monumental frescoes were wrapped in an aura of mystery and obscurity. The reasons for this were manifold. First, little was known about the paintings' origins. Second, the circumstances of their late discovery were unclear. Third, they were some of the very few Renaissance paintings that had survived a devastating earthquake in Ferrara in 1570 and the city's subsequent annexation by the Papal States.[3] Most importantly, however, the Schifanoia pictures had a puzzling iconography – at least until Warburg's revolutionary interpretation.

The late-fourteenth-century edifice and its garden were modelled on the suburban villa. Its function was clearly defined by its name, *schivar la noia*, a flight from boredom to entertainment/delight (*delizie*). Refurbished and extended to become a palace in the second half of the fifteenth century by Borso d'Este, the Duke of Ferrara, it was decorated with magnificent frescoes. This suburban residence lost its function when the d'Este family was forced to abandon the city in the late sixteenth century. It repeatedly changed owners in the next few decades until, in the early eighteenth century, the building was purchased by the Tassoni family and given a major refurbishment. Sold by the Tassonis in 1736, it was transformed into a tobacco factory. The walls in the first-floor grand room with Renaissance frescoes were painted white.[4] For decades thereafter, the images disappeared not only from the walls, but also from collective memory. These lime-covered frescoes were discovered and praised in 1820 by

2 Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 105.

3 Elizabeth Blair MacDougall, *Fountains, Statues, and Flowers: Studies in Italian Gardens of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1994, p. 98.

4 Anna Maria Visser Travagli, *Schifanoia e il Centenario del Museo*, in *Aby Warburg e le metamorfosi degli antichi dèi*, ed. Marco Bertozzi, Modena: Franco Cosimo Panini, 2004, p. 4.

the painter Giuseppe Saroli.[5] Consequently, in times when interest in the Italian Renaissance underwent a great resurgence, the frescoes were reborn and their second life began – their life-after-life (*Nachleben*), to employ the term Warburg himself coined.

Now that they were restored to the world, the frescoes became a source of inspiration for writers and poets, such as Gabriele D'Annunzio and Ezra Pound, but also for art historians. The latter, being diligent practitioners of the formalist method, were particularly interested in establishing the authorship of the Schifanoia frescoes. Their attribution was neither easy nor unequivocal. The 'first recourse', typically inestimable in such circumstances, *The Lives of the Artists* by Giorgio Vasari, remained silent on the Schifanoia mural paintings, as if the biographer had never heard of the Palazzo Schifanoia. It could be argued that Vasari deliberately neglected the fifteenth-century Ferrarese paintings, as his study either omitted or confused the lives of three major artists from the Ferrarese school: Cosimo Tura, Francesco del Cossa, and Ercole de' Roberti, all of whom were possible suspects in being behind the Palazzo Schifanoia frescoes.

Initially, it was assumed that the frescoes were painted by Tura, the oldest, and most versatile and favoured of the three, and a leading painter at the court of Duke Borso d'Este.[6] This belief, however, was challenged towards the end of the nineteenth century. Awareness of workshop-based, or collective, production of art in the early Renaissance was accompanied by a discovery in the local archives. If, to this day, Tura is believed to have draughted a composition sketch for the entire series of twelve murals,[7] it is

5 Giovanni Sassu, *Palazzo Schifanoia. Cenni storici*, in *Schifanoia e Francesco del Cossa. L'oro degli Estensi*, ed. Pietro Di Natale, Giovanni Sassu, Ferrara: Fondazione Ferrara Arte, 2020, p. 22.

6 Peter Burke, *The Italian Renaissance: Culture and Society in Italy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 94.

7 Stephen J. Campbell, Michael W. Cole, *A New History of Italian Renaissance Art*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2012, p. 209.

others – 'a number of artists of widely varying abilities'[8] – who emerged as having rendered the paintings. Among them, del Cossa proved to be the most outstanding and original contributor. The archival discovery which testified to the involvement of del Cossa in creating the murals was made by Adolfo Venturi, an Italian art historian who found a letter to the Duke of Ferrara from del Cossa.[9] The missive not only confirms del Cossa's work in the Palazzo Schifanoia but, most importantly, it stipulates which parts of the frescoes he painted: the months of March, April, and May, that is, three out of the twelve paintings commissioned by the Duke. The letter is of particular value to art history. Not only does it serve as a major source of information about del Cossa, it also speaks volumes about the artist's personality and character. In this letter del Cossa bitterly complains about his poor salary, and about being put on a par with artists unequal to him in talent or fame. The missive did not have the effect del Cossa desired. The Duke of Ferrara did not award the painter a better salary, which resulted in del Cossa leaving Ferrara and moving to Bologna for good – not too far away, but out of reach of the d'Este family.

Like most Quattrocento works, the frescoes in the Palazzo Schifanoia were the product of a collaborative endeavour – the effort of many artists and the corollary of a specific social order and its system of producing artistic meaning. They were the expression of aesthetic preferences, expectations, and taste of a patron, as well as the skills and artistic predilections of the workshop in which they was created. However, in the frescoes by del Cossa, the duplexity of Quattrocento paintings is far more complex and intriguing. If we were to describe them through the relationship postulated by Michael Baxandall,[10] we would identify, on the one hand, del Cossa, the proud painter demanding

8 Aby Warburg, 'Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara', in idem, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, trans. David Britt, Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute: 1999, p. 572.

9 Warburg, 'Italian Art . . . ', p. 572.

10 Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 1.

better pay, and, on the other, Duke Borso d'Este, the patron. Yet this dual relationship needs to be re-examined to accommodate other agents. For one is entitled to, and, in fact, should pose the following question: Who created the complex iconography of the images, a task that exceeded the abilities and competences of both the painter and the duke?

The above question inevitably leads us to recognise the duality of the Schifanoia frescoes. The doubleness (bothness) of the image seen as a concatenation of del Cossa's and Borso d'Este's intentions needs to be supplemented by yet another bilateral relationship, between the painter who gives a concrete shape and form to an idea and a philosopher who conceives and presents it. The philosopher in question, who conceived the iconographic and ideological background of the Schifanoia frescoes and approved and supervised its proper execution was Pellegrino Prisciani, a Ferrara-based man of letters, professor of astronomy at the University of Ferrara, librarian and courtly chronicler of the d'Este family.[11]

This duality and bothness of the image was the source of some grave concern to del Cossa, as testified by his letter to Duke Borso. He not only addressed the patron with a request for additional payment but, first and above all, wrote to Borso directly, brushing off Prisciani, the Duke's superintendent, whom del Cossa considered ignorant in matters of art, and whom he tried to avoid at all costs.[12]

The twelve frescoes correspond to the twelve months, and are each divided into three parallel sections (or spheres). Every sphere has a different objective. Warburg observes:

> Each month is represented by three parallel registers, one above the other, each with its own independent pictorial space and approximately half-life-size figures. In the highest

11 Warburg, 'Italian Art . . . ', p. 581; Nicola Iannelli, *Simboli e Constellazioni. Il mistero di palazzo Schifanoia. Il codice astronomico degli Estensi*, Firenze: Angelo Pontecorboli Editore, 2021, p. 33.

12 Warburg, 'Italian Art . . . ', p. 582.

> zone, the Olympian deities ride past in triumphal chariots; the lowest shows the worldly activities of the court of Duke Borso, who can be seen attending to official business or cheerfully riding out to hunt. The intervening zone belongs to the astral world, as would in any case be apparent from the zodiac sign that appears in the centre of each field, attended by three mysterious figures.[13]

As we have mentioned, prior to Warburg, the Schifanoia frescoes' tripartite compositions were problematic for interpreters. Of course, it was evident and incontestable that the lower panels showed images of courtly life in Ferrara and Borso d'Este, and narrated a story about a good and just ruler. The top panels, which featured Olympian gods, had also been accurately interpreted and read. The real challenge was posed by the middle sections, in which the signs of the zodiac could be identified, but scholars remained confounded by the figures surrounding them – they were deemed to be 'strange',[14] 'confusing', or 'obscure'.[15] This failure to interpret the middle sections made it impossible to understand the whole of the composition, comprised of three types of panels. 'The complicated and fantastic symbolism of these figures has hitherto resisted all attempts at interpretation,' Warburg declared.[16] With this argument, Warburg rejected the popular understanding of the Renaissance as the emancipation of the rational world-view,[17] drawing heavily from a repertoire of Greek and Roman forms. In his iconographic explorations, Warburg, who wanted to make the Renaissance a key to the modern world,[18] moved beyond European culture. He wrote: 'By extending the purview of the investigation to the East, I shall show them [figures in

13 Ibid., p. 565.
14 Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982, p. 168.
15 Kazimierz Chłędowski, *Dwór w Ferrarze*, Lwów: H. Altenberg, 1907, p. 495.
16 Warburg, 'Italian Art . . . ', p. 565.
17 Ryszard Kasperowicz, 'Obraz w koncepcji Aby'ego Warburga', *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa*, vol. 2/3, 2011, p. 38.
18 Ibid.

the middle panels] to be survivals of the astral images of the Greek pantheon. They are, in fact, symbols for the fixed stars – although over the centuries, in their wanderings through Asia Minor, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Arabia, and Spain, they have lost their Grecian clarity of outline.'[19] In short, Warburg's reading (and method) showed how images and forms travel through times and cultures, how the past exists in the present, how pagan Antiquity arrived in the Renaissance court in Ferrara.

In explaining the middle section of the March painting, Warburg turns to the notion of decans, a basic unit of the ecliptic. According to Greek astrology, every month was comprised of three separate decans. This was Warburg's first interpretative step, allowing him to explain the fact that in March, Aries is surrounded by three figures: a black man in rags, a woman in a red dress, and an androgynous young man holding a ring and an arrow. But how did the decans assume their forms? Why were they not represented differently? By choosing the example of the black man in rags, Warburg shows how forms, ideas, and modes of recollection (*Erinnerungsvermögen*) journey through the centuries.[20]

Warburg starts his investigation into the travels of figures/decans with Teukros's *Sphaera barbarica*, a 'system of fixed stars . . . devised probably in Asia Minor'.[21] He takes the figures' peregrinations, which start in Asia Minor and end in Italy, from Pietro d'Abano's *Astrolabium* – via Egypt, India, Persia, Spain, and France.[22] In reconstructing their travels, Warburg finds the decans in Abū Ma'šar's *Introductorium majus* – a text which 'brings us at last to the mysterious figures in the intermediate zone in the Palazzo Schifanoia. In the relevant chapter of his *Introductorium majus*, Abū Ma'šar gives a synopsis of three different codifications of the

19 Warburg, 'Italian Art . . . ', p. 565.
20 Idem, 'Italienische Kunst und internationale Astrologie im Palazzo Schifanoja zu Ferrara', in *L'Italia e l'arte straniera. Atti del X Congresso Internazionale di Storia dell'Arte in Roma*, ed. Adolfo Venturi, Roma: Maglione & Strini, 1922, p. 181.
21 Idem, 'Italian ArtArt . . . ', p. 566.
22 Ibid., p. 567.

fixed stars: the current, Arabian system; the Ptolemaic system; and finally the Indian system.'[23]

Who, then, is the first decan of Aries? Whose clothes is he wearing? As Warburg notes, in *Astrolabium* Aries is accompanied by two small figures, the first of whom is a man with a sickle and crossbow, identified as Perseus.[24] The Ferrarese fresco, however, depicts neither a sickle nor a crossbow. Instead, we have a black man in rags, tied with a rope. By tracing subsequent incarnations of the black Perseus, or the first decan of Aries, in Egyptian, Indian, and Arab astrology, Warburg carefully reconstructs the history of his guises and costumes, always referring to the specific iconographic examples.

The appearance of the decans, travellers through time and history, on the walls of the Renaissance palace testifies to an irrational, superstitious vision of life reliant on astrological interpretations. Putting scenes from the life of Duke Borso under the signs of the zodiac and symbols of the stars implies a belief in a close connection between earthly life and the heavenly sphere, as well as the former's dependence on the topologies of stars. However, we should keep in mind that 'what was crucial for Warburg was not the unriddling of the imaginary but something humanly disturbing about its presence'.[25] To paint the figures of the decans is tantamount to giving them life-after-life, or *Nachleben*. They emerge from the past into the present, thus becoming figures of an individual (though repeated) life.

THE SECOND AFTERLIFE

'One day in April 2013, I saw a picture,'[26] writes Ali Smith in her essay on the inspiration for her novel *How to Be Both*. 'The picture

23 Ibid., p. 569.
24 Ibid.
25 Podro, *The Critical Historians* . . . , p. 168.
26 Ali Smith, 'He looked like the finest man who ever lived', *The Observer*, 24 August 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/24/ali-smith-the-finest-man-who-ever-lived-palazzo-schifanoia-how-to-be-both (accessed 5 January 2022).

was in the art magazine *Frieze*,' she continues, 'and I was flicking through it having my breakfast coffee. I took a mouthful of coffee and opened it at a full-page reproduction of a painting so beautiful that it did something to my breathing and I nearly choked.'[27] The picture in question – 'old, but modern too'[28] – was the middle panel of the *Month of March* (*Mese di Marzo*) painted by del Cossa for the Hall of the Months.

It was the black man that particularly caught Smith's attention; by that time, she had been exploring some new ideas for the structure of her novel and, having discovered a book on Renaissance frescoes and the absence of the original underpaintings hidden under the surface – unless they had been damaged – she had been wondering 'if it might be possible to write a book consisting of something like this structure of layer and underlayer, something that could do both'.[29] Not being familiar with the painter or his work, Smith decided to travel to Ferrara – a city to which she had been first introduced by Giorgio Bassani's novels – to visit its palace of 'escaping from boredom' (*schivar la noia*), and also to learn more about del Cossa and his frescoes. This process ultimately led to completing *How to Be Both* in August 2014.

The book was published in two editions. One opens with the story of del Cossa and is followed by the fictional story of an English teenage girl named George. The other edition has the reverse arrangement; the novel starts with the narrative about George and is succeeded by a fictional autobiography of Francesco. This unusual structure was inspired by Smith's fascination with the technique of *buon fresco* and two images created when a fresco is being sketched: an underpainting (underlayer) that is subsequently covered by the *'real'* wall painting (upper layer).[30] Thus, by its very structure, the novel invites its readers

27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Alex Clark, 'There are two ways to read this novel, but you're stuck with it – you'll end up reading one of them', *The Guardian*, 9 September 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/06/ali-smith-interview-how-to-be-both#:~:text=Interview-,Ali%20Smith%3A%20'There%20are%20two%20ways%20to%20read%20this%20novel,up%20reading%20one%20of%20them' (accessed 5 January 2022).

to acknowledge its main themes: simultaneity versus sequentiality, singularity versus doubleness, sameness versus difference.

The del Cossa part opens in Room 55 of the National Gallery in London, where the painter is 'shot back into being'[31] in front of one of his pieces (*Saint Vincent Ferrer*) and next to a boy sitting and admiring the image of the saint. The ghost reveals himself to be one of the painters called to adorn 'the palace of not being bored'[32] in Ferrara, and starts narrating the story of his life – from his childhood to his commission to contribute to the Hall of the Months and up to his death from the plague in Bologna. The ghost of the fifteenth-century Italian painter is, however, not allowed to freely roam the streets of London. He remains tied to the boy: 'it is as if a rope attached to the boy is attached to me'.[33]

Throughout his narrative of the self, Francesco makes constant reference to the book's titular concern: bothness. Upon his arrival in 'picture palace',[34] that is, the National Gallery, the Italian painter immediately recognises his state as 'neither here nor there'.[35] When he starts drawing images and discovers the uses of perspective, he is quite amazed that 'things far away and close could be held together, in the same picture'.[36] He also says: 'Pictures can be both life and death at once and cross like a border between the two.'[37] In addition, God is always referred to as 'Fathermother Motherfather', Francesco's pieces are characterised by 'freshness and maturity both', while s/he is described as 'more than one thing'.[38] Finally, he openly voices the preoccupations of Smith, his creator: 'How to tell a story, but tell it more than one way at once, and tell another underneath it up-rising through the skin of it'.[39]

31 Ali Smith, *How to Be Both*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 2014, p. 39.
32 Ibid., p. 10.
33 Ibid., p. 38.
34 Ibid., p. 40.
35 Ibid., p. 5.
36 Ibid., p. 33.
37 Ibid., p. 158.
38 Ibid, pp. 39, 119, 98.
39 Ibid., p. 51.

The most overt manifestation of the principle of 'bothness' in Smith's narrative, however, is the figure of Francesco himself, as he has become fictionalised, and thus imagined by the writer. Despite preserving a number of 'facts', such as del Cossa's involvement in the Hall of the Months project, his complaint to Borso d'Este, his death in Bologna, and his collaboration with de' Roberti, and historical figures (Tura, Bartolomeo Garganelli), Smith not only invents most of the incidents from del Cossa's life, he also imagines Francesco was, in fact, a woman: the talented daughter of a brickmaker who, dressed as a boy, became her father's apprentice after her mother's premature death.

The mother's death and the gender shifts are two of the most evident thematic links between the two sections of Smith's novel. George is initially identified by the ghost of Francesco as a boy, her 'true' identity only becomes evident almost halfway through Francesco's narrative. Francesco is also aware of the fact that she is grieving – 'Most I see that around his eyes is the blackness of sadness (burnt peachstone smudged in the curve of the bone at both sides of the top of the nose).'[40]

The George section of Smith's novel is, one could argue, certainly much more conventional than the 'fantastical' one narrated by Francesco. Yet, apart from being more overtly thanatographic, it remains as 'hauntological' as the del Cossa section, not only because George is obsessively reminiscing about her deceased mother, but, above all, the narrative itself is temporarily disjointed, with the narrator simultaneously occupying both the present and the past. As in the del Cossa part, the reader is thus neither fully here (in the narrative present, with George trying to make sense of her loss, attending therapy sessions with Mrs. Rock, taking care of her brother, befriending and falling for a fellow schoolmate, and, finally, working on a project dedicated to del Cossa), nor there (in the past, with George and her mother spending time together, talking, and, most importantly, taking a trip to Ferrara to visit the Palazzo Schifanoia). The sense that

40 Ibid., p. 49.

the book is 'twisting time'[41] is predominantly achieved by shifts in grammar, such as those from present to past tense, 'Consider this moral conundrum for a moment, George's mother says to George who's sitting in the front passenger seat. Not says. Said.'[42]

Just as readers are diegetically challenged by the narrative's temporal conjunction of sequentiality and simultaneity, they are equally confronted with 'bothness' by means of the story's thematic preoccupations. Francesco's concern with 'how to be both' is reflected by George and her mother, and their multiple discussions on the nature of being: 'Past or present? George says. Male or female? It can't be both. It must be one or the other. Who says? Why must it her mother says.'[43] When they visit the Palazzo Schifanoia, the room is described as 'warm and dark. No, not dark, it's light. Both', while one of the figures on the blue strip, 'the playful rather dilettante richly dressed' in the March section of the Hall of the Months, as '[m]ale, female, both'.[44] The man in rags, on the other hand, is simultaneously seen as an allegory of 'laziness' and 'activity'.[45] George's mother also echoes Francesco's ideas (and, as already demonstrated, Smith's) about the art of *buon fresco*: 'It is like everything is in layers. Things happen right at the front of the pictures and at the same time they continue happening, both separately and connectedly, behind, and behind that, and again behind that, like you can see, in perspective, for miles. . . . The picture makes you look at both – the close-up happenings and the bigger picture.'[46]

Apart from mourning the dead mother and the gender confusion, there are other, more or less evident links between the two parts of Smith's novel. The most crucial one is that George is described as an artist; she not only surrounds herself with and exposes

41 Ibid., p. 191.
42 Ibid., p. 189.
43 Ibid., p. 194.
44 Ibid, pp. 235, 238.
45 Ibid., pp. 326–27.
46 Ibid., p. 239.

herself to works of art,[47] she creates them as well. She decorates the walls of her room in a manner not unlike the Hall of the Months: the images she uses are of female icons of the 1960s (Monica Vitti, among others), and a series of photographs she takes 'in honour of her mother's eyes'.[48] In this way, she creates her own 'palace' – not a palace of escaping from boredom, but of banishing grief and sorrow. Just like the Schifanoia was responsible for 'the literal cheering-up of her mother',[49] now it is up to her own Cambridge room to save her from despair – a process the reader is tempted to recognise as successful.

'Nothing is not connected', says George's mother when, having supper next to the castle of the d'Estes, she teaches her daughter about 'the presence of the past'.[50] The two sections are, indeed, connected by their themes, characters, and places. Yet one might be tempted to ask, what is the reason for bringing together the story of a fifteenth-century Ferrarese painter and a twentyfirst-century Cambridge girl? What is the meaning of this juxtaposition?

If Smith appears to reiterate del Cossa's gesture (but also Prisciani's, Tura's, and others') by bringing together two stories,

47 Especially film, performance, and music from the late 1960s and early 1970s: the works of Jean-Luc Godard (George watches his 1968 *Un film comme les autres*); Fabio Mauri and Pier Paolo Pasolini (when browsing the Internet, George stumbles across a photographic documentation of a 1975 performance of Mauri, who asked Pasolini to sit in the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Bologna in a white shirt and be a live screen for his movie, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, which was projected onto his chest); and Sylvie Vartan and Françoise Hardy (whose music George listens to). At one point in the novel, George and Helena discuss a picture of Vartan and Hardy taken by Jean-Marie Périer, the same one that features on the front cover of the book's first British edition. Furthermore, George is said to look like Vartan, hence, the front cover of *How to Be Both* displays the image of a person who is said to resemble George, while the back features the supposed self-portrait of del Cossa. When George and her mother visit Ferrara, they go to the museum and see an exhibition about Michelangelo Antonioni. After that, she hangs one of the walls in her room with a picture of Monica Vitti, one of Antonioni's favourite actresses.

48 Ibid, p. 371.

49 Ibid., p. 233.

50 Ibid., p. 291.

one the fantastical/hauntological (del Cossa's, which corresponds to the Olympian gods section) and the realistic/present-day (George's, which matches the depictions of the courtly life of the Duke of Ferrara), then the book's readers clearly need to reiterate Warburg's gesture. His assistance and guidance allow us to see *How to Be Both* as a novel which, by its very form, speaks of the travels (through time and space) of the third decan of March: a (fe)male figure from the Palazzo Schifanoia, 'the effeminate boy, the boyish girl, to balance the powerful masculine effect of the worker [black man in rags], . . . [who] holds both an arrow and a hoop, male and female symbols one in each hand'.[51] In short, it is the travels of the figure of androgyny, Hermaphroditus, the son of Aphrodite and Hermes who is merged with his lover, the water nymph Salmacis, and whose *Nachleben* comes into being in the characters of del Cossa and George.

THE THIRD AFTERLIFE

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas visited Ferrara in 2021, arriving at the Palazzo Schifanoia exactly one hundred years after Warburg's visit. She did not travel to Ferrara from Hamburg, but from her native Czarna Góra, and, unlike the art historian before her, she did not come to do a scholarly study of the Quattrocento painting. Nor was her purpose to write a book to compete with Ali Smith's novel. She certainly did not intend to work on the palace itself and its polychrome paintings, though this is not to say that she only wanted to use them as a pretext. Rather, she used the building, as well as its interior, its history and 'life after life' as a model and – as in the case of Ali Smith's book – as a template for her own narrative. In this sense, she interpreted the Palazzo Schifanoia as a timeless and universal vehicle for telling stories, through which she could also tell her own.

The story occupying the entire upper band is about the past of the Roma, whose origins are lost in the depths of history and have become mythologised. A past full of images and clichés created

51 Ibid., p. 297.

by non-Roma, which need to be appropriated and decolonised. It is also a story about the guardians of memory, Roma women in the roles of sibyls and guardian deities, who, in Mirga-Tas's artistic vision, populate the central strip of the composition, where the personifications of decans so fascinating to Aby Warburg and Ali Smith are found in the real Palazzo Schifanoia. They are accompanied by portraits of those dear to the artist, Roma and non-Roma, friends of different sexes, placed above the images of zodiac signs. Finally, this is a story about everyday life in settlements of Romani people in the south of present-day Poland – often despised by the non-Roma majority of Polish society, here elevated by monumental images/screens.

In Mirga-Tas's vision, the Olympian gods inhabiting the upper belt of the great hall of the Palazzo Schifanoia gave way to a sumptuous, multicoloured procession of Romani wanderers passing through the four seasons. Here, the artist made use of a popular early-Renaissance method of telling stories through images: the continuity narrative,[52] which involved placing depictions of the same figures, captured at different times, in a single image. Thus, in the long procession, which lasted twelve months, we have several portrayals of a woman wearing a headscarf and walking with dignity, or a cheerful boy with an iron cauldron on his head, as well as the non-human actors of the story: the same animals, donkeys, dogs, birds and horses, and trees, changing their foliage in spring and autumn.

This monumental interior frieze depicts a journey of people and, at the same time, of images, their life after life. The artist used four etchings by Jacques Callot (1592–1635), entitled *The Gypsies* (*Les Bohémiens*), also known by the title assigned to them in the artist's inventory of works from 1635, *The Lives of the Egyptians* (*La vie des Égyptiens*). Although the series of four prints was created in the 1720s in the artist's home town of Nancy, it is believed it

52 Lew Andrews, *Story and Space in Renaissance Art: The Rebirth of Continuous Narrative*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; Campbell, Cole, pp. 99–102.

draws from observations Callot made during his stay in Italy in the previous decade.[53] Here, the artist depicted groups of wanderers in mantles and feathered hats, often with weapons, hauling their belongings on horses and carts. The scene depicting an encampment shows the Roma playing cards, children sitting by a fire where food is being cooked, a woman giving birth under a tree and a man defecating off to one side. Their provisional, uncertain existence is shown as miserable, but also – and this is important for later portrayals of the Roma – not devoid of picturesque appeal. John F. Moffitt argues that Callot's four etchings, which are the visual equivalent of Pechon de Ruby's *La vie généreuse des mercelots, gueux et bohémiens* [The Extremely Interesting Life of Stallholders, Beggars and Gypsies],[54] published in Lyon in 1596, should, however, be read alongside writings of the time bearing testimony to the negative attitude of Europeans towards the Roma. The prejudice evident in Callot's works was neither surprising or unusual in his time. One might even say that this aversion was already institutionalised and confirmed in many European countries through anti-Roma legislation and expulsion edicts issued from the late fifteenth century onwards.[55] The sarcastic warnings in these writings tell us to keep an eye out for gypsy swindlers and pickpockets, fortune-tellers and well-armed vagabonds. At the same time, they point to another aspect of these depictions: firearms, swords and daggers identify the Roma as 'dangerous vagabonds', while fortune-telling brings them into the forbidden world of witchcraft.[56]

Just as important, however, is that the card-game motif Callot depicts, as well as the flirtatious, alluring gaze bestowed on the

53 Edward J. Sullivan, 'Jacques Callot's *Les Bohémiens*', *Art Bulletin*, vol. 59, no. 2, 1977, pp. 217–21.

54 David Cressy, *Gypsies: An English History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 30.

55 John F. Moffitt, 'Caravaggio's Gypsy Cheats: Naturalism as a Contemporary "Low-Life" Subject', in idem, *Caravaggio in Context: Learned Naturalism and Renaissance Humanism*, Jefferson and London: McFarland & Company, 2004, p. 53.

56 Bronisław Geremek, 'Cyganie w Europie średniowiecznej i nowożytnej', *Przegląd Historyczny*, vol. 75, no. 3, 1984, p. 575.

onlookers by the Roma woman on horseback, have, over time, become conventional gimmicks and clichés. Małgorzata Mirga-Tas has decided to face up to Callot's cycle. In a gesture of artistic re-appropriation, she has transformed these portraits of her presumed seventeenth-century ancestors, significant to the history of the representation of Roma by non-Roma, thus decolonising the history and historical perception of Roma communities. With no period Romani self-portraits or historical testimonies of how the Roma perceived themselves, the artist opted for a retrospective and phantasmagorical attempt at (re)creating and restituting images – a kind of pictorial fantasy equivalent to the biographical fantasy about Francesco/Francesca del Cossa told by Smith.

This reappropriation of ancestral portraits created four hundred years ago is, at the same time, an exercise in identity, the restitution of history and regaining control over contemporary ways of constructing a Romani visual narrative. It is, in the end, the creation of a symbolic, collective self-portrait on the ruins of a decolonised stereotype.

There are at least two more aspects of great importance for Mirga-Tas's palace of images, closely connected with the way of making pictures itself. This is the way the artist organises work in her studio, and the material that determines the technique and the medium of the works in the *Re-enchanting the World* exhibition. When embarking on the production of the exhibition at the Polish Pavilion in Venice, Mirga-Tas faced the challenge of organising her work so as to achieve the intended effect in a relatively short period of time – from October 2021 to April 2022. This meant creating several hundred square metres of images sewn from fabric. The organisation of the workspace and the division of tasks in the artist's studio are highly reminiscent of the collectivist method of producing the frescoes at the Palazzo Schifanoia, on which several large teams of painters worked. This model of artistic production, dictated by the strictly limited time of execution, its complexity and scale, also corresponds to the collective and communal creation of art characteristic of Małgorzata Mirga-Tas's entire oeuvre.

Stitched together from many pieces of material, the artist's works are often created in collaboration with the women who help her, they are the products of women's collective action. The picture at the bottom of the March panel is a good illustration of this. The artist has shown three women focused on joint, united work – using needles, thread and scissors to create a pictorial fabric. Their image can be read at least in two ways. On the one hand, they can be seen as the goddesses of fate, the three Moirai – Klotho, Lachesis and Atropos, or Parcae – Nona, Decima and Morta. This interpretation suggested by the March fresco in the Palazzo Schifanoia, where there is a scene of Minerva's triumph in the upper part. A group of women can also be seen at the loom, with the three spinners of human destiny sitting in the background. Mirga-Tas's painting is a portrait of real people and, at the same time, a self-portrait of the artist, with her mother Grażyna Mirga and her sister Stanisława Mirga, who also worked on the *Re-enchanting the World* exhibition. This exhibition would certainly not have been created in such a short period of time without the help and participation of two other women in the artist's studio, dressmakers from the Podhale region: Halina Bednarz and Małgorzata Brońska.

It is no coincidence that cooperation, female collaboration, resourcefulness and solidarity, values so dear to the artist, are especially prominent when she uses her favourite material – fabric – and a technique which she modestly calls patchwork. This coarse, vernacular technique, discursively and historically associated with the creativity of women who are not professional artists, has become a regular feature of the artist's work, though the term itself does not fully and accurately convey its essence. Indeed, some pictures included in the exhibition do feature this technique. It is visible, for example, in the backgrounds which have been stitched together by the artist and her collaborators. However, what comes to the fore here is another technique and medium which originated in the work of women: collage. Unlike patchwork, collage consists in sewing and sticking ready-made elements and fragments of clothes and fabrics to the background and joining pictorial and non-pictorial elements. Mirga-Tas uses this method constantly and in various ways.

Let us return for a moment to the painting of March. It is strikingly grounded in collage – it builds its depiction from elements of the 'real' world and their mimetic equivalents, which represent it. The artist combines painted parts (women's hair and faces) and pieces of fabric (a bench in front of a house, the wall of a building, the background) with objects like a real curtain glued to a window in the background, needles and pins which were used to make the picture and which became part of it, real coral earrings in the artist's mother's ears, or a rosary held by the artist's grandmother in the central band of the composition.

The curtain, needles, pins, beaded eyes of the earrings and the rosary do not function as mimetic equivalents of the real world. As elements of reality in the image, they clearly change the status of the image itself, whose function is less to symbolically or imitatively represent the portrayed people than render their tactile and palpable presence. The real objects belonging to the central figures of the paintings start to function as relics, remnants and traces.[57]

Thus the palace of Małgorzata Mirga-Tas's images also turns out to be a palace of memory. It is not only built of material traces and remnants (fragments of fabrics, materials, clothes, objects), the thing itself is a reservoir of crumbs of memory, both individual and collective. And so the black Perseus, the first decan of March, is reborn in the figure of Alfreda Markowska, known as Noncia (1926–2021), a Roma woman who saved several dozen Jewish and Roma children during World War II, and who, in Małgorzata Mirga-Tas's vision, becomes a guardian of the Roma and non-Roma collective memory. The androgynous figure, the third decan of March, takes the form of the artist's grandmother, Józefa Mirga (1922–99), a Roma Holocaust survivor who helped Małgorzata Mirga-Tas begin her artistic education at the Antoni Kenar State

57 Thus, the images turn into a kind of collage/reliquary. See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. John Goodman, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press 2005, pp. 139–219.

Visual Arts School in Zakopane. She became one of the guardians of the artist's individual memory.

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas's Palace of Images and Memory not only makes the past the present and gives new life to the Renaissance frescoes from the Palazzo Schifanoia, it is also a testimony to the belief in the power of the image, once lost, and now recovered.

Jan Mirga
E Rat

E rat na dźal sig joj hini meg adro drom
Korkori phirel e ćerheńengre dromenca
Anglune lampi miśto labarel
Ando durale galaktyki pherde ćerheńenca

Ko agor dromesko terdźol pas o veś
Thovel e jag kikidel o suno
Khine miśli traden sunale
Kaj uźarel pe lende e phirutneskro ućhaj

O Baro Verdan śvicinel judutenca
Khato ćhon he khate sune – phirutno bardos
Te aven amen phakha na kereki sar cirikla te dźas ko niebos
Te kamlipen so arakhel amen te drabaras dal o karti

Jan Mirga
Night

Night takes its time, it's still on the road
walking the starry trail alone.
Nimbly it goes, it lights the first lamps
of faraway galaxies with luminous stars.

At the end of the road outside the wood
it stops, lights a fire, curls up to bed.
Weary thoughts dreamily glide
where the wanderer and his shadow lay their head.

The Big Dipper shines, shrouded in the glow
of the moon and dreams – the wandering bard.
Oh, to have wings and not wheels, to soar like a bird,
and to foretell redemptive love from a pack of cards.

Visconti-Sforza Tarot Cards, #9 Wheel of Fortune, Milan, Italy, ca. 1450–80,
The Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.630.9. Purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan (1837–1913) in 1911

THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE

WOJCIECH
SZYMAŃSKI

The Wheel of Fortune is 'one of the most complicated images in the whole tarot game',[1] wrote Italo Calvino in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*. The representation has a long history in iconography and literature; as a symbol of the volatility and capriciousness of fate, it was popularised by the last great philosopher of antiquity, Boethius. Having experienced first-hand the vicissitudes of fate and his own downfall, he wrote the following in his *On the Consolation of Philosophy*, written in 523 AD from his imprisonment in Pavia: 'Mad Fortune sweeps along in wanton pride, / Uncertain as Euripus' surging tide. / Now tramples mighty kings beneath her feet, / Now sets the conquered in the victor's seat. / She heedeth not the wail of hapless woe, / But mocks the griefs that from her mischief flow. / Such is her sport; so proveth she her power; / And great the marvel, when in one brief hour / She shows her darling lifted high in bliss, / Then headlong plunged in misery's abyss.'[2] Boethius was executed the following year, yet his work, and the key concept of the Wheel of Fortune, became one of the central literary and artistic motifs of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance. One could say that Fortune had once again carried him to the top.

1 Italo Calvino, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, trans. William Weaver, London: Vintage, 1997, p. 18.

2 Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, *On the Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. H.R. James, 1897, p. 21.

An artistic rendering of Boethius's description is a card with the image of the Wheel of Fortune from the collection of The Morgan Library & Museum in New York, which Małgorzata Mirga-Tas consulted while working on the façade of the Polish Pavilion. The card comes from the magnificently decorated Colleoni-Baglioni deck, described by Italo Calvino in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*. It was commissioned by a member of the Visconti-Sforza dynasty in the second half of the fifteenth century in Milan by Bonifacio Bembo or Francesco Zavattari.[3]

Fortune is depicted here as a winged, blindfolded woman in the middle of a circle. Above her, on a throne atop the circle, we see a figure with donkey ears, a sceptre in her right hand. Fortune is flanked by two other male figures. On the right, a man in a green robe with donkey ears is looking towards the figure on the throne with a smile. On the left, a man in a red robe with a tail protruding from underneath, depicted upside-down, is looking at the fifth figure in the painting: an old man in rags, with a white beard. The unfortunate man crushed by the wheel is on all fours here. The figures on the wheel are accompanied by banderols, upon which are words in Latin in a Gothic typeface: *regno* (I reign) on the figure at the top of the wheel, *regnabo* (I shall reign) on the figure to the left of Fortune, *regnavi* (I have reigned) on the figure to the right, and *sum sine regno* (I have no kingdom) on the figure of the old man crushed by fate.

In Romani culture, the tarot card with the Wheel of Fortune is referred to as *bacht*. The word comes from the Persian *baxt* and means luck, success, prosperity.[4]

3 Sergio Samek Ludovici, 'The Game of Tarots and the Visconti-Sforza Packs: Critical Examination', in *Tarots: The Visconti Pack in Bergamo and New York. Text by Italo Calvino*, trans. William Weaver, Parma: Franco Maria Ricci, 1975, pp. 154–58.

4 Gerd Carling, Lenny Lindell, Gilbert Ambrazaitis, *Scandoromani: Remnants of a Mixed Language*, Leiden: Brill, 2014, p. 136.

The materials, clothing, and curtains from which I sew portraits are meant to give them additional energy and power. I have been collecting things given to me by women in my family, from Roma neighbourhoods and friends. Sometimes I buy them in second-hand stores. . . . I can see life in them; I see emotions and feelings. Portraits sewn from the clothes of these or other Roma women gives them spirituality and magic. I personally feel moved when I see some of the scraps of material, knowing who they came from, who I saw in them, who they belonged to. It is also wonderful to feel that what I do is important to them, that they know they are a part of the project, a part of something bigger, a fight against racial, class and economic prejudice.

Romani feminism looks a bit different, but we are always fighting for the same thing – for freedom and choice, but without straying from our tradition and roots. . . . For me, Roma identity is very important: you cannot separate yourself from it, you cannot talk about the important issues without being on the inside. You also have to be very careful and sensitive towards others, to what they feel and how they want to be represented. My feminism does not shout, but it tells stories.

THE STITCHES REMAIN VISIBLE

On the Work of Małgorzata Mirga-Tas

JOANNA
WARSZA

‘You don’t always need to present yourself as being a Roma artist’, an organiser of a large exhibition in Poland once remarked to Małgorzata Mirga-Tas. Indeed, she does not need to; however, she expressly chooses to. Why omit this fact if her artworks, sensibilities, and artistic and activist practices are clearly grounded in Polish-Romani culture and especially pertain to Roma women? Her art is socially and politically embedded, and, most importantly, autonomously created from within a community that is otherwise often tokenised and stigmatised. It is, to paraphrase Donna Haraway and her (presently very popular, yet only recently truly applied) concept of *situated knowledges*,[1] a Roma-situated art. This apparently innocent curatorial comment on Mirga-Tas’s work, a piece of ‘good advice’ on how to wash away her ethnicity and avoid associations with ethnographic museums, obviously begs a plethora of important questions that are relevant to our times: Who has the right to speak for whom? How can mechanisms of exclusion and discrimination be dismantled? What is the place of native art within the canon of contemporary art? What does a minority feminism look like in a traditional community? Can there be a reciprocal acculturation and interdependency, and, if so, how can the majority learn from the minority? Finally, can working on identity, especially

1 See: Donna Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’, *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1988, pp. 575–99.


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one rooted in an experience of injustice, be an affirmative and emancipatory strategy rather than a reductionist and isolating one?

Mirga-Tas was born in Zakopane and graduated from the sculpture department at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow. She lives in a Roma settlement in Czarna Góra, in the Tatra Mountains, where she also works as an educator and activist. She is married and has two sons. She is Romani, Polish and European. Her vibrant patchworks with rich ornaments, sculptures, screens, small altars and pictorial collages often depict scenes from everyday life in Roma communities. They mainly portray women and their relationships, alliances, and joint activities; they also show children and animals, less often men. Mirga-Tas's paintings are created from fragments of various fabrics by, as she calls it: 'throwing the material into the painting'. Many of the fabrics sewn onto her paintings to create collages were taken directly from the wardrobes of those depicted, who are often close to her. They consist of bits of skirts, scarves or shirts sewn onto curtains, drapes, bedclothes or rags. 'Shall I give it to someone, or do you want it for a painting?', her mother often would ask. This fabric is a literal carrier of history. Knowing who has worn a given piece and under what circumstances is of no small importance: bearing traces of life and use, these appropriated materials are infused with energy and gain a new existence in art. The curtains, bedlinen or canvas become the underlying architecture of the works and, at the same time, the visual basis for creating feminist narratives about 'bright people and their characters'.

HOTEL IMPERIAL TORN APART

For the preparations of the large-format textile installation *Re-enchanting the World*, inspired by the Renaissance Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara and its astrological frescos from the Hall of the Months, we needed kilograms of fabric. This time it not only came from the wardrobes of loved ones, but predominantly from the second-hand shops around Zakopane, Nowy Targ or Rabka. Heaps of used clothes, probably shipped from Western Europe and originating in Bangladesh, India or China, piled up on

the floor of our temporary studio. This studio was located in the spacious dining hall of a historical hotel in Zakopane that was closed for renovations and called (coincidentally) the Imperial. From these oceans of fabric Mirga-Tas cut fragments and picked out patterns to match the unmatchable. Then she applied and sewed them onto sketches, made first on an untreated canvas, stitching odd parts in highly unlikely combinations. Over time, these bits and pieces formed into a striking armature of textile frescoes, representing the twelve months of the year, each cut into three strips.

Needlework is one of this artist's basic techniques. The needle, with its magic power – as Louise Bourgeois had it – 'is used to repair the damage, it's a claim to forgiveness . . . it's also a restorative tool, used to repair guilt, hate, abandonment, hostility, destruction of one's own work, and self-inflicted damage, and it is never aggressive, it's not a pin'.[2] Mirga-Tas's thorough needlework literally rehabilites and recovers those tons of garments, and symbolically repairs the relationships between marginalised Roma people in the fabric of European society. Often they don't fit, and they don't have to. The stitches remain visible.

Mirga-Tas's work for the pavilion – accomplished in five months, together with three other professional seamstresses – Halina Bednarz, Małgorzata Brońska and Stanisława Mirga – also reintroduces the hand to contemporary conceptual practices. During the preparations the team used Minerva sewing machines, named after the ancient goddess of wisdom, warfare, justice and arts. A couple of Minervas, assisted by several pairs of scissors, performed many surgical procedures in which the *Imperial* bedlinen and curtains received a C-section, to assist something that could not to be born. Handkerchiefs and tablecloths were torn apart, digested, and eventually applied, with sensitivity, into the textile frescos. In this astute decolonial acupuncture, the fabrics had a choice to make. Either to go to the upper strip of the

2 In Paulo Herkenhoff, 'Needles', in *Craft*, ed. Tanya Harrod, London: Whitechapel Gallery, and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2018, p. 126.

installation, where the often derogatory historical representations of the Roma culture made a voyage from cultural appropriation to cultural appreciation; or to become part of an affective archive of herstories in the middle strip; or perhaps to figure in the bottom frieze, in images of the everyday life in Czarna Góra, often based on the photos of an ethnographer from within the community, the artist's uncle, Andrzej Mirga.

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, an anti-racist and anti-imperial scholar of visual culture, argues that the whole paradigm of Western culture, with its concepts of sovereignty, human rights, museums, history, and inevitably, contemporary art, is dependent on imperial and violent modes of thinking.[3] Azoulay calls for a practice of what she names 'potential history', digging up erased and yet possible non-violent scenarios of coexistence.

To this day, the Roma people are both on the outskirts of the majority society and at the centre of this society of epistemic injustice. The Roma first settled in Eastern Europe in the fourteenth century, but it was mostly the flight of oppression and the refusal to part take in a military struggle that turned their existence into a peripatetic life of exile. It was perhaps a wish to leave the violence of stigmatisation and the imperial mindset behind that made them not belong. A failed attempt at a potential history.

A TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY

Mirga-Tas's practice is allied with the work of many, predominately Roma academics and artists who have been pressing to turn the tide of stigmatisation and to demonstrate that Roma culture can be influential in European society, not just at its mercy. Scholar Albert Atkin describes the Roma journey 'not only as an action in the world, but a way of seeing the world, being a lens of sorts, where nothing is complete or

3 See: Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, London: Verso, 2019.

settled'.[4] Tímea Junghaus, an art historian and the curator of the first Roma pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2007, proposed 'a transnational identity, one that is competitive, up to date, bilingual in character, and embodies many European ideals such as, for example, adaptability, mobility, multiculturalism'.[5] In an essay called *Reclaiming the Camp and the Avant-Guard*, Roma scholar Ethel C. Brooks traces the links between the Bohemians and the organisational forms of the Occupy movements: 'The camp has been the model for the current wave of anti-neoliberal politics, for another way of being. We are the practitioners of the future. We occupy the camp, now let us reclaim it in the name of politics, of impermanence – in the name of Roma practice, in the name of another politics, in the name of change.'[6]

Mirga-Tas adds another unique voice to this anti-imperial collection, turning the problematic mode of perception into an asset. She weaves an image of Roma as proto-Europeans, as a multilingual, transcultural, mobile and non-violent community, reshaping the boundaries of convention and decolonising the imagination. And yet, two hours east of Vienna, Roma people live without electricity and warm water . . . and this is also a European reality.

DECOLONIALITY IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

In its decentralised and pluralistic logic, Mirga-Tas's work offers one more layer: it questions how postcolonial and decolonial discourses have navigated Central and Eastern Europe. This region often falls out of the global picture, which is dominated by the US-American-grounded race theory and a Western-centric perspective. Here, questions of racialisation and critical whiteness differ from the Western European reality.

4 'We Roma: Notes from a Conversation', in *We Roma: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, ed. Daniel Baker and Maria Hlavajova, Amsterdam: BAK and Valiz, 2013, p. 17.
5 Ibid., p. 196.
6 Ibid., p. 138.

According to Tímea Junghaus, who is presently the executive director of the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC), Europeans like to look for colonies in places far away and beyond their borders. They fail to see the long-term 'internal colonised minority' that has existed in Europe since the fourteenth century. The Romani are Europe's largest and oldest ethnic minority, counting more than twelve million people, with approximately 30,000 inhabiting Poland today. This transnational, trans-European community has long been present across Europe, especially in its central, eastern and southern parts. For just as long, it has resisted both the European ideas of the nation state and the daily mechanisms of 'othering'; to this day, it has been heavily subjected to racialisation. As scholars Nidhi Trehan and Angéla Kóczé have written: 'From the British Isles to the Balkans, if you are marked as being Romani . . . , there is little respite from the violence that envelops you – physical, symbolic, epistemic – as a consequence of persistent and deeply embedded antigypsyism within European cultural enclaves.'[7]

The Central and Eastern Europe position and history calls for a more in-depth analysis of a vernacular experience of the post-communist and post-socialist legacy across the eastern part of the continent, including the participation of ex-Yugoslav countries in the Non-Aligned Movement, the history and relations between older and newer Central and Eastern European states, especially between Russia and Ukraine, the differences between slavery in the western part of the continent exported overseas, and the serfdom implemented locally in the East, as well the long-term co-existence and racialisation of Jewish and Roma populations.

NEW STARS OF THE ZODIAC

In recent years, Mirga-Tas has created many works about the important women in her life, creating an affective archive of the

7 Nidhi Trehan and Angéla Kóczé, 'Racism, (neo-)Colonialism and Social Justice: The Struggle for the Soul of the Romani Movement in Post-socialist Europe', in *Racism Postcolonialism Europe*, ed. Graham Huggan and Ian Law, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012, p. 51.

Roma herstory. The middle band of the pavilion installation is a narrow turquoise blue velvet strip where re-enchantment occurs through feminine power, astrology and the symbols of tarot cards. This female genealogy consists of portraits of Roma women who have inspired Mirga-Tas in her life and work. Those new zodiacs and stars include artist Delaine Le Bas, activist Nicoletta Bitu, scholar Ethel C. Brooks, singer Esma Redžepova, Holocaust survivor and activist Krystyna Gil, community organiser Adela Głowacka, curator Tímea Junghaus, Holocaust survivor Alfreda Markowska, who saved the lives of many children, musician Krystyna Markowska, Małgorzata's mother Grażyna Mirga and grandmother Józefa, poet Teresa Mirga, politician Soraya Post, silversmith and actress Rosa Taikon, writer Katarina Taikon, who is also her sister, and artist and Holocaust survivor Ceija Stojka. This constellation, both personal and political, is inscribed and interwoven with the symbolism borrowed from astrological signs, charts and decans from the Palazzo Schifanoia.

Mirga-Tas's work also becomes personal on another level. Occasionally her tapestries contain objects from everyday life, such as earrings, rosaries, or playing cards. Those personal items make the paintings more personal to those who recognise their provenance, most often Mirga-Tas's family: 'When I show my loved ones the work I say: This is Aunt Celina. She even has her skirt here. The fact that they see something familiar completely changes their perception. An image becomes dear to them.'[8]

In their formal eclecticism, Mirga-Tas's artworks also evoke the idea of *femmage*, a concept coined in the late 1970s by Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyer, both US-American artists associated with the second wave of feminism. Femmage was born from various driving forces and is most famously associated with slogans such as 'the personal is political' and with efforts made to reclaim the authorship of works by women that, over the course of centuries, were falsely attributed to men. If you

8 Quotes from Małgorzata Mirga-Tas are from her private conversation with the author.

consult Wikipedia to see who invented the collage, you get Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, without the long female genealogy. Femmage helps to blur borders and asymmetries between 'native' and 'professional' art, between the domestic and the public. It combines collage, assemblage, photomontage and other techniques like them, both in traditional communities and in contemporary art. Mirga-Tas's femmage also has an ecological dimension. She incorpoates fabrics and materials that would otherwise end up as waste: 'Even during my studies, I was running all over Krakow searching for waste paper and boxes.' The artist's textiles, like her sculptures made primarily of cardboard and wax, are ecological not by ideological necessity or to keep up with fashion, but by virtue of their respect for and proximity and interdependence with human and non-human ecosystems.

Mirga-Tas's sustainable and almost magical way of making something out of nothing is a form of art as recovery and re-enchantment of not only relations between humans, non-humans, the material culture and the resources of the planet, but also between what is considered professional high art and its vernacular sources. As Lucy Lippard wrote in her 1978 essay on crafts: 'On an emotional as well as on a practical level, rehabilitation has always been women's work. Patching, turning collars and cuffs, remaking old clothes, changing buttons, . . . to give the family public dignity.' Over forty years ago, Lippard concluded that only in feminist art was there a chance for '"fine" arts, "minor" arts, "crafts", and hobby circuits . . . to see all the arts of making as equal products of a creative impulse which is as socially determined as it is personally necessary'.[9]

In transforming materials, Mirga-Tas transforms not only the perception of Europe's largest minority, revealing the shortcomings of its majority and the fabric of European society, she also calls attention to certain aesthetic criteria and stigmas towards native and vernacular art. Aby Warburg, a Jewish-German

9 Lucy Lippard, 'Something from Nothing (Toward a Definition of Women's Hobby "Art")', in *Craft*, p. 32.

art historian who wrote extensively on Palazzo Schifanoia and the migration and *Nachleben* (life after life) of images across cultures and forms, sought to undo what he termed the *grenzpolizeiliche Befangenheit* (border-police-bias) of disciplinary practice. Yet his own method, just like any other, had its blind spots. He overlooked Roma culture.

A FEMINISM OF THE MINORITY

In Russia and Scandinavia, early women's organisations had their origins in weaving workshops or sewing clubs, which served as covers for women engaging in politics. By taking part in certain 'feminine activities', they cooked up 'emancipatory' practices. With Mirga-Tas, the impulse toward change, education and fighting stigmatisation is comparable, perhaps, yet different. Instead of achieving social gains through self-denial, her work springs from the affirmation of the self – from a firm desire to practice female-gendered art, to emphasise and even perform her own identity. This is not achieved by conforming to the expectations of an appraising voice from the outside, but rather by constructing new, positive models of a transnational community, referencing specific ornaments, colours and history.

Just as the activist movements of #sayhername and #saytheirnames seek to raise awareness of the Black victims of police brutality in the United States by emphasising the stories of specific people, rather than treating them as statistics, so Mirga-Tas presents, names and affirms a circle of women who are important, both to herself and her community. The artist calls herself a feminist and practises minority feminism, although, as she told me, 'many women around me view this term with suspicion'. According to researcher Ethel C. Brooks, Roma feminism does not aim to cut women from their backgrounds or cultural baggage, it works within a specific context in various ways. On the local and private levels, this often means changing the perspectives or behaviour of men at home. On a structural level, it means fighting against nationalism, confronting dysfunctional social behaviour, and

combating racism, xenophobia and preconceptions arising from a mixture of imaginings and disdain.[10]

The optimism of Mirga-Tas's work comes from her special way of being a realist who responds to the mechanisms of exclusion and self-exclusion with sisterhood and internationalism. The language she employs to overthrow antigypsy stereotypes reflects a determination to affirm and build positive paradigms through art, which is the inverse of the pornography of poverty proffered in the media. The feminism and activism in Mirga-Tas's works stems from a subjective, emancipatory story, wherein the autonomy, the recording of women's genealogies, the practice of sisterhood, and a conscious rooting in Roma identity and culture are embodied ideas first and foremost, and only later theoretical concepts. Similar strategies have been pursued, among others, by Katarina Taikon, sometimes referred to as the Martin Luther King of Sweden, who was an activist, actress and writer, and the author of a children's book series about the little Roma girl Katitzi that became nearly as popular as Pippi Longstocking.

THE MAGIC OF INTERDEPENDENCE

The images created by Mirga-Tas are always full of people, often women, as well as animals and domestic items. The painting *Sisters*, a new version of which features in the lower belt of the month of June, presents four women. The first is hanging a sweatshirt with a playing-card motif on a line to dry. The second is braiding what would seem to be an endless rope, while the third person is appraising a patchwork cloth that the fourth woman is sewing. This fabric-cum-curtain-cum-tapestry has no beginning and no end, it is like a collective, shared tissue.

Mirga-Tas reminds us of something evident and yet obscure: that as human and non-human beings on the planet Earth we exist only

10 Ethel C. Brooks, 'The Possibilities of Romani Feminism', *Signs* (The University of Chicago Press), vol. 38, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–11.

through interdependence. And although the patriarchal culture has told us to believe we are self-sufficient individualists, we are, in fact, all born into a condition of radical dependency: 'If we were to rethink ourselves as social creatures who are fundamentally dependent upon one another – and there's no shame, no humiliation, no "feminization" in that – we would treat each other differently, because our very conception of self would not be defined by individual self-interest', says philosopher Judith Butler commenting on their new book, *The Force of Non-violence*.[11]

For an artist or curator, being independent in fact means a great deal of dependency on other people's choices, decisions, budgets and schedules. Being independent also allows you to maintain the minimum necessary level of anxiety regarding how far you need others. The fact that we need to give and take, to see and hear, and to be heard and seen, does not eliminate the conflict from the picture. The tension is a necessary part of that interdependent circle. And it is all there in Mirga-Tas's textile grammar: the thread of detachments, someone's recurring pattern, the patchwork family, fabric of society, web of life. It is all there in her 'picture palace' as an attitude, art magic, a mode of work and life.

Roma characters have historically been used to symbolise the desire to escape the social constraints of modern life, to show a way out. And today, in our transnational pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale, they still do, but this time, not like in Palazzo Schifanoia, whose images displayed the duke's ego, they collectively influence the fate of earth, striving to re-enchant the world, at least a little.

11 'Judith Butler Want Us to Reshape Our Rage', interview by Masha Gessen, *The New Yorker*, 9 February 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/judith-butler-wants-us-to-reshape-our-rage (accessed 16 February 2022).

It is hard to separate activism from art. These two activities merge, permeating and affecting each other. . . . I can’t shout. I thought that what I can do is talk about my community, show how we see ourselves. And the tool I use is art.

Jacques Callot, *The Marching Gypsies: The Advance Guard*, from the series *The Gypsies*, 1621–31, etching, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Collection, Bequest of Phyllis Massar, 2011, public domain

WHAT IS RE-ENCHANTMENT?

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas and the Palace of Our Dreams

ETHEL C.
BROOKS

Claiming the commons
Unalienated labour
Celebrating Romanipe
Acknowledging women's work
Minority formations
Intimacies
Love
Re-imagining the world.

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas has built us a palace. Made from what has been discarded, rejected, cast aside, her palace is a product of both her hands and our dreams. Across continents and across centuries, Romani women have built homes, palaces of cloth, for our loved ones: through our stopping places and in our movement, the cloth tents, fabric interiors, woven rugs, quilts, and cushions have been our homes, our futures, our palaces, our survival. We have always built our mobile palaces as means of existence: they were home even as our ancestors were resettled from place to place, country to country, tried as heretics, labelled untouchable, robbed, enslaved, and targeted for genocide. Our encampments have been the enchanted palaces of our survival, enchanted because they are unrecognised by those who would evict us, those who would do us violence, and those whose understanding of home is based upon private property and enclosure. Our sense of home has been built on the commons,

on our work, on our ties to one another, and on our intergenerational formations of love, intimacy, and survival.

My childhood memories are of family, of trees, of the tiny brook that ran outside of my family trailer. The brook had a tiny fairy-tale bridge, perhaps built by my father, that I would run across with my cousins, Cindy and Charlotte, and our friends and neighbours. We would follow the brook to a large drainpipe, wading in its bubbling water. The water that flowed and bubbled in the brook was most likely wastewater, a mixture of rain and various kinds of run-off from the surrounding area. To us, it was a playground, an enchanted forest just steps away from our home, and not so far away from the trailer where my grandmother and my uncle lived. I was surrounded by family, and relatives who lived far away would visit regularly – just as we would 'go visiting' them on the weekends. I felt embraced, enveloped in a world of family, love, and yes, enchantment.

A little over an hour away, by car, was Gypsy Hill. Gypsy Hill was where my mother was born, as were my grandparents and my great-grandparents. It was a large expanse of grass surrounded by trees in the middle of a working-class suburb. During my childhood, Aunt Sarah and Uncle Billy and Aunt Tootsie lived in tiny homes on the Hill; their homes did not have electricity, and there was an outdoor hand pump from which we would get water. My great-aunts and great-uncle were from the last generation of family who had made their home, stopped, camped, and who were born and died at Gypsy Hill. When I was a small child, Gypsy Hill was taken over by the state for an unpaid tax bill of $150. The elderly aunts and uncles were resettled in public housing units built on the site. There was no marker, no sign, to mark the importance of the site to our family, to the survival and resilience of our large Romani community that had called it home for a century, or to the larger Romani diaspora in the United States. All that remained was the cemetery and the memory of a home in the world.

The story of my family, its dispersal, eviction, removal, and loss of home, as well as its survival and the intergenerational

transmission of language, culture and a sense of belonging, echoes throughout the Romani diaspora. Indeed, it echoes throughout the world, in Romani communities and in all peoples and communities subject to the violence of colonialism, genocide, enslavement, dispossession and erasure. It is echoed in indigenous, Black, migrant and refugee communities, and in the histories and experiences of minority communities worldwide. Even in the midst of these multiple erasures, we hold on to each other, to our language, to our sense of ourselves and our history. We hold on across oceans and across continents, binding us within our communities and connecting us to communities across the globe.

Encampment, Re-claiming
Romani intimacies
Romani feminism
Minor intimacies
Minor feminisms
Making beauty out of what is discarded
Seeing what is unseen.

The complexity of our loss, of the violence we have faced, of our survival, and of our continual re-building in the face of destruction, has been depicted by artists across the centuries. If we read these depictions through Romani eyes, we are struck by the stereotypes, yes, but we also see glimpses of our stories that have been erased. In *Les Bohémiens*, a series of four etchings from around 1620, Jacques Callot portrays four moments of Romani encampment: *The Marching Gypsies: The Advance Guard*; *The Stopping Place of the Gypsies: The Fortune-Tellers*; *The Camping Place of the Gypsies: The Preparation of the Feast*; *The Marching Gypsies: The Rear Guard*. In these etchings, Callot depicts four elements of encampment: the search for a stopping place, the work involved in setting up camp, the process of preparing a meal at the end of the day, and packing up camp and moving on. Each of these etchings, for me, is about making a home and what I have

Jacques Callot, *The Stopping Place of the Gypsies: The Fortune Tellers*, from the series *The Gypsies*, 1621–31, etching, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Collection, Bequest of Phyllis Massar, 2011, public domain

Jacques Callot, *The Camping Place of the Gypsies: The Preparation of the Feast*, from the series *The Gypsies*, 1621–31, etching, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Collection, Rogers Fund, 1922, public domain

elsewhere called keeping body and soul together.[1] We Romani people have kept body and soul together through our work, our bonds with each other, and our love: from fortune-telling to horse-breeding, recycling and metalwork, we have laboured to make our home in the face of violence.

A cursory reading of the *Bohémiens* series shows stereotypical Romani practices of travelling, camping, fortune-telling and cooking over a fire, complete with horses and exotic draperies. I would offer another reading of the etchings: if we look closely, we do see travel and movement, as well as setting up camp. Through a feminist lens, we see women front-and-centre – women's labour, women's place in the community. Yet also, and above all, we can reframe or reclaim these as practices of enchantment, marked by the work and reproductive labour that make a home, that keep body and soul together in circumstances of constant expulsion and the threat of violence. I also see the possibilities of portraying Romani feminism in the family – multi-generational, all genders and ages, working together to make a home, to enchant through everyday labour, with human and non-human connections between the horses, dogs and, in the *Stopping Place* etching, a rooster. I see connections within communities, with the place itself and its natural and man-made elements. *Stopping Place* in particular does just what it promises, depicting stopping and fortune-telling; it also depicts the gathering of food. It depicts work and opens up the possibility of understanding the relations of Callot's 'Gypsies', not only with nature, but also with the majority community. A deep reading of the stereotypical depiction shows us how stopping is never just stopping, it rather contributes work, productive and reproductive labour, and ties between Roma and non-Roma that often go unrecognised. Each of the four woodcuts can be read through this lens: *Advance Guard* as the search for a home; *Stopping Place* as making a home and carrying out necessary work; *Camping Place* as feeding the community; and *Rear Guard* as eviction.

1 Daniel Baker and Ethel Brooks, 'A Roma Model: The Cosmopolitan Other?', a performative conversation held on 20 March 2013 as part of *Former West* project, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin.

Re-enchantment is a reclaiming of our labour, our contributions, our belonging. It is the legacy of the past – the commons of the wastewater brook and the sites of encampment that have kept us alive – as the dream of the future. It is taking back what we have been denied and bringing back what has been lost. Through re-enchantment, we are re-membering the future with pre-eviction dreams. It is a reclaiming of the camp as our history and a taking back of the commons in the name of one and all. The Romani camp, and our practices of encampment, have held us together even as they have been exoticised by coloniality in the form of the Gypsy camp, and utilised, in the form of the *lager*, to carry out genocide. They have provided a sense of belonging and have been sites of inter-generational transmission of knowledge, of our *chib* – our language – and of love. In this pavilion and in our practices of encampment, we offer the camp and the commons, just as we have throughout history, even in the face of attempted genocide. It is our practice of continual re-enchantment, putting our reproductive labour to the service of the earth. We work to re-enchant in all that we do.

Labour and value
Non-alienated labour
Labour of love
Non-violence
Sewing Stitching Weaving.

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas's palace is her contribution to the world when it most needs repair. She has given us a home. It is a re-enchantment of the world in the space of the Biennale. According to Silvia Federici, re-enchantment is brought about by making reproductive labour visible, reclaiming the commons, and living together as feminists and as a community. This space of re-enchantment serves as a home for all of us: Romani people, for women, for feminists, as it is for Venice, for Poland, and for the world. It offers us a chance to come together. It will enchant throughout the Biennale, through this still-pandemic period of 2022, it will bring us together and provide healing. It is the

re-enchantment that Romani people, Romani women, have given the world throughout the centuries, through our medicine, our healing practices, our fortune-telling, our metal-smithing and our repairing what has been broken. At this moment, our world needs repair. Who better to do it than Mirga-Tas? As a practitioner of enchantment, she has brought the gifts of our ancestors, the knowledge passed down from generation to generation, to her work as an artist, healing the world and building a home with her hands. She is reclaiming enchantment and, in what I would like us to see as part of a long tradition of decolonial Romani practice, her enchantment makes space for all of us to live together, communally, and to live in the commons.

Romani people have always depended upon and contributed to common places: we have set up home, practised encampment, worked, and loved in those spaces; we have recycled and made useful and beautiful that which has been broken and rejected, by the majority society. We have done so because these spaces, objects, entities are what was left for us. They became common property – the commons. The commons, defined by feminist theorist Miriam Tola as 'a site of cooperation and mode of living alternative to the pursuit of profit and corrupted public policies',[2] is not the product of statecraft or capital, but rather a site of possibility, of cooperation, which is also, as Tola argues, 'more-than-human' in the 'imbrication of human and nonhuman entities (including water, land, and chemicals) that provide the conditions of possibility for communing'.[3] Romani people – and all people and communities who have been expropriated from their land, evicted and expelled from their homes and marginalised – have created the commons as part of this imbrication of human and non-human entities. The commons, in indigenous land practices, Romani encampments, squatter communities, have been a part of sustaining life through the necessity of human and non-human

2 Miriam Tola, 'The Archive and the Lake: Labor, Toxicity, and the Making of Cosmopolitical Commons in Rome, Italy', *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 11, no. 1, May 2019, p. 196.

3 Ibid., p. 210.

interdependence and, at the present, through living in places that are seen as external to private property.

What the artist has created here, and in all of her work, is the possibility of a commons, a site of reclaiming and belonging. These commons belong to everyone and they are where everyone belongs. They are made from scraps – material that has been cast off, as beyond private property. The tapestries she has created are made of old clothing, of what Joanna Warsza called 'rivers of fabric'[4] – and Mirga-Tas has made rivers, mountains, forests from fabric was thrown away. She has built beauty for us, and from us. Across generations, Romani people have taken what has been thrown away and made it beautiful, useful – through our work, our skill, and our imagination. Often, this work, particularly that of Romani women, has been invisibilised as reproductive labour. Once we 'see' the work, the labour, the care, the imagination, it becomes a model for remaking the world. As Silvia Federici argues at the beginning of her book, *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*:

> From a feminist viewpoint, one of the attractions exercized by the idea of the commons is the possibility of overcoming the isolation in which reproductive activities are performed and the separation between the private and the public spheres that has contributed so much to hiding and rationalizing women's exploitation in the family and the home.[5]

This is a particularly feminist space, a product of women's work: the stitching, sewing, quilting and weaving that form these tapestries come from oft-overlooked practices and forms of gendered, racialised labour. We read the stories embodied in the tapestries, and, at the same time, we read the histories of the second-hand clothes from which they are made. Whose bodies

4 Personal communication, Ethel C. Brooks and Joanna Warsza, 27 January 2022.

5 Silvia Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, Oakland: PM Press, 2019, p. 4.

and how many lives did they touch before coming to the artist's studio? Family members, friends and strangers are all brought together through the clothes, and Mirga-Tas has made new life from torn bits, discarded clothing. These are rivers, mountains, forests of fabric from which she has built palaces, stitched oceans and forged continents. She has made for us a new commons that builds on our history, our work, our stories and our knowledge. It is also crucial that we pay attention to the cutting, the stitching, the sewing and the love that brings this together. Mirga-Tas's work is made visible in the stitches and in the creation of beauty from old clothes and discarded fabrics. This is truly a practice, and a palace, of re-enchantment.

Mirga-Tas has been doing the work of re-enchantment, even in the face of violence, throughout her career and in her art. I see this in the photos of her workshop, where she is sewing with women around her, stitching together the magical tapestries that tell the stories of Roma, of Europe, of the world. In 2011, the artist created a wooden sculpture entitled *Monument to Memory of the Holocaust of the Romani*, which commemorated the murder, at that very spot in the woods in southern Poland, of twenty-nine Roma at the hands of Nazi German soldiers and Polish collaborators from the 'Blue' Police. The monument also commemorated the over 500,000 Roma and Sinti murdered by Nazis and their allies during the Holocaust. Five years later, the monument was vandalised, smashed to pieces. In the face of the violence and disrespect of vandalism, she worked to remake the monument in the same spot in the months following the vandalism. Out of the smashed remains of the original monument, she created *29. Exercises in Ceroplastics* (2018–20), which became part of her *Out of Egypt* exhibition at the Arsenal Gallery in Białystok. In both remaking the monument and recreating the shattered remnants of the original into a new series of artworks, Mirga-Tas honoured the memory of those who were murdered and paid tribute to their families and communities, while holding onto the visibility the act of vandalism and creating something new from what was broken and smashed. This repair – of the world, of what is smashed, in the face of violence – is enchantment. Enchantment

involves reclaiming – through building, through sewing, through women's labour-made-visible, through creating beauty – and it becomes the material for envisioning and building new worlds.

Old clothing becomes the material for rivers, lakes, mountains and forests, for visions of all people and communities. Re-enchantment means reclaiming. Reclaiming the commons. As Federici maintains: 'Commons are constituted on the basis of social cooperation, relations of reciprocity, and responsibility for the reproduction of the shared wealth, natural or produced.'[6] Re-enchantment means reclaiming our *romanipe*, our feminism, our elders and our youth, our minority position, and our belonging – for each other, for you, for the world. This reclaiming is something we have to do to survive, as a practice of resistance. We are looking to reclaim Europe, to have a right to Europe and to our history in Europe. For the Roma and for everyone: 'We are Europeans. We have been enslaved, transported, evicted, expelled; we are trafficked, forcibly sterilised, murdered. We claim our humanity, we claim our history, and we claim our place on the soil of Europe.'[7]

Reclaiming happens through encampment and through re-enchantment. Once the re-enchantment leaves Venice, it has the opportunity to set up camp and make its home elsewhere. The tapestries are movable – a mobile palace, like the Palazzo Schifanoia, whose frescoes served as the model for Mirga-Tas's installation, made for people to come together to eat, to laugh, to dream, to dance. This palace is not just for the nobles, it is for all of us, across time and space. This is what the reclaiming, encampment and re-enchantment of Palazzo Schifanoia becomes in the artist's work. Here we can mark the months of the year, the zodiac, not just as a series of feasts for the rich, but as work and seasonal labour, as divination and a reading of the future, as movement, resistance, and survival.

6 Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World*, p. 9.

7 Ethel Brooks, 'Europe Is Ours: A Manifesto', European Roma Rights Centre, 20 October 2017, http://www.errc.org/news/europe-is-ours-a-manifesto (accessed 1 February 2022).

Embodiment
Palm-reading
Divination
Fortune-telling
Embodied practice
Intimacy.

Just as the encampment means reclaiming our past, it is marked by the work of divination for our future. Fortune-telling as an art, a labour practice, and a symbol of Romani women's knowledge is honoured in Mirga-Tas's work and in this pavilion, both in the zodiac and in the tarot. Romani women brought fortune-telling to Europe, reading palms and reappropriating the tarot. These divinatory practices – reading palms, cards, the future – involve reading people, their bodies, their expressions, their stories and their past, in order to help understand their future. When we look more closely at practices of fortune-telling, we see tarot, palm reading, and tea and coffee reading as early forms of psychoanalysis. Freud disparaged the knowledge of '. . . old women who, since their mundane powers have deserted them, turn their eyes towards the future . . . ',[8] even as, during his childhood, his mother firmly believed in the prophecy of a woman they had met in the bakery, who said his mother 'had brought a great man into the world'.[9] Even as Freud disparaged the work of 'old [Romani?] women', it is clear that the work of fortune-telling – its interpretation of dreams, its use of life histories, and its embodied, face-to-face methodology – served as a prelude to psychoanalysis. I would go further, and say that the development of psychoanalysis removed gendered and racialised labour, women's labour, from the centre, replacing it with masculinist scientific approaches, while relying in practice on the very methods that were part of fortune-telling from the start.

8 Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud, Volume 1*, New York: Basic Books, 1953, p. 5.
9 Ibid., p. 4.

For Romani women, fortune-telling has been a connection to the external, non-Romani world and, more importantly, to put food on the table for our families and care for our loved ones. The tarot deck was not designed as a tool for divination; rather, the cards were an art form, an entertainment, and a status symbol for rich patrons.[10] The façade of the pavilion is from the Wheel of Fortune card from the Visconti-Sforza Tarot Deck, which was created in the mid-fifteenth Century for the Visconti-Sforza family of Milan. These cards, currently in the collections of The Morgan Library & Museum, feature intricately painted figures of women throughout, marking the importance of women to the tarot deck, and, later to the reading of tarot cards for divination. In particular, the Wheel of Fortune card gives centre-stage to a woman, Fortuna, turning the wheel and determining the fate of those around her.

The façade and entry into the pavilion open the process of re-enchanting, of making reproductive labour visible, and of showing the importance of women's work in conjuring, creating, and building the future. While the tarot is not of Romani origin, it has been associated with and used by Romani people, and specifically Romani women, for centuries. It has been reclaimed through practices of encampment and Romani women's labour. In this way, the façade opens up a possibility of re-centring Romani knowledge, women's knowledge, making space for Romani feminism, for a minority feminism that sheds light upon the work done by women, and by racialised women in particular. The Wheel of Fortune card, and the tarot more generally, work to re-enchant the world, making women into powerful rulers. Romani women's use of the tarot for divination across the centuries builds upon their feminine symbolism and their feminist possibility. Importantly, just as Romani people have repurposed and remade metal, cloth, jewellery, land and nearly everything around them, the cards themselves have become a sort of commons as they are repurposed for fortune-telling. The tarot is part of a larger practice of reframing and claiming, of re-enchanting, through Romani knowledge, and making the future possible.

10 The Morgan Library & Museum, *Visconti-Sforza Tarot Cards*, video, https://www.themorgan.org/collection/tarot-cards (accessed 30 January 2022).

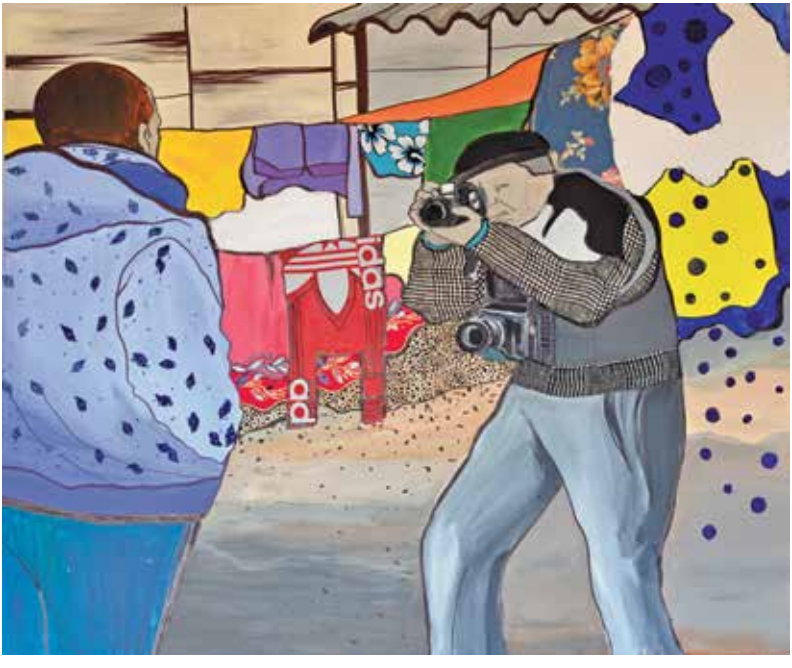
We make flowers bloom.
We make magic.
We make the future.
We camp in the forests that were denied us for centuries
For the centuries of our existence
We build palaces wherever we are
We bring beauty to the world
We remake them, re-enchant them, for all.

This pavilion, and the work of re-enchantment, is a counter-image of and for the moment. In the face of new exclusions, new violence and an ongoing pandemic, we need the re-enchantment the pavilion offers, made by women, by Roma, for everyone. We need a re-enchantment of the world. Now more than ever. This work represents possibility, openness, and a future Poland offers to the world through the work of Małgorzata Mirga-Tas and this beautiful pavilion she has created.


Ces pauures gueux pleins de bonaduētures
Ne portent rien que des Choses futures.

Jacques Callot, *The Marching Gypsies: The Rear Guard*, from the series *The Gypsies*, 1621–31, etching, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Collection, Bequest of Phyllis Massar, 2011, public domain

Callot's prints are very beautiful and very anti-Roma. If I didn't know who was depicted in them, I would probably still admire them. But their depictions of the Roma have influenced how we have been perceived for centuries. And I thought: If this stereotype has persisted for so long, how long do we need to change it? . . . I appropriated Callot's prints and processed them in my own way. And I feel I have given dignity to the characters depicted.



Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, *O Fotografis*, 2015,
acrylic and fabrics on canvas, mixed media, private collection,
photo: Marcin Tas

THE FABRIC OF THE MOUNTAINS

An Encounter with the Artwork of Małgorzata Mirga-Tas

DAMIAN
LE BAS

It never ceases to amaze me how interesting everyday life really is.
There are an endless number of human truths.

Svetlana Alexievich, *Second-hand Time*

There is something special in Czarna Góra, my parents told me, and I believed them. They seemed to return from the 'Black Mountain' refreshed, while other expeditions working abroad would leave them feeling raw and creatively depleted. In Czarna Góra they stayed with artist friends, 'Gosia and Marcin' and their family, with whom they had done projects and exhibitions. I had seen some of the resultant artwork but never met any of this faraway family, and the name of the place had connotations for me that were likely misleading – the Black Mountains of Wales, where I sometimes walked with friends, or the densely forested slopes of Montenegro.

There were Romani people in Czarna Góra: Bergitka Roma – 'mountain Gypsies', a name that could set the dustiest travel writer's heart aflutter. Even to someone from a Romani family the idea is bewitchingly romantic. My forebears were wandering farmworkers from the lowlands, who encamped away the centuries in unsung parts of the English pastoral landscape. The idea of 'mountain Roma' captivated me. It was tempting to imagine a Gypsy equivalent of Scottish Highland warriors or the Amazigh nomads of the Atlas Mountains, with their own ancestral musical instruments, weapons and sacred cloths: Romani counterparts to the famous Górals of the Tatras and their upland surroundings. Did they know about the secret ways of the forests, of the nimble Tatra chamois and the bear? Perhaps – but surely not – they could even ski?

Amid such callow musings, I remembered the serious reason why I had boarded the plane to Krakow: I was going to meet Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, the first Roma woman ever selected to represent a nation state at the Venice Biennale, and to get a glimpse of the new works she was creating for the show. There had been Roma pavilions at the Biennale before, the first of which, in 2007, was a significant moment in the history of both Romani people and European fine art. But this was something else: it had an entirely different symbolic value. Across Europe, the opinion that Romani people do not belong in the countries of which they are citizens is commonplace. This is not a fringe racist view, as it might be in other lands, but a mundane political position, which enjoys elected representation in government at national and supranational levels. Thus the Roma pavilions had operated under the Romani flag, a flag of a borderless nation; a country embodied solely by those who dare to fly that flag. Mirga-Tas's artwork, by contrast, would be displayed under the insignia of Poland. Aside from being in this unprecedented position, Małgorzata Mirga-Tas was also 'Gosia', the friend of my parents. We had never spoken before: on the plane I thought about how these two ideas, of the artist and the family friend, would merge into a single, real person before me.

The artworks of Mirga-Tas with which I was familiar put forth a luminous, human, sometimes troubled world: a world I had not seen, but which was nevertheless immediately familiar. Its lissom lines and throngs of colours and textures encompassed a domain of proud poses, heartache, cheeky attitudes, resilience, smiles and tears. It was a different part of Gypsyland, but Gypsyland all the same, and these works used the clamouring appeal of bright colours to draw the viewer into both its cosy and harsh realities. They show the Roma chromatically exalted, enthroned in a lustrous world – except, unlike others who occupy thrones, the figures in Mirga-Tas's artworks do not adopt the ramrod postures of people who think they are turning into gods. These transfigured characters retain, in captured moments, the grounded body language of their flesh-and-blood counterparts.

In the fabric screen *Phuter o jakha*, a woman's blank eyes are reminiscent of Ancient Near-Eastern sculpture, but they are also open eyes, the eyes of a seer: eyes that seem to be open in a new, unlimited, even disconcerting way. In *Visitation*, exposed breeze blocks stand in for what, elsewhere, might be a section of ancient wall: the historical buildings of an unfolding history, where the clean laundry hangs precariously over the spilling trash. In *Ćhavo he dad*, a young man sitting on the edge of a card game wears a Darth Vader T-shirt. He smiles. The authoritarian villain is reduced to a casual motif, a mere design, yet he retains a sinister presence at the table. In *O Fotografis*, the photographer is depicted, his contortions matched to the physical task of taking the picture, rather than any misgivings about whether he should be doing it. Life goes on behind the camera's back: trimming the beans for dinner, plants that will nourish. The produce of earth and work. The piece titled *Romniakre ława* – Romani women's words – keeps to itself the words to which the title refers: it reminds us that these are words most of us do not hear because we cannot. The conversation is kept from those who aren't privy, from men, from the prying ear; such words are spoken out of earshot of the sociologist's microphone. But the facial expressions themselves are also words: the remarks of the eyes, the drama of the shifted contours of the face. There is a certain posture of seated women which recurs in Mirga-Tas's work: the hand holding the cigarette, and the head held in that hand. It is an occasion of involuntary meditation in distress, a moment of desperate self-collection with a fiery little accomplice, the cigarette, the wounding helper, the stifling staff. The posture of the body reflects the posture of the mind, doing its best to hold itself up, and hold itself together.

Other pieces take a very different form, not least because Mirga-Tas has previously done much work in sculpture. In *29. Exercises in Ceroplastics*, a sabotaged Holocaust memorial, originally made from wood and subsequently vandalised, is freshly cast in pink wax. Although delicate and quite beautiful, these pieces also possess, upon second glance, an unsettling resemblance to processed, tinned meat. They might speak of the historical lack of care shown to human flesh and its

commemoration: the body treated as a mere fodder for the economic machine, as were the Romani slaves of both Medieval Europe and the Nazi period; the body which, even in death, is not safe from the strokes of defiling axes. There is an echo, too, perhaps, of the concentration camp at Lety u Písku in Czechia, which, for many decades after the war, was the site of a pig farm.

I was met at Krakow airport by Wojciech Szymański, art critic and historian, author, curator, now friend. Wojciech had invited me to Poland, and I took advantage of a brief conversation over coffee to glean some knowledge about what awaited me in the highlands. He took me to where the bus would soon be leaving for Zakopane and we said a temporary goodbye – in a couple of days he would be coming to join us in Czarna Góra with his partner, the literature professor Robert Kusek.

After a two-hour bus journey I stepped off into the snow and stretched my legs. Outside Zakopane station, the snowflakes were falling softly through the still night air, and before long I spotted a figure walking towards me in a full-length coat and hat. She called out my name: it was Mirga-Tas, and after a spirited greeting, accompanied by broad smiles, welcomes and a hug, she had become Gosia.

Gosia had just come from working on new artworks with her small team of assistants. They were putting in long hours in the vacated Imperial Hotel at the south-eastern end of town. Gosia drove us back to Czarna Góra, where she welcomed me into her home, introducing her husband Marcin, their sons Antek and Ignacy, and Gosia's sister Dorota. The notion of outlandish 'snow Gypsies' wizened by life in the mountains was immediately dissolved in a profusion of warm embraces and familiar Romani words. Everyone knew my mother and had known my father before he died suddenly, four years prior to my visit. It is a quite unique feeling, arriving somewhere you have never been, but being greeted with exceptional kindness because those close to you have passed that way before. I felt somehow known in advance of being known. It was strange and wonderful. It was impossible not to feel gratitude

for how the sinews of art and travel had connected me to this other family. And yet the artwork, and its relationship to this world, was too interesting to be lost in mawkishness: I immediately began to make notes on what I saw. And in my notes I went back to referring to Gosia as the artist, Małgorzata Mirga-Tas.

In Czarna Góra I glimpsed a little of the world depicted in Mirga-Tas's artworks. I stayed in the house of Bibi[1] Basia – known to me from her eponymous portrait – and her family, who showed me tremendous kindness in their company and wonderful food. Marcin told me of a cruel Foehn wind, the Halny, which comes ravaging down from the mountains at times, razing forests and homes to the ground. It was a sobering thought which led to other sobering thoughts. One reason why Romani 'art scenes' in literary and fine art have been so long in the emerging is that many of those who might wish to participate in them are otherwise preoccupied with the basic necessities of staying alive. Hence, when they do pursue art, it tends to be in forms that are regarded as more likely to yield immediate wages. This tends to mean music, or in some places, dance. The space and time to make physical artworks, or to spend long and often speculative hours typing away at written creations for which no remuneration might ever come, are luxuries which can only be entertained once the critical human needs for shelter, warmth and nourishment have been met. For these few days, Mirga-Tas and her family were meeting those needs for me, keeping me safe from the icy cold of the Tatras, and whilst I enjoyed the bounty of time thinking about how to describe art, I also thought about those for whom the struggle is to fight off the constant sieges of hunger and cold.

These matters are rarely far away in the work of Mirga-Tas. Deftly sidestepping a tawdry pair of tendencies – to glamourise Romani life, or grimly fixate on its various troubles – she dares to show the colour and hope alongside and inside the pain. This is colour both

1 *Bibi*, in Romani 'aunt', is a term used by members of Romani societies towards older women, much like 'uncle' (*kako*) is towards men. These terms are both indicative of respect and a sign of community (ed.).

in its literal sense and in the sense of the self-redeeming vibrancy of human life. Like her compatriot Władysław Hasior, Mirga-Tas reminds us that through tribulations, absurdity, history and grief, colours remain wide awake, unabashed in the world, and that sometimes a colour serves to heighten the discomfort, just as pain can heighten the senses. The coral reef, in its gaudy ebullience, is far from a cartoon environment, but rather a world of predators, opportunism and decay, which nonetheless pulses with bright life; with birth and potential. It is a real world. Likewise, by way of incorporating lived-in materials, Mirga-Tas's artworks are often less representations of the real world than excerpts from it: in *Romani Kali Dai III*, a red lace curtain hangs in a doorway, beckoning us to step through with an allure derived from the fact that it truly is real. No surprise, then, that Mirga-Tas has been drawn to the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara, with its astonishing deployment of *trompe l'oeil* painting techniques.

In this new work are scattered circular spaces. Are these strange roundels 'bubbles' of potential, open eyes as in *Phuter o jakha*, spaces in which we might open our minds? Are they dreams? Misgivings? Holes in the possibility of our ever being able to claim that we really understand history, or anything? Are they white orbs, at once the snows of the mountains of Europe, the artist's home, perhaps even reminiscent of crystal balls, their alluring emptiness seeming to float between us and the artwork, reminding us of both an old Roma job and the misapprehension of its workers as agents of diabolical mischief? Are they, like the bubbles blown by children, reminders of joy and the brevity of physical things?

Mirga-Tas has been described as an artist who is 'reclaiming Roma identity' – but is that really what she is doing? I am in two minds about the casual deployment of phrases like this, however well-intentioned. They seem to suggest that the art they are referring to is somehow of a different order to other art, which 'simply' dares to depict our worlds – or new ones – as the artist sees them, or would cause them to be seen; that there is somehow a process of asset seizure afoot, rather than a journey of intellectual exploration fused with physical craftsmanship. The phrase also

presupposes that the identity in question was previously in the clutches of somebody else, and thus requires retrieving. Is Mirga-Tas reclaiming Roma identity, or 'merely' doing what a real artist does: summoning her craft to convey precious truths of the worlds she knows and those she dreams, to set them going in a new, material being? And was Romani identity itself really ever in anyone else's hands? Were they actually holding a phantasm: a mirage, an assemblage of thoughts and their material manifestations, intriguing but largely adrift from their depicted subjects' inner lives? The idea that a people's identity can belong to anyone else is troubling, but it might also simply be wrong.

For *Re-enchanting the World*, Mirga-Tas has taken direct inspiration from early modern depictions of 'Egyptians' – Roma, as they were then called – which were accompanied by rhyming insults, written in French with a beguilingly florid script. Using them in spite of these barbed remarks, Mirga-Tas blends rehabilitated invectives with a 'Roma Bayeux Tapestry', with the Zodiac, the Tarot deck, the Palazzo Schifanoia and Roma people in daily activities, instead of glorifying aristocrats, saints or gods. It is almost a complete re-envisioning of how the Roma might be perceived, replacing an absent religio-artistic history – the sort of crafted ethnic inheritance that might be regarded as worthy of a ticketed heritage industry. It is that thing which every other nation presumes is theirs by default: the birthright of a cultural hinterland, partly mental and partly made by hands, which is known by every intellectual in the nation to be too complex to pin down with simple group descriptors and barfly clichés, but which instead requires custodians, holy places, museums and barrier ropes to persuade the onlooker to be mindful of its precious and multifaceted nature. This new work of Mirga-Tas achieves, in one mighty artistic deed, something doubly remarkable: it makes us realise that there is a material absence in the world, that there is a 'something' we lack; and, in the very same moment, gives birth to it.

The figures in these scenes, traceable to the unnamed Romani people who inspired the original artworks, and wearing their vibrant latter-day garb made out of actual cloth, might

be seen as freshly re-formed 'ur-figures' of the Roma: a sort of extemporisation on an unsung and largely forgotten 'national dress'. Watching these tapestries come into being in the town of Zakopane, it was difficult not to think of how Stanisław Witkiewicz, in his expansion on the vernacular architecture of the mountains, sought a Polish national style. Of course, there is no Gypsyland in the sense of a land with a limited physical hem, so is Roma dress better viewed as an under-celebrated European style of dress? Some might object, in the context of the Indian heritages of Romani culture, to the choice of the word 'European' here. The obvious riposte is that if the idea of 'European-ness' is thought to be unable to incorporate strands of Asian-ness, and vice versa, then there can be no hope for discussion on the subtler dimensions of art.

The textiles themselves do not have a single origin of manufacture, but rather a shared provenance of a *prior life* – as the timbers employed by Witkiewicz previously lived as trees that breathed and remade the mountain air, so the fabrics used by Mirga-Tas were in many cases once a part of their wearers' bodily environments. Their employment here feels less like a straightforward use of materials and more like a sort of supervised reincarnation: from being in touch with people's flesh, through the work they become a kind of second body, something more than a regular artistic avatar for the person they represent. The person is not just represented, they are semi-present. In a sense the work is thrice made: created by the makers of clothes, changed by those who have lived in and used them, and finally re-cast by Mirga-Tas into this new and variegated whole. It imbues the art with an obvious sanctity, built using the true relics of the uncanonised. As a world wrought of fabric, it might represent the dream of a 'softer world' – a world fit for travellers, Roma, babies and animals to lie down in.

Something important also happens when so many different devices are assembled as part of a newly conceived harmony. The idea of 'clashing patterns' – of markings and arrangements of colours that supposedly do not or should not go together – is challenged,

perhaps even gently mocked. The method of challenge is not one of rational interrogation. It is an artistic procedure rooted in the refusal to believe these things cannot co-exist, or even by a presumption that they can and should live alongside each other, the formulation of a new image, a new vista of reality. Whether intended or not, an enticing pathway of thought opens up from contemplating these artworks, leading to a re-appraisal of received ideas about society and its make-up. The mind poses the question, 'imagine these images without the different fabrics, without the colours . . . ' Try doing it. It is a grim prospect that the spirit instinctively rejects, with implications for how we might feel about the grey imposition of a monoculture upon the world. In farming, the process can cause the soil to become deficient in nutrients. In human society, we can swap 'soil' for 'soul'.

The name Schifanoia is thought to derive from the phrase *schivar la noia* – an escape from boredom, the colourisation of the drab quotidian of streets and rubbish, stones and snow. Here, Mirga-Tas enables us all to escape the boredom and fake mathematics of Roma clichés by presenting us with complementary bands of visions which can co-exist without needing to form a coherent, reductive account. Bands, panels, portals, and altarpiece-sized tarot-inspired figures: might this even be an imagining of an historical Romani quasi-religion, a 'Gypsianity'? In the same way that the contents of a church do not just tell a story of distilled faith, but rather its being chambered in spaces built by the sweat of the brow, and clad in the styles of times, plated and badged with the memorials of particular individuals, so too this space of 'sacred irreligion' is clothed in the garments of real people, and stitched together not by a conciliar, wax-sealed theology, but by the fingers and minds of living women. Instead of the triumph of Mercury, they present to us the triumph of the artist's Romani aunt.

What is the most powerful effect of using these materials to create a chapel – a locale of a re-enchanted world? It is to state, without words, that the world can be a place not just furnished by, but made of, the materials that cling to the body. The vestments which in Romani history have proven the stuff of both disguises and of

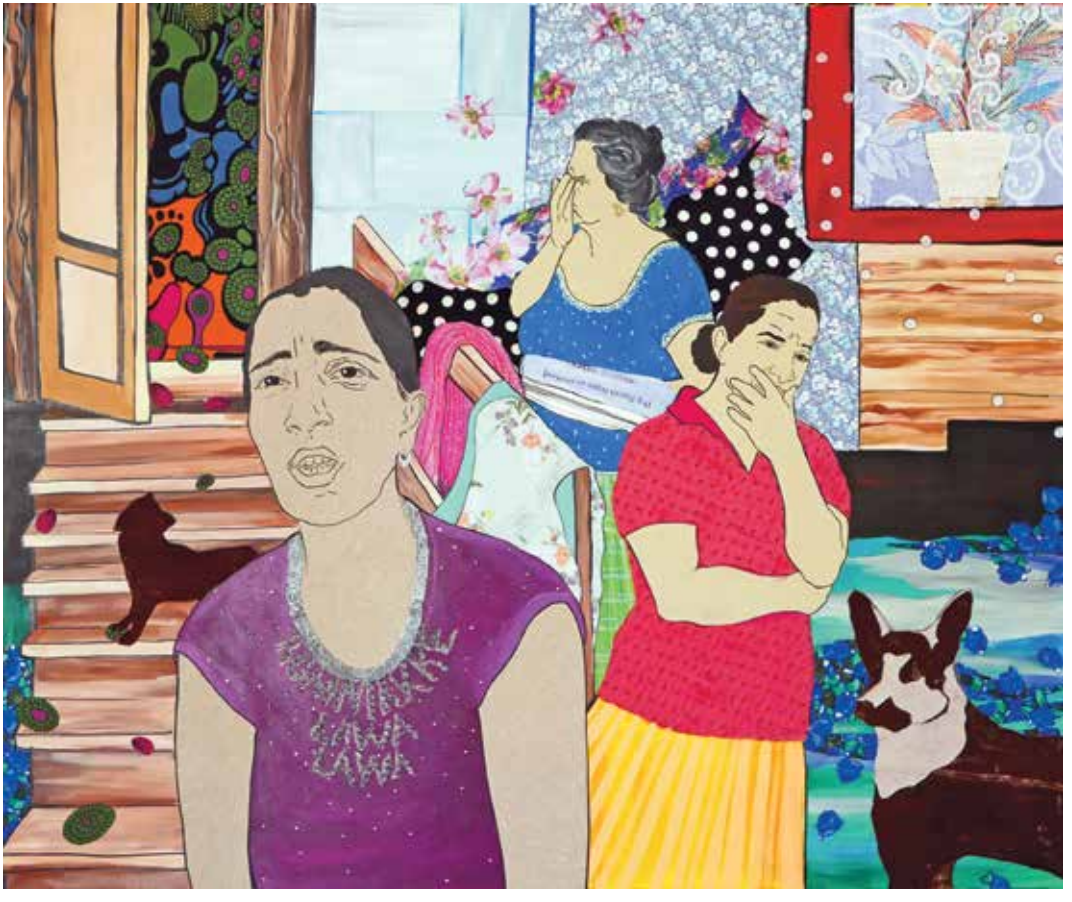
declarations of identity; of the adorning of the homes of hardship, and the embellishment of the affluent, well-loved house.

'Re-enchanting the world' is the general aim, but something more specific is also being achieved. In a single, daring, vast creative act, a great drama of stitches, colour and the artistic occupation of the pavilion – the 'art palazzo' – Mirga-Tas compensates for an absence in the physical Romani world and a resultant gap in the rest of the world's perception of who the Roma are; an absence which, had she not done this work, we would never have known had the potential to be filled, but would have experienced instead as a simple, troubling discord of the mind. It is the lack of a chapel of veneration, veneration of our status as sacred beings, like everyone else alive: sacred by dint of the circumstances of our creation, yes, but also simply because we have lived, and we do live: because we *are*.

Władysław Hasior, *Anticrisis Banner*, 1975/1980,
assemblage (fabric, plastic, paper, ceramics), Tatra Museum, Zakopane

Władysław Hasior, *Banner of a Guide*, 1979,
assemblage (fabric, plastic, metal, fur, glass), Tatra Museum, Zakopane

Władysław Hasior, *Banner of Niobe*, 1982,
assemblage (fabric, plastic, metal, paper, fur), Tatra Museum, Zakopane



Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, *Romniakre ława*, 2020,
acrylic and fabrics on canvas, mixed media, private collection,
photo: Marcin Tas

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, *Phuter o jakha*, 2020,
acrylic and fabrics, mixed media, Collection II of Arsenal Gallery, Białystok,
photo: Marcin Tas

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, *Ćhavo he dad*, 2016,
acrylic and fabrics on canvas, mixed media, private collection,
photo: Marcin Tas

Władysław Skoczylas, *Brigands*, 1911,
wall-hanging, wool, linen, Tatra Museum, Zakopane

Teresa Mirga
***

Powakier mancamiri pcheń
Miro silalo pani.
Dikchaw pre tu he dikchaw furt ciuno mangie
Pre tiro panieskro, kipesno muj.
Saworo pał mande dzianes,
saworo wakieras tukie,
Sar Andre tiro pani dziawa
sasciaraw miarę dukcha
Azie cisto Pes kierawa
Sar fire zielenią jakcha.
Kam Man, dr łaccho ław.
Nane pas ma Niko,
Tu Kamil he zorali.
But gwałti kieres, he nić na wakieres.
Saworo dzianes, he ciujines, achalos.

Teresa Mirga
***

Talk to me, friend,
My swift, raging river.
I stare and I cannot stare my fill
At your beautiful watery face.
You know all about me, for I tell you
As I step into you.
You heal my wounds,
Your chill freezes my pain.
My body so clean
As your eyes so green.
Hug me and comfort me,
For there's no one here around.
You so tender yet so tempestuous.
So thunderous that you're silent.
You know all, feel all, comprehend all.

I am preparing a series of collages – portraits of women who are changing the Roma world. They include Alfreda Markowska, Noncia . . . . And of course Papusza. . . . And also Perełka, that is, Krystyna Markowska, who leads the music band Perła i Bracia, and is the vice-president of an association which grants Roma children scholarships for education and development under a government programme and implements employment projects. Women from the world of art are also important to me: Delaine Le Bas, performer and creator of the mobile Roma embassy – wherever she appears, she creates a place where the Roma feel at home; Tímea Junghaus, the most important Roma curator, who prepared the first Roma pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2007.

DECANS

ARIES

ALFREDA
NONCIA MARKOWSKA

ANNA
MIRGA-KRUSZELNICKA

JÓZEFA
MIRGA

TAURUS

ANGÉLA KÓCZÉ

JOANNA WARSZA WITH HER SON LEW

VĚRA BÍLÁ

GEMINI

KRYSTYNA GIL

CEIJA STOJKA

ANTONI TAS

CANCER

ESMA REDŽEPOVA

WOJCIECH SZYMAŃSKI AND ROBERT KUSEK WITH HIS CAT BIAŁA

KRYSTYNA PERŁA MARKOWSKA WITH HER GRANDSON ANTONI

LEO

GRAŻYNA
MIRGA

IGNACY
TAS

BOGUMIŁA
DELIMATA

VIRGO

PAPUSZA

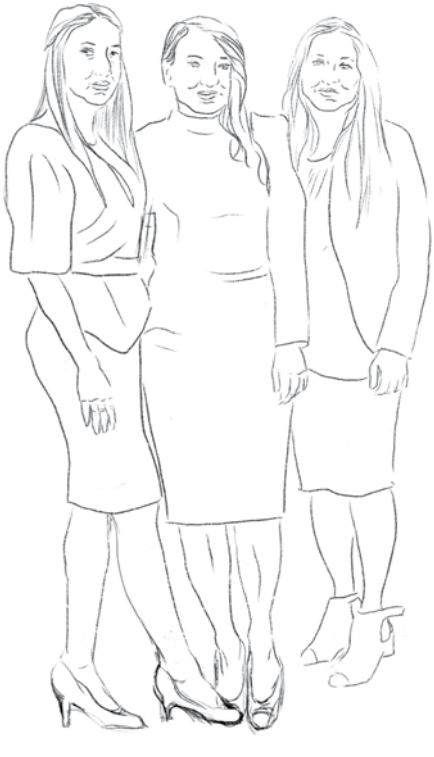
KAROLINA
KWIATKOWSKA

ADELA
GŁOWACKA

LIBRA

SORAYA
POST

EDYTA,
MAGDALENA, AND SYLWIA
JAŚKOWIAK



TÍMEA
JUNGHAUS

SCORPIO

TERESA MIRGA

MAŁGORZATA BROŃSKA AND HALINA BEDNARZ

JOANNA TALEWICZ-KWIATKOWSKA

SAGGITARIUS

ETHEL C. BROOKS

ADAM BARTOSZ AND ABY WARBURG

NICOLETA BITU

CAPRICORN

EMÍLIA RIGOVÁ

ANDRZEJ MIRGA

MICHAELA DRĂGAN AND DELAINE LE BAS

AQUARIUS

ROSA TAIKON
AND KATARINA TAIKON-LANGHAMMER

MARCIN TAS
AND KATARZYNA GARAPICH

DOROTA
GERMAŃSKA

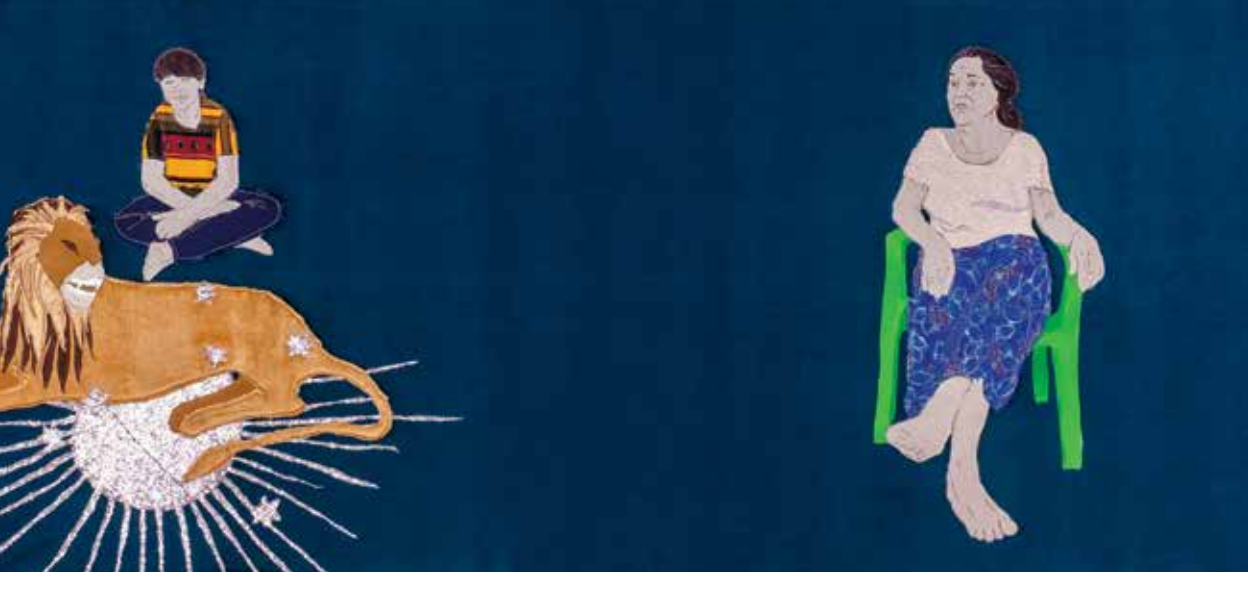
PISCES

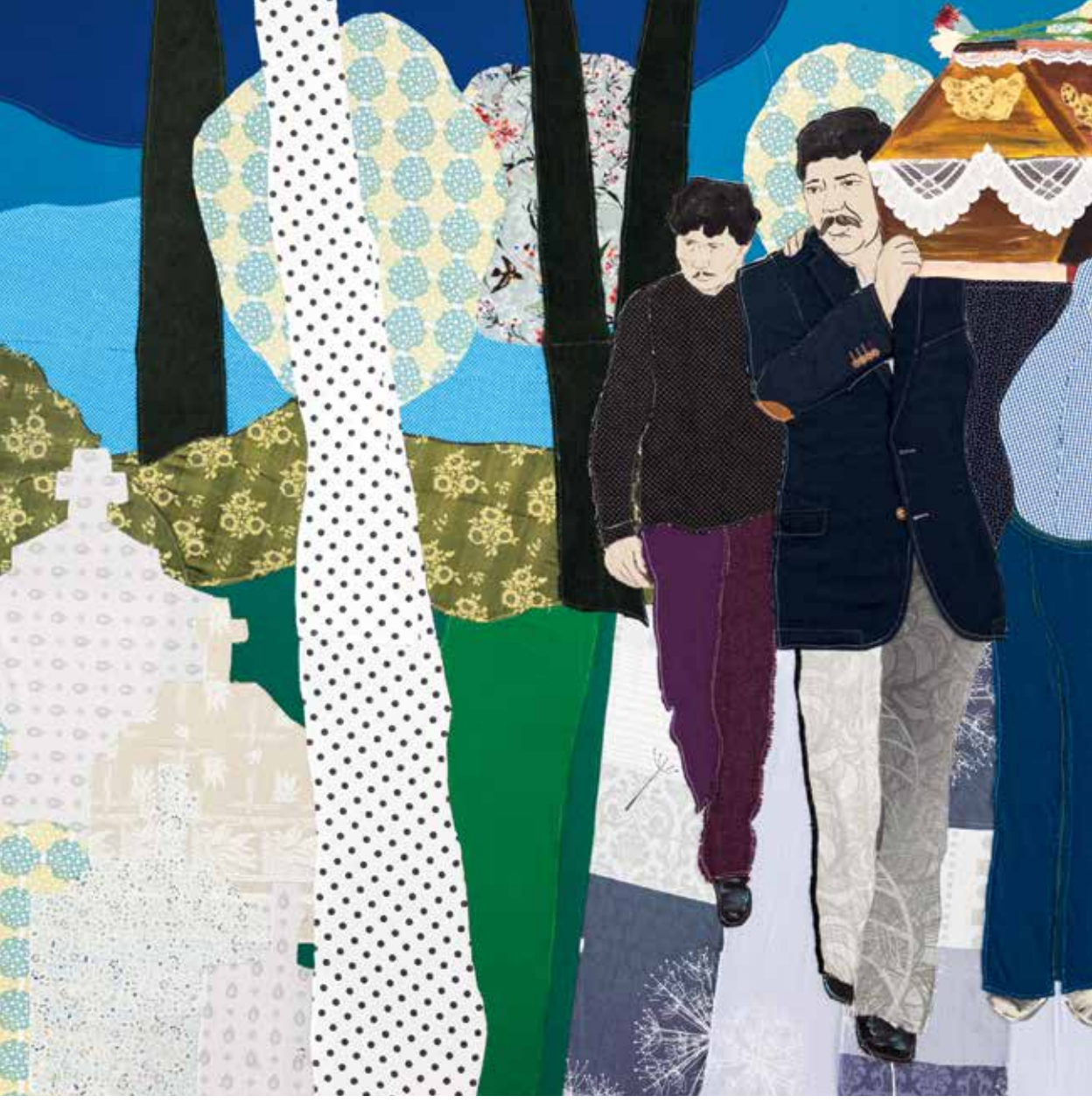
DIANA PAVLOVIĆ

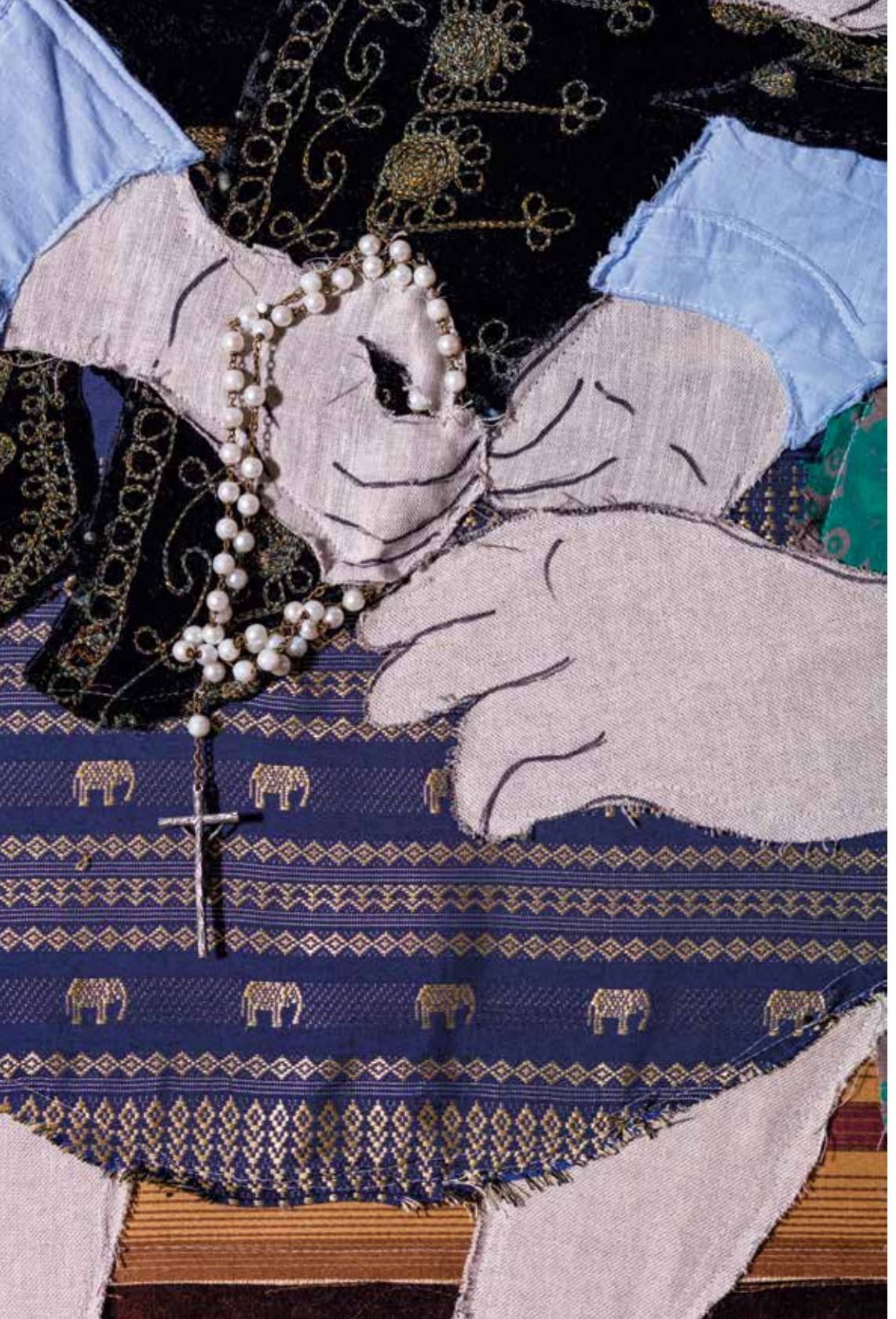
MARIA MIRGA AND JAN MIRGA

ELŻBIETA MIRGA-WÓJTOWICZ AND KAROLINA MIRGA-DANEK

Some fabric I take from second-hand stores. But most of it is bits of clothes my sister, cousins, aunts, or friends have worn. When I like something of theirs, I immediately warn them not to throw it out when it gets worn out, but to give it to me. . . . People give me things because they know that I will recycle them, not destroy them.







Many of my paintings border on kitsch. You could say that I show ‘typical Roma’, and people in Roma neighbourhoods really do dress quite extravagantly, you could say. You can see all the colours of the rainbow. Patterned jumpers, fairy-tale trousers, shiny shoes. I love their style, their belief that the more, the better. However, I am fed up with the fact that Roma culture is perceived only through their dancing and frilly costumes. . . . The Roma in my paintings are more than that. They are simply very colourful people, with interesting characters.

Jan Mirga
Korkoripen

E rat garudzi
Hodzinatar so nane phendo kana
Vimukli avri khate kale pania
Śilali sar duripnaskre ćerheńa so len na obdźal nic
Perdale vudara so barile ande amende
O korkoripen zamangel
Javela avronenca berśenca
Khate rig so pes kerla
Po svetoskre droma
Hudela amen sar oda so hin
He so na kamas
A o dźidźipen dźala peskre dromeha dureder

Jan Mirga
Loneliness

A cloaked night
At an unforetold hour
Released from the dark depths
Cold as the indifference of faraway stars
Crept through the gate and into us
Loneliness beckons
It will arrive from the years to come
From around the corner of events
In the world's courtyard
It will touch you like an unwanted
Destiny
And life will carry on blindly

I do a lot of work devoted to women. In the Roma world, they are the ones who foster the reality around them, they are more active, they raise the children, it is up to them to change the reality.

I want to show women who may not have a university degree, but who have life wisdom, who respect the people around them. While my heroines would never have called themselves feminists, in a sense they actually were: they strove to make a difference.

It is Roma women who are making a difference in our world.

I grew up in a Roma neighbourhood – the same one I live in today. My grandparents and great-grandparents have lived here since time immemorial. The first mention of Roma in the parish records dates back to the mid-eighteenth century.

Teresa Mirga
***

Na murdaren andre mande
e wodzi so cia gilaweł
na therdziuwen po dumisiagos
so pes akana ulilas.
Na roden man
bo na rekhena
miro drom.
Me turnari sam
siunen mire gila
a na dzianen man
dziaw dur.

Teresa Mirga
***

Don’t kill the soul in me
it’s only singing
don’t step on the thoughts
only just being born.
Don’t search for me,
you won’t find
my way.
I am all yours,
you may listen to my songs
but you don’t know me
so I’m leaving.

My work deals with themes from Roma settlements, but also the history of my own family. This is a constant source of inspiration for me.

AUTHORS

MAŁGORZATA MIRGA-TAS

is a Polish-Romani artist and activist. In her works, sculptures, paintings, spatial objects and large-format textiles, she addresses anti-Romani stereotypes and engages in building an affirmative iconography of Roma communities. She graduated from the Faculty of Sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow (2004). She has participated in several dozen individual and group exhibitions, including the 11th Berlin Biennale (2020), the Art Encounters Biennale in Timişoara (2019, 2021) and the 3rd Autostrada Biennale in Prizren (2021), while her works have been displayed at the Moravian Gallery in Brno (2017), the Centre of Polish Sculpture in Orońsko (2020), Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (2020) and Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum in Köln (2021), among others. She lives and works in Czarna Góra, Poland.

WOJCIECH SZYMAŃSKI

holds a PhD, and is an art historian, art critic and independent curator. He is assistant professor at the Institute of Art History, University of Warsaw, author of several dozen articles, editor and author of monographs and exhibition catalogues, and principal investigator and researcher in a number of Polish and international scientific projects; since 2019, he has been editor-in-chief of the *Ikonotheka* journal. He has curated numerous art shows, with a special interest in contemporary Roma art and its presence in the global art world. He curated the following shows featuring the works of Małgorzata Mirga-Tas: *Kali Berga* (Krakow, 2016; Berlin, 2017), *The Right to Look* (Krakow, 2018), *29. Exercises in Ceroplastics* (Orońsko, 2020) and *Out of Egypt* (Białystok, 2021). He is a member of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA). He lives in Krakow.

JOANNA WARSZA

is an interdependent curator, editor, and Program Director of CuratorLab at Konstfack University of Arts in Stockholm.

She is interested in the political, performative and poetic dimensions of art. Recently she co-curated, together with Övül Ö. Durmusoglu, Die Balkone in Berlin, the 3rd Autostrada Biennale in Kosovo, and the 12th Survival Kit in Riga. She was also the Artistic Director of Public Art Munich 2018, curator of the Georgian Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale, head of the public program of Manifesta 10 and associate curator of the 7th Berlin Biennale at the invitation of Artur Żmijewski. Her recent publications include *Red Love: A Reader on Alexandra Kollontai* (with Maria Lind and Michele Masucci, 2020), and *And Warren Niesłuchowski Was There: Guest, Host, Ghost* (with Sina Najafi; published by Cabinet Books and Museum of Modern Art Warsaw, 2020). Originally from Warsaw, she lives in Berlin.

DAMIAN LE BAS

is a writer from the south coast of England. His first book, *The Stopping Places: A Journey through Gypsy Britain*, won the Somerset Maugham award, a Royal Society of Literature Jerwood award, and was shortlisted for the Stanford Dolman Travel Book of the Year. Damian has written for *Granta, Tate Etc, Raw Vision, The Guardian* and others, and his next book is due to be published by Chatto & Windus in 2023. He read Theology at St John's College, Oxford.

ETHEL C. BROOKS

is Chair of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies and Associate Professor of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies and Sociology at Rutgers University. Brooks is a Tate-TrAIN Transnational Fellow at the University of the Arts London, where, in 2011–12, she was the US-UK Fulbright Distinguished Chair. Brooks was appointed under President Obama to the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, where she served from 2015–20. She is Chair of the Board of the European Roma Rights Centre and member of the Bavarlipe Academy of the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture, the RomaMoma Think Tank, and the US Delegation to the International Holocaust

Remembrance Alliance and its Roma Genocide Working Group. Since 2007, she has been co-Director of the annual *Feminist Critical Analysis* course in Dubrovnik, Croatia. Brooks is the author of the award-winning *Unraveling the Garment Industry: Transnational Organizing and Women's Work*. Her current book project focuses on encampment, claim-staking and Romani futures.

ROBERT KUSEK

holds a PhD and a D.Litt, and is a professor at the Department of Comparative Studies in Literature and Culture, Institute of English Studies, Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland. His research interests include life writing genres, the contemporary novel in English, visual culture, queer heritage, as well as a comparative approach to literary studies. He is the author of numerous articles and books, including *Through the Looking Glass: Writers' Memoirs at the Turn of the 21st Century* (2017). His current research project focuses on the reception of Polish literature and visual culture in South Africa in the 20th and 21st centuries.

JAN MIRGA

was born in 1947 in Czarny Dunajec, he is a Polish-Romani teacher and writer. He is the author of fairy-tales and poems, and the editor of the first Polish-Romani dictionary. He lives in Czarna Góra, where, as he says, he is 'building a home with an open door and a chair ready and waiting'.

TERESA MIRGA

is a Romani poet and composer, a songwriter and guitarist, founder and lead singer of the Romani band Kałe Bała. Apart from her

own pieces, she performs songs from the Bergitka Roma music tradition. She has published several volumes of poetry; she has cut a few albums with Kałe Bała, and has made recordings for Polish Radio and Television. She lives in Czarna Góra.

ALI SMITH

is the author of many works of fiction, most recently including *Summer, Spring, Winter, and Autumn*. Born in Inverness, Scotland, she lives in Cambridge, England.

Citations

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Hall of the Months, Museo Schifanoia, Ferrara, courtesy Musei di Arte Antica di Ferrara, photos: Daniel Rumiancew

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Małgorzata Mirga-Tas's studio in Zakopane,
photos: Daniel Rumiancew (pp. 100–102, 104, 105), Joanna Waśko (p. 103)

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Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, *Re-enchanting the World*, 2021–2022,
acrylic and fabrics on canvas, mixed media, photos: Daniel Rumiancew
(pp. 63, 73–75, 84, 88, 89, 169–193, 214–232),
Bartosz Solik (pp. 64, 65, 194–213)

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Małgorzata Mirga-Tas's sketches for *Re-enchanting the World*, 2021–22,
pen, pencil and marker on paper

59th International Art Exhibition
– La Biennale di Venezia
The Milk of Dreams
23 April–27 November 2022, Venice
curator: Cecilia Alemani

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas's exhibition *Re-enchanting the World* proposed by curators Wojciech Szymański and Joanna Warsza was selected through an open competition for a curated exhibition project, organised by Zachęta – National Gallery of Art on behalf of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage of the Republic of Poland, as a result of a meeting on 28 September 2021.

The competition jury appointed by
Prof. Piotr Gliński,
Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Culture and National Heritage,
consisted of:

Mateusz Adamkowski
director of the Department of State Patronage of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage

Prof. Maciej Aleksandrowicz
director of the Centre of Polish Sculpture in Orońsko

Piotr Bernatowicz, PhD
director of the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle

Prof. Jacek Friedrich
director of the National Museum in Gdańsk

Alicja Knast
director of the National Gallery in Prague

Agnieszka Komar-Morawska
director of the Department of National Cultural Institutions
of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage

Joanna Mytkowska
director of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw

Joanna Malinowska
artist representing Poland at the 56th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia

Barbara Schabowska
director of the Adam Mickiewicz Institute

Sylwia Świsłocka-Karwat, PhD
director of the Wrocław Contemporary Museum

Prof. Andrzej Szczerski
director of the National Museum in Krakow

Jarosław Suchan
director of the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź

Prof. Tomasz Wendland
director of Mediations Biennale Polska

Karolina Ziębińska-Lewandowska, PhD
director of the Museum of Warsaw

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Ministry of Culture and National Heritage of the Republic of Poland

CULTURE.PL ADAM MICKIEWICZ INSTITUTE

ERIAC
EUROPEAN ROMA INSTITUTE FOR ARTS AND CULTURE

ISTITUTO POLACCO ROMA

VOGUE

EXHIBITION

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas
Re-enchanting the World
Polish Pavilion at the 59th International Art Exhibition
– La Biennale di Venezia
23 April–27 November 2022, Venice

curators:
Wojciech Szymański and Joanna Warsza

Polish Pavilion Commisioner:
Janusz Janowski, PhD (since 2022)
Hanna Wróblewska (until the end of 2021)

Polish Pavilion Office:
Ewa Mielczarek
Joanna Waśko (Deputy Commisioner)

exhibition organiser:
Zachęta – National Gallery of Art
pl. Małachowskiego 3
00-916 Warszawa

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of Culture and National Heritage of the Republic of Poland

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European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC)

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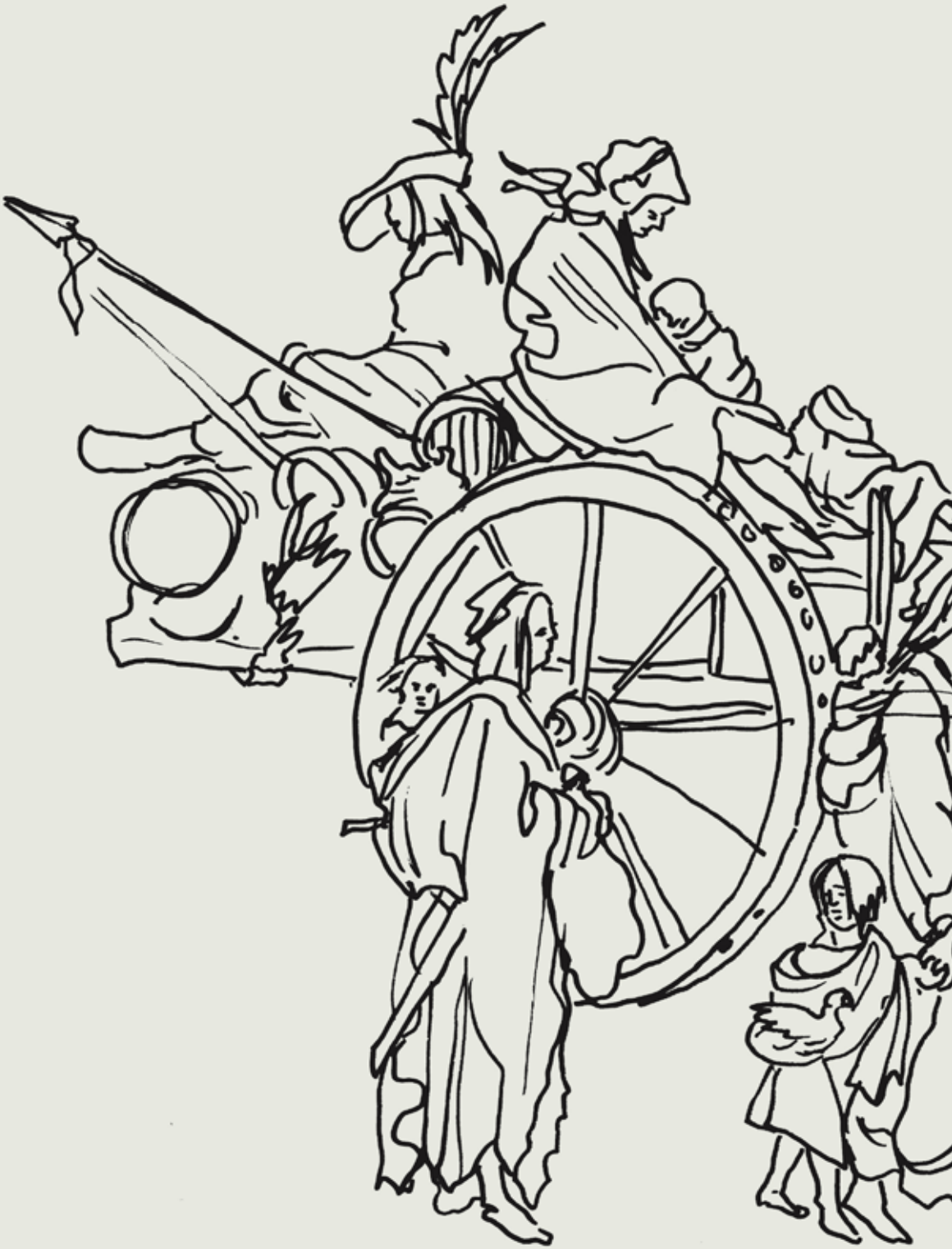
Czarna Góra is a village with a mixed Roma and highlander population on the border of Spisz and Podhale. The beginning of the Spisz region, by the Białka river. Actually, you could say it's either the beginning or the end, but for me it's the beginning. I love it, it is my place on earth.



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