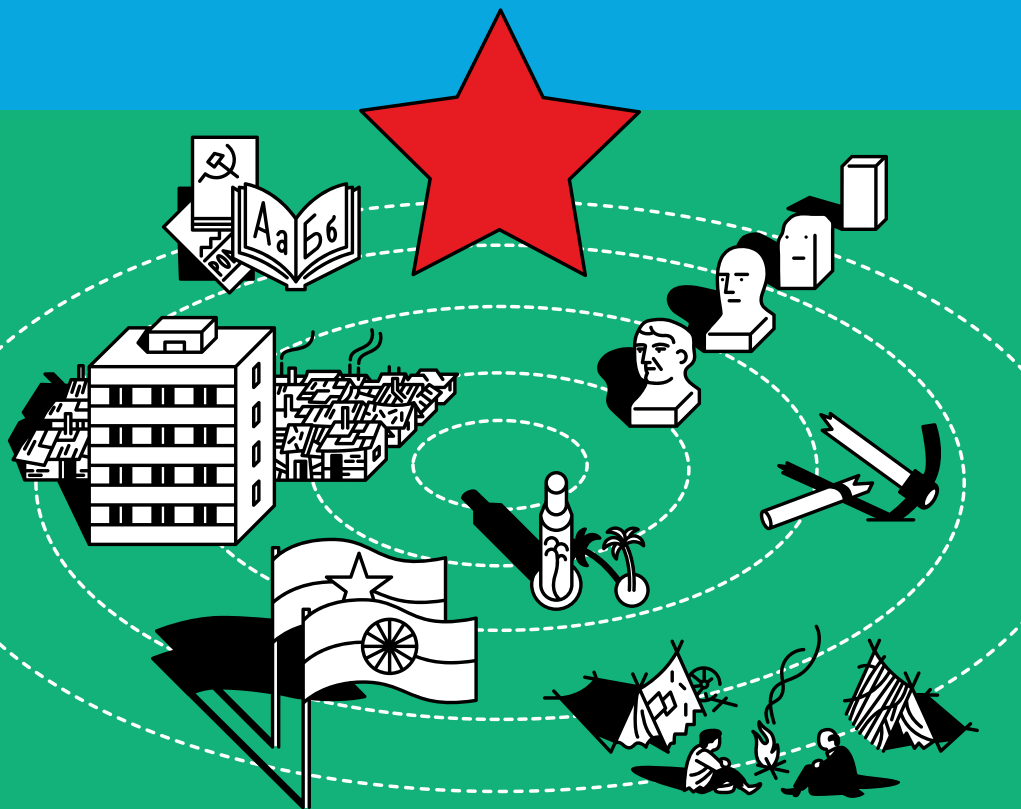
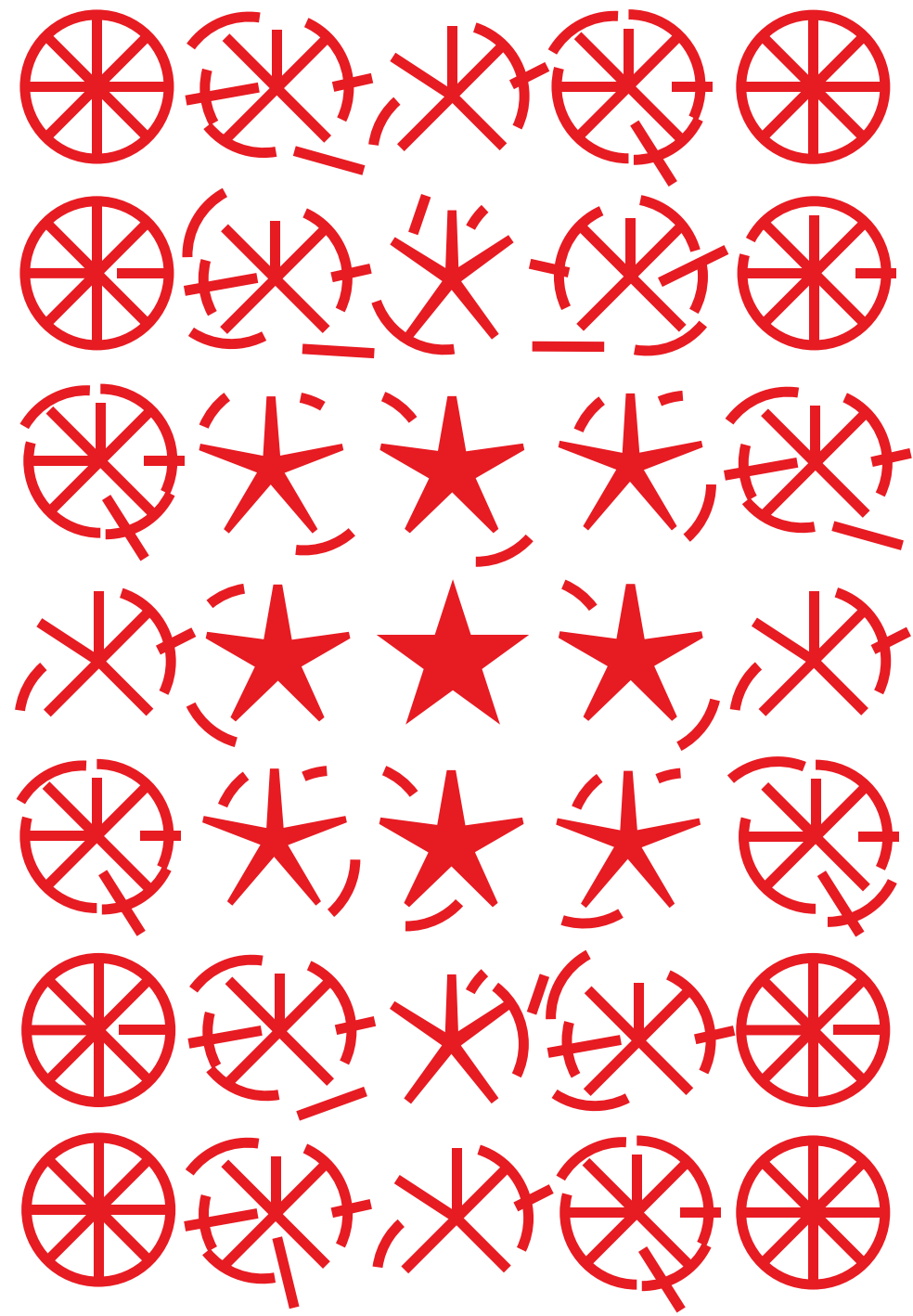


MANUŠ MEANS HUMAN

Averklub
Collective



kunsthalle wien



MANUŠ MEANS HUMAN

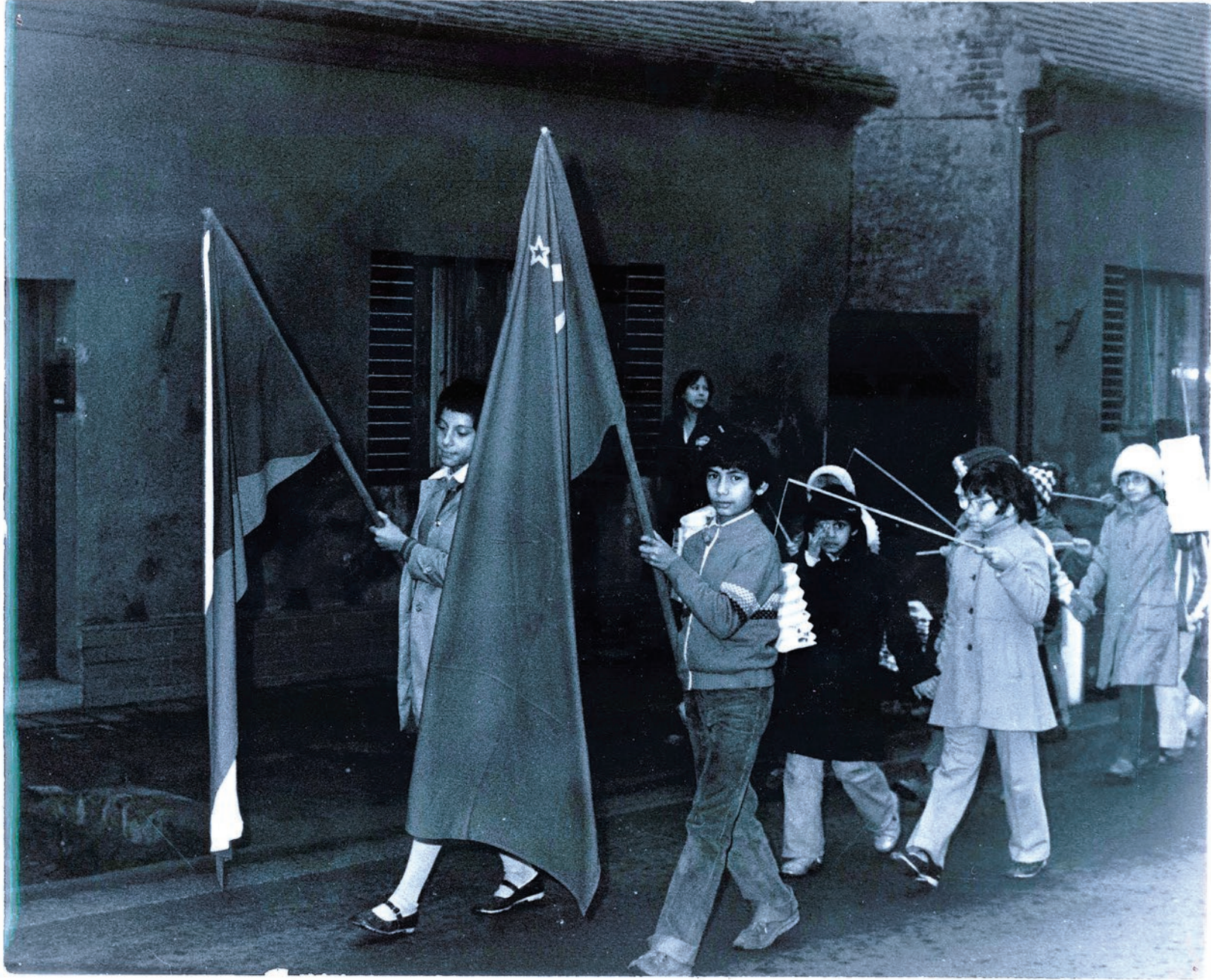
Averklub
Collective

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kunsthalle wien

Celebration of the anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution, lantern parade in Komořany, 1970s,
COURTESY STATE REGIONAL ARCHIVES LITOMĚŘICE, PHOTO: UNKNOWN





Mosaic of a poppy in the House of Culture, Chanov housing estate

Organized by a collective of artists, cultural workers, and activists, *Manuš Means Human* opens up a series of questions about the relationship between art and the material conditions of its production and presentation, and about the ways in which the constitutive narratives and origin stories of places, peoples, and nations are written. Through juxtaposing ethnographic, documentary, and artistic materials, the exhibition examines the role of art in creating cultural myths, the relation of art objects to remembrance and the interpretation of history, and the scope of a decidedly non-elitist and activist practice within the privileged space of the white-cube exhibition hall. It explores the ways in which we can talk about marginalization without slipping into stereotyping or exoticization, and how we can fight against oppression on an everyday level while challenging ourselves to imagine things beyond the pragmatic *realpolitik* of this particular moment.

Averkclub Collective's practice starts from recognizing that the oppression of marginalized and dispossessed peoples comes from structural conditions created by interlacing economic and social factors over long periods of time, rather than from isolated incidents of discrimination. *Manuš Means Human* traces the policies through which the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic

addressed the structural causes of the exclusion of the Roma people, situating these in the wider historical context of the twentieth century. But while it looks to the past, the exhibition is strongly grounded in the contemporary moment. Starting from the context of the Chanov housing estate in the city of Most in the Czech Republic, the exhibition puts the living conditions under the “totalitarian” regime of the past and the “liberal” regime of the present into sharp contrast. In this way, a different map of the second half of the twentieth century emerges—one that deconstructs the false narratives perpetuated by major contemporary media that present capitalist countries as technologically and socially advanced, and socialist countries as oppressive and joyless places in desperate need of catching up. The exhibition explores the successes and shortcomings of socialist policies toward Romani integration in order to inspire us to look once more at the socialist project, with clear eyes, as a possible model of building equality that goes beyond identity politics.

Economic injustice, stigmatization, negative stereotyping, and racism against the Roma has been present across Europe for centuries, and the treatment of the Roma is one of the biggest blind spots of the contemporary European project—they continue to be scapegoated and used

to divert public attention from larger social conflicts. During the “transitional” period in Central and Eastern Europe, following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the violence targeted at the Roma population increased significantly. Austria had its own shameful episode in 1995, when four Romani men were killed in Oberwart by a pipe bomb hidden behind a sign that said, “Go back to India”. In more recent history, a particularly harsh example of discrimination is the division of Europeans into “bad” and “good” citizens, resulting in the infamous deportations of Roma from France and Italy in 2010, and which continues through increased policing and harassment. At the same time, despite official declarations on inclusivity and numerous humanitarian and non-governmental programs in most European countries, the general socioeconomic position of the Roma people is downplayed and turned into a problem of “cultural” difference, while the systemic causes behind their extreme poverty and social exclusion remain unchanged.

This exhibition is about the specific histories of the Roma, but by bringing to light different episodes from the history of Romani movements, it touches upon, in the words of the **Averklub Collective**, “the desire for a dignified life common to all ordinary folk who are prevented from participating in decisions regarding their own fates”. It looks

into ways in which the cultural imagery of a marginalized people is created, as a way to offer alternatives to hegemonic narratives of “minority” and to work against policies of erasure and the forgetting of past struggles and attempts at emancipation.

Cultural and activist work interconnected with art practice strongly informs the activities of the **Averklub Collective**, and we are pleased that, through this exhibition, we can present the group’s latest research and artworks, produced in collaboration with various generations of residents of the Chanov housing estate. The aim is to move away from romanticization, victimization, and essentialization and to instead offer new perspectives capable of mobilizing cross-ethnic solidarities. The exhibition at **kunsthalle wien** is also an implicit critique of contemporary trends that disguise charity, and its patronizing handing out of what one has in excess, as solidarity. *Manuš Means Human* advocates for a solidarity that asks for the questioning of one’s own comforts and privileges, and consideration of structural social changes that are necessary to create just and dignified living conditions for all members of society.

What, How & for Whom/WHW
Directors, **kunsthalle wien**

Most city center, 1980s, FROM THE ARCHIVE OF MARIE PULKOVÁ



Averklub Collective Manuš Means Human

The **Averklub Collective** is the outcome of a collaboration between the **Romafuturismo Library** (now the **Josef Serinec Library**) and the association **Aver Roma**. This collaboration culminated in the establishment of the **Aver Club Cultural Center** at the Chanov housing estate in Most, Czech Republic.

The **Aver Club Cultural Center** offers a daily cultural and leisure program in the premises of what used to be a nursery school, which is open to all residents of the housing estate. A social enterprise is also currently being set up in order to improve the social and economic situation of the local population. Developed as a self-supporting initiative, this social enterprise has stepped in to compensate for the lack of structural solutions.

The **Averklub Collective** researches the silenced history of the Roma and other sociopolitical questions related to excluded localities and groups in the Czech Republic and beyond. Its members are **František Nistor**, **Roman Šváb**, **Radek Šváb**, **Nikola Nistorová**, **Dana Bažová**, **Helena Pompová**, **Zuzana Cicková**, **Markéta Pařízková**, **Markéta Strnadová**, **Ladislava Gažiová**, **Jakub Jurásek**, **Zbyněk Baladrán**, and **Alexey Klyuykov**.

Manuš Means Human (*Manuš znamená člověk*) is the title of a book by **Vincent Danihel**, a Czechoslovak communist politician of Romani origin. In this book, which was published in 1986, **Danihel** analyzes the historical development of the social status of the Roma. In using the same title for the exhibition, we want to draw attention to what unites people rather than what divides them. We want to show that, over and above the multiplicity of cultures, genders, nations, and so on, there exists another level of belonging that is accessible to all without exception. Aware of the individualism that could result from this, we place the collective principle of mutual belonging at the forefront of our activities. While this could be regarded as a socialist principle, we see it as a perspective directed toward the future and also as the only possible way of relating to others within human society. We do not believe that this perspective is possible within a society organized along capitalist lines. We are also conscious of the confusing historical and conceptual associations that surround the word “socialist”, but we are prepared to risk being misunderstood.

The exhibition *Manuš Means Human* attempts to show this “dialectical whole” using the example of Romani art. Rather than simply recounting a comforting story of Romani art, it instead

shows that any such attempt at cultural or ethnic exoticism defers and complicates genuine emancipation and inclusion within the broad collective of the European social community. The exhibition presents artifacts and documents relating to events from the past seventy years in what used to be Czechoslovakia. It puts together a picture—albeit a fragmentary one—of why the inclusion and cultural development of the Romani population is impossible without social justice. The truth is that the Roma enjoyed greater social justice when integrated into the former communist countries, and that the renewed capitalist order of the past thirty years has failed to achieve what was at least partially accomplished under the previous regime. We see the former situation as inspirational for beginning to consider positive changes in the future.

The System Must Change before Anything Else

Averklub Collective in conversation with What, How & for Whom/WHW



Averklub Collective, Chanov housing estate, 2021

WHW: *Manuš Means Human* builds on the collaboration between the artists from the Averklub Collective and activists and organizers in the Chanov housing estate in Most, Czech Republic. How did this collaboration come about, and why? How do you work together? Could you tell us a bit about your collective's structure and artistic approach?

AC: The collective arose spontaneously and naturally. We've never had an explicit mission statement. It was more a kind of functional aid to our joint efforts rather than a declaration of collectivism as such. We got to know each other while searching for a new home for the **Romafuturismo Library**, which had previously been based in Prague. The **Aver Roma** [Other Roma] clubhouse had already been in existence for some time at Chanov. It was led by a handful of locals, and the emphasis was on youth sports activities (e.g., the junior football team). The club members were involved in other aspects of the life of the estate too, and **Aver Roma** seized the opportunity to open a library. That's when the collaboration started.

We moved from the small prefab clubhouse to the building of what used to be the nursery, which had been empty for a long time. A broader, more versatile collective was gradually formed, as more and more activities for young people were dreamt up, which in turn meant we had to find suitable lecturers and specialists. People got involved for a while, then left. Someone who was active at the start but who is not involved today may well return sometime in the future.

It should be emphasized that all the activities **Aver** is involved in revolve around the leisure activities of the residents of the housing estate. **Aver** was never—not at the start and not now—an art project, and inasmuch as an artistic element appeared in our activities, it was more in the form of workshops, as a service for the local community.

The collaboration on the exhibition *Manuš Means Human* arose gradually from the need to find a means of capturing how the way of life of the people of Chanov was changing. Later on, the topic expanded into more general questions of culture and art and the conditions under which they arise. At first we met as an informal group of people

sharing a similar worldview. Mutual trust grew, and from that a determination to work together on an exhibition addressing specific problems. These problems involve how to demonstrate, describe, and present the history of oppressed and marginalized groups of people. There is no system behind the way we work—it's more an ongoing awareness of what it is we want to say. Our task is to keep framing the challenges faced by the Roma as a social and economic problem, not a cultural or ethnic one. Our working method could be summarized thus: we don't want our starting point to involve an identitarian division of society, since this leads to the blurring of material problems through cultural sentimentalism and an orientalist condescension.

WHW: For the exhibition in Vienna, you are producing new video works, related to the Chanov housing estate, as a prism through which to examine the successes and pitfalls of housing policies for the Roma minority in Czechoslovakia under socialism. Can you tell us a bit about the videos and why you opted for the interview format?

AC: The interviews are a good example of how we approach “art”. The older generation of residents expressed a wish to recount the history of the place. A great deal of research has been done on the Chanov housing estate, and in the media, it is a synonym for segregation, poverty, a ghetto, and so on. It is generally claimed that segregation was why it was built, and how it has been since the very start. However, witnesses who remember moving into the newly built apartments—that is, people who had already lived there for twenty years prior to the events of 1989, and another thirty after that—point out that, though much is written and said of Chanov, no one had ever thought to ask the residents themselves for their opinion.

And so interviews became the logical format. We reached out to a variety of people, spanning generations. We spoke to elders about the past and young people about the way they live today. It should be pointed out that we plan to release the interviews in book form, including photos from the personal archives of the residents. This is why the videos do not attempt to offer an exhaustive account of Chanov's past.

Chanov housing estate, 1985,
FROM THE ARCHIVE OF HELENA NISTOROVÁ



WHW: Besides those newly produced works, *Manuš Means Human* includes a significant number of works from the Museum of Romani Culture (Muzeum romské kultury / MRK) in Brno. In previous conversations, you said you chose works through which a certain political narrative can be projected. What do you mean by this—that they create a space for political interpretation and speculation, or that they are witness to a political moment within Romani history?

AC: One could argue that every work of art or artifact can be interpreted politically. But that's not how we want to do things. The truth is that we do not treat the objects on show as works of art; that is, we're not interested in the aesthetic ambitions and qualities of a particular work. In addition, we assume that what is now called “Romani art” does not and has not ever existed. It is a complicated category that could not come into existence under the historical conditions of Central Europe. This group of European citizens either lived a life of complete poverty and destitution that did not allow for an interest in culture of this type, or, during the period of “real socialism”, saw no reason to highlight ethnic identity in the same way as it is being spotlighted in culture at present.

Romani culture existed and was supported, but only in the same way as every other folk tradition existed and was

supported. That is to say, the aim was not to support progressive art as such.

The current trend for art inextricably bound up with identity is irrelevant in respect of the Roma, because it doesn't address the real reason for the nonexistence of Romani art and artists. These days, people are laying blame at the door of mainstream institutions, which, the argument runs, overlooked Romani art for a long time. However, this problem should not be racialized. The situation is the result of the social status of poor people—people who do not have the opportunity, or even the desire, to think about art.

That's why our approach to the works on show from the **MRK** collections involves delving into the conditions under which they were created. This is the political aspect we spoke of.

WHW: The works from museum collections and historical documents are organized in the exhibition through an intertwining of historical and thematic narratives that track the emancipation of the Roma in the second half of the twentieth century. But there are also certain works that are “fabricated” by you and “nested” within the historical narrative under various pseudonyms. What made you decide on this strategy? Why was there a need for this?

AC: We don't think that this strategy is in any way crucial to the exhibition. There are a few “fake” objects, but basically there is nothing that could not exist in reality. Perhaps it's less exciting than it seems at first sight. The vast majority of those “fake” objects illustrate the socialist period of the 1950s and 1960s and imitate the relatively run-of-the-mill output of that time. Sometimes it's simpler to recreate something than to track down the original. The way we see it, the presence of these objects means we can expound on certain topics more clearly. We see these objects as technical aids that do not disrupt the canonized history of art. The presence of fictive works was far more significant in the exhibition *The Universe Is Black*, which was shown at the **Moravian Gallery** in Brno in 2017. You could even say the exhibition in Brno was *based* on them. That's not so in the case of this exhibition.

WHW: How does *Manuš Means Human* relate to and build on *The Universe Is Black*, which was curated by Ladislava Gažiová, who is

one of the initiators of the Averklub Collective, and the topic of Romafuturism, which was explored by this show?

AC: The exhibition *The Universe Is Black* was created by a whole group of people. In addition to **Ladislava**, it involved the curators **Ondřej Chrobák** and **Natalie Drtinová**, and the exhibition architect was **Alexey Klyuykov**.

As for the material on display, the two exhibitions share many features. The Vienna exhibition is a pared-down version of what was exhibited in Brno—a kind of thematic focus on a certain part of *The Universe Is Black*. The two exhibitions communicate with their audiences by means of a different narrative. We approached both the Brno exhibition and the theme known as Romafuturism with reservation. We see it as a way of thinking that was highly influenced by a particular trend in art discourse at the time. *The Universe Is Black* exhibition was intended to be an analogue to the classical, national-revivalist exhibition—a show representing the cultural history of a nation in the spirit of a Western conception of the museum. It was based on the concept of Romafuturism, a term we came up with, derived from the popular Afrofuturist movement. We were promoting an alternative vision of the history of Romani art, and what we put on show was basically the opposite of what we want to say with the *Manuš Means Human* exhibition. It was a demonstration of the “great history” of Romani art, which has its historical continuity and remains active today. Hence the importance of the fictive works in *The Universe Is Black*, which intervened in certain periods in a more dynamic way. That show offered a completely fictive timeline, in which the story of art from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day was told using objects largely from the 1990s.

Nevertheless, the Brno exhibition diverged from the principles supplied by Afrofuturism in one important respect: it did not claim that Romani art is “other”. It said that it is essentially the same as what we know from European art history; that is, that it is the art of a people who have shared the same geographical and cultural space as the majority European population for many centuries.

Manuš Means Human does not have a linear timeline. It's constructed on a concentric basis, with the center



"We Sing and Dance in Peace", Chanov housing estate, May 15, 1987, PHOTO: LUBOŠ DVORÁK

occupied by the socialist emancipation project that we clearly spotlight as the most progressive moment in European history. This then sets themes flying off to the outer edges through the distortions dictated by the conditions prevailing at any given time.

WHW: One of the Averklub Collective's primary activities at Chanov is running the Josef Serinek Library, which began life as the Romafuturismo Library in Prague in 2017 and moved to Chanov in 2019. Could you explain how this library functions? Why was it established, and why was it important to relocate it to the Chanov housing estate?

AC: **Ladislava** had long dreamt of gathering together Romani literature with links to postcolonial and decolonial theory. The library was eventually created with the support of **tranzit.cz**, a contemporary art network working across Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, the Slovak Republic, and Romania.

It was originally an attempt to distance ourselves from the seemingly depoliticized approach of Romani studies, the practice of which includes a culturalist approach and an ethnographic interest in the subject under examination. That's why our aim was to gather literature written by Romani people, and not by specialists in Romani studies. Also, a relatively large number of translations had been published in socialist Czechoslovakia of African and African American writers. In other words, we had access to a sufficiently large corpus of important postcolonial texts that were barely known in the Eastern bloc (e.g., translations of **Frantz Fanon's** work and the criticism it elicited at the time). We wanted to bring all this together to create a collection dedicated to the literature and emancipation theory of oppressed nations and ethnicities. We named the library **Romafuturismo** for the reasons outlined above (curator **Vít Havránek** may have come up with the actual name). As well as housing the collection, the library organizes discussions, lectures, readings, and so on.

Everything worked as how one might imagine a library to function within a contemporary art institution: none of the people for whom the library was primarily intended ever crossed its threshold. It became a space "spotlighting

a problem”, “stimulating debate”—that is, noteworthy in many respects, but only for the community surrounding contemporary art. It was an elitist institution, which meant that, for all the positive feedback it received, it had failed as a project.

Had we continued within the environment of contemporary art, it would have been a classic example of the parasitism of a social problem—and that’s not what we wanted. There was also the question of finding new premises.

Ladislava had contacts at Chanov, and we met up with **Aver Roma**, who welcomed the vision of relocating the library to the housing estate. What was so great was that the library finally found its way to the people for whom it had been created. The residents of the housing estate participate in its operations. And yet, despite all the events the library has hosted and the books it has loaned out and the space it has provided for someone to sit quietly and read, the main function of the books in the club is really to create a kind of backdrop. In a certain way, the collection of Romani literature is the guarantor of the place—the metaphorical bedrock on which it is based. It’s a collection that offers local people the feeling that it contains their history, a history they wrote themselves. It is something that boosts their self-confidence.

The name also had to change. The concept of Romafuturism proved completely inexplicable to the average person. If we had retained the name, no one would have identified with it. And so the decision was taken to rename the library after the Czech Romani guerrilla and communist **Josef Serinek**, who is greatly admired by the people of Chanov. It was the right decision.

WHW: In your writing and our previous conversations, you have talked about the challenge of organizing cultural programs for participants from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds, and of establishing meaningful contact between culturally elitist programs and grassroots activism. How do you set about getting out of what you call the “art-world bubble” in your work with Roma communities?

AC: The first step involved relocating the library to Chanov and cutting ourselves off completely from institutional art



Workshop, Chanov housing estate, 2020



Concert by Jan Bendig, Chanov housing estate, 2020

operations. The library was never an artistic project, but could have been perceived as one if only by virtue of the fact that it was created in collaboration with **tranzit.cz**. And so we are definitively no longer part of the art-world bubble. We work alongside the people of Chanov for the people of Chanov.

However, we once more find ourselves in that bubble thanks to *Manuš Means Human*. On the other hand, you could argue that this represents a step in the opposite direction. That is, this exhibition isn't an attempt to introduce contemporary art to people who are not interested in it. Instead, there is a particular theme that we address as part of the **Aver** group, and we are taking the opportunity to talk about it through the format of an exhibition intended for the audience of an art institution.

WHW: Who do you envision the audience for *Manuš Means Human* to be?

AC: We are realists. This is an exhibition for the average visitor to the **kunstHalle wien**: in the vast majority of cases that means an educated, liberally inclined, middle-class audience. We are not in a position to wish for anything more. The institution of contemporary art has its limits, and these are not related to barrier-free access or the price of a ticket.

WHW: Despite the fact that most Roma are settled and live in houses, their “nomadism” remains a negative and widely exploited stereotype. And yet, given its legacy of divergence from the majority narrative—which mystifies the “connection between people and their country”, and in which “country” is more often than not a proxy for territory caught up in various violent national conflicts—nomadism also holds out the promise of transnationality. An implicit critique of nationhood and the nation-state is therefore present in discussions of Romani identity and its role in imagining the future of Europe. How important is this question of transnationality, as opposed to the nation-state, for *Manuš Means Human*?

AC: You're right: the idea of the Roma as nomads is still alive and kicking, and as a stereotype it is often used to stress their differences and to exclude them from the national histories of individual European states. It's as though

people still think the Roma belong “elsewhere”, even though they were already settled in Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. There is probably no analogous situation to that of the Roma. It's very complicated and unique (in the negative sense of the word). From the very start, the Roma in Europe represented an undesirable element, often occupying the position of slaves. Nomadism was a necessity—not a question of tradition. The nationality they have acquired through history was due to a kind of benevolence on the part of one or another state: a decision that the Roma would be tolerated on its territory. The situation of the Roma today is not that different from the situation in the first half of the twentieth century; take, for instance, the situation in Germany, where the people who have been living in the country for many generations are still victims of violent attacks and discrimination. And in this context, we're talking of families linked with the history of the Romani Holocaust. For the Roma who arrived in Germany as asylum-seekers in the 1990s from the former Yugoslavia, Romania, and Bulgaria, returning to the country they had left was fraught with danger. Nevertheless, they were often resettled. The Roma whom the Germans allowed to remain were given the status of *Geduldete*, or “tolerated” people, which in practice means they have no right to state support. They live in a state of permanent precarity and fear of deportation.

However, this story of nomadism can be interpreted in a positive way. In fact, your very question hints at the possibility of a positive interpretation.

For instance, in left-wing circles, the claim is often made that nomadism is synonymous with freedom, with independence from the material conditions of life in today's late-capitalist society. Unfortunately, this leads to an orientalized relationship to the Roma, who are viewed by the majority society as “passive agents”—as the eternal victims of various political regimes that have oppressed and subjugated them for centuries. This image of the martyrdom of the Roma bestows upon them an element of purity and immaculacy that in turn reinforces the idea of an eternally unsatiated and unbreakable desire for Roma freedom (understood as nomadism). And yet, as modern research shows, since as far back as the nineteenth century, Roma elites have been promoting

the need to move to sedentism as the only possible path to positive change.

It seems to us that the naive liberal idea of a seductive (and yet safely distant) nomadism—despite its positive attitude to “otherness”—has the effect of maintaining this otherness. It leaves everything in its place. Poverty continues to thrive in ghettos and slums, and this “lifestyle” only receives the thumbs-up from people in the role of sympathizers. This perspective then leads to those qualities related to a life of poverty being associated with a certain ethnicity or culture. Material poverty becomes a culture that its sufferers then retrospectively identify with.

We are not entirely convinced as to the parallels with transnationalism. We take transnationality to be a natural part of postmodern society. It’s a kind of fracturing element that cannot be avoided, and it cannot therefore be said that it is in itself positive. If we took transnationalism to be wholly positive, we would find ourselves inhabiting a dangerous dualism, whereby we simply assume the nation-state to be a negative, violent force, in contrast to viewing the scattered multiplicity of transnational subjects as something positive. These two processes run simultaneously, and one supports the other. Moreover, the very concept of a transnational identity implies an allegiance with at least two nations. If we cling to the notion that the Roma still belong to some original homeland, then all the peoples of all the nations of Europe—all the outcome of past migrations—would also possess some mythical “homeland”. From today’s point of view, this would simply be nonsensical.

WHW: There is an effort in your work to break away from an essentialist way of thinking about Romani cultural emancipation, while also not denying the existence of ethnicity or certain established customs. How do we talk about the ways in which the Roma can influence their image and counteract negative stereotypes and racism without resorting to identity politics?

AC: We don’t see a contradiction, for the simple reason that we don’t believe that a rejection of identity politics inevitably means a rejection of culture. The opposite is true.

THE KINDERGARTEN AT THE CHANOV HOUSING ESTATE, 1981. FROM THE ARCHIVE OF HELENA NISTOROVA



No matter how hard we try, splintered identities cannot be emancipated in capitalist society. The Romani people cannot liberate themselves and transform their status as long as the political and economic framework remains the same. We need to think within a broader societal framework and seek commonalities across societies, rather than struggling to assert our own uniqueness. What we see today is a misunderstanding of Marxism: that the politics of the past (which stood for Marxism) repudiated all forms of cultural difference. This was not the case. Cultural authenticity was desired, but there existed another social level that was to connect people across all possible cultures and identities. What is important is to pinpoint that universal narrative today. For instance, if you ask Roma living in the Czech Republic how they identify, they will reply that they are primarily Czech and also Romani, and they will be equally proud of both identities.

Whether or not there exists a proletariat or similarly defined group of workers as a common denominator remains a moot point. The belief that there is no such thing as society—that there is no longer anything that brings people together—may simply be a form of wish fulfillment. After all, we all know that the highest class still possesses its own class consciousness, and guards it jealously. Furthermore, we believe that the culture of identity politics is horribly reductive. The individual is slotted into their chosen identity, which is accorded a certain credit. And yet each of us has a multiplicity of identities, and there is no reason to resort to just one of them. We are in favor of a far more pluralistic approach than current identitarian emancipation offers.

WHW: Is there a way to focus on Romani art without falling into a colonialist way of thinking of the “other” as comprising a constantly different cultural code that cannot be shared universally?

AC: Since “Romani art” is a relatively recent construct, we have to realize that, inasmuch as such art is being created today, it is usually the product of the given construct. That is to say, it is art that, from the outset, wants to be “other”, for the simple reason that it benefits from this “otherness”.

The current discourse forces the few Romani artists working in the Western art world to focus on how, as Roma, they

embody “diversity”, which then becomes a self-perpetuating process and forms the substance of an artwork. This is an easy way to achieve success, and if things continue down this path, then we shall be condemned to be forever regarded as the “other”. However, if there is to be change, it must be systemic, and it must involve more than a mere re-evaluation of how we think about our own identity.

WHW: In *Manuš Means Human*, the juxtaposition of old works referring to emancipation during the socialist times with contemporary works alludes to the changes in the social status of Roma in Slovakia and the Czech Republic since the Velvet Revolution of 1989. Can you say a bit about the status of the Romani minority in Czechoslovakia during the socialist period, as well as how it changed after 1989?

AC: The vision and demands of Romani activists from Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Poland, and so on were first realized in the USSR. According to the well-known historians **Elena Marušíaková** and **Veselin Popov**, **Joseph Stalin** listened carefully to Romani activists and implemented many projects on the basis of their suggestions.

In the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, Romani nationality was not recognized. The main argument was that the Roma spoke many different dialects and were divided into groups among which antagonism reigned. Politburo documents describe the dangers of exclusion based on this self-determination. The Soviet model of Romani emancipatory politics was described as unfeasible within the context of Czechoslovakia.

In an interview, the lawyer and activist **Gustáv Karika** recalls **Anton Facuna**, now a well-known Romani partisan, who from 1957 sought to establish the **Union of Gypsies-Roma** (Svaz Cikánů-Romů / SCR) in Slovakia. After many requests to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the union was eventually registered, but was not provided with any facilities or support. In fact, it did not become active until the start of 1969, under the directive of the USSR, following the arrival of Warsaw Pact troops in Czechoslovakia. However, whatever its faults, it's still the case that Czechoslovakia created the conditions necessary for the Roma to lead a dignified life.



The Žehra settlement, Slovakia, 2021, PHOTO: AVERKLUB COLLECTIVE



Averklub Collective, *Social Murder* (video still), 2021, COURTESY THE ARTISTS

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the situation in many countries of the Eastern bloc, including the former Czechoslovakia, was dismal. Most of the Roma (and the non-Roma, for that matter) were stripped of the basic needs required to live a dignified life, stripped of decent housing and work. Under these conditions, it is easy to run a system of segregated education and excluded localities. The educational level of the poor constantly declines, and the result is a vicious circle from which it becomes more and more difficult for a person to extricate themselves from that situation.

WHW: Can you talk a bit about the title of the exhibition—*Manuš Means Human*—and the way it draws attention to the wealth of Romani dialects? It seems it may be intended to highlight the complex political choice made when “Roma” was accepted as the collective name for a variety of diverse groups during the First World Romani Congress, which was organized in 1971 in Orpington, near London.

AC: *Manuš* is the Sanskrit word for “human being”. It’s a word known by every Rom, Sinti, Olach, Manouche, Romanichal, Kale, Ashkali, Balkan Egyptian, and so on. Absolutely everyone knows what the word *manuš* means.

In the exhibition title, the word refers to a more universal thinking and represents the bond between all people of very disparate historical, linguistic, and cultural groups.

Manuš Means Human is also the title of a book by **Vincent Danihel**, a Romani Czechoslovak politician, which includes a detailed description and critique of the governmental measures taken to improve the lives of the Roma in socialist Czechoslovakia.

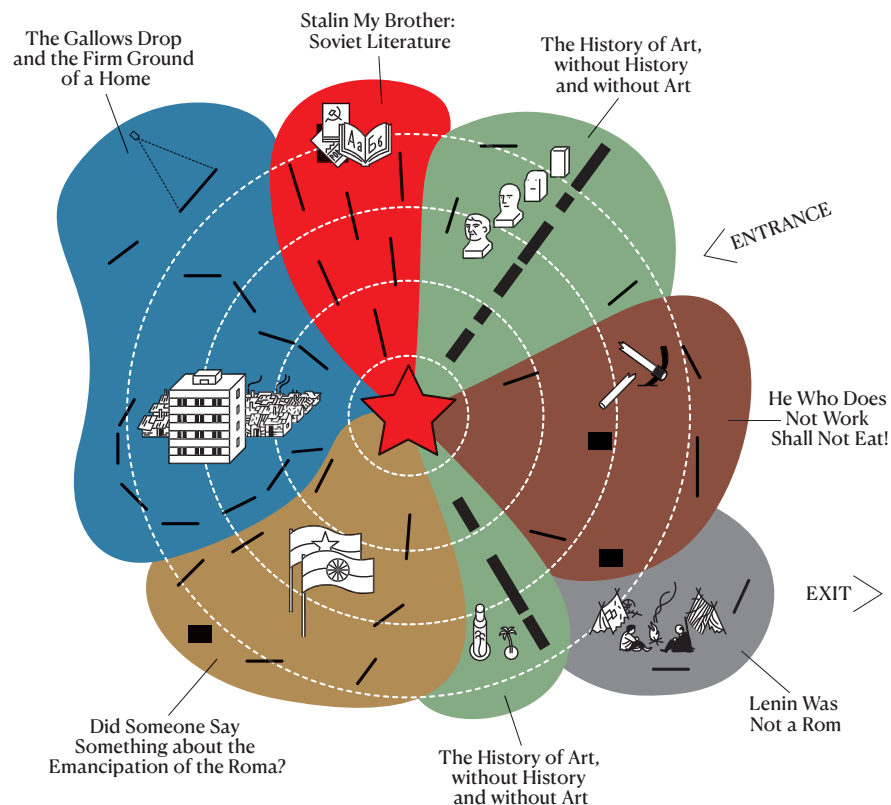
The 1971 **World Romani Congress** is one of the most famous events in the history of the Roma. The common origin of the Roma, the design of the Romani flag, the anthem, and the ethnic name of “Roma” were all agreed upon at the congress. The wheel in the center of the flag, in addition to being a symbol of nomadism, refers to India, the geographical origin of the Roma. It is often said that representatives from fourteen countries met at this congress. However, the academic literature includes documents that confirm the

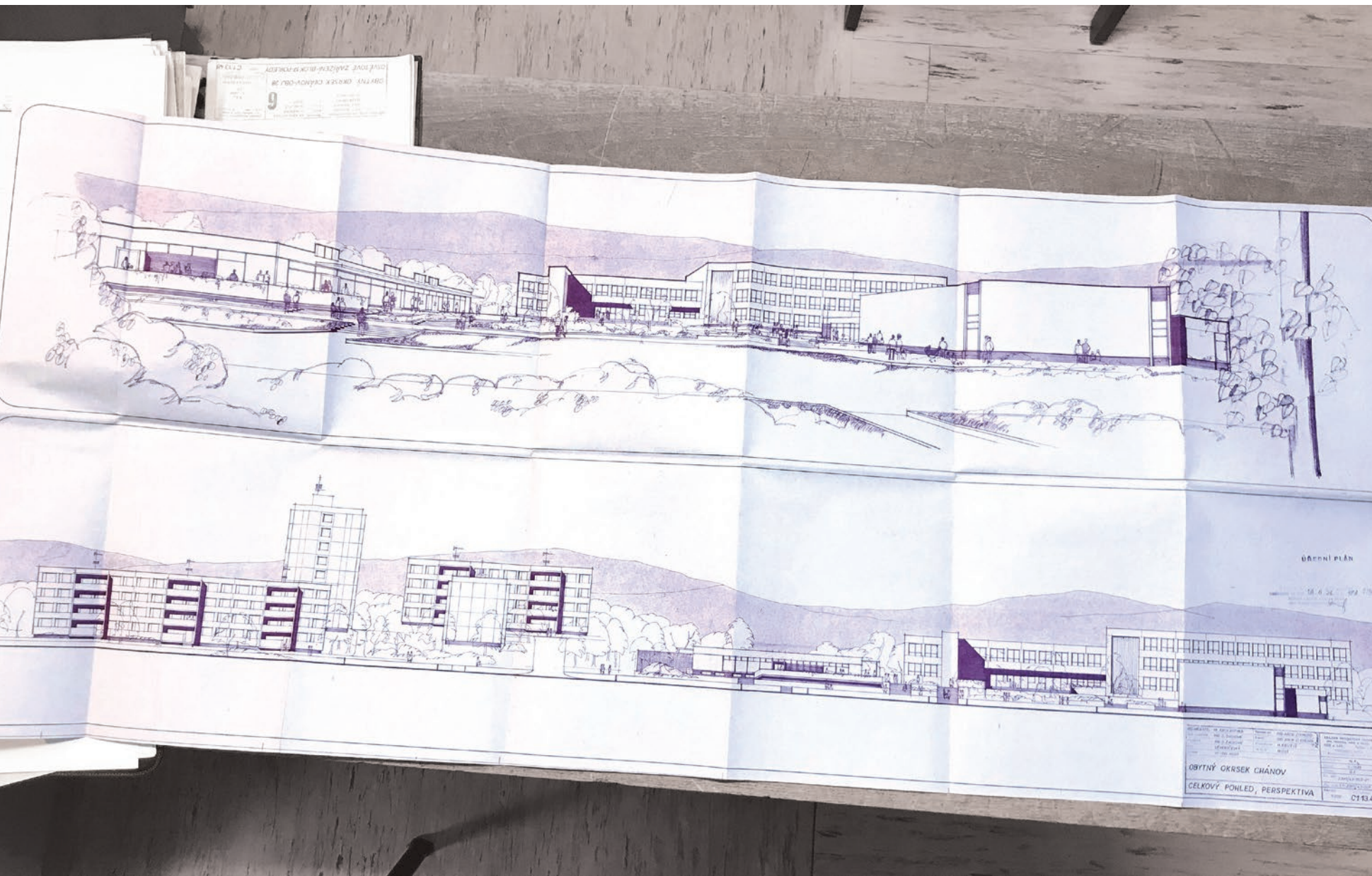
presence of only eight representatives. These were from Western Europe, with the exception of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. The event was and is most definitely important. However, it should be observed that some Roma do not share the historical interpretation of an Indian origin and are reluctant to claim allegiance with the nomadic lifestyle, and that many countries—including some with large Romani populations such as Russia, Hungary, and Romania—were not represented at the congress.

WHW: In our conversations, you have referred on several occasions to your desire to go back to a universalism based on the model of socialist emancipation. What potential for the future do you see in this universalist model? How does one reintroduce universality into the art discourse as a socialist principle? How do we speak about universality when there is oppression?

AC: Socialist universality is important, because it represents a genuinely open model of emancipation accessible to anyone. It is inclusive and excludes no one. When voiced by artists, considerations regarding the potential of some emancipatory model or other can sound naive. However, as today's reality shows, certain liberation movements based on diversity can easily be taken in by the system. They are no longer a threat, but, on the contrary, serve to reinvigorate and consolidate the system. Socialist universality offers a broader, completely different framework. It is based on the idea that the system must change before anything else. Yes, these days, it seems almost unimaginable. But we can't simply resign ourselves to things never being different. And we have to fight against oppression. Or at least try to.

MANUŠ MEANS HUMAN FLOORPLAN OF THE EXHIBITION





He Who Does Not Work Shall Not Eat!



Ondřej Roubal, *Portrait of Metallurgist Jan Oláh*, 1970, COURTESY THE ARTIST

The pictures and artifacts in this part of the exhibition focus on the depiction of labor over the past fifty years. They illustrate the transformations in the interpretation of what labor means and reflect how the perception of labor has impacted a poor and very often closed community.

The slogan *He who does not work shall not eat* has become an unchallenged truism. It's a phrase that has the potential to create consensus but is also used as a tool of ostracism. Since the Middle Ages, it has been used as part of a moral injunction against slothful behavior and to label as sinners those who do not lead a virtuous Christian life. Its origin can be traced back to the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians, the author of which is presumed to be **St. Paul** or a later imitator.

Though it may surprise some, **Vladimir Ilyich Lenin** also drew on these words of **St. Paul**. He cited them in a letter, this one to the workers of Petrograd, during the Russian Civil War of 1918. **Lenin's** letter, entitled "On the Famine", urges the politically conscious to persuade the less aware to join the revolution. In the midst of civil war, it was a challenge to take sides in an as yet undecided dispute. **Lenin** explains the need to halt and destroy private food speculators, to unite the masses of the poor by establishing an iron rule, and to help redistribute food and other necessary resources to all who needed them. He writes that *He who does not work shall not eat* is the main principle of socialism. He continues: "In this simple, elementary and perfectly obvious truth lies the basis of socialism, the indefeasible source of its strength, the indestructible pledge of its final victory. Everyone who has experienced poverty will agree with this, everyone who has earned a living from their own labor". Which, at that time, meant nine-tenths of the laborers and peasants and all workers.

This was **Lenin's** opinion on the question of hunger.

In a similar way to how **St. Paul's** slogan has become embedded in social life, the ethos of *An honest day's work for an honest day's pay* has become the emblem of modernity. The way it's interpreted depends on the interpreter. In the binary world of the Cold War, labor in the communist countries under state capitalism took on cult-like qualities, while in

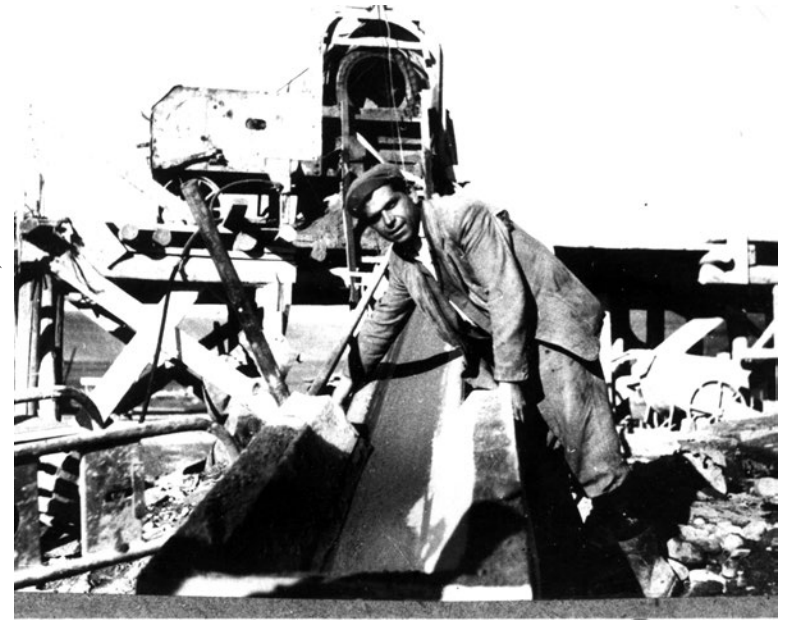
the capitalist countries, with their promotion of private property, labor became an aspect of market logic. It was conceived either as communal work on which everyone was to cooperate or as simply a logical operation offering individual pleasures and rewards.

The doctrine of the former Czechoslovak Socialist Republic was to take care of all citizens and to integrate them into the body of the socialist state along with certain stereotypically marginalized groups within the population. In the spirit of the slogan *He who does not work shall not eat*, work became compulsory. Anyone who did not participate in the creation of common goods was deemed a parasite. The legal norm derived from this obligatory employment was primarily intended to function as a tool for dealing with the idle rich and unproductive speculators.

The post-communist neoliberalism of the 1990s built upon this ethos of fighting parasitism and reunited it with a negative image of socialism as a type of regime that allows people to profit who do not deserve it. However, in reality, it is the poor who end up paying. According to the rhetoric prevalent in the public discourse, the poor want socialism so that they don't have to work.

These days, after thirty years of the systematic dismantling of the welfare state, the slogan *He who does not work shall not eat* has become the expression of a vulgar social Darwinism. In public space, letters championing collectivity have been replaced by billboards and television clips in which right-wing conservatives and fascist politicians use this slogan as part of a campaign to divide society.

Young shock worker, Prešov and Košice district, Czechoslovakia, 1950s, COURTESY MUSEUM OF ROMANI CULTURE, BRNO



OBČANIA ČIG. PŮVODU PREVADZAJÚ AJ NAROČNE
PRÁCE PRI ŠTROJOCH /ŠT. ĽUBOVNA/

Handmade pickaxe, Medzev, Slovakia, mid to late 20th century, COURTESY MUSEUM OF ROMANI CULTURE, BRNO





Young builder, Czechoslovakia, 1950s, COURTESY MUSEUM OF ROMANI CULTURE, BRNO,
PHOTO: LADISLAV PŘIBORSKY

Jan Bartoš, *Diggers*, 1999, COURTESY MUSEUM OF ROMANI
CULTURE, BRNO



Julius Lakatoš, *Crown*, 2003, COURTESY MUSEUM OF ROMANI
CULTURE, BRNO



The Gallows Drop and the Firm Ground of a Home



The failings of the poor in general may be traced

Averklub Collective, *Social Murder* (video still), 2021.
COURTESY THE ARTISTS

The entire history of the Roma has been marked by oppression, persecution, and the contempt of the rest of society.

Most Roma permitted to settle by various European aristocracies lived on the edges of villages or forests to ensure a supply of basic provisions and the materials needed to build their homes. Initially, these homes took the form of tents, shacks, *burdeis* (a type of pit house), and dugouts. They were often built on a slope and had openings at the front, which were covered with tarpaulins and later with doors. The other residents of these areas did not welcome the Roma, but merely suffered their presence.

After the creation of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, nothing changed for Roma living in the Czech lands or in Slovakia. In 1927, the government passed the “Act on Nomadic Gypsies and People Living the Gypsy Lifestyle”, which served to completely eliminate the Roma’s presence in society.

Andrej Hlinka’s regime in Slovakia from 1936 onward and the 1939 occupation of Czechoslovakia by Germany intensified the suffering of the Roma. They were gathered together in special detention facilities, transported to concentration camps, and exterminated en masse as an “unclean and inferior” race. During this period, Romani settlements and dwellings were razed to the ground, and many Roma were forced to hide for extended periods in the forests, while many others lost their lives. The settlements created in the forests in the mid-twentieth century exist still to this day, mainly in Eastern Slovakia. In the Czech lands, the situation was even more tragic. The Roma were subject to genocide, with fewer than 600 surviving World War II.

After the founding of the new socialist state in 1948, the Roma became equal citizens in Czechoslovakia and throughout the Eastern bloc. Many entered the labor market, especially in the construction and agricultural industries.

Slovaks were invited to settle in Czech lands to make up for a shortfall in manpower, and many Roma were among



Aladár Kurej, *Romani Settlement of Podskalka near Humenné, 1993*, COURTESY MUSEUM OF ROMANI CULTURE, BRNO



Julius Lakatoš, *Abandoned House (When the Settlement Came to an End), 1998*, COURTESY MUSEUM OF ROMANI CULTURE, BRNO



Romano magazin (YouTube still), Slovakia, 2011, COURTESY THE ARTISTS



Julius Lakatoš, *Pero (Romani Settlement near Selice), 2004*, COURTESY MUSEUM OF ROMANI CULTURE, BRNO

the people who made this move. In the region of Ústí nad Labem, to which our work *My Home in the Chanov Housing Estate* (2021) refers, Roma became an important labor source—one that this district and the companies operating in it did not want to lose.

The city of Most is the second largest municipality (after the eponymous capital) in the region of Ústí nad Labem. It was founded in the thirteenth century as a royal town due to its economic potential and strategic location in north-west Bohemia. Since the Middle Ages, various minerals have been mined in the vicinity of Most. Over the last two centuries, the most important activity has been the surface mining of brown coal, which is even found beneath the city itself. Mining intensified significantly in the latter half of the nineteenth century thanks to new technologies and the irrepressible development of capitalism. The source of coal beneath the city, of which people have been aware for centuries, was an ongoing topic of contention from the beginning of industrial mining in the nineteenth century until 1964, when it was finally decided to extract the coal pillar from beneath Most. This entailed demolishing nearly the entire city. As compensation for the liquidation of the old city, the utopian dream (later largely realized) was the construction of a new city of the future—a city of social justice and a “city of roses”, as it was then called.

The Chanov housing estate was built in this new city of Most in the 1970s, and most of its first residents were Roma. The housing estate was intended to offer modern, quality accommodation corresponding to the standards of housing construction at that time. The twelve apartment blocks host 328 flats, most of them spacious and containing three or four rooms. The construction of Chanov exceeded the usual technical and economic specifications for such projects in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, but nevertheless it received approval, being considered a necessary project in light of the community’s requirements, including the fact that Romani families tend to be larger. The grounds of the estate also included a kindergarten with a nursery, a primary school with an after-school club and canteen, a cultural center with a cinema, a shopping center (including a restaurant, hairdresser, and general store), a health center, and all the other accoutrements of



Averklub Collective, *Social Murder* (video stills), 2021, COURTESY THE ARTISTS

Thus the social order makes family life almost impossible.



The Chanov housing estate, 1980s, FROM THE ARCHIVE OF HELENA NISTOROVÁ



the good life (playground, sandpit, sports ground, etc.), as well as public transportation running every five minutes.

The standard of living of most Roma rose considerably across the republic. However, the socialist government remained dissatisfied with the fact that the Roma's standard of living still remained lower than that of the rest of the population. Concrete measures to improve it often encountered internal party criticism for their ineffectiveness, and the strategy was changed over time to achieve better outcomes. From today's perspective, the communist government's attention to the issue is, quite simply, unique.

These days, Most has a reputation for being a city where no one wants to live, a city overwhelmed by social problems. After thirty years of neoliberal reforms, the closure of factories, rising unemployment, and the dismantling of the welfare state, the postwar housing estates of Ústí nad Labem, as in many other regions remote from the prosperous centers, find themselves on the periphery of governmental interest and alone with their problems. After 1989 (i.e., the Velvet Revolution), the Chanov housing estate became the largest and highest-profile ghetto in the Czech Republic. The city, following a sad historical trajectory lasting fifty years, has transformed from an example of how social justice can be successfully implemented into a synonym for a socially and racially excluded district without a future.



Helena Nistorová



František Nistor



Helena Bystrá,
Martin Cina (middle left),
Helena Grunzová (middle right)



Zuzana Ferencová, Marie Pulková (middle)



Averklub Collective, *My Home in the Chanov Housing Estate* (video stills), 2021, COURTESY THE ARTISTS

Stalin My Brother: Soviet Literature



Theater performance of *The Year of 1905* by Ivan Rom-Lebedev, Roman Theatre, Moscow, 1930s *

In its early stages, the Bolshevik party's policy in the Soviet Union on the question of nationality was a unique proposition, even in a global context. The powerful claim of the revolutionary year of 1917—the right of all nations to self-determination—helped to draw the general public to the side of revolution. However, as a tool to create a model for the organization of a large multinational country, self-determination was insufficient. Bolshevik policy was satisfied neither with the idea of assimilation nor with the extraterritorial existence of ethnic groups. The party's guiding principle thus became the creation of individual nations with their own territory within the larger union.

More than 40 national territorial units were created, but not all groups were satisfied that their requirements had been met. One problem was the huge number of small ethnic minorities within such a large expanse of land. The Bolsheviks saw a solution through applying the national territorial policy to even the smallest governmental entities: national districts, municipal councils, and collective farms or *kolkhozes*.

One remarkable aspect of this plan was the status of the Russian ethnic majority: it was too sizable to be ignored yet too dangerously large to be given its own national territory. This is why Russians did not receive their own independent republic or other ethnic privileges (including the right to have their own communist party).

In 1923, at the 12th Congress of the Russian Communist Party, the future direction of the party's support for nations was set forth by grouping concerns into four vectors: territory, language, elites, culture. This approach was called *korenizatsiya* (from *koren'*, the Russian word for "root"), meaning "indigenization" or "nativization". In 1926, the Central Committee released a statement about the assistance that was to be provided to those Roma wishing to transition to a settled way of life. That same year, the **Roma Union** was formed, the purpose of which was to unite the Roma and protect their interests, to increase the literacy of the Romani population, to organize libraries, clubs, production cooperatives, and communes, and to combat the continuing negatively perceived remnants of

the past, such as charlatanism and nomadism. This is also how the Roma *kolkhozes* were founded.

A written form of Russian Romani was also created during this period. Between 1928 and 1938, an unprecedented number of books were published in Romani: around 250 titles covering everything from translations of classical literature and poetry, through political literature and current party speeches, to children's literature, school textbooks, and practical manuals on housekeeping, farming, and personal hygiene. A newly created, authentically Romani literature was an important aspect of all this activity. Its main authors were **Alexandr Germano** and **Ivan Rom-Lebedev**, who published their first works in the almanac *Romany Zorya* [Romani Dawn].

In 1931, the Romani theater **Romen** was founded in Moscow, where it survives to this day.

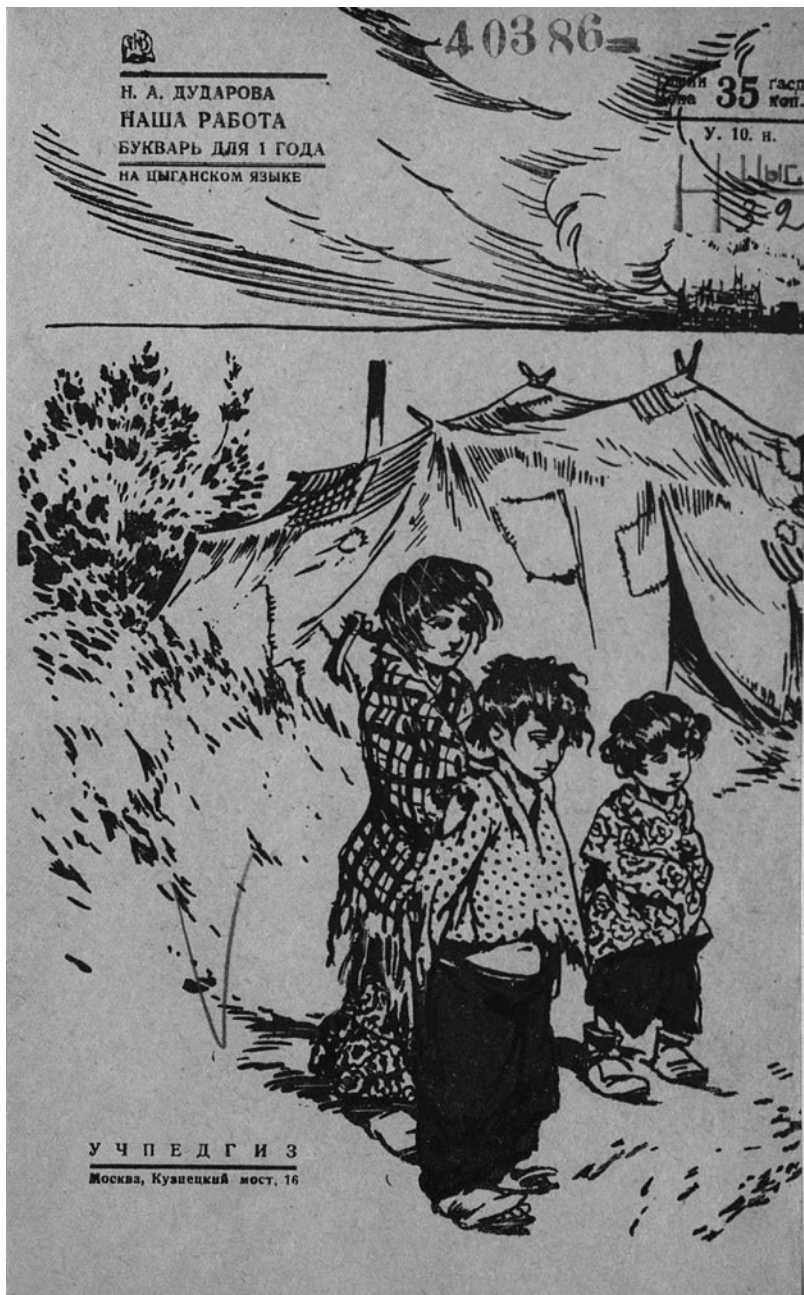
From 1932, the government gradually began to slow down the policy of *korenizatsiya* (indigenization) and in 1938 brought it to an end. At that time, new vectors of Stalinist policy that aimed at the "soft Russification" of the population prevailed. There were many reasons for the party's turn, from fears of the intensified nationalization of certain groups to practical problems such as the lack of school-teachers able to speak specific languages and the inability of large numbers of students to continue their university studies without a knowledge of Russian. Nevertheless, despite the overall failure of the *korenizatsiya* project, some positive outcomes were achieved. It managed to educate a generation of hitherto nonexistent national elites, who adopted the Soviet party's internationalist slogan "socialist in content, national in form" as their own.



Examples of books in Romani published in the USSR, late 1920s–early 1930s **



Front and back cover of the book: Nina Dudarova and Nikolay Pankov, *Amari buty*; *bukvaryo vash pervo bersh syklyabe* [Our Work: A Primer for the First Grade]. Gosudarstvennoye uchebno-pedagogicheskoye izdatelstvo [State Educational and Pedagogical Publishing House], Moscow, 1932



The History of Art, without History and without Art



Unfired handmade brick, 1990s, Krásnohorské Podhradie, Slovakia.
COURTESY MUSEUM OF ROMANI CULTURE, BRNO

When looking at idols made of concrete blocks, it might occur to the experienced art historian that cultural expressions bloom everywhere, under any conditions. If our imagined historian is well informed by a standard education, she does not hesitate to enthusiastically include such manifestations of animism alongside the sculptures of the early Middle Ages, or perhaps she might identify them as the crude contemporary creations of an obscure part of Central Europe. If the art historian works mainly out of Western universities, she no doubt sees in these artifacts a unique manifestation of a distinctive culture that has managed to maintain itself, despite being disciplined by modern social establishments, and that has proven its ongoing dignity against all the odds. Such creations should then occupy a place of honor among other monumental artifacts of European civilizations, such as **Raphael's** *Sistine Madonna* (1512) and *Guernica* (1937) by **Pablo Picasso**.

A different art lover might instead follow the development of form or the evolution of shape in these artifacts. He sees the brick, and the individual phases of its transformation, as an archetypal object. He considers its gradual transition from simple to more complex shapes, all the way to its ability to embody abstract ideas. This art lover recognizes the gradual transformation and work of the imagination in the figural representation and self-awareness of the creators. He is delighted by the first, hesitant attempts at realist depiction, suggesting a classical period, which is eventually broken by an emancipated modernist expression that rejects dependence on any model. Finally he studies the late phase of the artifact, in which popular culture plays its part as a manifestation of late capitalism.

Or yet another cultural critic might deploy a perspective inspired by cultural sequences, in which incommensurable groups of artifacts and their development can be considered general manifestations of social and economic pressures. Art is here understood in the form of an absence: the knowledge that what is missing is its own negative manifestation of oppression, and is therefore straightforwardly defined. That is to say, there exists no Romani *history of art*, because there probably exists no Romani *art* as such. One might sum up the situation in this way: Romani art has not yet been invented, and its projection into the past has not



Unfired handmade bricks, 1990s, Krásnohorské Podhradie, Slovakia, COURTESY MUSEUM OF ROMANI CULTURE, BRNO

yet illuminated the white spaces on the map of the generalizing construct called “art history”.

So, what do we see in this exhibition? Firstly, what we want to see.

It is impossible to see fully the repercussions of permanent poverty, or the struggle for human dignity within the context of permanent exclusion. We see objects, artifacts, and pictorial metaphors classifiable by period taken out of context. We have not yet gathered a sufficient number of documents to prove the thesis that the items on display in the exhibition are not the products of a cultural phenomenon but rather the results of a long-standing injustice. In the items on show in this exhibition—perhaps somewhere between the carpet hung on the living room wall next to the television and the carved figurines of exercisers and workers—it is possible to make out reflections of the desire for a dignified life common to all ordinary folk who are prevented from participating in decisions regarding their own fates.

What we *don't* really want to see is a culture of exclusion.

This exclusion is hidden and is the subliminal driving force of today's divided and unequal world. The class- and caste-based divisions of society exist despite the fact that they do not seem to be part of our everyday experience, and do not fit into a consistent common image of people's shared proximity to one another.

Did Someone Say Something about the Emancipation of the Roma?



Union members from a folklore ensemble during May Day celebrations in Brno, 1969–1973. COURTESY MUSEUM OF ROMANI CULTURE, BRNO. PHOTO: ANDREJ PEŠTA

On December 10, 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) adopted its Universal Declaration of Human Rights. One of its basic articles goes: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”. This idea reconfigures a line from the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, resulting from the French Revolution of 1789. Despite the limitations associated with that period, this notion played a revolutionary role in shaping society—something that cannot be said of the UN’s article. The revolutionary contingent of the working class and its representatives in advanced capitalist countries had already formulated their programs and demands long before the UN did, and these programs qualitatively exceeded the UN’s declaration. We know of the attempt at and partial realization of revolutionary demands from the history of certain countries of the former Eastern bloc.

However, the demands of the working class were not always correctly understood, or have been and still are vulgarized. Some envisioned socialism as an “empire of equality”, and after discovering signs of inequality, concluded that socialism was simply not possible. Others proceeded from the opposite direction, learning about socialism and its history and deciding that it forced people into a single mold—something that is at odds with human nature.

Neither standpoint has anything to do with the essence of socialism, even though the first example—an “empire of equality”—appears to be based on it. The amalgamation of egalitarianism and Marxism is a misunderstanding caused by theoretical ambiguities. The goal of socialist societies was not, in fact, universal equality—as the mere negation of social *inequality*. Socialism starts with inequality and insists that everyone, without exception, should have an equal opportunity to develop their personal abilities and potential to the full. It is not simply a legal framework to equalize all people in the eyes of the law; rather, socialism involves actively creating the conditions necessary for the development of the individual, and thus for their liberation.

These days, the word “emancipation” has become so popularized through frequent use that it evokes a strange feeling of emptiness in us. Most of today’s Romani initiatives and movements want to emancipate the Romani population.



Rozana Kuburovič, *Romani Flag*, 1971, COURTESY VÍT HAVRÁNEK



Yugoslavian Romani flag mockup, 1971

Some realize—though many do not—that without changes at the level of the social and economic base, the emancipation of humankind is impossible. It is understandable that small initiatives do not have enough power and influence to carry out changes of this magnitude, and yet it is of the utmost importance to keep this point in mind at all times.

For this reason, the *Manuš Means Human* exhibition commemorates an organization that emerged under the conditions of socialist Czechoslovakia: the **Union of Gypsies-Roma** (Svaz Cikánů Romů / SCR). This union was founded in August 1969 thanks to the efforts of the Romani intelligentsia. Many voices had been calling for the establishment of a similar organization since the 1950s. The best known of these voices was that of **Anton Facuna**, the Romani partisan and later chairman of the Slovak branch of the **SCR**, in a letter dated 1957 and addressed to the Central Committee of the Communist Party. The main aim of the **SCR** was to increase the participation of Roma in social life and to improve their living conditions. Already during the planning phase of the **SCR**, its future members were discussing the possibility of creating an economic arm of the union that would support joint work activities in Roma collectives, thus leading to higher levels of employment among the Roma. And so, in 1970, the **Něvodrom** production cooperative was created as a way to finance the union's activities. The **SCR**'s cultural and political mouthpiece was the magazine *Románo líl*, published for the duration of the union's existence and the first important platform for the dissemination of Romani literary texts in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. Though the **Union of Gypsies-Roma** was dissolved by state authorities in 1973, just four years after its founding, it represented an important stage in the history of the Roma in Czechoslovakia.

Around the same time, another important initiative was emerging that would offer a fundamental definition of Roma identity from the perspective of the western Roma intelligentsia: the **World Romani Congress**. In a sense, it represented the antithesis of the activities of Roma associations and organizations operating within the framework of socialist states. In 1971, the **First World Romani Congress** was held in Orpington, near London. It was attended by delegates from eight countries and observers



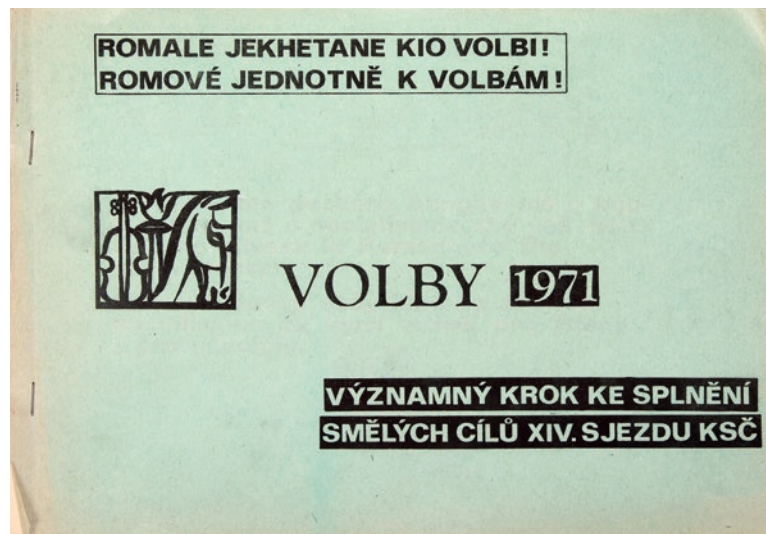
Romani football players, 1969–1973. COURTESY MUSEUM OF ROMANI CULTURE, BRNO, PHOTO: ANDREJ PEŠTA



Tomáš Holomek (at right), 1969–1973. COURTESY MUSEUM OF ROMANI CULTURE, BRNO



Romani Days, Bratislava, 1972. COURTESY MUSEUM OF ROMANI CULTURE, BRNO, PHOTO: ANDREJ PEŠTA



Roma People, We Go to Elections United!; information brochure of the Union of Gypsies-Roma, 1971. COURTESY MUSEUM OF ROMANI CULTURE, BRNO

from other countries. At this meeting, five committees were set up to deal with social issues, education, language, culture, and the investigation of war crimes. However, the mission of the congress—and the way its history is interpreted today—was the quest for emancipation, with a focus on culture.

At the congress, the majority of participants approved the use of the designation “Roma”—which is the Romani term for “own people”—as opposed to the less flattering “Gypsy”, which most European populations had been calling the Roma since the Middle Ages. The song “Gelem, Gelem” was declared the Romani anthem.

A pivotal moment—one that highlighted the divergent views on unification—was the dispute over the design of the new Romani flag. The Yugoslav delegation proposed a flag in the form of a blue-green field with a red five-point star in the center. In the end, the winner was a flag that, instead of a star, features a red chakra wheel with sixteen rays, referencing the Indian ancestry of the Roma ethnicity and symbolizing nomadism.

The First World Romani Congress, 1971, Orpington, COURTESY MUSEUM OF ROMANI CULTURE, BRNO, PHOTO: ANDREJ PEŠTA



Members of the Union of Gypsies-Roma, 1969–1973, COURTESY MUSEUM OF ROMANI CULTURE, BRNO



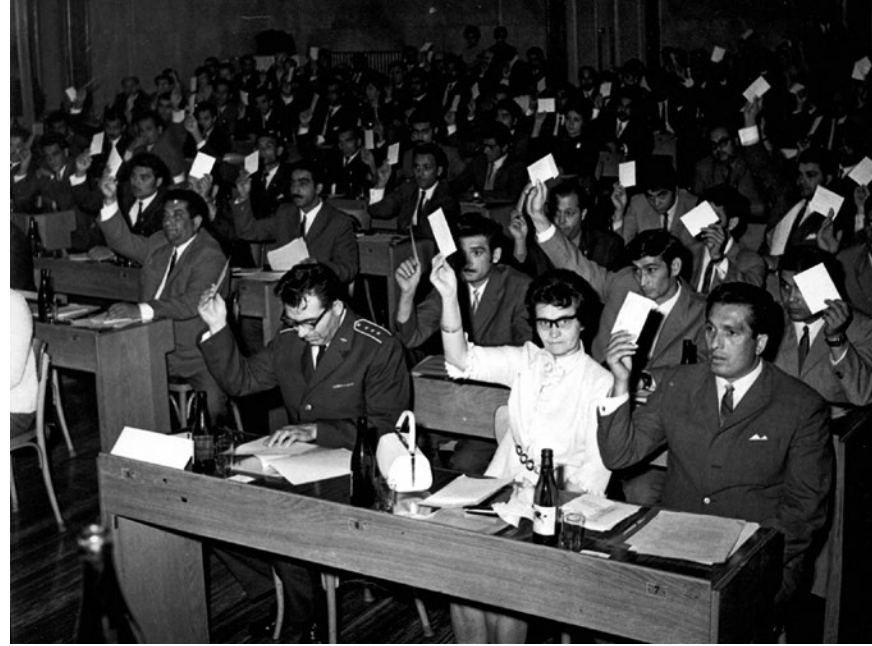


Romani football players, 1969–1973.
COURTESY MUSEUM OF ROMANI CULTURE, BRNO,
PHOTO: ANDREJ PEŠTA



Union of Gypsies-Roma at May Day celebrations in Brno, 1979. COURTESY
MUSEUM OF ROMANI CULTURE, BRNO, PHOTO: ANDREJ PEŠTA

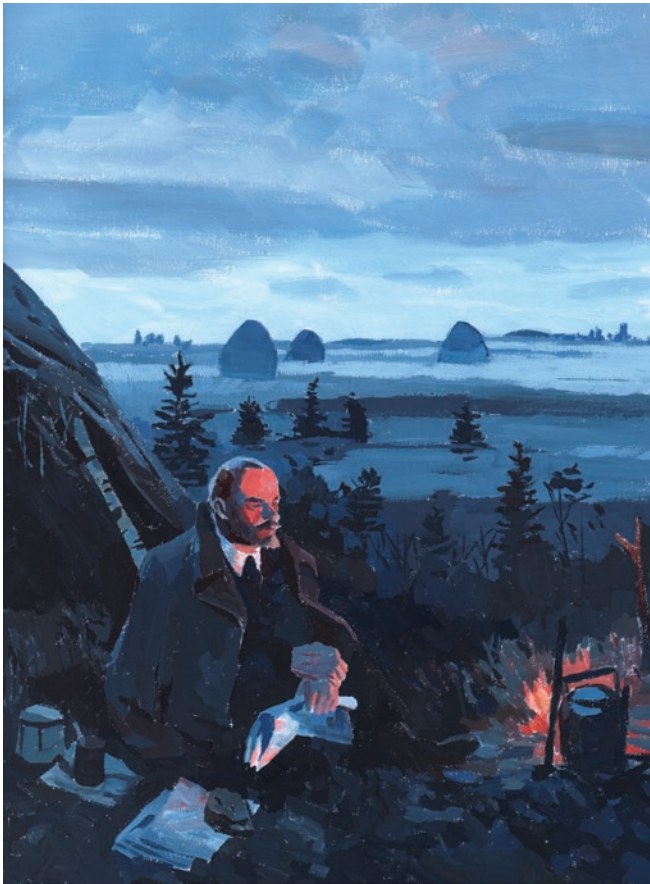
Constituent congress of the Union of Gypsies-Roma, August 1969,
COURTESY MUSEUM OF ROMANI CULTURE, BRNO



Constituent congress of the Union of Gypsies-Roma,
COURTESY MUSEUM OF ROMANI CULTURE, BRNO
(from left: Unknown, Tomáš Holomek, Antonín Daniel,
Miroslav Holomek, Zigmund Vágt), August 1969



Lenin Was Not a Rom



Averklub Collective, *Lenin in Razliv*, 2021 (free copy of Arkady Plastov's painting from 1948),
COURTESY THE ARTISTS

“It was a somewhat unsightly hut made of branches covered with hay. There was a log on which he sat. Next to the hut a cauldron hung on stakes in which something was cooking. There were mosquitoes biting you, especially at night. One could not escape them. But one simply had to come to terms with them.”

This is a description of **Vladimir Ilyich Lenin**'s temporary quarters given by his aide, **Nikolai Alexandrovich Yemelyanov**, a worker at the Sestroretsk arms factory. The archetypal dwellings of nomads could be described in the same way. However, it is clear that—leaving aside the charming image of rustic huts—the only thing connecting **Lenin** with the nomadic Roma is their shared knowledge of the state of exile. After the Provisional Government in Petrograd issued a warrant for his arrest, **Lenin** spent the summer of 1917 hiding on the shores of Lake Razliv, disguised as a Finnish peasant. In October of the same year, he returned to Petrograd, where a momentous turning point in social history was to take place.

Lenin's exile lasted one summer. The exile of the Roma was a state of “normality” that lasted centuries. The idea of a different, dignified life was inconceivable—as inconceivable as the fantastic visions of the Afrofuturists seem today. But then, as everyone knows, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. The Revolution of 1917, however, ushered in the possibility of realizing the previously unthinkable. In the territory of the new Soviet state, the Roma acquired the same opportunities for their own advancement as every other nation inhabiting the huge landmass of the USSR. Variations on a similar theme were later to take place in other socialist countries. These socialisms were focused on eradicating poverty, and thus unleashing cultural potential—not the other way around. From today's liberal viewpoint, such a policy is perceived as violence perpetrated against the representatives of an “other” cultural tradition. The myth of a free, unfettered nomadism—as we have viewed it since the Romantic era of the nineteenth century—returns. Explaining social problems by appealing to cultural differences is a simple matter. It's not hard to advocate for the preservation of traditions and the cultivation of a plurality of cultural identities from the secure, comfortable position of a middle-class metropolis. And this is why we should never forget that what

might appear to be a centuries-old cultural tradition that “must be conserved at any cost” may in fact be a preserved state of grinding poverty and exile.

“Lad’a, I’m worried that we will soon have to start traveling again”, my friend tells me as we enjoy a coffee on Jan Palach Square in Prague. Her family is not doing well financially, and her adult children and grandchildren have huge housing problems.

I don’t know what to say in reply.

LIST OF WORKS & MATERIALS

Works and materials from the collection of the Museum of Romani Culture, Brno

FOLK ART FONDS

Julius Lakatoš, *Abandoned House (When the Settlement Came to an End)*, 1998

Decorative plate featuring an unknown woman, 1999

Julius Lakatoš, *Abandoned Roma Settlement (Péro) near Selice*, 1998

Decorative plate featuring the Czech actress Jarmila Švehlová, 1999

Julius Lakatoš, *At the Pond, Romani Shepherds and the Making of Války (Unfired Bricks)*, 2002

Decorative plate featuring the Slovak singer Marika Gombitová, 1999

Julius Lakatoš, *Crown*, 2003

Decorative plate featuring the Slovak singer Marika Gombitová, 1999

Julius Lakatoš, *How the Roma Used to Wander*, 2003

FINE ARTS FONDS

Julius Lakatoš, *Pero (Romani Settlement near Selice)*, 2004

Jan Bartoš, *Diggers*, 1999

Julius Lakatoš, *A Wheel in Search of Its Direction*, 2006

Dezider Fertö, *Family*, 1984

Dezider Fertö, *The Spartakiad*, 1984

Andrej Pešta-Corrado, Artillery shell from World War II with an engraved peace message, 2002

Dezider Fertö, *Combine Harvester*, 1984–1992

Andrej Pešta-Corrado, *Roma Settlement of Lubica near Kežmarok*, 2005

Dezider Fertö, *Family with a Bird*, 1986

Dezider Fertö, *Feast*, 1990–1995

Andrej Pešta-Corrado, Tank shell from World War II with an engraved peace message, 2005

Daniel Kováč, *Female Saint with Hands Folded across the Chest*, 2005

Daniel Kováč, *Head*, 2005

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Daniel Kováč, *Lion*, 2005

Badge of the Névodrom production cooperative of the Union of Gypsies-Roma, 1969

Daniel Kováč, *Woman* (ashtray), 2005

Daniel Kováč, *King*, undated

Badge of the Union of Gypsies-Roma, 1969

Aladár Kurej, *Romani Settlement of Podskalka near Humenné*, 1993

Certificate of an employee of the Central Committee of the Union of Gypsies-Roma, 1971

Aladár Kurej, *Chronicle*, undated

Diploma of Dr. Vladimír Srb, Central Committee of the Union of Gypsies-Roma in Czechoslovakia, 1971

Five Good Principles, informational material published by the Union of Gypsies-Roma, 1969–1973

Invitation card to the concert *A Roma Acts, Sings, Dances*, organized by the Union of Gypsies-Roma, December 1970

Mandate of a delegate of the constituent congress of the Union of Gypsies-Roma, featuring the signature of Miroslav Holomek, 1969

Membership card (E dženakeri legitimácia) of the Union of Gypsies-Roma in Slovakia (Románo kultúrno jekhetániben), 1969–1973

Membership card of the Central Committee of the Union of Gypsies-Roma, 1971

Membership cards of the Union of Gypsies-Roma of the Czech Socialist Republic and the Slovak Socialist Republic, 1969–1973

New Year card of the Regional Committee of the Union of Gypsies-Roma of the Central Bohemian Region, 1971

Pennant of FC Roma Névodrom football club, early 1970s

Pennant of the Selection Team of the Union of Gypsies-Roma of the Czech Socialist Republic, 1971

Pennant of TJ Roma Karlovy Vary physical education association, early 1970s

Pennant of TJ Roma Poruba physical education association, 1965

Roma People, We Go to Elections United!, information brochure of the Union of Gypsies-Roma, 1971

Románo lil, gazette of the Union of Gypsies-Roma, 1970–1973

Rules of the Union of Gypsies-Roma, January 1973

Statutes of the Union of Gypsies-Roma, 1969

Volunteer worker ID card for the Union of Gypsies-Roma, 1969–1973

FONDS FOR DOCUMENTATION OF TRADITIONAL CRAFTS, PROFESSIONS, AND OCCUPATIONS

Handmade mold for forming unfired bricks, Krásnohorské Podhradie, Slovakia, 1990s

Handmade pickaxe, Medzev, Slovakia, mid to late 20th century

Handmade sledgehammer, Szaflary, Poland, mid to late 20th century

Unfired handmade brick (*války*), Krásnohorské Podhradie, Slovakia, 1990s

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Ribarova Vlasta, Tapestry with two birds, 1970s–1980s

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Poster for *Hartíkáni Buti*, an exhibition of Romani blacksmith art organized by the Union of Gypsies-Roma in Brno, October 1970

All works and materials: COURTESY MUSEUM OF ROMANI CULTURE, BRNO

Works from the Moravian Gallery, Brno

Miloš Axman, *Portrait of the Sculptor's Wife*, 1951–1952

Vincenc Makovský, *Student*, 1945–1949

Both works: COURTESY MORAVIAN GALLERY, BRNO

Other works & materials

Averklub Collective, *A Portrait of George Soros*, 2021, COURTESY THE ARTISTS

Averklub Collective, Replica [#1] of a work titled *Palm* (2003) by Andrej Pešta-Corrado, 2021, COURTESY THE ARTISTS

Averklub Collective, Replica [#2] of a work titled *Palm* (2003) by Andrej Pešta-Corrado, 2021, COURTESY THE ARTISTS

Anna Čonková, *Untitled*, 2016, COURTESY THE ARTIST

Fragment of a wheel from a Romanichal's wagon, featuring an inscription that reads "Opře Roma", 1950s

Saban Hasy, *Onward*, 1969, COURTESY THE ARTIST

Rozana Kuburovič, *The First World Romani Congress*, 1971, COURTESY THE ARTIST

Rozana Kuburovič, *Romani Flag*, 1971, COURTESY VÍT HAVRÁNEK

Rozana Kuburovič, Sketch for a painting, 1971, COURTESY THE ARTIST

The official flag of the Yugoslav Roma (offered as a version of the international Romani flag in 1971)

The official Romani flag, in use since 1971

Porous concrete brick (found object)

Ondřej Roubal, *Portrait of Metallurgist Jan Oláh*, 1970, COURTESY THE ARTIST

Unknown artist, *Lenin in Razliv*, 1970s, COURTESY THE ARTIST

Video works

Averklub Collective, *My Home in the Chanov Housing Estate*, 2021, 53 min 50 sec, COURTESY THE ARTISTS

Averklub Collective, *Social Murder*, 2021, 6 min 46 sec, COURTESY THE ARTISTS

Romano magazinos, Slovak vlogger magazine, YouTube video, 2011, 20 min, COURTESY THE ARTISTS

Public Programs

We warmly invite you to visit www.kunsthallewien.at, as well as our social media channels, to learn more about our public program for *Manuš Means Human*.

While as a contemporary art institution we consider it crucial to mediate, share, contextualize, and enhance our exhibitions through a rich and diverse public program, the last year has also taught us that, due to the unpredictable pace and extent of pandemic-related restrictions, it is necessary to retain a certain flexibility, both for us as programmers and hosts and especially for those we invite to participate. For that reason, we will publish and update the public program for this exhibition exclusively online, in order to adjust formats and dates more easily.

Together with the **Averklub Collective**, **kunsthalle wien**'s team is developing a public program that will critically respond to and accompany the exhibition and its context. It will revolve around the silenced histories of the Roma and other excluded groups in the Czech Republic, Austria, and beyond. Among other things, we will look deeper into the difference between artworks and artifacts and how this informs the sociocultural background and the means of production of the people who make these objects.



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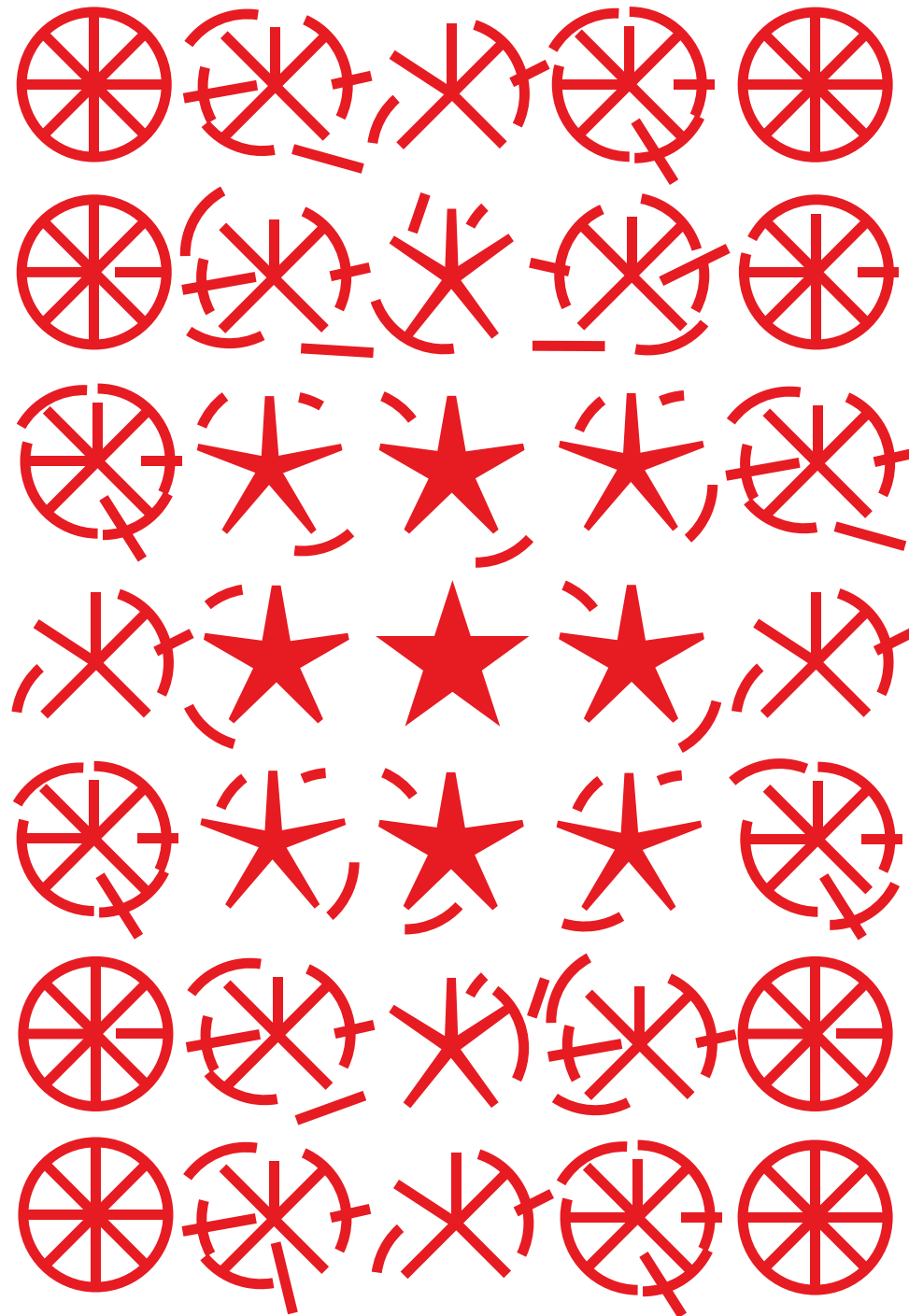
COVER OF THE BOOK: *Amaro znamyo - Lenino (sbornik)* [Our Flag Is Lenin (digest of articles)], trans. Nikolay Gladkov, Obyedinenie gosudastvennykh izdatelstv - Gosudarstvennoye antireligioznoye izdatelstvo [Association of State Book and Magazine Publishing Houses - State Anti-religious Publishing], Moscow, 1933

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