

PRESS

Averklub Collective Manuš Means Human 2/6 – 5/9 2021

CURATORS: What, How & for Whom / WHW (Ivet Čurlin, Nataša Ilić and Sabina Sabolović)

CURATORIAL ASSISTANT: Aziza Harmel

The **Averklub Collective** is a loosely organized group with no fixed structure. Its core is constituted by several residents of the Chanov housing estate, the largest Roma settlement in the Czech Republic. The collective expands and contracts as it sees fit, adapting with various configurations of artists, theorists, cultural workers and activists depending on current projects and needs. The activities of the **Averklub Collective** are strongly informed by the interconnectedness of cultural and activist work with art practice. With *Manuš Means Human* **kunsthalle wien** presents the group's latest research and artworks, produced in collaboration with various generations of residents of the Chanov housing estate.

The exhibition 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.

Manuš Means Human (*Manuš znamená člověk*) takes its title from the eponymous 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 and the policy of Roma integration in Czechoslovakia. In using the same title for the exhibition, the **Averklub Collective** 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."

Through juxtaposing ethnographic, documentary, and artistic materials, *Manuš Means Human* 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. The exhibition 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 imagining things beyond the pragmatic realpolitik of this particular moment.

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. 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. **Averklub Collective's** practice is based on awareness 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. As **WHW**, the directors of **kunsthalle wien**, put it: "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." 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.

This exhibition is about the specific histories of the Roma, but by bringing to light different episodes and key events from the history of Romani movements, such as the First World Romani Congress held in London in 1971, 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.

The selection of historical and contemporary artworks presented in *Manuš Means Human* explores possibilities and impossibilities of producing art in scarce material conditions and the ways in which Roma artists address topics of work, poverty, housing, and the physical environment, as well as political organization and emancipation, thus weaving counter-narratives to their persistent exoticization by mainstream culture.

Averclub Collective

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

A summary of the exhibition's topics

Averklub Collective. Manuš Means Human is composed and built through exploring six topics that overlap and intertwine. Through presenting different artifacts and documents, these six chapters of the exhibition use the prism of cultural production to explore different aspects of social, political, and economic conditions of the Roma community through history, while at the same time accentuating the emancipatory moments. Through this strategy, the exhibition puts together a picture — albeit a fragmentary one — of why the inclusion and cultural development of any marginalized population is impossible without social justice.

He Who Does Not Work Shall Not Eat!

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.

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 a marginalized Roma community.

The Gallows Drop and the Firm Ground of a Home

This topic explores the question of housing, with an accent on planned socialist housing, while at the same time tracing the histories of exclusion in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, as reflected in conditions and locations in which Roma communities were allowed to live.

The Chanov housing estate was built in the city of Most in the 1970s by the socialist state and most of its first residents were Roma. After 1989, it became the largest and highest-profile ghetto in the Czech Republic. Following a sad historical trajectory lasting fifty years, the city 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.

Stalin My Brother: Soviet Literature

In this part of the exhibition, the **Averklub Collective** focuses on the attempt of the Russian Communist Party to increase literacy of the Romani population through organizing libraries, clubs, production cooperatives, and communes, and to combat the negative perception of the continuing remnants of the past.

A written form of Russian Romani was 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 this activity.

The History of Art, without History and without Art

Through the topic of absence of Romani art and art history, the **Averklub Collective** complicates the status of cultural production in order to acknowledge the sociopolitical reality and the means of production of those who have made it.

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

Did Someone Say Something about the Emancipation of the Roma?

This part of the exhibition presents the **Union of Gypsies-Roma (SCR)** that was founded in 1969 in Socialist Czechoslovakia, thanks to the efforts of the Romani intelligentsia. Many voices had been calling for the establishment of a similar organization since the 1950s. The main aim of the **SCR** was to increase the participation of Roma in social life and to improve their living conditions.

Around the same time, another important initiative was emerging that would offer a fundamental definition of Roma identity: the **World Romani Congress**. In 1971, it was held for the first time in Orpington, near London. 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.

Lenin Was Not a Rom

The paintings in this section depict Lenin's exile in 1917 while he was hiding on the shores of Lake Razliv, disguised as a Finnish peasant, after the Provisional Government in Petrograd issued a warrant for his arrest. Showing these depictions of exile is a way to address the myth of the nomadic life which is in the case of the Roma a result of exclusion rather than a free, unfettered nomadism. Though Lenin's exile lasted one summer, the exile of the Roma was a state of "normality" that lasted centuries.

Interview: „The system must change before anything else“

Averklub Collective in conversation with WHW

(This is the abridged version of a detailed interview that can be found in the exhibition guide.)

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. Could you tell us a bit about your collective's structure and artistic approach?

ac: The collective arose spontaneously and naturally. 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. Aver Roma seized the opportunity to open a library. That's when the collaboration started.

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. 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. Our task is to keep framing the challenges faced by the Roma as a social and economic problem, not a cultural or ethnic one.

WHW: For the exhibition in Vienna, you are producing new video works, related to the Chanov housing estate. 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 point out that, though much is written and said of Chanov, no one had ever thought to ask the residents themselves for their opinion.

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?

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.

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 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?

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.

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 — nomadism also holds out the promise of transnationality.

Ac: 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. 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.

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. 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.

WHW: There is an effort in your work to break away from an essentialist way of thinking about Romani cultural emancipation. 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.

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. What we see today is a misunderstanding of Marxism: that the politics of the past repudiated all forms of cultural difference. 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.

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". 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 Marušiaková 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 Soviet model of Romani emancipatory politics was described as unfeasible within the context of Czechoslovakia.

After many requests to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the Union of Gypsies-Roma (Svaz Cikánů-Romů / SCR) 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.

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.

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. 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?

Ac: Socialist universality is important, because it represents a genuinely open model of emancipation accessible to anyone. 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.

Public Programs

Please visit www.kunsthallewien.at, as well as our social media channels, to learn more about our public program for *Manuš Means Human* — we will publish and update the program 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.

The exhibition at a glance

Averklub Collective. Manuš Means Human

ARTISTS: Averklub Collective — František Nistor • Roman Šváb • Radek Šváb • Nikola Nistorová • Dana Bažová • Helena Pompová • Zuzana Cicková • Markéta Pařízková • Markéta Strnadová • Ladislava Gažiová • Jakub Jurásek • Zbyněk Baladrán • Alexey Klyuykov

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EXHIBITION VENUE: **kunsthalle wien** Museumsquartier, Museumsplatz 1, 1070 Wien

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OPENING HOURS: Di–So 11–19 Uhr, Do 11–21 Uhr

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