

Breaking beyond the Local The Function of an Exhibition

Daniel Baker

THE LOCAL PICTURE

‘No Gorgios’,¹ an exhibition of work by Gypsies and Travellers in the UK, staged in London, attempted to open up questions of cultural visibility and examine the resonance of visuality within the construction of Gypsy identities. Co-curated with Paul Ryan, in this show I sought to increase and advance visibility against a distinct under-representation in the visual arts and wider media. The project was timely, beginning in a year that saw a significant Gypsy presence at the Prague Biennale² and the first Roma Pavilion³ at the Venice Biennale.

I use the word Gypsy to refer to Roma, Romani and Traveller communities collectively. This is not to suggest that we are a homogeneous group worldwide – we are certainly not – but to list all the local groupings contained within the category would be unwieldy and add little. The term Gypsy is in process of reclamation, despite being seen by some as problematic, particularly in the field of Romani Studies. Hancock writes: ‘there was no single, acceptable designation that served to include all populations who define themselves as Romani except a foreign – and for some pejorative one, “Gypsy”’.⁴ In my view it is time for us to embrace the term, not only because our use of it suggests a resistance to stereotyping by non-Gypsies (Gorgios) but also because it portrays an essence of the historic positioning of continued marginalisation from society that is missing from words like Roma, Romani and Romanichal. The use of the term Gypsy as a cross-group identifier is resilient, enhanced as it is by a pervasive self-definition in contrast to non-Gypsy society, illustrating a creative outlook on family, on community construction, on inclusion and exclusion. This creative outlook is key to the development of Gypsy identity and is evident throughout our journey.

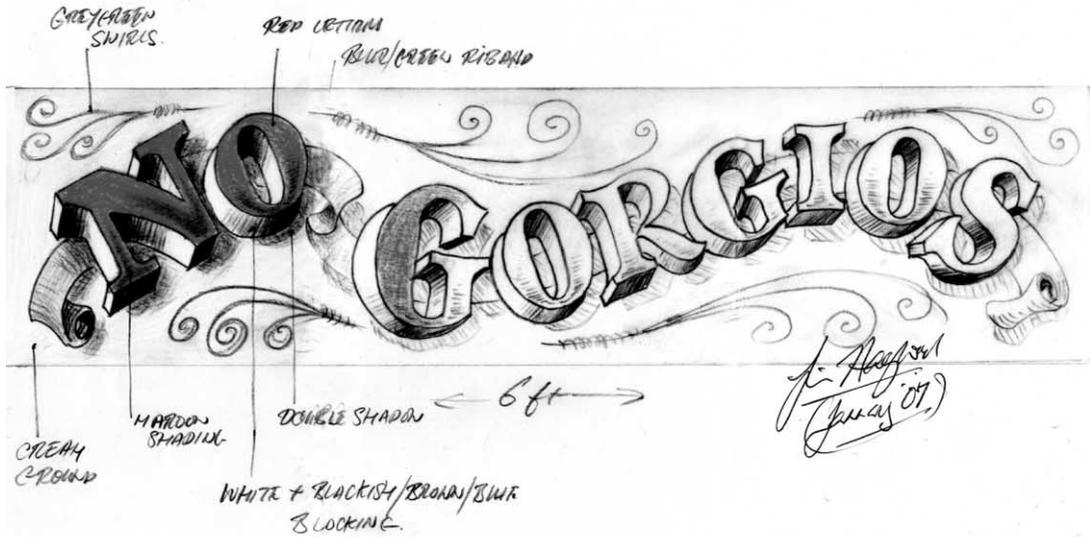
In contrast to the traditional reluctance to allow the outsider’s gaze into the guarded intimacy of the Gypsy world, the London show set out to present a new kind of cultural visibility. This novel access was achieved by presenting artworks by Gypsies and Travellers in a contemporary art

1 ‘No Gorgios’, Novas Gallery, London, 26 February–24 March 2007

2 ‘Refusing Exclusion’, Prague Biennale, Prague, Czech Republic, 24 May–16 September 2007, available at: <http://www.praguebiennale.org/3/eng/index.html>

3 ‘Paradise Lost’, Venice Biennale, Italy, June 10 2007–November 21 2007, available at: <http://www.romapavilion.org>

4 Ian Hancock, ‘The Struggle for the Control of Identity’, *Roma Participation Program Reporter*, 1(1):11–20, 1998, p 1



© No Gorgios catalogue cover, designed by Daniel Baker and Paul Ryan, showing catapults by Simon Lee, mixed media, 17 × 6 × 27 cm each, pencil drawing by Jim Hayward, 20 × 30 cm collections of the artists, photo: Daniel Baker

gallery setting unhindered by over-contextualisation. The exhibitors were not fine-art professionals who were also Gypsies but rather Gypsies who make art that appears not to be concerned with the Western Fine Art canon. The project was new in two other significant ways. First, given the almost total absence of reference to visual production by Gypsies amongst the growing number of academic tracts on Roma identity – and no mention within recent presentations of Folk Art⁵ and Outsider Art,⁶ the show gave a long overdue account of a visual culture from within. Second, by presenting a show that sought to move away from the anthropological gaze (Folk Art) and the pathologised artefact (Outsider Art), the exhibition offered not only a viewing experience free from the confines of the specialist exhibit but also an alternative to the cultural blackout that has long held sway due to preconception and misrepresentation. Inevitably the Gypsy community's tendency towards closure has helped facilitate this cultural curfew, and with this in mind it was the intention of 'No Gorgios' to offer a momentary dialogic opening on which future projects can be built.

The title of the exhibition, 'No Gorgios', is a play on the 'No Travellers' signs until recently commonplace in parts of the UK.⁷ Gorgio (the Anglo-Romani version of 'gadje' or 'gajo' as used in other parts of Europe) refers to those outside the Gypsy community. 'No Travellers' signs were generally displayed in pubs to dissuade Gypsies from entering. Although this blatant racist practice is in abeyance, the visible Gypsy is still on the whole an unwelcome presence, as evidenced by anti-Gypsy legislation⁸ and recent vigilante attacks.⁹ This exclusion from social space, and its broader translation into an exclusion from wider society, has ensured that Gypsies remain culturally invisible, both in terms of cultural production and physically as a community. Atkin references this stalemate in his essay for the exhibition catalogue 'Only Gorgios Read':

... for Romanies the symbols used to define themselves are often kept hidden, and for Gorgios, far too often, the symbols used to define Romanies are only introduced in order to define that which is to be removed or eradicated.¹⁰

As a result of this representational void, any debate regarding the aesthetics of Gypsy culture has managed to avoid generating serious attention to date. This invisibility may be an extension of the Gypsies' historic facility to 'fly under the radar' but has, I suggest, more to do with the academic focus on the word (written and oral) as well as the contemporary artworld's aversion to cultural and ethnic particularity.

The unwillingness to see beyond the stereotyped figure of the Gypsy, combined with the Gypsy's mistrust of outsiders, results in a community that has continued to be misunderstood and misrepresented. Romanticised and at the same time demonised,¹¹ the mythic Gypsy continues to perform a seemingly invaluable role in society as an embodiment of desires and fears. Mattijs Van de Port writes of the role of the Gypsy in the Serbian popular imagination: 'fantasies about the Gypsies serve to provide a place to accommodate the painful and disturbing truths about the beast in man and the irrational world'.¹² As well as referencing an ambivalence towards the Gypsy, Van de Port highlights a functional virtuality performed by Gypsies on behalf of

- 5 Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane, *Folk Archive: Contemporary Popular Art from the UK*, Book Works, London, 2005
- 6 Jon Thompson, *Inner Worlds Outside*, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, 2006
- 7 Angus Fraser, *The Gypsies*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992
- 8 Donald Kenrick and Sian Bakewell, *On the Verge: the Gypsies of England*, University of Hertfordshire Press, Hatfield, 1995
- 9 Daniel Baker, 'Funny ha ha', in *Catalyst*, ed Olivia Skinner, Commission for Racial Equality, London, December 2006, available at: <http://83.137.212.42/siteArchive/catalystmagazine/Default.aspx?LocID=0hgnew0o4.Refl.ocID=0hg01b001006009.Lang=EN.htm>
- 10 Albert Atkin, 'Only Gorgios Read', *No Gorgios*, Novas Gallery, London, 2007, p 15
- 11 Thomas Acton and David Gallant, *Romanichal Gypsies*, Wayland Publishers, Hove, 1997
- 12 Mattijs Van de Port, *Gypsies, Wars & Other Instances of the Wild*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 1998, p 162

wider society that is rooted in an array of historically crafted fictions and fantasies. In contrast to this, 'No Gorgios' invited the viewer to consider an alternative to the cultural denial induced by pervasive stereotypes.

VISUAL NARRATIVE

The focus of artistic exposure for Gypsies in the UK has been music, performance and more recently literature, this signalled by a growing movement of Roma text from overseas resulting in an emerging confidence and body of work. The late arrival of a Gypsy literature in Britain, compared with other parts of Europe, is not surprising given the absence of a reasoned view of the Gypsy within British cultural narratives in which we most frequently appear as romanticised, eroticised and demonised symbols of a long-lost tribe residing nowhere except in the popular imagination. Society's stories have no place for us and suspicion has fuelled the Gypsy's mistrust of the written word. Images can tell a different story.

Until recently what might be loosely termed Gypsy art and craft in Britain has generally taken the form of carved and painted objects. The main function of these has been the enrichment of home and work environments with little interest being paid to the production of 'art objects' in their own right. Historically, every item in a wagon had to earn its keep. By looking good and being useful these domestic objects perform dual roles. A combination of utility and ornament makes sense for a historically nomadic people where display space is limited and maximum visual impact culturally desirable. The continued significance of this aesthetic can be seen in the works exhibited in 'No Gorgios' where the hand-carved catapults and peg knives, and the care paid to the elaborate fabric and needlework obscures their necessary potential for practical employment as everyday items. A duality of material opulence and spatial economy occurs in these objects where domestic matter becomes the vehicle for lavish artistic expression. The most recognisable example of this phenomenon has been the Gypsy wagon and more recently the trailer (or caravan), embellished vehicles that perform the combined functions of transport/habitat, cultural motif and cultural narrative. One



© Henry Stanford, *dogs chasing rabbit*, 2006, oil on wood, 17 × 60 cm, collection Novas Gallery, photo: Daniel Baker

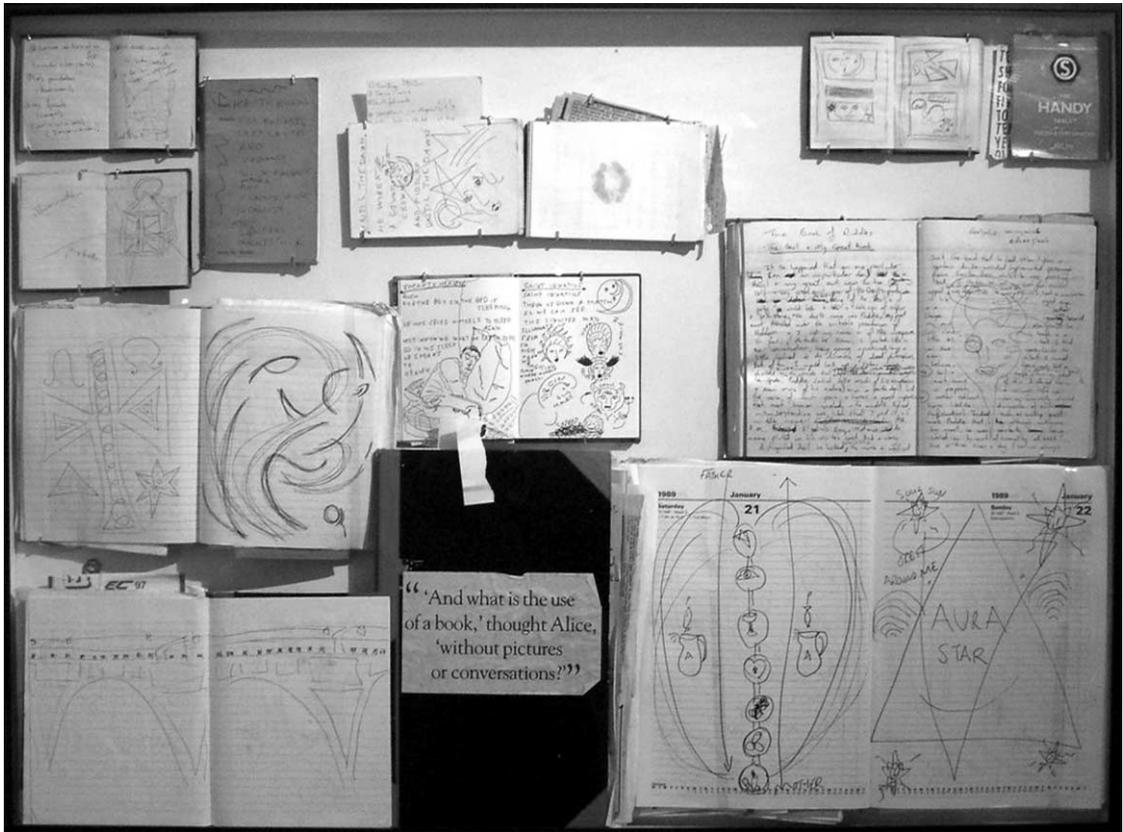
exhibitor in 'No Gorgios' produced tableaux depicting birds, flowers, dogs or game. These painted wooden panels are made to line the inside and outside of wooden wagons. He paints the things he sees around him, a wildlife that informs the way he lives, and that have enabled him to make a living. Hunting with dogs or selling primrose baskets may not be common any more but the merging of the lived and the represented, the experienced and the ornamental still has high stock, speaking as it does of a way of life that is close to the heart of Gypsy communities.

The catapults that became the signature image for the show were bought at Stow Horse Fair. These hybrid objects with their wooden handles carved and painted to form animal shapes, and their rubber and spent bullet extensions, were for sale at thirty pounds each. The maker had an armful of them. He was agreeable to the idea of exhibiting them as artworks in an exhibition but the price was the same whether the catapults were used as toys, ornaments, weapons or art. This versatility of the object, along with the flexibility of the maker and the trust in the creativity of the interpretant, allows the object the potential to inhabit multiple environments and find a way of operating appropriately – a feature common to many of the items displayed in the exhibition and not without resonance in the resource and adaptability of Gypsy identities.

Another exhibitor in 'No Gorgios', a woman in her eighties, exhibited knitted wool works in multicoloured sections. These pieces came about partly through a therapeutic imperative, to exercise her arthritic hand joints and maintain sufficient dexterity in a state of decreased



© Celia Baker, *Wool Works, numbers 6, 7, 8, 9*, 2007, knitted wool, 130 × 170 cm, and 150 × 35 cm each respectively from left to right, collection the artist, photo: Daniel Baker



© Keith Brazil, *notebooks*, 1985 to present day, mixed media, variable size, collection the artist, photo: Daniel Baker

- 13 'What Are Feelings For?', Centre for Drawing, Wimbledon College of Art, London, 8 January–9 February 2007. See <http://www.paulryan.dircon.co.uk/cfd.htm>. He quotes semiotician C S Peirce (1839–1914): 'Consider what effects which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object.' Charles Sanders Peirce, 'Issues of Pragmatism', in *The Essential Peirce Vol 2*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1998, p 346.

mobility, and to cope with anxiety which prescribed medicines did not remedy. The recycled wool is knitted into squares of colour which are then sewn into sheets or strips. The process of making is a key aspect of the work, the by-products of which are the meandering abstract figures. The dropped stitches and gained stitches that mark the journey towards completion shape the works into anthropomorphic forms. The therapeutic aspect of production seems embodied in the materiality of the yarn constructions and is transmitted to the viewer. The resulting works speak of a warm matriarchal aesthetic, bright, uplifting and powerful. When viewed in the gallery space, associations beyond the domestic are called into play allowing the works to transcend their usual or intended environment. The effect of this re-viewing results in lucid and surprising resonances whereby objects that may once have been 'understood' in one particular environment allow us to re-encounter and re-experience them in another way. Whilst the item enters a process of transformation through re-siting, the original intention of the work can remain, and acts to inform and further articulate the viewer's response. This is the object/cultural dynamic that the show sought to set in motion. Paul Ryan explored this in his exhibition 'What Are Feelings For?'.¹³

A visitor to the show commented that she 'kept bringing it back to Art by reading the objects through Art History. Was this a problem?' It is enough that this question is asked as it highlights one of the main

objectives of the project: to activate the objects so that their possible cultural meanings increase and catalyse the viewer to a fresh appraisal. This approach to presentation, in asking the viewer for more than a mere confirmation of expectation, heralds exciting and valuable possibilities not only for the viewing of objects but as a way of re-encountering the makers.

The work on show comes from a community where the artistic, the social and the economic are intertwined. Many of the objects have been made in a domestic setting, sometimes by more than one family member, to be used or displayed within the home. Here the family comes first, and both requires and deserves a closeness of consideration beyond all else. This close attention is reflected in the surroundings of family life. In this environment everything is elevated to a level of intense aesthetic significance. Here the boundaries between art and craft become blurred. Why hang a tender still life painting on your wall when your eye can rest upon the exquisite depiction of fruit and flowers on your cup and saucer? Some of the objects made by and valued by Gypsies may appear to be placed beyond use – how many cups of tea does an elaborately painted Crown Derby porcelain tea service serve? How many nights are spent in the skilfully carved and painted wagon? Probably not many. The potentiality of utility yet remains, playing an active role in the narratives of



© Celia Rickwood, *Paper flowers*, 2007, crepe paper and wire, 40 × 40 cm, collection the artist, photo: Daniel Baker

these and objects like them, activating the social space and fuelling the dialogue between life and art.

AN EXPANDED VIEW

In attempting to question the sociological and anthropological representation of works, 'No Gorgios' sought to liberate artworks from the confines of a culturally specific reading. There is of course nothing wrong with cultural specificity in art presentation, but it can also be important for the works and the artists to be allowed to stand apart with their vision and have it seen as such. Predrag Pajdic and Paul Ryan echo these concerns in their catalogue introduction to 'In Focus', a programme of art events addressing representations of the Middle East; 'How can a methodology be developed to curate when we no doubt carry preconceptions and judgements?... The goal is to re-define, or re-present through dialogue rather than re-enforce.'¹⁴ This open dialogue can facilitate a fresh eye for the work and the relationship between the work and the viewer, and in 'No Gorgios' prompted an expansive questioning on the nature of family, home and community, lifestyle and ecology, and use, form and function – whether practical, social or aesthetic.

By marketing the show without any initial overt reference to Gypsy and Traveller culture on the flyer, the intention was to elicit a phenomenological response to the unfamiliar content of the promotional material and the works on display. The layout for the exhibition invitation and catalogue cover showed two catapults and a working drawing for a painted 'No Gorgios' sign commissioned for the show. The words on the sign would be recognisable to members of the Gypsy and Traveller communities and those with some knowledge of Gypsy culture. These same words were unlikely to be understood by those outside these groups and so aimed to prompt a curiosity rather than a closing down of possibilities through assumption of what one might expect to see. The intention was not to be deliberately obscure but to allow a reading unhindered by preconception, enabling the viewer to encounter the objects afresh and engage in their own creative interpretation. Visitor feedback confirmed that this had been effective. This transformation through relocation is not new but has been much underused in the appreciation of art by culturally marginalised individuals – more specifically those who are making work that operates equally outside the confines of the mainstream artworld.

My own work as an artist and Gypsy explores the position I hold in contemporary societies. The staging of the 'No Gorgios' exhibition can be seen as an extension of this examination. The works explore the pervasive space occupied by the Gypsy, offering a window into the marginal area allocated to us by others: outside of, yet surrounded by, connected, yet dislocated from societies that we have existed within, mixed and merged with for hundreds of years. This multiple occupancy of positions is a transformative dance in which we are well practised. Nicholae Gheorghe has described this facility optimistically as a process of 'ethnogenesis' for Gypsies, specifically in relation to our ethnic status: 'a social group, previously occupying a despised and inferior position, moving from this position to some kind of respectability with a sort of

14 Predrag Pajdic and Paul Ryan, eds, *In Focus*, Paranoia Publishing, London, 2007, available at: <http://www.infocusdialogue.com/essays/in-focus/>

equality with other groups in the hierarchy of social stratification on the basis of a revised perception of their identity'.¹⁵ He suggests a process by which a social identity is transformed into a cultural ethnic identity. Whilst this view acknowledges our resilience and our facility for transformation as a culture, ten years on we have yet to forge and ensure the respect and equality that Gheorghe predicts.

Art has the power to challenge long-held stereotypes and misconceptions. The alternative narratives offered by a visual discourse surrounding Gypsy culture can signal a way forwards towards equity and presence. This route has not been reflexively considered until now, but our presence at both the Venice Biennale and the Prague Biennale gives a clear marking of cultural space that will be an important factor in opening up the discourse surrounding contemporary Gypsy representation. As well as allowing Gypsy artists to present work and ideas on a world stage, the symbolism inherent in our inclusion in these international art events will send a message of serious artistic strength and cultural visibility that has so far bypassed the global Gypsy community. As Europe's largest ethnic minority, this recognition is surprisingly long overdue. Gypsies have a unique and complex view of the sociopolitical workings of Europe's geographical and cultural terrain, and the insight afforded by our experience can only enhance the current global debates surrounding cultural territories, transnational relations and the rising impact of ecological issues. Gypsies have a vital role to play in the cultural and political landscape of Europe – once the gatekeepers are made to open the door.

15 Nicholae Gheorghe, 'The Social Construction of Romani Identity', in *Gypsy Politics and Traveller Identity*, ed Thomas Acton, Hertfordshire University Press, Hatfield, 1997, p 158

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