Spotlight on voices from the community

"RomArchive – The Digital Archive of the Roma"

Isabel Raabe[1]

1) RomArchive – The Digital Archive of the Roma. Germany

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

"RomArchive – The Digital Archive of the Roma"

Isabel Raabe
RomArchive Project Initiator

Abstract

"Spotlight on voices from the community" is a section of the International Journal of Roma Studies (IJRS) where interviews, experiences, initiatives and other news related with the Roma will be collected. This section aims to highlight and share the voices from the community, especially from the Roma People, in order to know more about how to improve the situation of this population and having more information and other points of view about Roma around the world. In this Issue, IJRS dedicates this section to "RomArchive – The Digital Archive of the Roma" (Germany). This paper has been written by Isabel Raabe, one of the RomArchive Project Initiator.

"RomArchive – El Archivo Digital del Pueblo Gitano

Isabel Raabe
Promotora del Proyecto
RomArchive

Resumen

"Spotlight on voices from the community" (destacando las voces de la comunidad) es una sección de la revista "International Journal of Roma Studies" (IJRS) en la que se recogerán entrevistas, experiencias, iniciativas y otras noticias relacionadas con el Pueblo Gitano. El objetivo de esta sección es destacar y compartir estas voces desde la comunidad, especialmente desde la comunidad gitana, con el fin de conocer más sobre cómo mejorar la situación de esta población, y de tener más información y otros puntos de vista sobre el Pueblo Gitano alrededor de todo el mundo. Para este número, IJRS dedica esta sección a "RomArchive – The Digital Archive of the Roma" (Alemania). Este artículo ha sido escrito por Isabel Raabe, una de las promotoras del proyecto RomArchive.

Palabras clave: RomArchive, archivo digital, Pueblo Gitano, arte, Europa

Hipatia Press
www.hipatiapress.com

RomArchive – The Digital Archive of the Roma went online in January 2019 and is a pioneering project in every respect. Funded by the German Federal Cultural Foundation with 3.7 million euros, RomArchive makes the richness of the arts and cultures of the Sinti and Roma visible for the first time and illustrates their contribution to European cultural history. It presents counter-narratives told by Sinti and Roma themselves and, with over 5,000 objects, offers a reliable source of knowledge that counters stereotypes and prejudices with facts. More than 150 project participants from 15 countries worked for five years on the development of RomArchive. The project was awarded the Grand Prix of the European Heritage Award/Europa Nostra Award 2019 in the category "Research".

Noting about us without us

In contrast to "hegemonic archives", in which Roma are usually depicted exclusively stereotypically, RomArchive focuses on their self-representation: narratives are created that reflect the heterogeneity of their different national and cultural identities. For RomArchive does not want to define the image of the Roma, but to create a blur. It shows the diversity and plurality and the interweaving with the different national cultures.

Roma shape the archive in all decisive positions of responsibility: as curators, as artists, as scientists and in the advisory board which is accompanying the project. For this reason, the committee architecture was an important prerequisite for the success of the project. How are decisions made? How can self-representation succeed in the face of the diversity of the participants? What is authentic, what is stereotypical? How do we deal with antiziganistic images? These negotiation processes take time and so it took more than two years until the advisory board, which appointed the curators and set the strategic guidelines for the project, agreed on a collection policy and ethical guidelines for the archive (both documents are available on the website).

Fourteen curators (almost all with Romani background) and their teams have selected exemplary collections for the archive sections of visual arts, film, literature, music, dance, theatre and drama and the interdisciplinary

section of flamenco, as well as material on politics of photography, self-testimonies in connection with the persecution of the Sinti and Roma under National Socialism (archive section „Voices of the Victims") and academic material on the civil rights movement. The material was collected after years of research worldwide from libraries and archives, but also from private collections.

The Roma Art Label

The danger of ethnicisation through a "Roma Art Label" was discussed very controversially in the project. There were artists who emphasized that their diploma did not mention "Roma artists" but „artist", others argued with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of Strategic Essentialism as a tool of resistance by marginalized groups. Our advisory board member Ethel Brooks once said: "The 'Roma Art Label' could become an important instrument to reclaim our cultural practice, our history and our culture".

Each archive section had its responsible curator, who developed his or her individual curatorial concept. The archive section Visual Arts not only takes a critical look at the image of Roma in art history, but also presents over 30 very diverse contemporary Romani artists and their works. For the archive section Literature, experts from 22 countries compiled a collection of the most important writers. From more than 300 films, a committee of experts selected 35 films for the film section that best represent Roma in film. The archive section Music examines the influence of Sinti and Roma on classical music and jazz and presents the diverse musical achievements of Roma throughout Europe. The archive section Dance aims to show the diverse traditions, innovations and influences of Sinti and Roma dance around the globe, not without a sensitive approach to stereotypes and myths. The interdisciplinary archive area Flamenco presents icons of Flamenco in interview films, enhanced by the historical context in Spain since the 16th century. The theatre section of the RomArchive offers concise essays by poetic voices, accompanied by biographies and material on historical as well as contemporary theatre companies and interviews with contemporary theatre makers. In the Civil Rights Movement section, the curators were keen to tell the story from the activists' perspective and to

portray Roma as agents of change. Interview films with important personalities of the civil rights movement from all over Europe were produced, supplemented by articles and historical documents.

A research for the archive section of politics of photography at renowned picture agencies showed: there are almost no pictures of Sinti and Roma in these databases, where one does not have to speak of an antiziganistic representation. Thus, this archive section does not even show many pictures, but rather investigates how emancipated photography can function and demands an ethics of seeing.

An own pilot project within RomArchive is "Voices of the Victims". It tells about the genocide of the Sinti and Roma under National Socialism from the perspective of those affected. An international team of historians collected early testimonies (letters, testimonies, secret messages) from 20 countries. Sources that have never been collected and evaluated before.

The curators were able to hoard treasures, such as unique audio recordings from the Phonogrammarchiv in Vienna, which document the oral tradition, the "oral literature" of Sinti and Roma. Or extensive collections of historical images of Flamenco from the Centro Andaluz de Documentación del Flamenco in Jerez or of Hungarian Roma dances from the Hungarian Academy of Science. But above all, the curators have managed to gain trust and acquire many materials from private collections. Since RomArchive has been online, further offers, mostly from private individuals, artists, activists, descendants of Holocaust survivors, have come from all over the world who wish to make their archives available.

The collections, which are designed to be constantly growing, reflect in an exemplary manner the enormous range of cultural identities and national characteristics, rather than conveying an unrealistic picture of a homogenous "Roma culture". The archive and those involved in the project therefore have to endure a certain amount of dissent. For there is not only the "one story".

Art needs freedom - archives need standards

Despite all cultural and political particularities, it must not be forgotten how much effort it takes to digitise cultural artefacts and catalogue them

thoroughly in a database according to archive standards. It was necessary to develop an archive ethic that was appropriate for the contents. In a project that operates in an identity-political context and in which a minority that has been discriminated against for centuries raises its voice, keyword lists and the programming of the search engine also have to address ethical questions.

RomArchive meets all archive standards and yet its web interface resembles more a magazine than a database. An intelligent contextualisation provides background information, helps to understand complex relationships and thus ensures a differentiated reading of the objects shown. Not all objects in the database are visible online. This is mostly due to legal reasons. However, in the so-called "internal archive" all objects are accessible for research purposes on request. Thus RomArchive can also be regarded as an important research source.

The richness of a centuries-old and, to the present day, extremely lively and varied artistic and cultural production is publicly visible on RomArchive for the first time on this scale. For the majority societies this is an opportunity to recognise this wealth and to see that the arts and cultures Roma are an integral part of European cultural history. For Roma, RomArchive offers an opportunity to reclaim authorship of their own arts, their own art history, their own cultures.

After the launch RomArchive was handed over to the Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma, which will be responsible for the further development of RomArchive in the future.

www.romarchive.eu

"We cannot fight racism without making refernce to history and the arts"
Dr Nicoleta Bitu
Former chair

Project Initiators

Isabel Raabe and Franziska Sauerbrey (Germany)

Project Participants

Curators

Romani Civil Rights Movement: Dr Thomas Acton, sociologist (Great Britain); Dr Angéla Kóczé, sociologist (Hungary); Dr Anna Mirga-Kruszelnicka, anthropologist (Poland); Dr Jan Sellin, historian (Sweden)
Film: Katalin Bársony, filmmaker (Hungary)
Dance: Isaac Blake, dancer and choreographer (Great Britain)
Literature: Dr Beate Eder-Jordan, literary theorist (Austria)
Voices of the Victims: Dr Karola Fings, historian (Germany)
Music: Dr Petra Gelbart, musician and ethnomusicologist (Czech Republic/USA)
Visua Arts: Tímea Junghaus, art historian and curator (Hungary)
Flamenco: Gonzalo Montaño Peña, musicologist (Spain)
Politics of Photograph: André Raatzsch, media artist and theorist (Germany)
Theatre & Drama: Dragan Ristić, cultural manager, theatre director, musician (Serbia); Miguel Ángel Vargas, art historian, theatre director, actor, musician (Spain)

Advisory Board

Pedro Aguilera Cortés (Spain); Dr Gerhard Baumgartner (Austria); Dr Nicoleta Bitu, Chair, (Romania); Professor Dr Klaus-Michael Bogdal, Deputy Chair (Germany); Professor Dr Ethel Brooks (USA); Ágnes Daróczi (Hungary); Merfin Demir, Deputy Chair (Germany); Dr Jana Horváthová (Czech Republic); Zeljko Jovanovic (Hungary); Oswald Marschall (Germany); Moritz Pankok (Germany); Romani Rose (Germany); Riccardo M Sahit (Serbia/Germany); Dr Anna Szász (Hungary), Zoni Weisz (Netherlands)