



FUTURE LABORATORY

EWA MIKUŁA STIPEND PROJECT PROPOSAL

ASSUMPTIONS

My activities as part of the Future Laboratory project are an attempt to continue and expand considerations regarding the identity of young people from minority ethnic groups. I was inspired by attempts to observe my own Silesian identity, along with its ungraspable and multilayered aspects. For some time, I had been asking myself questions: Who am I as a contemporary representative of a minority group? Can we find different ways of describing minorities other than challenging histories, colourful traditions and other preconditioned stereotypes? In the age of globalisation is my local identity still valid? And why, even though I feel proud of my origins, I still feel ashamed of admitting to them?

I wanted to discover whether young people of other minority groups are asking similar questions and find out how we differ from each other. I was interested in minority groups who do not have their own homeland. In Romania, the Roma are the most visible minority group and so I decided to talk to young representatives of this particular community.

WORKING METHODS

The main working method was most of all field interviews with young people. To start with it was necessary for me to define my own position. Even though my work emerged from a personal perspective and my own struggles with identity, many things separated me from the people I intended to talk with. A key difference was my lack of personal experience of exclusion due to the color of my skin. I also quickly discovered that no such things as a cohesive Roma community exists, and its history is closely related to poverty, exclusion, slavery – phenomena it is impossible to comprehensively understand in the short period the residency has been scheduled for. In addition, the Roma community in recent years has been over-exploited in terms of artistic practice which in no way helped improve the life circumstances of the community, which eventually led to reduced levels of trust when it came to artistic practices with this ethnic group.

I did not want to participate in an approach which reinforced harmful models and representations which would reduce this community's autonomy and dignity. I considered what methodology to adopt in order for my actions to be as inclusive as possible. This was particularly hard because I was an outsider to both Roma and Romanian communities. Following consultations with my local mentor, the Romanian anthropologist Valer Cosma, who accompanied me throughout the



residency, we decided that asking directly about such complex identity could be damaging. This is why we decided that we would not ask about it at all, leaving it up to our interviewees to decide what topics they wanted to discuss with us.

In the end, the theme I used to look at the local community was music and its representatives – local artists, seeing as music is a phenomenon which is shared between city and countryside, reaching far beyond simple divisions. Music which reflects traditions is a space where styles, regions and family histories intermingle, as well as being the pop-cultural mirror in which young people's dreams are reflected. It is a place where identities are constructed, negotiated or rejected. Music in a direct sense is also connected with the ways in which the Roma are stigmatized – lautari – who entertained people with music at weddings and other events.

Although at the outset my assumption was to talk to young Roma people, during my residency I expanded my field of activities through the opportunities I was afforded to talk to people of different ages, of both Roma and Romanian ethnicities.

Between 18 and 27 October 2022, Valer Cosma and I conducted fifteen interviews with local Piatra Neamț artists, art school students, teachers, musicologists and office workers. This included two interviews with students in a local arts high school, two with families who hosted us in their homes, one with the staff of the literary and art department at Teatrul Tineretului in Piatra Neamț.

I will now present selected conclusions and initial impressions from the residency which represent the start of reflections upon minorities and my own identity.

CONCLUSIONS

RACISM

Exclusion is not just a song of the past, but continues to feature in the work of many musicians. This is a repeating experience which appears in the stories being told. Some Roma have learned to ignore it, while for others racist attitudes and attacks were the reason why they abandoned the profession. On the other hand, the status of musicians allowed them for some time to suspend exclusion. As long as a musician played music they remained an artist, but as soon as they stopped playing they “became” Roma. Because of social exclusion and powerful associations of music with Roma professions some Roma, wanting to deny their Roma identities, also denied themselves music. It was very moving to listen to stories in which Roma returned to music and thus their own roots after many years.



WOMEN'S LIVES

Being a musician was not considered to be a profession suitable for women. In traditional communities women were expected to take a back seat. The same was true of music, because working conditions were hard – in order to protect women, men traditionally worked as performers. In recent years this has changed – young women now also work as performers. Furthermore, for some women starting out having careers in music and achieving the highest social status is a way to escape the traditional path in life as predestined in the more conservative Roma communities.

EDUCATION

During the residency, I had opportunities to talk with artistic high school students in Piatra Neamț. Many of them have support from their parents who want their children to go on to have better lives. Some are discovered by their teachers, while others follow in the musical footsteps of their parents. We asked them how they perceived the arts. Young people talked about how the arts was mostly meant to bring audiences entertainment and joy, they rarely perceive the creative sphere as one of critical thinking. They believe artists are professionals who are fully aware of their trade. We also had the opportunity to ask how and where they see themselves in ten years' time. Students dream about becoming teachers, of being a part of a team, of playing in philharmonic orchestras, military bands, of performing in opera, of starting out in local careers. Yet in practice only 30% of this art school's graduates will work in the arts. Some graduates changed practice for a theoretical path in life. Many do not continue their musical education, but instead work in local bands where they can make quick and easy money.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

A key event was the presentation of conclusions during an open show staged at the of the residency. Those we interviewed were also invited, many of whom came to the event. Open Lab consisted of two parts: the first, in which I talked about conclusions and personal reflections – the second involved open conversation. The meeting was crucial because I was supposed to find out whether the conclusions drawn during the fieldwork process were correct and how the interested parties perceived my work. Interviewees confirmed the correctness of the conclusions, although they had not always noticed regularities in them before. I was surprised that during the meeting they did not talk about themselves. Instead, they were interested in me as an artist representative of another minority, as well as my comparison of the Silesian and Roma minorities. The interlocutors, by asking questions, reversed the balance of power between us themselves. Thus the meeting, which was initially a conversation between the artist and her focus group, turned into an equal meeting of artists who were all representatives of a minority with a member of another minority group.



The residency in Piatra Neamț altered my approach to asking people about their identity, but most all it changed me. Roma artists impressed me with their self awareness and precision, when it comes to music and history and open, self-aware dialogue with them. This helped me see my own identity from a completely different perspective. The processes I undertook proved once again that the arts, and music especially, can make it easier for people from different environments and those with different belief systems to come together and connect. I had the opportunity of learning that music, although often used as a political tool which reduces minority cultures solely to a narrow sphere of cultivating traditions, is a multifunctional phenomenon, one which is multidimensional and constantly evolving. It is a sphere of emancipation, exclusions, negotiations with tradition or simply a trade. For me it also became clear that including local artists in discussions is key in shaping a full, rather than incomplete, picture of an European ethnic community.

BIO

Born in Mysłówice, Ewa Mikuła is a dramaturge, director and author. She is a graduate of Theatrical Direction Studies (specialising in theatrical dramaturgy) at the St. Wyspiański Academy of Theatrical Arts in Krakow and Theatrical Studies at Jagiellonian University. She explores documentary forms, especially in the contexts of work and creating identities. As an author she debuted with Piotr Fronia in the Dialog monthly (01/2020) with an autobiographical text titled *Praca, praca / Work, work* which was presented at the 9th Forum of Young Direction in Krakow and was the foundation for a piece of conceptual art titled *Praca, praca* (2020). She directed *Stracone Lata* (Festiwal Szekspirowski in Gdańsk, 2021). Together with the Sweet Spot collective at the Non-Fiction Festival in Sopot she created a show about seasonal workers in the resort. She created workshops which led to an exhibition based on the theme of young Silesians' identity (Teatr Śląski im. St. Wyspiańskiego, Katowice, 2018). She created texts and dramaturgy for shows, including *Ha(e)user*, dir. Helena Ganjalyan (Teatr Dramatyczny im. Jerzego Szaniawskiego, Wałbrzych, 2021) and *Opowieści z Wielkich Bloków*, dir. Marta Streker (Wrocławski Teatr Lalek, 2022) – a text which combined the Polish language with Polish Sign Language. She loves foreign languages. She received the City of Krakow Creative Scholarship and is presently on the European Future Laboratory scholarship programme.