***Malgorzata Mirga-Tas: An Altarpiece of Roma Contemporaneity. I rromnĕnqi zor*[1]**

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My poor clothes for sale.
Who wants to buy them?
I'm hawking them
For your freedom.
Pastora Pavón, Niña de los Peines, seguiriyas. 1910.[2]

I urge you to read these lines as a necessarily limited conversation between peers, the purpose of which is to unlearn everything you think you know about the perception of Roma people via the tragically visual contemplation of a Polish-Romani artist's works. This essay was written in Spanish from Seville's Polígono Sur district, though perhaps it ought to be sung, spoken and mingled with the thousand and one disruptions of fragmentary Gitano life. A text to be read by my mother or a university professor. But be warned: you cannot comprehend Małgorzata Mirga-Tas in Seville in 2023 without thinking about the official iconographic portrayal of Roma bodies, the historical imagery and that which *represents* the six poorest districts in the city. The two processes go hand-in-hand, being part of the larger process of occupying spaces of hegemonic representation.

The Romani Aesthesis[3]

My ID card may be new
but I was born aeons ago:
when we bored into the horizon slowly,
apace with the plodding beast.

José Heredia Maya, Penar Ocono. 1973.

The concept of *Romani aesthesis* as posited by Gitano anthropologist Iván Periáñez allows us to explore other senses of Roma artistic expression. In the representation contest, we are expected to at least be aware of the pre-eminence of the sense of sight. The explosion of Romani creativity will draw us closer, if only in the fantasy of sensory perception, to other forms of the multiverse of senses of the modernity that

[1] The strength of Roma women, in the Romani language.
[2] Informe técnico para el expediente de Declaración como Bienes de Interés Cultural, Patrimonio Documental, de los registros sonoros de La Niña de los Peines | Instituto Andaluz del Flamenco (juntadeandalucia.es)
[3] In the English translation of this text, the terms Roma and Romani are used interchangeably to identify the ethnic group historically known as "Gypsies" in English. "Gitano/Gitana" is also occasionally used in reference to Spanish Roma, for despite the recent revision of colonialist language, in Spain this exonym has been re-signified and is not considered pejorative.

dwells within us. It will show us the diversity of Roma experiences across the globe, which fortunately resist classification in the categories of academia and European borders, thereby making it possible to elude the Western obsessions with seeing and embodying.

"Cultural ontology that proclaims itself at the outer limits of modernity" (Periáñez, 2022)

In order to centre the work of an artist like Małgorzata Mirga-Tas in the context of Andalusia and Spain, we must first navigate the sea of terms used to define us: Gitanos/Roma/Rom/Romani. In any event, I will make every attempt to avoid words such as people, community or ethnic group and instead cling to the definition provided by Iván Periáñez: we are a cultural ontology that announces itself to the world at the outer limits of modernity. Let us take a deep breath and think about how this definition might help us to analyse the artist's work from other angles.

Terminology, classifications and imposed knowledge: who are the Roma?

In order to answer this question, we would first need to know who is asking it, what they hope to achieve by asking it, what tools do they use to define who defines whom and for what purpose. In the identity politics arena of the last fifty years, the primary goal of Romani thinkers, creators and researchers has been independence, challenging, critiquing and breaking free from the image of ourselves that others have imposed and often embodied. As a usurped, unwanted representation, that image has been and is treated as a two-faced, contradictory mask. Thinking of the "right to opacity" formulated by Black Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant, the visibility often demanded by combative Roma voices is a sham, for it forces us to compare ourselves with other identities in the forum of capitalism. Visibility obligates us to translate the elusive and necessarily ambiguous nature of identity into tangible, transparent, Western terms. Romanipen insists on the right to obscurity of thought.

Let us play, obscurely, a game of self-definition:

> **Roma** or **Rroma** is the broad term, democratically chosen in 1971 at the first World Roma Congress in London, which those whose sense of belonging stems from a common origin in eleventh-century India have used to distinguish themselves from the rest of the world that emerged from World War II and the decolonisation processes. Complex historical migrations have produced a nation that is ultra-diverse, aware of its roots and proclaims itself to the whole world from the outer limits of modernity. In this rush to get away from Eurocentric taxonomy, which historically has often spawned coercive laws riddled with Egyptian fantasies—written with G, T and even Z,[4] as we are

[4] Gypsies, Tigani and Zigeuner are just a few of these derogatory exonyms imposed by non-Roma.

still called by a thousand different names—the term Roma (Romnia in the feminine plural) encompasses the entire Romani population, and Romni/Rom helps to differentiate between roles. The game of recognising the endonyms that define different communities in their spaces of self-representation and legitimation brings us to the use of different national, linguistic and political terms in order to make ourselves heard in a parliament or deal with those who guard the borders and districts which the Rroma cross and inhabit (*Glosario Cultura y Ciudadanía*, 2022. Spanish Ministry of Culture).[5]

Romanipen or **Romanipe**: When I query the royal academy's online Spanish dictionary, I get this message: *Please note. The word* romanipén *is not in the dictionary. The following entry may be related to the word you seek:* romper *(to break*). And they're quite right, Romanipen does not exist. In the Spanish context, Romanipen is, or ought to be, a departure from *Gitanismo* (Gypsyism), which represents the usurpation of the Roma's own capacity for representation, in art and in society, especially from the mid-eighteenth century to the present day. Do not make the mistake of confusing the two. Romanipen is the common home of all Romani diversity, variable and permanent, past and present, multiversal and slightly secretive, refusing to succumb to the constant obsession with visibility and classification. Of course, Romanipen—or *Gitanidad* (Gypsydom), as defined of late by the Spanish Roma political position—is the creation of the ontological possibility of being Romani. If we enumerate, antiseptically describe and divide it into sections, like a rulebook, we would be submitting to the liberal identification market. Romanipen is the experience of communal legitimation that ensures survival in the face of racially motivated violence. A pot of stew is more important than an entire museum.

Frontier neighbourhoods[6]

As a stateless nation dwelling in nation-states, the Roma tend to find themselves in a position of perpetual subalternity. What one part of the political spectrum perceives as an enduring and obstinate inability (sometimes even described as genetic) to fit into the society of social democracy can be construed—while acknowledging the limitations of this interpretation—as spaces of legitimation from a strictly Romani perspective. In other words, the Romani space is that in which life is governed by peer recognition, mutual support and relations between different parts of the community. The Roma's capacity to create their own institutional legitimation tends to have different parameters: some are rituals, others have to do with social status and recognition, and most are part of a schizophrenic identity-negotiating complex

[5] glosario-digital-viiicyc-final.pdf (culturaydeporte.gob.es).

[6] Iván Periáñez (2023) Cosmosonoridades: cante-gitano y canción-gyu. Epistemologías del sentir. Akal.

forced upon them by their subaltern situation. They know that self-legitimation is also contentiously connected to the lack of recognition of the legitimacy of the nation-state. Romani barrios are therefore *frontier neighbourhoods* between two worlds, and although many people see them as ghettos where the non-hegemonic dregs of modern society congregate, they are also friendly, welcoming places for the members of the motley Roma community. It is essential to bear this in mind when we try to understand the position of critical contemporary Romani discourses in art and the multiple purposes they may have for the Roma and the rest of society.

Destruction of the representation of Roma women

Spivak asks,
Can the subaltern speak?
To which the poet replies,
Is anyone even listening?
P.S.: The subaltern speaks
just ask the ages.

Mi abuela no ha leído a Marx, Helios Fernández Garcés[7]

The representation of women perceived and described as “Gypsies” in what we now call European art history can perhaps be divided into three general periods, which is of course just as arbitrary as the division established by the academies. During the first period, coinciding with the first Roma *migration* into Europe, “gypsy” women were marginally represented, little more than a splash of colour against the landscape. In the second, when Roma communities were part of larger societies, these women began to be portrayed as archetypal characters and even occupied a quasi-individual, if nameless, space of representation, in a constant oscillation between attraction and repulsion. During the third period, from the mid-1700s to the present day, representations of and about Roma people have occupied a hegemonically obsessive position, as Lou Charnon-Deutsch would say.[8] In countries like France, Spain, Russia and Hungary, Roma representation became, by opposition, an imitation game with quasi-aristocratic connotations for the new bourgeoisie. “Gypsy” fashions, with the connivance of mass image reproduction media, offered them a reactionary narrative contrary to the new Enlightenment ideals and provided a space in which to project their own imagery. The bodies of Roma women as repositories of the historical representation of Blackness:[9] a calmed, tamed, controlled Blackness that reproduces its traumatic experience in the space of

[7] *Mi abuela no ha leído a Marx*, Helios Fernández Garcés, Amargord, 2019.

[8] *The Spanish Gypsy. The History of a European Obsession*, Lou Charnon-Deutsch. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2004.

[9] *Sonidos Negros: On the Blackness of Flamenco*, Meira Goldberg. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

art and has filled subaltern imagery with what Yuderkys Espinosa would call phantasmagorias of modernity,[10] which must be challenged, reappropriated and returned in righteous vengeance.

From a corner in Poland

Czarna Góra is a Polish village not far from the Hungarian and Slovakian borders. It is located in the Polish Spiš, a territory situated in the southern part of the Lesser Poland region, close to the Tatra Mountains and between the Białka and Dunajec rivers. This is the Mirga family's home base, a kind of Macondo to return to or a Lebrija-Utrera-Morón triangle in Eastern Europe, where a handful of Roma families have been holding their ground against the world since before 1799.[11] Catholic tradition, the dedication to relatively independent trades and professions with regional mobility, and the demographic diversity (Slovaks, Hungarians, Jews) resulting from its geopolitical position all contributed to the strength of this place's Romani community. However, their contemporary life has been marked by the events of the twentieth century: first the Nazi invasion of this part of Poland, which hit the family especially hard; and later the Soviet era, with the forced settlement and literacy policies that produced the first generation of university graduates. Those were years of creative effervescence and anthropological and artistic interest in Czarna Góra. In 1978 and 1979, the Gardzienice Theatre Association—run by Włodzimierz Staniewski, who studied under and worked with Jerzy Grotowski—organised trips to Czarna Góra and Szaflary with the aim of creating theatrical performances involving the Roma and inspired by Romani arts, culture and history. All this was part of Małgorzata Mirga-Tas's upbringing and life experience, ultimately forging a sense of commitment, freedom and pride in her community.

The auto-narratives of Roma women

My heart has been cut open
My blood drained in the name of freedom
What remains?
Sweet music in my veins,
Ancient dance in my broken bones.

Romani Soul, Nadia Hava-Robbins

Since the 1990s, the presence of Roma women in the European and international visual, literary, performing and musical arts, academia and politics has galvanised

[10] *Devuélvannos el Oro: Cosmovisiones perversas y acciones anticoloniales.* Colectivo Ayllu. Madrid: Matadero. Centro de Residencias Artísticas, 2018.

[11] *A transformation: History of the Mirga family and the Roma settlement in Czarna Góra*, C.P. by Anna Mirga-Kruszelnicka and Andrzej Mirga.

the Romani consciousness that emerged from the aftermath of World War II. The cohesion policies of the European Union, the Council of Europe and the OECD have facilitated a transfer of knowledge from bottom to top, from communities to institutions, and have established and strengthened the international networks that paved the way for the emergence of Romani feminism as a transnational, intergenerational movement which celebrated one of its first milestones in 2011, when Granada hosted the First World Congress of Romani Women. This mighty river of relations had its source, or sometimes its reflection, in Romani cultural institutions and projects fuelled by a spirit of critique and protest.

A brief history of contemporary Roma art

In order to talk about contemporary Roma art today, we must—if we want to understand the roots from which it sprang—question the imagery of the European avant-garde movements and how they represented the Romani lifestyle; we need to examine the presence of Flamenco , French, Hungarian, Russian and even Turkish artists at world's fairs since the late nineteenth century and the constant tension with the colonial-national perspective, which though not hegemonic was still accepted as *representative*. We might even question the emancipating Romani imagery of the early years of the Soviet Revolution, so important to Helios Gómez and Roma critical discourses. Formal concretion aside, the turning (and liberating) point was the first World Roma Congress held in London in 1971, when the representational revision crossed the borders of art as spaces of power relations and proclaimed its own agency and capacity for self-definition. In 1985, the French Ministry of Culture hosted the Première Mondiale d'Art Tzigane, an exhibition with works by Tony Gatlif, Sandra Jayat and Gérard Gartner. Shortly afterwards, Hungary held the first showcase of works by self-taught Roma artists and the Roma Parliament project was launched. The first Roma Pavilion appeared as a collateral event at the Venice Biennale in 2007 (ERIAC repeated the experience in 2018 and 2022), with Delaine Le Bas's project titled *Paradise Lost*. The 2000s witnessed the emergence of the first galleries specialised in Roma artists, such as Kai Dikhas in Berlin and 8 Gallery in Budapest, and the consolidation of international Romani cultural institutions, like the Berlin-based European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC) and the Instituto de Cultura Gitana under the Spanish Ministry of Culture. In 2022, we saw *RomaMoMA* at documenta in Kassel and the creation of the Helios Gómez Room at Centro Cerámica Triana in Seville, in connection with the Factoría Cultural project in Polígono Sur called *Consulado Comunitario Gitano de Sevilla* [Gitano Community Consulate of Seville].

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas and memory as art material

You on one leg
and I on the other.
Tell me all your joys

For I've got few, brother.

(Popular saying but best heard from the
lips of Pedro Bacán singing on *Noches Gitanas en Lebrija*)

And suddenly *Re-Enchanting the World*, a project curated by Wojciech Szymański and Joanna Warsza featuring works by Małgorzata Mirga-Tas for the Polish Pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022, catapulted the artist's home village of Czarna Góra into the international limelight. It was not the first time that a Romani artist had centred the gaze of those who scrutinise the lives of those constructed as others. According to Romani-American scholar and activist Ethel Brooks, Małgorzata Mirga-Tas has built a palace for the Roma at the centre and crossroads of European history[12]. A presumably trans-European pavilion, despite the fact that it *represents* a nation-state of the old continent. A home for contesting a centuries-old construct.

Małgorzata dove into Renaissance figuration (figure, perspective, vanishing point) with the aim of reconstructing a genealogy of the image of Roma, revealing—as Walter Mignolo noted in *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*—the constitution of coloniality in the gaze. Viewing painting as both art and craft, she took the imagery of the Palazzo Schifanoia frescoes and added layers of proximity to the history of Romani men and women to snatch the lavishness of centuries from images of power. She played with a new kind of figurative representation, in which Romani bodies and biographies are, in the words of British-Romani author Damian Le Bas, not just represented but semi-present in a sort of "supervised reincarnation". By tacking other materials over the paint, she makes us feel—with an unbiased, clean and clear vision, what Gitano professor of literature José Heredia Maya would call a "cleansed gaze"—the life behind those images and materials, for her "portraits" are dressed in the subject's own garments but also in second-hand clothes from India and Bangladesh. The apparent sweetness of the colours and softly textured fabrics is a minor optical illusion. As Louise Bourgeois once said, "The needle is used to repair the damage. It's a claim to forgiveness. It is never aggressive, it's not a pin."

Like an iconographic interrogation machine or apparatus, Mirga-Tas updates the past-present of the works of art patrons. There is no break in the timeline of the figurative image's fiction like there was in the Renaissance (think of a portrait of a slave trader dressed in Roman fashion, with the Virgin Mary wrapped in Turkish robes); the artist places her contemporaries and relatives alongside people from earlier eras, hoping to affirm the past-present of the Roma's sense of time. Other Romani timelines. Everyday life and the violent shattering of that ordinariness.

[12] Reenchantment. Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, documentary film directed by Anna Zakrzewska. 2022. European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture.

By crafting a unique figuration for her Roma women, Mirga-Tas tries to show the body that should not be seen, the time that cannot be seen but is sensed; the ineffable music of joy and the lazhav[13] (shame) of corporeal innocence. There is no pathos on their faces, but there is a pensive stillness.

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas's anti-racism as sweet rebellious provocation

Before us
Water did not drown
nor fire destroy
And the wind kissed the leaves

[...]

Before us
Nothing

Before us
neither grave
nor home

Bi kheresqo bi limoresqo, Rajko Djuric[14]

Andalusia, beacon of modernity

From the Island of La Cartuja here in Seville, let us observe and think about how an exhibition for an artist like Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, whose imagery is rooted in European pictorial tradition but also offers new interpretations of that history, can help us to initiate challenging debates.

We need to move past simplistic, cumulative and even merely formal readings of the genealogy of the image of Romani people in art history, as passive objects/models of figurative representation, and dig deep into the historical record of the racialised gaze upon subaltern bodies.

The philosopher Andrea Soto tells us that, while we do live in a society of images, those images are few but highly repetitive. That is where we must turn our attention and change our focus. In a city where images of Spanish Roma can be found in a thousand different forms (from postcards to the ubiquitous "gypsy dresses"), as plentiful as the bricks used to build tourist flats, where those images are part of a

[13] Ronald Lee, Rromano Alavari. Kalderashitska - Inglezitska / Romani Dictionary. Kalderash - English. Magoria Books, Toronto, 2010.
[14] Sin casa y sin tumba, Rajko Djuric. Translation: Nicolás Jiménez González. Huerga y Fierro Editores. 2011

hoard of confiscated wealth and are used by the media to give all Roma a single anonymous personality—because they're *Gitanos* and they're nothing, they're anything or they're all alike, or they are ours, the flamenco artists, because they're from here, not like the foreign ones—it is wonderful to give oneself the opportunity to say, "I had no idea." A chance to understand Mirga-Tas's work and to at least try to understand why she chose Seville, once the Gateway to the Americas, cradle of all the racial laws that justified the plundering of Abya Yala, all the presses for printing Antonio de Nebrija's Spanish grammars and Cervantes's *Don Quixote*s, pictures of female saints, painters of light and colour, and port of entry for the black slaves, the city where people coexisted (not always in harmony) with Moriscos and Gitanos, the sons of Allah and the daughters of Lilith in the New Rome. The proposed history, an other-history, is not just going to shatter stereotypes and narrate the neoliberal fantasy of inclusiveness and diversity. And so? What lies behind these proud Roma women? A defiant stare and a challenge.

Towards a Romani aesthetic as a door exit of modernity

Houria Bouteldja ,[15] spokesperson for the Parti des Indigènes de la République (PIR), wrote, "They say 1789. Let's answer 1492!" It is our obligation (the duty of everyone who looks at their fellow humans with love) to build kind, welcoming spaces, to shorten the distance between Polígono Sur and La Cartuja, and to fight for the right to beauty—not Kantian beauty, but the beauty of public spaces. Think of Małgorzata strolling through the notorious neighbourhood of "Las 3000 Viviendas" and suddenly coming across the home of Aunty Encarna and Uncle Rubio, with dozens of potted plants and flowers beautifying the inhospitable ugliness of the asphalt road, concrete pavement and corrugated asbestos roofs. Revolutionary love to heal sorrows through revolutionary love. Stitching up the wounds, like the images on the canvas. Answering police brutality with Romani beauty.

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, África and her girls

"Where are the Roma brothers?" This is something we often say when we travel to other parts of the world. Małgorzata becomes Gosia and makes herself understood thanks to some basic words that are the same in both Romani and Caló, the language of Spanish Gitanos. Factoría Cultural, a municipal facility in the Polígono Sur district, opens its doors so that she and her team can share a process of listening and remembrance with África Fernández Montoya, the flamenco dancer África de la Faraona, and her daughters. This parallel activity to the CAAC show is an expression of the artist's need to continue weaving networks among Roma women. They come from very different backgrounds, but they connect with each other's warmth. África would like to be portrayed with her mother, the flamenco

[15] *Whites, Jews, and Us: Toward a Politics of Revolutionary Love.* Semiotext(e), 2016.

dancer Pilar Montoya La Faraona (God rest her soul), and her daughters África and Rosario select photos from their phones to be immortalised. The fringes of the establishment unite to confront the violence of spaces of power: a simple act of self-representation using personal photos becomes a form of identity negotiation.

Sacristy of the Flamenco Roma Women

The commission was to use Zurbarán's three works painted for the sacristy of Santa María de las Cuevas as a pretext for reflecting the lives of three Andalusian Gitana women that were directly or indirectly marked by flamenco. One is a studio portrait, another is a live performance, and the third is a family celebration. Romani bodies sending out signals from different moments in history and in their colourful life stories, in which shared joys and sorrows intermingle. The mantle of Our Lady of the Caves and the fabric of monkish habits and doublets are replaced by an iconography that touches on flamenco, Gitano and Romani culture.

Juana la Macarrona, Juana Vargas de las Heras, Jerez de la Frontera, 1870–Seville, 1947

"So why are you leaving 'the stage'?"

"Because it's getting to the point that I can't do it no more, son. I have to miss a lot of nights, 'cause these gams of mine used to be solid bronze but now they're more like string wire. The Macarrona that used to stay out partying for a week, dancing, singing and drinking, she's history. A wreck, son!"

(Juana la Macarrona interviewed by Agustín López Macías, Galerín, 1926)

Juana Vargas de las Heras, aka "La Macarrona", was a paradigmatic example of the precocious female Roma artist, who appeared at *cafés-cantantes* (cafés with live music) in, Málaga, Barcelona and Madrid in the late nineteenth century—a period marked by constant military uprisings and coup attempts in Spain—before landing in Seville at the tender age of 16. When she was 17 she travelled to Paris with a company of "Gitana" flamenco dancers from Granada, although hardly any of them were actually from Granada , to perform at the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris. After seeing her there, the Parisian press gave her the epithet "Queen of the Gypsies". The myths about Juana la Macarrona are interesting, but it is even more interesting to consider what was built up around her: what others saw in (and projected onto) her and what we imagine she saw of herself. The iconographic basis of this reflection is a photo album (*Gitans d'Espagne*, by Don R. Bonaparte[16], it says on the cover) of the company's members, something very few people had seen until recently. They show a very young Juana, guitar between her legs, sporting a disdainful, almost virginal smile as she stares defiantly at the French *gachó*[17] who is

[16] [31 phot., portraits de Gitans d'Espagne, don R. Bonaparte] | Gallica (bnf.fr)
[17] Gadjo, in Romanes, a non-Roma man.

taking her picture. Reclaiming that joy is a pressing matter, and so is resignifying these images over which the subjects had no control.

Herminia Borja, Seville, 1959

I'm a genuine aristocrat,
through elegant halls I glide.
But they call me Lady Democrat
'cause I've got a baser side.
Despite my noble pedigree
I posed for the painter's art.
And palace-born though I may be,
I'm a working girl at heart

"La maja aristocrática", lyrics by Aniesa and Arozamena, music by Butet (but think of it sung by Pastora Pavon, "Niña de los Peines")

Herminia Borja is a free-dancing flamenco singer, mother, grandmother and resident of Seville's Polígono Sur, the poorest neighbourhood in all of Spain. She was born under the yoke of Franco's dictatorial regime, not long after Spain lost its colonial protectorate in Morocco. Herminia first appeared on the local flamenco scene in the 1980s when, after divorcing her husband, she felt empowered enough to pursue her girlhood dream. Speaking of her childhood, she remembers being a good girl who knew that her family was poor but did everything they and the state expected of her. Her musical role models are not limited to figures from the history of flamenco, whether mainstream or within her family; she also absorbs influences from across the Atlantic and dares to embody them in her voice and body. She is a great admirer of Aretha Franklin, Tina Turner and Black gospel music. Herminia has no formal schooling or musical training, but she inherited an artistic tradition that has given her a craft and career in the trenches of flamenco song and nightlife of Seville, where a solitary Gitana woman who's never alone stands as a heroine before the drunks. Her overwhelming personality as an artist and wise presence on stage and at home have made her a matriarch who uses her own special brand of deep-throated Romani feminism to banish the shadowy menace of job insecurity in the entertainment industry. When her neighbourhood organised a tribute to Herminia on 21 June 2023, Aitor Lara produced two portraits of her, one in tension and the other in a listening pose.

Manuela Carrasco Jiménez, 28 May 2012
Catalina Rubio Carrasco, Jerez de la Frontera, 1952

"Times have changed. What do you think of the world today, Manuela?"
"What do I think? It's terribly ugly."

Más fuerte cantaba yo, Christina Firmino - Carolane Sanchez, 2011[18]

Manuela Carrasco Jiménez, a blonde, blue-eyed Roma woman born in Jerez de la Frontera, was a grandmother, mother, sister and entrepreneur, in her own way. Though unable to read or write, she raised twelve children and had a higher social status than her siblings thanks to her husband, a member of the upper-middle class that flourished in Jerez after Franco's coup and the ensuing civil war. Manuela was born into a family of Roma labourers, who slaved in the fields of wealthy landowners between Jerez and Lebrija, not long before the 1929 Ibero-American Exhibition in Seville, which she experienced when she was just a girl: at a moment of extreme poverty, Manuela and her sister Juana went to live in Seville with an aunt who danced in a show called "La Malena y sus Gitanas" at the Exhibition Casino. After the Spanish Civil War, she suffered abuse and humiliation until the father of her oldest children decided to make her his wife, after which more children arrived. In this family portrait, where she is accompanied by her daughter Cati, we can sense the inner struggle of a woman forced to hide part of her identity by donning bourgeois clothes and attending the social events of her non-Roma relatives. Her sister Juana took to walking the streets, her other sister Curra became a card-carrying communist, and her brother Manuel, whose stage name was Manolito Jero, sang for the Americans at the naval base. She always thought love was devotion and surrender until, after her husband's death, she decided to embrace life and cling to her flamenco and Roma roots: "He can wait plenty of years for me."

Epilogue: An emotion-venting confession

Writing in poverty and instability is not the same as writing in an office: of how a Romani artist from Lebrija dreams of talking about Roma art and about a Polish-Romani woman to an ethereal, vague audience who think they know even before they see.

25 September 2023.
Seville. Polígono Sur. Calle de la Residencia de Estudiantes. No number.

[18] ¡Más fuerte cantaba yo! on Vimeo.