On Caring Institutions, Safe Spaces and Collaborations beyond Exhibitions: An Interview with Robert Gabris

Denisa Tomkova

Robert Gabris is a visual artist born in Slovakia who lives and works in Vienna, Austria. Gabris’s work critically engages with identity issues, corporeality and the queer body as well as issues of marginalisation and exclusion. In his work the artist engages the intersectional layers of his own identity: belonging at the same time to the Roma ethnic group and the queer community. In his practice, Gabris critically deals with issues of safe spaces and inclusivity, in relation to queer Roma communities in Slovakia. In 2021, he initiated his project *ERROR: Roma Corporeality and Their Non-Binary Spaces*. The project began during his residency in Košice, a town in the east of Slovakia. The artist used dating apps to meet representatives of the Roma queer and non-binary community. The apps offered him a safe space to connect with people who live in very excluded and marginalised spaces, and who could not otherwise meet. New technologies and virtual spaces offer an important tool for the empowerment of the Roma people. For example, Mihaela Drăgan, a Romanian actress, playwright and co-founder of the feminist theatre company Giuvlipen, proposes the blending of technology and magic used by Cyber-Witches for creating a more egalitarian and democratic world.¹ In the tradition of the robot in Afrofuturism and AI in Sinofuturism, Drăgan proposes the Techno-Witch/Cyber-Witch as the central figure and symbol of Romafuturism.² Gabris’s project challenges concepts of temporality and proposes future thinking. Similar to Legacy Russell’s concept of cyberfeminism,³ Gabris’s project proposes the link between gender, technology and identity. In this interview, Gabris proposes the concept of the caring institution and wishes for collaboration beyond exhibitions, as he believes it is the only way art institutions can provide any sustainable care.

¹ See Giuvlipen’s website: https://giuvlipen.com/en/
Denisa Tomkova  In your three most recent art projects, you deal with questions of the human body and your own identity: Inside Out – Redefining the Body I am Temporarily Living In, 2022; ERROR: Roma Corporeality and Their Non-Binary Spaces, 2021; and Insectopia, 2020. How do these projects differ from each other? How did your ideas develop or change?

Robert Gabris  The project Insectopia focuses on institutional power, the exploitation of contemporary discourses for own profit in ethnological museums and their art collections. Insectopia also criticises Roma organisations that violently exploit Roma discourse, calling us Roma artists and marking and marginalising us. These institutions do not perceive critical voice, even if they claim the opposite. The insect develops a different kind of language because the institutions have silenced him. Their language is based on sounds of disgusting smacking, swallowing spit and pushing it out, and talking despite the barriers – the masks and ropes. Inside Out thematises diversity, but much more poetically, more personal. Here I don’t strive, I don’t resist. It is a very silent work, focused on my inner self. I archive my body parts and organs through drawing on paper, I build new compositions of my own anatomy. This series unfolds a fictional speculation of the genesis of myself. I imagine the own origin of bodies in the universe as a big bang. An event which joins different body parts together but does not connect permanently. It is another definition of order, a playful interplay of different momentary states, a process of becoming.
These projects all tackle the topic of corporeality and the body. The body is here to give a form to something abstract, as Legacy Russell argues. Hence, in her Glitch Feminism manifesto, Russell proposes the ‘anti-body’ as a tactical glitch feminist strategy, similar to what Slovak artist Anna Daučíková referred to as the ‘mental body’. How do you understand the body as a form?

I am convinced that diverse corporealities refuse any heteronormative norms. By the way, in gay digital networks there is a preference ‘heterolike’. This toxic masculinity is extremely aggressive and sexist towards other queers and trans non-binary bodies. I claim that a body is not static. On the contrary, it is in constant, changing motion without spatial and temporal definition. I have the physical body; I didn’t have to do anything for it, but I own and protect my corporeality. I like to experiment, play, deceive, deny, with the countless possibilities I have.

Can you tell me more about your project ERROR: Roma Corporeality and Their Non-Binary Spaces, 2021? When it was exhibited, you presented this project as an installation consisting of fourteen fabrics, eleven hanging in a circle in the first room, three in the second room. What did this installation symbolise?

In ERROR, I use Legacy Russell’s Glitch Feminism manifesto, particularly the chapter ‘Error’, where she describes a ‘gap’ for diverse queer strategies. I see parallels here with queer Roma communities in Slovakia, who are excluded from their own families and society. They live in corporealities (I use this term intentionally to draw attention to the yet non-existent, gender-neutral language in Slovakia) and in non-binary spaces built out of need and doubt in order to freely live their own identity and resist racism and exclusion. Last summer I met participants of the ERROR project in eastern Slovakia and asked them what they need, what measures are necessary for change – or more symbolically, how they imagine a world without the daily struggle for their own dignity and survival. Right up front was mental and physical health, prevention and healthcare, and the issue of poverty. We dreamed up a house together. In it we pack all these issues and build a complex network, for their own self-determination to exert pressure against the ignorant and apathetic majority society and political powers. The main goal is to build a health centre in eastern Slovakia. I am communicating and negotiating with different activists, representatives of institutions, politicians and social workers.

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4 Ibid
DT You used online dating apps to connect with people who live in very excluded and marginalised spaces, and who cannot otherwise meet. The online apps offered a safe space to connect and meet. What is your opinion about the potential of cyberspaces for empowerment, feminism and the creation of safe spaces?

RG The potential of cyberspaces is an ambivalent discourse, because affected people have to take over protection-control themselves, because cyberspace in general still does not offer much protection. Therefore, it is important to recognise racism, exploitation and violence first, and then to resist. I say this because multi-marginalised groups are resigned to this oppression; they accept it or ignore it because they (most of the participants of the ERROR project) depend on sex work and quick earnings. Empowerment happens when we create safe spaces of encounters, inform each other, share strategies, and feel a sense of belonging. Specific examples in my project show the huge gap in education about accessible sources of information, so an online safe space must be inclusive and therefore accessible – for example, language diversity in the applications, lists of aid organisations and health centres, and many other things, still need to be processed.
When you started working on the ERROR project, you mentioned to me that it will be accompanied by an ethical code: the photos were supposed to be for sale and all the money from any sales were to go to the people who need it for specific and necessary resources for healthy and safe survival in the unhealthy conditions they face every day. How did the participants and the exhibiting institution perceive this? How do you consider the outcomes of this aspect of the project now, after the exhibition is finished?

The ethical code was my initial idea. I changed it later because I understood that it was a completely wrong strategy. I don’t want to trade Roma bodies on the art market. Instead, I have developed a new idea to build a health centre, to provide training and courses to Roma people so that they can do this work themselves. But I can’t do it alone; I will probably never earn that much money. With this project I push the responsible authorities in Slovakia to implement this idea. I believe this cannot be achieved by one single individual, but instead should be accomplished through collective work. I draw attention to this problem; I open dialogues for possible implementation. But I must admit, everything moves very slowly in this country. I have given up a few times because sometimes it seems impossible. Everyone talks smart, but implementation is still a foreign word. Yet I still have many attempts, I know that. Everything is a question of time. But I am sure of one thing: if we don’t help ourselves, others surely won’t.

Tell me more about the participants in your ERROR project. Why did you decide to directly involve participants in the process of creation of your project? What was your interaction from the first meeting, online and offline, up to the final realisation of the project? Are you still in contact with the participants?

I do not want to describe in detail what we did and how we did it, because I do not let people from the outside in. We have made an agreement with each other; there are precise rules that neither of us should break. We protect our safe space. It is built to collect knowledge and experiences, to protect them and not to entrust them to anyone. The result is a documentation that can be shown, everything else is our ongoing process that is not for others to see. But the outline of the process was this: I presented my project to them online and asked them to participate. The meeting happened quite quickly. The process was a bit complicated, we had some intensive discussions and developed different formats. Of course, not all of them were physically involved, but they gave me important feedback. In the process, we had conversations, visited different places of queer Roma, and I met their families. In-between we collected sentences for our manifesto, made photos. We celebrated and argued a lot. All this was two months of intensive work. I am aware that this time has an end; they gave me their voice, trust and hope to make a strong statement outside in the society.
I am preparing the exhibition in Košice; we will meet again there. Of course, we are in contact, but not with all of them.

DT You talk very directly about direct action, healing, and implementing actual change in relation to your art projects and their participants. Your work is not about performing the given topic; it is about living it, for you and your participants, and changing real-life circumstances through art. Would you agree? How do you see it?

RG My art is always autobiographical, a reaction to my experiences and knowledge. To speak for others or to theorise about it is not right, because everything is in a constant movement. I don’t want to be fixed; I like to float. I can’t and won’t sell art as the ultimate truth or proposition; that makes no sense to me. I connect my art with activism because it is a kind of direct interaction with real circumstances. Maybe I mistrust an exhibited artwork a little; it’s like a passive watching and listening, I miss a dialogue and exchange in it. Art can do so much more, we just need to lower our egos, not hide behind academic language and learn to achieve realistic goals in practical challenges in life.
DT Your idea of the link between institutional cooperation and short-term but decisive solutions to the necessary needs of participants is precisely what I see as the potential of this participatory art project. I believe that there is a potential for socially engaged art projects in the decolonial struggles and in addressing pressing socioeconomic concerns. Do you think your project has managed to achieve some changes, or at least give more visibility to certain topics?

RG Yes, the visibility is great. However, the question remains of what has been looked at. Is it the artist himself, who won an award, or the discourse? I would often prefer to hide behind the art, but that is not yet possible. We have to be at the forefront and force these discourses. Institutions often overestimate themselves; the work is not enough after an exhibition. Karina Kottova (the Director of the Jindřich Chalupecký Award) understands this, she is very attentive and sensitive. We are cooperating again this year, this time at the Roma Museum in Brno. I believe that an important key in this question is, how do institutions provide sustainable collaboration? Complex discourses need multiple resources to continue to exist. Institutions fill exhibition programmes with diversity, but the deepening of a discourse suffers. The work is not done with one exhibition. That is why I think institutions overestimate themselves.

DT You made a very important point about collaboration beyond exhibitions. Can you please elaborate on that? How do you imagine the real sustainable collaboration between art institutions and artists and a broader community?

RG It’s simple; the interests of art and cultural institutions must be better focused on our needs, artistic content and concepts, which, for some of us, merge with activism in an interdisciplinary way. An art institution should become a space of encounter and mutual exchange. We need resources to implement our projects in a sustainable way. The institution has power and great visibility. We offer strategies. I don’t want to generalise; it depends on specific projects. Last year after receiving the award from the Jindřich Chalupecký Society, the Czech platform for contemporary art which aims to initiate and support innovative and experimental artistic, I gained access to a broader platform which has allowed me to be in contact with potential investors. Now I need more specific implementation strategies; for that I have to continue exhibiting and negotiating with art institutions.

DT Speaking of institutions in relation to spaces that are safe for everyone, we need to consider the relationship between space and the body. This is also the link you are making in your projects, and hence your focus on the body and corporeality. Am I right? It is like Sara Ahmed’s important distinguishing of ‘how some more than others will be at home in
institutions that assume certain bodies as their norm’. Can you please tell me more about your position here?

RG  The idea of safe space in the institution can hardly be realised until institutions change their inner structures. They are dominant, mostly white and extremely ignorant. The academic language is elitist, it theorises and massively exaggerates, without having any real experience with the subject. The language is arrogant, it excludes all others who do not belong to this artificial bubble. With my work I thematise diversity, which must no longer be marginalised. What is important is the sensitivity that does not allow the exploitation of diverse bodies in the institution. That is why we have to thematise the caring institution, which has the ability to achieve sensitive inclusion. I find it difficult to talk about a symbiosis of body and institution, because I am aware that it is more about spaces of conflictual dialogues, not about applause at exhibition openings. I thematise the non-material relations of gathering with each other without focusing on the physical body. I see a lot of potential for change, but unfortunately not many progressive movement in institutional structural work.

DT  I absolutely appreciate the disparity between the theory and the practice. What I meant is the focus in your work on the corporeality, the body, the norm, the refusal of the heteronormative norms and the insect as a genderless body. I meant your conceptual focus on the corporeality and the norm as institutional critique. You make a very interesting and urgent point, about the need to thematise a caring institution. Can you please elaborate?

RG  The caring institution is a transformation, a reconstruction, a reorganisation, a new idea of what has been neglected in cultural institutions until today. Care means nursing, assisting, counselling, healing of diseased systems, protection from violence, racism and toxic patriarchy. The inner structures of an institution should elaborate a manual with an ethical code and later implement it in practice. Artistic positions must recover a trust towards the institutional power. Contracts must be correctly respected; artists must be paid fairly. I often notice an extreme exploitation on behalf of institutions; artists cannot survive because there are no bodies that protect the rights of artistic content, and also of artists themselves. The institution exercises a pressure that is unbearable for many of us. There are far too many experiences of why artists have never found the courage to present critical content. The elaboration is demanding resources that the institution will never pay for, because it has to struggle with financial problems itself. Hence, the content often remains superficial, and it does not fulfil important functions.

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DT You developed a similar topic during your Villa Romana residency in Florence, where in your project *Insectopia* you focused on the human body and identity in a state of constant change. You explained that: ‘*Insectopia* is a metamorphosis of a human being who has become an insect, paralysed, mute and motionless. They became an exhibit in the ethnological museum, imprisoned and nailed in a glass cube.’ Here we observe a link with the art institution (museum) and the human body, but also this work brings another layer to it, that of being an object rather than a subject. It also problematises the question of gaze. How do you see this?

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The insect has no gender, which provides me neutrality; I am at point zero – in a gap. I absorb everything around me. I reflect and question norms that paralyse the insect. The glass is transparent, people observe me from the outside, but they also have access to go inside. In Vienna I performed *Insectopia* as a live performance, I passed ropes to the audience. We created a collective body. People started to pull my ropes, they put pressure on my body, or they stood around passively and watched how I got out of here. I found it very exciting to give them a responsibility; I was partly helpless and dependent on random people I had never met before. I had the opportunity to let go of my ropes, but I didn’t. That’s how a queer body operates. We don’t just resist. The body exercises resilience as an ongoing practice that heals the collective body.

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**Robert Gabris** was born in 1986 in Hnúšťa, Slovakia. He studied scenography at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava and continued his Master’s studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Gabris was awarded the Recognition Art Award / Strabag International SE, Vienna, and the Jindřich Chalupecký Award, Brno, Czech Republic (2021). He has exhibited internationally, most recently at documenta fifteen in Kassel, Germany, and the Prague Biennial Matter of Art in the Czech Republic (2022). Gabris has participated in several international artist residencies: MeetFactory, Prague, and Kair Košice, Košice, Slovakia (2021); Villa Romana, Florence (2020); Gallery8, Budapest, Hungary, and Lokomotiv, Örnsköldsvik, Sweden (2017); Swatch Art Peace Hotel, Shanghai (2015); and in copper engraving at the Stamperia d’arte Albicocco, Udine, Italy (2014).

**Denisa Tomková** is an art theorist and curator. She holds an MSc in Modern and Contemporary Art: History, Curating and Criticism from The University of Edinburgh and a PhD in Visual Culture from the University of Aberdeen. She was a member of the international research project ‘Comparing WE’s: Cosmopolitanism, Emancipation, Postcoloniality’ based at the University of Lisbon. She has worked for the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC) in Berlin as a research fellow, curator and a project coordinator, and has been a Curatorial and Publications Research Fellow at SixtyEight Art Institute in Copenhagen. As a curator, she has worked on the Secondary Archive project, an online platform dedicated to the work of artists from Central and Eastern Europe. Currently, she is the Curator of Editorial Programming at Kunsthalle Bratislava, Slovakia.