

CZECH-ROMA FLAG AS THE INDICATOR OF THE STATE OF THE SOCIETY

Curators text

Tomas Rafa enters the public space with a seemingly simple gesture: by combining the Czech and Roma flag, he created several versions of a new Czech-Roma flag. With this, however, the project only begins. From many submitted designs by the artist, a jury selected 7 proposals for public vote and the winning flag will be offered to the Czech Governmental Office. It is an artistic project with an open end and more important than the outcome is the procedure.

The combined flag is an outstanding symbol, but its significance is not simple. The whole project Competition for the New Czech-Roma Flag is based on certain ambivalence. The interpretation of the hybrid flag depends on the position of the viewer. On one side the artistic gesture can be perceived as "abuse" of the Czech symbol, while on the other it can be understood as "abuse" of the symbol of the Roma people. From another perspective the combined flag is a symbol of unification. It is also important to consider the position of the author – a Slovak artist living in Warsaw is inevitably speaking from a certain distance. His approach is experimental and in a way humanist. Through his artistic gesture, he knowingly becomes involved in a turbulent discussion and not only as a disinterested observer.

The symbol of the flag is connected to the complicated concepts of Nation, State, Space or Political Representation. Next to the Czech-Roma flag proposals in the NTK Gallery, one can spot photographs and a video depicting actual anti-Roma demonstrations in the Czech Republic that took place in recent times (Duchcov, Ceske Budejovice). This documentation material was acquired by Tomas Rafa at the demonstrations from a position of a reporter. On the footage one can see Czech flags (Slovak also) in the hands of radicals, their sympathisers and neo-nazis, and hear shouts: "Czech for Czechs!", "We are at home here!", "Nothing but the Nation!". The Czech flag in the hands of the anti-Roma attuned citizens becomes a symbol of an ethnically homogenised state. In this context, the Czech-Roma flag becomes a contradiction to the concept of the ethnically pure state as it is mixed in the same way as the population of the country. It highlights and criticises the absurd and dangerous projection of the Czech Republic, populated only by White Czechs. The hybrid flag poses the question if the original Czech flag is still truly the symbol of the people living in Czech lands, or if it had been appropriated by ultra right.

The mixed flag could contain other symbols than the symbols of the Roma minority. Also it could contain a different symbol than the Czech one. The author chose this particular combination of these two symbols in order to direct attention to the relationship of the Czech majority to its Roma minority.

The exhibition of Tomas Rafa in the Artwall Gallery overlaps with the recent anti-Roma moods in the Czech Republic. This was not planned. These tendencies are not new, but perpetually latent in a society, where in the long run, racism is tolerated. This project does not want to escalate this tension, but to return to constructive discussion about mutual coexistence of a majority and a minority in a society. In order to spark discussion, Tomas Rafa uses a certain dose of ambivalence, which is present in his project. The author does

not formulate his own personal view through creating the flag – this is only evident through the contextualization of the project. In this sense it is not activist art. The intention of art is not to declare declare one's opinions, but to create an open horizontal platform, that one can navigate as a mediator.

The project Competition for the New Czech-Roma Flag is not a political reality, but an artistic vision. The audience and participants of this artistic project have a plethora of possibilities of how to perceive it: they can support the project and vote or for various reasons they can refuse the project and express their opinions in the on-line forums. The artistic level serves here as an indicator of the attitudes of the society.

Lenka Kukurová

co-curator of the exhibition