# Futures Past Means *Tajsa*
# Review of an Artwork by Krzysztof Gil


## Monika Weychert

weychert@gmail.com

Assistant Professor, SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3941-0800


*Monika Weychert* is Assistant Professor and Head of the Department of Journalism and Social Communication at SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities. Since 2016, she has been working with the Institute of Public Space Research at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. She is also associated with the Foksal Gallery and the Xawery Dunikowski Museum of Sculpture. Her MA dissertation was entitled *The Image of 'Gypsy' in Polish Culture – Myth or Stereotype?* Her PhD focused on the *Invisible Genocide. Contemporary Roma Art as Rebellion by the Subaltern*.


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The notion that Romani genocide victims belong to an ever-growing number of past, present, and future victims of antigypsyism is an inherent part of many artworks by Romani artists, Krzysztof Gil's[1] subversive piece being one of them.

*Tajsa. Yesterday and Tomorrow* (2018) is a painting (semi-rotunda) displayed within a makeshift abode on a campsite (Weychert-Waluszko 2016). The installation was first exhibited at the Galeria Henryk in Kraków for a solo show entitled *Welcome to the Country Where the Gypsy Has Been Hunted* (2018).[2] Wojciech Szymański writes:

> Made of random pieces of wood and other materials, the cubic shack resembles in shape, dimension and execution the traditional, poor and temporary houses built by Roma people marginalised by law and society. Yet, by using the paradigmatic form of the white cube gallery, he creates a situation within a situation for viewers. On entering, the installation turns out to be a self-contained exposition space with a darkened interior, seemingly a dialectic antithesis of the gallery space (Szymańsk 2018).

The space is almost completely enveloped in darkness. Delicate spotlights allow the eyes to adapt. At first, only the soft ground under the feet can be felt and faint sound can be heard. The form, which refers to nineteenth-century painted panoramas, evokes the sense of being within a situation. Drawn with delicate white lines (vanishing here and there, merging with the black), the depicted scene of a hunt reveals itself only gradually, as the eyes of the viewer become accustomed to the surrounding darkness. At the centre, facing the entrance, trophies are laid out. Phantom characters have been taken from historical paintings, and one can easily identify famous works of art: figures from Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, Irene bending over the body of Saint Sebastian from Georges de la Tour's painting, or seventeenth-century still lives of slain animals. This 'appropriation art' plays a key role. Viewers are willingly seduced by elegant drawing, puzzles hidden within the work – all this refers to the 'visible', to the common universe of European culture. However, barely visible, is the victim of a *Heidenjacht* (Gypsy hunt), a corpse whose limbs are entangled with carcasses of animals, in a central position in the composition. It is hardly noticeable for want of interpretational tools at our disposal. We are only able to see what we have acquired in an educational process – elements of the dominant culture – and not what is being shown to us: a *Heidenjachten*. Under the bulb illuminating the space, a magical Romani object

1 Krzysztof Gil was born in 1987 in Kraków, Poland, and grew up in Nowy Targ. A Hans Guggenheim grant allowed him to attend the Józef Kluza Secondary Art School in Kraków, from which he graduated with distinction in painting and visual advertising. Since 2008, he has been co-running the art group Romani Art. Between 2008 and 2013, he studied sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts, Kraków, obtaining his diploma in lithography under Piotr Panasiewicz, PhD, and in drawing under Joanna Kaiser, PhD. In 2018, he received his PhD from the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków. Gil is a lecturer at the Chair of Painting, Drawing and Sculpture, Faculty of Art, Pedagogical University, Kraków. He has been awarded a grant by *Porozumienie bez Barier,* Fundacja Jolanty Kwaśniewskiej, and, thrice, by the Polish Minister of Interior and Administration. He is actively involved in combating discrimination and social exclusion and is a member of the international association ternYpe.

2 The title of the exhibition refers to a contemporary photograph found online, depicting an inscription on a wall in a Polish town. The inscription was photographed, described as a 'hate couplet', and uploaded onto social media by the writer Łukasz Orbitowski (location: Ks. Jerzego Popiełuszki Street, Skorogoszcz, 27 April 2018).

appears, a tiny 'hairy cross', or *truszuł bałenca, made of bees' wax blackened with soot and covered with human hair, presaging death and symbolising the grave.* 'Magical' objects of this kind like the *bengoro* and *kokało bałenca* were used in games played with representatives of the majority nations – their role was to cause fear and scare off attackers (eRom 2018). In his comment on the work, Gil points out the weakness of such resistance and the fragility of a weapon made of wax, meant to protect Roma trying to avoid bullets from the firearms of aristocrats:

> An excerpt from a eighteenth-century German hunting chronicle […] serves as the point of departure […]: "The trophies included a superb deer, five roes, three sizeable boars, nine smaller boars, two Gypsies, one Gypsy woman and one Gypsy child." […] In the 18th century, German and Dutch laws did not punish those who killed a Roma. Gypsy hunting became a pastime. […] Hunting trips were seen as public entertainment, and this continued until the 19th century. […] The title of the installation – *Tajsa. Yesterday and Tomorrow* – implies that Roma hunting did not end in the 19th century, and its consequences affect their fate till this very day. […] In the Bergitka dialect, the word *tajsa* stands for both the immediate past and what is going to happen. There is no word for 'tomorrow'. *Tajsa* signifies the past and the future, and the speaker's intention is interpreted in that context. To me, the term, freed from any context, became a metaphor of a time in which the past and the future happen simultaneously (Różyc 2018).

It is worth pointing out that the figure of a hunter, chasing people, is found in many of Gil's works, including two pieces: *Rat-Rat-Night-Blood* (2013) and a mural commemorating the Romani Genocide painted on the gable wall of a tenement at 42 Męcińska Street in the Grochów district of Warsaw and not unveiled until 2014. The subject matter of the work is not only *Heidenjachten* but also the terror in which Roma have been living over the centuries. Gil writes: "This is not the kind of fear that makes you numb and anxious, this is another kind of fear, one that is always there, one that is so natural that you stop noticing it" (Gil 2018). Homi K. Bhabha described it as a muscular tension in the body; it was also referred to by Fanon: "The symbols of social order (…) are at one and the same inhibitory and stimulating: they do not convey the message 'Don't dare to budge'; rather, they cry out 'Get ready to attack'" (2004, 89).

A counterpoint to the visual aspect of *Tajsa. Yesterday and Tomorrow* is provided by the recording of an interview with the artist's grandmother in which she relates the story of her father's death, murdered presumably by Poles, his Polish neighbours, soon after the war:

> Dad was lying by the riverbank, on his belly, without his shirt, his face in shallow water, his bicycle and violin case close by … My grandfather asked Zygmunt (…) who was passing by, to help him turn dad round. Mum and I came closer and felt utter despair… there was a hole in dad's head. I took the sand out of dad's mouth… Grandfather made a cart. They placed him on the cart, he was covered in blood. He was still bleeding from his head. They brought dad inside. No signs on his body. He had no shirt on, they must have taken it off him. We checked him for bruises. Nothing. Just one hole in his head. Blood kept flowing from this hole. Grown-ups went out to look for help. We, kids, were left home alone, looking at dad lying there, dead… The windows were low. I saw a man watching us and then… Militia came,

> even a prosecutor and doctors. There was nothing we could do when they said it'd been an accident. (…) The word was out that a Gypsy had been killed. A mate of my grandfather's told him about three drunken men boasting in the inn that they'd killed a Gypsy. He knew their names, we knew them, they lived nearby, but no-one would believe us … Oh God, it's difficult to talk about that ... when we took dad to the cemetery, everybody came out of their houses. And they laughed. All laughed. They laughed at us ... it was horrible, horrible... (Gil 2019).

In an essay accompanying the exhibition, Gil shares his own recollections, including one of a pogrom he witnessed at his grandma's:

> Late 1990s. (…) A group of nationalists announced an attack on the estate. We had three days to prepare. In grandad's cellar, the elders were fabricating weapons of whatever was at hand: planks and nails. They told us kids to stay in aunt's flat, on the fourth floor, far from gas and flying stones. My brother and I went downstairs and saw mothers and grandmothers by the windows. They were holding pots and salt [the only weapons they had – M.W.]. […] I will never forget (Gil 2018).

*Tajsa has another meaning too*, akin to the politics of affect, or, according to Brian Massumi – futures past. A past future is a vision of the future which – as the facts demonstrate – has never come true, but it still constitutes an integral component of the present-day, performing important functions in the economies of affect. In this regard, the phenomenon of past futures can be analysed in two different, though related, ways: on the one hand, it is part of our memory of the past; on the other, however, visions of past futures affect the present and, as such, are connected with current, rather than past, politics of affect. In consequence, the phenomenon constitutes an omitted or barely noticed sector of research on memory and affects.

In Gil's case, the play on meanings is very subtle: it indicates the mechanisms of perception linked with blanks in official history, making it impossible for the audience to 'see' some of the represented content and, as a result, highlights the mechanisms of rendering long-standing violence and its hidden consequences that render invisible contemporary *antiziganism*. The Romani Genocide continues.

All images: Krzysztof Gil, *Tajsa. Yesterday and Tomorrow*, 2018; documentation of the installation, the artist's archive, courtesy of Krzysztof Gil.

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