

Ancient Romani Handcraft and Contemporary Design

On Wick-art

“Man has always examined nature; his knowledge of basket weaving must have derived from observing birds construct their nests and therefore nature itself can be considered as Man’s mentor. All plants are suitable for weaving and most commonly willow is applied. Organic wearable materials exist throughout the world, with specialties defined by local soil and climate.”

- excerpt from Handbook for Weaving, Natural Crafts Institute, 2002

Thousands of years of documentation testify, that braiding is a more ancient skill than pottery. In Hungary, people living around flood-and-swamplands have been interested in basket weaving for a long time. Alongside willow, Hungarian native plants are also used, such as rush plant, common cattail, corn plant, rye-straw, wheat-straw, skinned hazelnut and black willow.

In 2009 I visited the workshop of a rural Roma master of basket weaving, József Kakas. In Kisbajom, a village located south of Lake Balaton, I discovered materials of sallow and willow branches that had been cooked and collected in bundles. Once I touched them, I realized how unusual and supple they were in comparison to the materials used in sculpture and industrial production. I discovered how easy it was to conceive sturdy surfaces and strong objects from this otherwise light-weight material and how objects braided from wicker were surprisingly economic in their material requirements in comparison to other materials deriving from wood, an increasingly costly resource.

Given our daily use of computers and cameras, I began to explore how to conceive agile and environmentally friendly cases for their protection from wicker and other natural fibres. In the long term, they could also be incorporated in to the hardware of the electronic goods, but of course, this is a process requiring extensive research to invent new ways to compress and process new forms.

The age-old technique of basket weaving made the preparation of these wicker objects particularly interesting.

Traditionally, Hungarian peasants used to weave along the banks of river, yet following the 19th century urbanisation of the working classes, weaving became a speciality of nomad Roma communities. To this day, Roma women spend the early days of spring in the vicinity of rivers, collecting strips for weaving from varied tree types, including **som**, hazelnut and willow. In shades of red, green and yellow, the unprocessed cuts are appropriated for domestic use, such as a simple basket resembling a bird’s nest. In these rich and dynamic patterns, I often identify Roma identity and self-expression.

A long-term unemployed master of basket weaving, stood in front of his turquoise house in Tiszadob, examining the materials I brought to him. He was handling and exploring their properties as if they were delicate, valuable objects and noted, that he would be glad to plant wicker trees in his garden. We looked around the surrounding plains and indeed there was space, many kilometres of available land in sight.

SZENDRÔLÁD WICKER BASKETS

Szendrôlád is a village positioned in the mountainous woodlands of north-eastern Hungary. Here the Roma weavers practice an ancient technique unique to all of Europe, known as wood-chip braiding. It consists of slicing black pieces of wood to ribbon-like strips, from which baskets are thus spun. Initially, these were the debris of the woodlands. While thick tree logs were used for industry and as fuel for fire, members of the local Romungro Roma communities were allowed to collect twigs no thicker than five centimetres. The Romungro sliced these to thin strips, which came to define the appearance of their objects. To the best of my knowledge, Szendrôlád is the last village where the technique of wood-chip braiding was still practiced in 2009 by a few senior practitioners. During the next two years, as a result of the workshops I conducted there, 20 young people acquired the skill. One of the key missions of this project is to help preserve local heritage.

According to the elder basket weaver Imre Kálló, just decades ago entire families made their living through this trade. As a result, we are at this stage also working on re-establishing a co-operative.

In addition to the classical shapes characteristic of Szendrőlád, the original round-shaped “kavas” basket is also a simple beautiful form: fitting for modern interiors as a container for fruit, CDs and magazines.

For two years I worked in rural communities and in Budapest at the same time. I was researching traditional skills and refining them in form and function (e.g. by designing new handles for traditional wicker baskets) and simultaneously developing new eco-friendly designs, such as protective covers for electric goods, with internationally renowned designers and curators.

BUDAPEST_LAPTOP BAGS AND CAMERA CASES

In 2010 I registered several designs with the Hungarian Patent Authority for the production of commercial goods. They are to be made from 100% degradable materials and for electric equipment, such as mobile phones, laptops, cameras and electronic goods e.g. monitors and GPS sensors.

The ambition is for the design to adapt the physical properties of the object at all times and for the process of production to accommodate its mechanic characteristics.

My plan is to reduce the unemployment and emotional turmoil of Roma communities in Hungary, Romania and Slovakia. While I too work under difficult financial conditions, I am keen to also produce a HD video of the project.

For the exhibition, I propose to present woven laptop bags and camera cases, which I have been developing for two years. I would also like to present some documentation about Roma culture and communities, as well as the workshops and university settings in Budapest, which have benefited my project with high tech support.

In summary, the project at once explores possibilities for new, eco-friendly innovations and pays tribute to the diverse cultural environment in which I live and work. I am also open to explore prospective future collaborations with industry experts, developers and investors.

ART_THEORY

Following three years of practice, achievements and failures, I was asked whether my work is art or sociology.

The question triggered the introduction, the second chapter of the doctorate thesis which I wrote chronologically much later than the other chapters.

I followed and criticized Marion von Osten's thesis on the paradigm change in art, which she defined in her curatorial work 'Be Creative' a show, which took place in 2002 in Zürich's Museum für Angewandte Kunst, and was followed by several analytic texts and conferences. Marion's vision is an art- landscape and practice, which is completely transformed by the 'Creative Imperativus': 'Be Creative', the obligation in office world, network and industrial production to be creative and available at any time. Influenced and exploited, the artistic individual tends to disappear to give space to corporate identity in art. I analyse the possible reasons for this paradigm change that took place between the 1980s and 2000. One of them is the working environment created by the computer and the net, and its effects on individual statements and the integrity of artists.

The aspect I added is the moral imperative, the shift of the collective work in booming networks, as it happened in the third industrial revolution of the internet in the 1990s and later around 2008 to deep social engagement of broad masses of artists after the 2008 worldwide economic crisis, followed, later in 2011-12, by an environmental and humanitarian crisis: and the need to keep up hope through art.