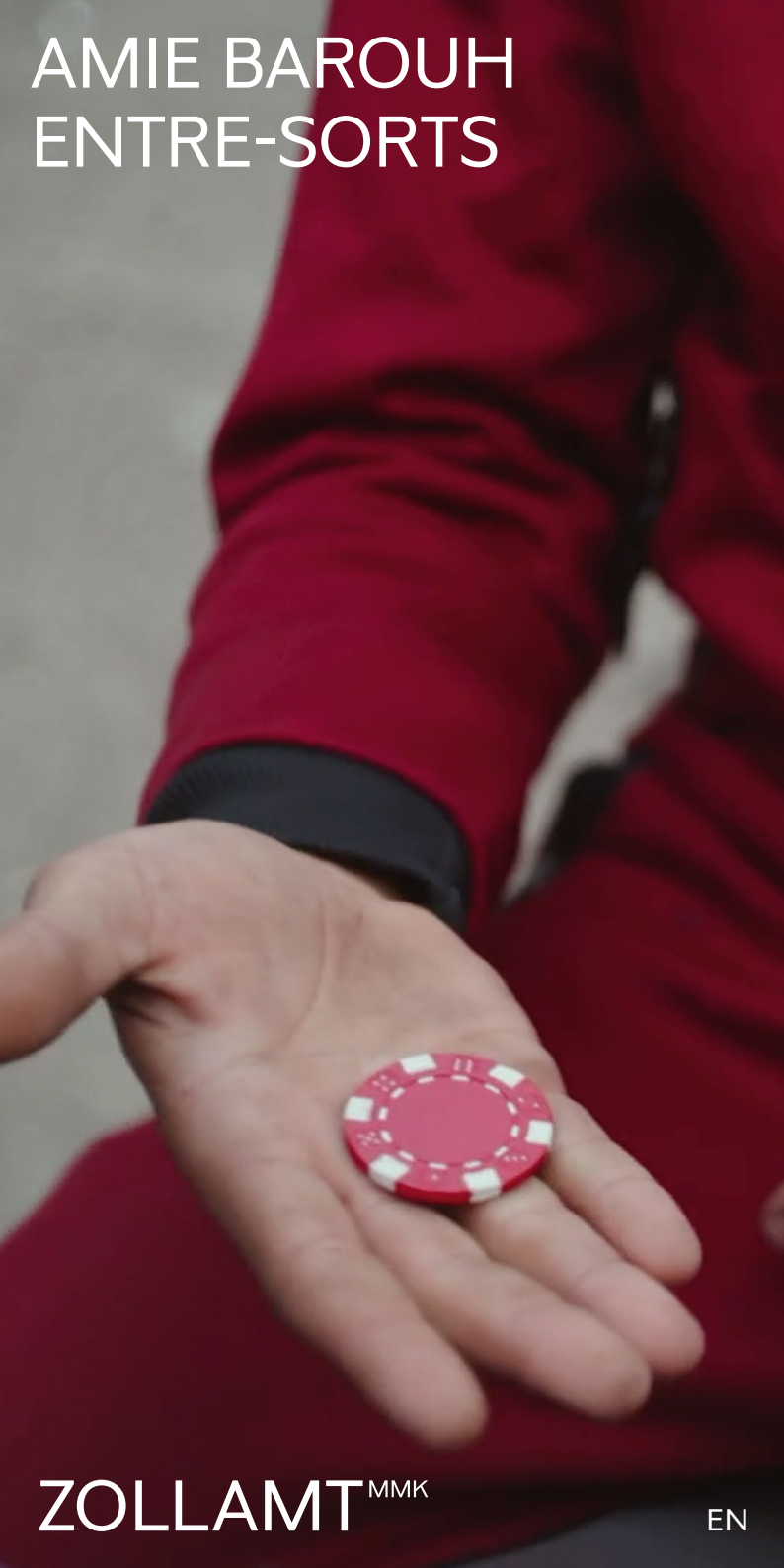
AMIE BAROUH
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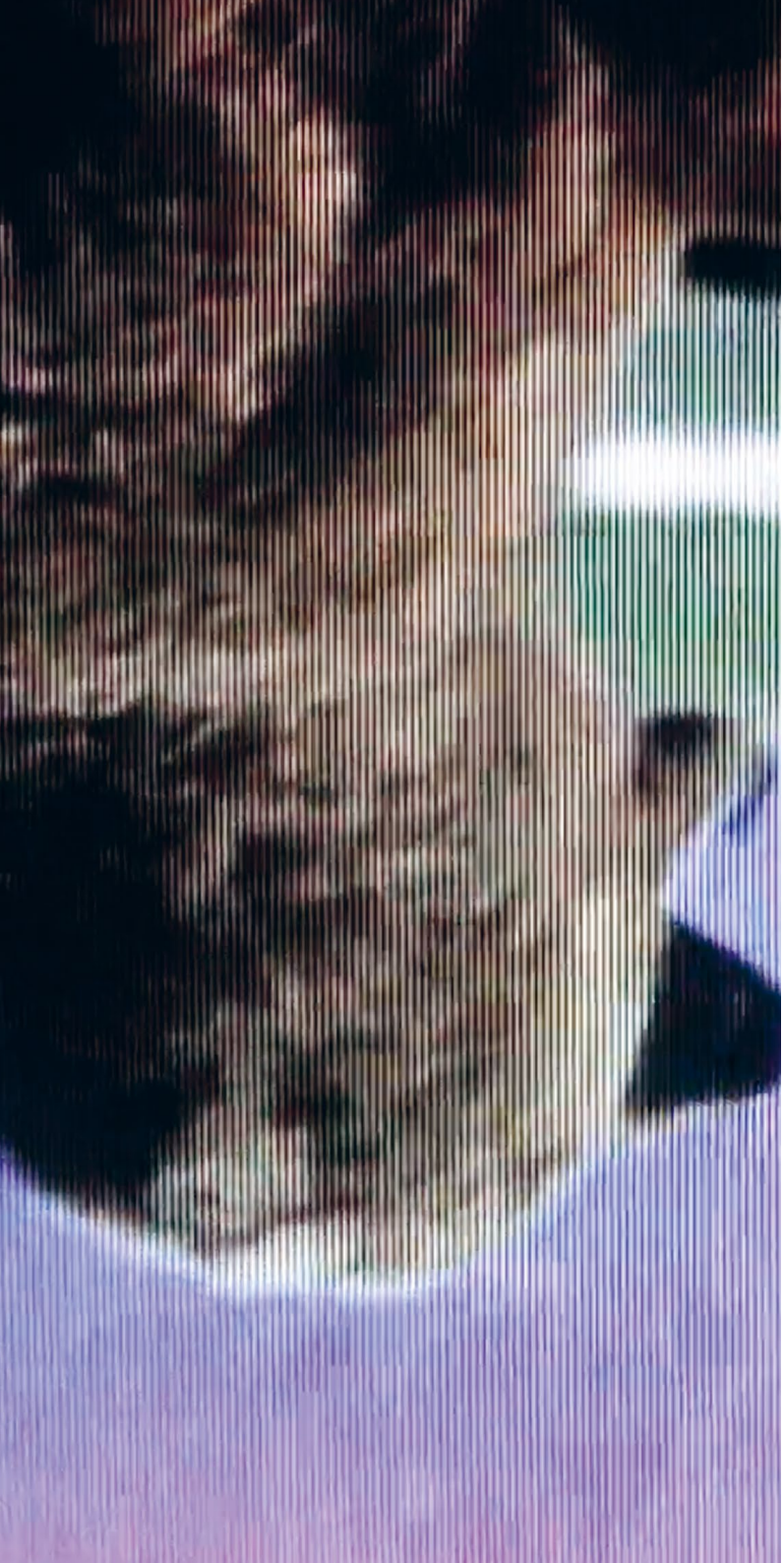

AMIE BAROUH
ENTRE-SORTS

22.03.–22.06.25

Susanne Pfeffer in conversation with Amie Barouh

SUSANNE PFEFFER Your films have touched me deeply and enriched my life. Thank you. I wonder, how did your interest in the Roma people begin?

AMIE BAROUH It came naturally. Initially, I wasn't specifically interested in the Sinti and Roma communities; it came through encounters. I grew up in Japan until I was sixteen or seventeen. But in Japan, I was already drawn to people on the margins of society—fishermen, small-scale workers—those considered "dangerous" or "different." I hung out with them. Others would ask me: Why do you stay with them? When I came to Paris, experiencing the city's diversity was a real revelation for me, and I wanted to learn about life on the streets.

SP How did your contact with the community, with whom your films were made, begin?

AB The first Roma man I met, Collin, was begging on the street. He was openly gay, very feminine, and funny. We began to spend our days together. Coming from Japan, I was quite naïve and had no knowledge of street life; I didn't know anything about how to survive on the streets.

SP How would you describe the differences in homelessness in Japan and France?

AB In Japan, homeless people are in hiding. They are stigmatized; it is a very socially violent situation in which homeless people are treated as if they were dead or nonexistent. They try not to look homeless. Some go to work during the day and sleep in their tents at night. In France, homelessness is more visible, and people often seek dialogue. This openness aroused my interest. It was completely new to me.

SP What did you learn from Collin?

AB I discovered Paris with him, especially the suburbs. He also took me to religious events, including Christian evangelical gatherings, which appeared almost occult. I saw parts of society I'd never witnessed before. Collin

lived in a makeshift house in a settlement consisting mainly of shanties. The families had built houses from found materials. The atmosphere was very lively and warm. The interiors of the houses were beautifully decorated. I felt welcome and wanted to find out more about the people who lived there. I gradually realized that they were members of the Roma and that they had their own language. They didn't speak Romanian, so I wanted to learn their language in order to gain a deeper understanding.

SP You then eventually lived with one of the families, right?

AB Yes, I wanted to learn Romani and decided to live with them. Collin's sister-in-law invited me to their house. I stayed in their home for six months, and then I was hosted by another family in the same settlement. For protection, we pretended that I was married to Collin—and this was accepted despite his being gay. Being a woman alone can be risky, especially considering the community's still very patriarchal views on women.

SP Yes, I'm thinking of a scene in your film *Melinda et George* in which another woman criticizes your behavior.

AB That is George's sister, who has taken on the mother's role since their parents passed away. She was telling me that she didn't like me being out all day and would rather I stay at home. I was going to the university, which she could not understand. Women's roles are still very restricted, and marriage is a central value.

SP When you reflect on the two years you shared the family's home and life, what stands out most for you?

AB I think a crucial point is that while the community may seem difficult to approach, this perception often stems from our own judgments. I felt incredibly welcomed; people opened their doors to me and shared whatever they had without hesitation. The hospitality, the humor, and the generous, warm atmosphere touched me deeply.

The Roma culture is fascinating, which is reflected in their language. Romani, which originated from the Indian subcontinent, in Sanskrit, blends influences from the Sinti and Roma migratory history, including Persian, Armenian, Greek, and various European languages. The result is almost a kind of Babylonian language. It is truly a very precious language, and it forms an invisible network, being spoken across Roma communities in different countries.

SP Did the families you stayed with maintain connections across borders?

AB Yes, many have family networks spanning across Europe and the world over.

SP Did the films change your relationship, or more generally, your perspective?

AB Absolutely! Filming helped me to reflect on my own experiences and gain distance. Until then, I thought I'd stay with them forever. The process made me realize I'm not truly part of their world.

SP Your films blur the lines between documentary and fiction. One realizes that you are filming from a highly personal perspective and closeness. Did this intimacy impact your work?

AB Initially, I hesitated to start filming because I didn't want the families' perception of me, and therefore our relationship, to change. But after a year of communal life, they proposed that I film a wedding in order to make a DVD to sell to the families of the bride and groom. After this experience, I started filming everyday life. George was also filming, which was a big help because he was less distanced than I was. But whenever I was doing the editing, I had to regain my distance. I had to reflect on my perspective: Why was I with this family, and what was it that I loved about them? This made me come back to myself. Every film I make has this element: the need to reflect on why I am putting myself in these situations and what my position is. Otherwise, I would be unable to balance the inside and outside perspectives.

SP This reminds me of the process of writing, which sometimes helps me to gain distance and become more critical. When preparing an exhibition, for example, it's a crucial activity.

AB It is almost cathartic.

SP Having watched your films and seen your interactions with the different communities you spent time among, I sensed that the tension between the inside and outside of the so-called "society," which exerts a strong violence against the "other," is an important theme for you. At the same time, violence is not limited to the "outside," just as in every other community.

AB There is a clear separation between outside and inside. You need to earn money, and that must happen outside the community. Within, there is a strong sense of family, but of course a complex set of internal norms and rules. Marriages mostly remain within the community. For example, if someone wants to divorce, it is brought before the community's own judge. The same judicial person is called upon to solve conflicts—for instance, when someone is beaten up. Nevertheless, the family bond is stronger than the feeling of being part of the community. There's mutual support, and yet it's not a collective system. The struggles of each family are managed independently, which can be isolating. The fact that life takes place outside broader social structures can also be challenging. This isolation can create a downward spiral—poverty, crime, and limited opportunities. Education is difficult to access, and children are exposed to life's harsh realities at an early age. Yet there is also resilience—through joy and simply being.

SP How did you experience your own position?

AB It was difficult to resist the role ascribed to me. I could hardly meet with other women because they were working all the time. Their life is hard. On the other hand, I don't want to generalize; I'm only speaking from my own experience. It was only towards the end that I began to understand how strongly their identity is shaped by their experiences of racism and injustice. The long history of persecution, slavery, and the Holocaust has had lasting effects on their community. I think this trauma from centuries of enslavement has been passed down through the generations. The Romanian Roma, who are the people with whom I stayed the most, were enslaved in Romania from 1370 to 1861. Too few people know about this.

Of course, there are also conflicts between different communities. I know some Belarusian Roma who cannot tolerate the Romanian Roma. They look down on them, and there is a form of racism there too. There is so much more to tell about the diversity and history of Roma communities that goes far beyond stereotypes.

SP The theme of freedom and independence seems to connect the protagonists in your films. This is especially evident in a scene from *Je peux changer mais pas à 100%*, in which Bobby declares that he is not afraid of the police, the prison, or the law.

AB Yes, there is this strong will to define one's own life. There is the freedom to live life as you see fit. So, I think you're right in saying that the theme of freedom links my films. It fascinates me because it's the opposite of Japanese culture, where everything revolves around belonging to a group. At school, you are part of the class; if you play sports, you are part of the sports club. There's always a connection to a larger group or concept.

You also see the contrast in how individuality and expressing emotions openly are not usually embraced in Japanese culture. People tend to avoid showing emotions like crying or yelling; such behavior is considered inappropriate. But in the Roma culture, I experienced the complete opposite. Emotions and the heart are central to everything, and openly expressing one's feelings is seen as entirely natural.

SP You describe a strong emphasis on the moment and the immediate community.

AB Definitely. When you have made some money, you spend it right away. You celebrate; you might invite everybody to come and share some food. Living in the communities, I loved spending time with the children. I would take them anywhere, like to the cinema or to the circus… it didn't matter what we did. They're full of life. Maybe we'd just be in the park, but it would be a beautiful time full of love. It wasn't until I took some distance that I could see how complicated their situation is.

In the beginning, the children could not understand what I was doing—my actions didn't fit in with the roles that were usually assigned to women. It was only once I'd finished making *Bari Mageia* and the children had been paid and watched the final film that they understood that I am a filmmaker.

SP In the film, magic takes on an important role, both symbolically and as a way to earn money from performing it. Did you teach the youngsters the magic tricks?

AB A few of the tricks, yes. But I'm not particularly good at them myself. Some of my friends, who are real magicians, came to teach them. It was a wonderful time, and I still feel very close to them.

SP What does magic mean to you in a broader sense?

AB Magic represents alternative perspectives and wisdom. It challenges conventional narratives and emphasizes the preciousness and beauty that stand in contrast to stereotypical stigmas. I try to convey the magic these people shared with me—the humor, love, and resilience.

SP Thank you for sharing your insights, Amie.

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Amie Barouh
Entre-Sorts

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Amie Barouh, *Bari Mageia*, 2022, film still, © the artist

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Amie Barouh, *Je peux changer mais pas à 100%*, 2019, film still, © the artist

IMAGE PAGES
Amie Barouh, *Damason*, 2024, © the artist

Amie Barouh, *Chambre 1*, 2024, © the artist

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