2

Humanæ – Work in Progress
Objectively about Human Skin Colour

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Blackness –
the black of it,
the rust-red of it,
the milk and cream of it,
the tan and yellow-tan of it,
the deep-brown middle-brown high-brown of it,
the 'olive' and ochre of it –
Blackness
marches on
the full chromatic spectrum of complexions

Gwendolyn Brooks, *Primers for blacks*, 1980

Our discussion begins with two contemporary art projects – the photographic exhibition *Humanæ* (**Fig. 2**) and the short campaign video *Yo no soy trapacero* (**Fig. 3**), and only then it moves on to Cervantes' tale "La gitanilla" generally considered to be the original source that has breathed life into the undying 'gypsy' child-theft motif. I start by focusing first on two contemporary art projects for a reason. Their purpose is to provide the readers with a critical frame of reference, to help them develop a certain distance to the overly familiar masterpieces, painterly styles and representational patterns, and thus to prompt them to take a moment to re-adjust their perception. Or, to put it in other words, these very fresh artworks should serve as a touchstone for the readers to keep at the back of their mind while engaging with my critical assessment of the 'gypsy' child-theft motif and its metamorphoses across visual media.
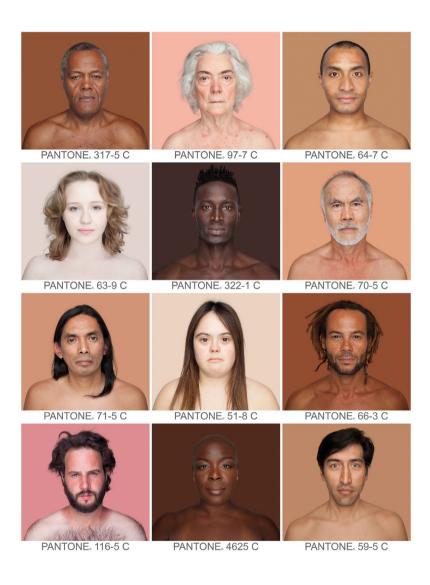
Fig. 2. © Angélica Dass | *Humanae Work in Progress* (Courtesy of the artist). Artist Angélica Dass rethinks the concept of race by showing the diversity of human skin colours in her global photographic mosaic.

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The photographic project *Humanæ* is, in many ways, a ground-breaking work of art. It brings a paradigmatic shift in the manner in which human skin colour is perceived and depicted. Simply put, *Humanæ* represents a gallery of photographic portraits of individual subjects with a backdrop of the Pantone colour corresponding to their skin tone. Its author, the Brazilian artist Angélica Dass, started the project in 2012 and has now photographed more than 4,000 people in eighteen countries spanning five continents (Strochlic 14). Called "work in progress", her project continues to grow. Before taking a closer look at the unique collection of human faces in *Humanæ* and the numerous implications this work has for the representation of humans in general, it is worth considering the concept behind the project as well as some aspects of its technical realisation.

Although an artistic project, *Humanæ* is designed in a manner that can enable anyone to explore and document the diversity of human skin colour with the rigour of a natural scientist. As Angélica Dass explains in her interview for *Der Spiegel*, the process is very simple. The artist always photographs her subjects in the same setting, with the same distance from the camera, with the same lighting set-up and with the same white background. After taking the photo, she selects a square of eleven pixels from the subject's nose, and uses it to colour the background of the portrait. With the help of Photoshop, she matches the strip of pixels to a colour card from Pantone and indicates its alphanumerical code at the bottom of the photograph. The very first portrait in *Humanæ* is a self-portrait of the artist bearing the Pantone code 7522C. (Schulz; see also angelicadass.com). The resulting photo series, as its title *Humanæ* suggests, displays the colour of human skin and facial features in its vast spectrum of tones.

The process is simple, yet it allows Angélica Dass, among other things, to capture and render visible – in a verifiable way – the sheer richness, variety, and individuality but also instability of human skin colour. Indeed, her project can justifiably claim scientific objectivity: it rests on empirical data, working with indexical images of human flesh tones that, thanks to the Pantone colour standardisation system, can be identified by designers and printing devices anywhere in the world. But at the same time, *Humanæ* contains an element of self-subversion and playful fluidity that is more characteristic of art. As the photographer jokingly explains, she has chosen the nose for her reference point because it is the body part with the least stable colour: "it changes when we take in too much sun, when we get the flu, when we've had too

much to drink. I want to focus on colour that changes. If I took your portrait, everything else equal, in the summer versus in the winter, your Pantone colour would be different. There is no intrinsic colour. The colour itself has no importance." ("True Colors").

Along these lines, there are a number of important statements that the portrait gallery of *Humanæ* implicitly advances. The project provides tangible visual evidence that the common classification of humans into four 'races', associated with the white, black, yellow or red colour, is more than inadequate. There is much to be said on how the concept of 'race' is further dismantled through the multitudinous combinations of facial features, hair types and skin tones presented in *Humanæ*. But let us focus here on one important visual statement that is of great significance to understanding the traditional racialised representations of Roma (or, indeed, of any other ambivalently 'white' group). The portraits in *Humanæ* evidence that every single human being has some skin pigmentation and a resulting skin hue. To put it in reverse, no human being is colourless. No one has a skin tone that is identical with the white background, commonly used in drawing, print making and painting (white paper or white canvas), in photography (white paper) or in magic lantern shows and films (white screen); no one is white. The portrayal of humans as white or as colourless, i.e. identical with the white backdrop used in the respective art, is an artistic convention. More importantly, it is an artistic convention that ensures marked visibility – let us not forget that white is also the colour of light – and thus it privileges the represented subjects. The effect of facial visibility is especially noticeable in art forms that rely on black-and-white colour contrasts for the illusion of three-dimensional realism, such as chiaroscuro or tenebrism in Renaissance painting, or in black-and-white printmaking, photography, and film. At the same time, as we shall see in the following sections, this convention has only rarely been employed for representations of the Roma minority in any of the traditional or modern fine arts. Hardly ever have Roma individuals been represented in the modus of whiteness and, in that sense, visually privileged.