



# Changing public spheres – from Eastern European underground to international platforms<sup>1</sup>

Scientific essay

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## Abstract

This essay explores the work of artists from different generations who have dealt with restrained public spheres, counteracted by their work: Russian Ilya Kabakov (b. 1933), Czech Kateřina Šedá (b. 1977) and the collective digital platform Harabel in Albania. Many artists who worked within the Soviet Union were subjected to extremely demanding conditions. All the same several found ways of collaborating in collective strategies, as in the case of Ilya Kabakov, who ‘defected’ in 1989 in New York. In the west the reception of Kabakov’s art has to a large extent been reductionistic in the sense that it was initially culturally biased, tied directly to biography and nationality rather than understood as fundamentally multifaceted. Šedá’s situation is a very different one, working within a social and conceptual conception of art. She has repeatedly engaged a variety of local societies in combining city planning, daily life, politics and the private sphere in her art. In Albania a younger generation of artists has created communication networks across geographic boundaries with a main focus on digital platforms. The question the essay

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revolves around is the following: How does one conceive of artistic approaches to the collective in the aftermath of totalitarian systems?

**Keywords:** public spheres, collective thinking, participatory art, iron curtain, Europe's east-west divide, Ilya Kabakov, Kateřina Šedá, Albania, digital platforms

## Introduction

Awareness of different public spheres and how they are changing seems particularly relevant in societies that have been subject to totalitarian regimes where the economic and social reality is quickly changing. The three examples I have chosen can illustrate an ongoing shift from clear opposition to an increasing complexity, with the emphasis on the exchanging and building-up of social structures. I look more closely at three different geographies and artistic approaches to the collective. All three share an origin in Eastern Europe, but in different historical situations which therefore suggest representation of different ideologies.

The starting point is the work of Ilya Kabakov, with the everyday life and political system of the Soviet Union as background. Then I look at the Czech Kateřina Šedá's artistic initiatives of the last two decades, with the main emphasis on collective actions. Her relational work attempts to improve people's lives by strengthening social bonding, often with whole villages and societies as participants. Finally, I present the platform Harabel in Albania's capital, Tirana, which has made a digital archive of artists and exhibitions in Albania, and at the same time forms a public sphere through its activity: presentations, discussions, workshops and interdisciplinary work. Harabel functions as one of many examples of collective strategies within a new public-sphere horizon.

## Kabakov's Soviet everyday life

Ilya Kabakov and his artist colleagues experienced the Iron Curtain as oppressive reality in the unofficial artists' milieu in the Soviet Union. When Kabakov emigrated to the West in 1989, the new cultural framework totally changed the reception of his work – the freer public sphere he now worked in required an artistic remodelling and a controlled approach to the so-called total installation. At an early stage Kabakov used the term *total installation* of his own installation practice, where the exhibition space is transformed, adapted to walls, floor and roof, as well as various objects and an adapted lighting. This space can surround the viewer, who cannot sum up the artwork in one glance – it can only be grasped in sequences.

The background from the Soviet Union became the basic material for these installations, especially in the first years after he defected in 1989 to New York, that is

at the end of the 1980s and through the 1990s. The transition to a western context made clear strong contrasts that Kabakov to a great extent played on by using autobiographically based fragments in an ambivalent interplay. The reception of Kabakov was typified early by a historical-biographical and ethnographic reading, something I tried to ease in a more metaphorical and literary direction in my master's thesis. The artist's own cultural background can be traced to among others the philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, with his thinking about dialogue and the equally valid 'voices' in a literary work. Beneath this lies a resistance to totalizing ideological tendencies which also has a resonance in Kabakov's work.

From 1955 on Kabakov illustrated children's books, and a type of naivist style from these can be traced in the drawings. Here too the narrative as strategy was crystallized out. These illustration tasks were done in accordance with the official Soviet style, and this was not where Kabakov developed his artistic ideas. He had to appeal to his public as simply as possible (Wallach, 1996, p. 31). Everything he drew was easily recognizable as well defined types, and he thus avoided criticism of style and content from the strict censorship authorities. At the same time children's books in the Soviet Union were a genre where elements from Russian avantgardism could survive, and an openness towards playfulness and absurdity could be tolerated. In this case links between image and text were to a certain extent 'safe'; the children's book had a relatively independent status (Kabakov, 1998, p. 34).

Several of Kabakov's earliest paintings are in institutional 'Soviet colours' and enamel, which effectively blocks off pure 'aestheticizing'. Later, for the same reason, he was to make use of materials such as plywood boards. The so-called *painting-objects* also helped to undermine the purity of the painting. With enamel-covered boards or canvas as a background, Kabakov fastened on smaller objects, for example in *Ekaterina Lvovna Soyka: 'Whose Cup Is This?'* (1982), where a black tin cup hangs from a hook in the middle of a green baize background and with this creates a relief-like effect. Everyday memorabilia gathered in archives are also a recurring feature in his art, which has sociological and aesthetic features – as a fragmented visual image of a given epoch. At the same time, in this 'low' consumption of materials one can find an echo of Duchamp's readymades and Surrealism's *objets trouvés*; in these cases, it is 'badly-mades' we are dealing with.

The early drawings of Kabakov have a slightly absurd quality, often with textual elements. They have much in common with illustrations, often with grid structures and schematics on the paper. The style is stereotyped with simple, slightly faded colours. The deliberately boring and bureaucratic expression, use of materials and

choice of motifs function as indicators of 'low' art, but also involve an implicit critique of the grey everyday life of Soviet society. The drawings often play on the experience of the banal, with a random, 'scribbled' appearance. They can appear deliberately incompetent, but in reality, challenge a simplified reading, and parody the clichéd official style.

The linkage between text and picture in the drawings refers at one level to the precarious gap between the word and its meaning in the totalitarian state, where the experience of text that did not mean anything or address anyone directly was incorporated. Advertisements could refer to material goods which in reality did not exist. Kabakov had to make use of a language that was 'out for the count' – hollowed out by the ideological use of language. In addition, the image was undermined by Social Realism with accompanying texts meant to explain the ideological message, without necessarily any agreement between words and image.

### **The unofficial art scene**

Between the sixties and seventies and towards the end of the totalitarian Stalinist era, Kabakov was a central actor on Moscow's unofficial art scene. This milieu can be viewed as closed and hermetic, inasmuch as both art production and art criticism mainly took place internally. The artists involved had to operate in secret. Despite the relative softening-up after Stalin's death in 1953, under Khrushchev and Brezhnev there were hardly any opportunities to exhibit in public. Abstract art was officially banned and only known to a minimal extent.

Public art was dominated by a rigid academic Social Realism that was meant to have an edifying effect on the population. Social Realism was adopted at a congress in Moscow in 1934 as the official method for all the arts, reaching its climax under Stalin. It was strictly hierarchically structured in its choice of subjects, style and practice. Allegory was prominent, and underscored the traditional affinity between allegory and ideology. The aim was that the artists were to contribute to the creation of a complete mythology where the political leader at all times took centre stage, flanked by the heroes of the revolution.

The *Moscow Conceptualists*, a central artistic circle that influenced the city's underground culture, were active from the beginning of the 1970s. The artists involved developed an ironizing artistic idiom as an ideological opposition to the glorifying, nostalgic party art. This was imitated and parodied in drawings, collages and paintings that pulled the rug from under the feet of the workers' paradise. The prevailing language of power was decoded, and a new language arose. At the same

time this art was given a strong metaphysical and mystical accent. In general, the discussion and the linguistic element were emphasized at the expense of the material artwork. Although specific political objectives were played down, it was evident that the art production was to be read politically.

*Collective Actions*, in which Kabakov participated, engaged in a conceptually oriented performance/happening practice critical of urban life and the east-west divide. The group was founded in the middle of the 1970s by Kabakov and Andrej Monastyrsky, who became the leading theoretician and leader of the group. Active until 1989, the group has in recent times been the object of much attention, among other things with an exhibition curated by Boris Groys in the Russian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2012. The reason for this is probably to a great extent that the activities of the group put western conceptual art into relief and underlined the precarious in art's dependence on freedom. Art production was put to the test by *Collective Actions* in a country without art discourse. Their actions underlined the emptiness characteristic of the Soviet experience, but at the same time opened the way for alternative aesthetic strategies. Inspired by western art, for example Fluxus, Chris Burden, John Cage's aleatory strategies and Zen, they arranged performances in the environs of Moscow, in forests, on open plains and snowclad landscapes beyond the radius of police surveillance. The artists dug themselves ritually into ditches, where they lay reading poems, blowing up balloons and the like. The actions, which functioned as a forum for debate, were documented by texts and photographs.

'Sots Art', from the seventies on with the artist duo Komar and Melamid at its head, was related to western art strategies with its explicit interest in Pop Art and postmodernism, although with its own social awareness and emphasis on everyday life in the Soviet reality. Another central group was 'Apt Art' (Apartment Exhibitions), who from 1982 exhibited in one another's private homes, both as protest and as the only possibility.

The designation 'the second Russian avant-garde' has been used of this milieu although there is an irony in this idea of repetition. The attempt of the early avant-garde to conquer nature and expose an artistic inner world was not the motivation for the Moscow Conceptualists. Nor was the unshakeable faith in the future that reigned at the beginning of the 1900s recapitulated. The future offered no hope, and the present within the Soviet system seemed static. This was an artist group without manifestos (Storr, 1995, p. 66). The great collective utopia that was formulated by both the classic avant-gardes and Stalinism was replaced, according to the

theoretician Boris Groys, by a myriad of private utopias. Kabakov's milieu and artistic generation was characterized rather by a post-utopian tendency.

### Looking to the west

In addition to the acutely political element at the basis of this artistic practice, one can find affinities with western Conceptual Art,<sup>3</sup> first and foremost in an emphasis on information and language forged into a system. At the same time shared references form the basis of a critical attitude to official truths. The art milieu in the West functioned both as an artistic ideal and as a myth of the unattainable. The internally dynamic milieu of Moscow was cut off from external practice and display and could only make minimal contacts with the USA and northern Europe. Nor was the image of western artistic practice particularly subtle – it was highly limited how much information slipped out. American contemporary artists in particular were the object of dreams of freedom and idealization. Correspondingly, from a western position, Soviet art was regarded as peripheral and myth-laden with a basis in the fact that the Soviet Union was understood by many as a kind of distorted image of the American reality.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to emphasize that this milieu did not exist in a cultural and artistic vacuum, but had its own, living traditions. It is not very tenable to read this art as nothing but a pale, delayed variety of western conceptual art. Although access to materials was limited, and it was by and large impossible to exhibit in public, the milieu was concentrated and productive. Western conceptual art problematized the artwork as a commodity on the market and attempted to 'disintegrate' the work as a physically saleable object. By contrast it is important to note that in the Soviet Union this market simply did not exist.

The art historian David A. Ross has emphasized that many of Kabakov's artist colleagues based their artistic practice on the oppression they experienced, and that they therefore lost an adequate basis for art production after *perestroika* at the end of the 80s – the basic axis had changed. By contrast he sees Kabakov's work as

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<sup>3</sup>. The idea of conceptualism came rather late to the Soviet Union, through articles by and about Joseph Kosuth, Terry Atkins and the *Art and Language Group* in difficult-to-access publications such as *Art in America* and *Art Forum*.

<sup>4</sup>. An event covered by the media in the West was the so-called Bulldozer Exhibition in September 1974, an outdoor exhibition mown down by state bulldozers. The overreaction of the Soviet bureaucracy aroused a wave of international protests.

permeated by a more general experience and a universal narrative strategy which is not ideologically specific in nature. This is an important view bearing in mind the fame he has later achieved in the West.

### **A new position – Kabakov resituated**

When Kabakov, from his new standpoint in the West, suddenly reached a wider public, he had to reformulate his artistic practice. The western public did not necessarily have any feeling for the cultural codes from his background. The context that made the works comprehensible in Moscow was now absent. The Soviet everyday life the works were created in dialogue with were distanced in time, space and mentality, and as a consequence lost their sting. When Kabakov tried to define his installations, he emphasized a contrast between Russian and western mentality and artistic practice. The installation became a way of conquering space. ‘Sentimental’ and universal aspects in the works were emphasized in the orientation towards a Western public.

For a long time Kabakov appeared as the incarnation of ‘the Russian artist’ in the West, where his reception was often based on mystifying readings, at one and the same time included and excluded from the art context. One can trace an often inadequate ability to transcend the immediately visible, in many cases with Soviet iconography as backdrop for gloomy and claustrophobic institutional interiors. An example that can be mentioned is *The Toilet* at Documenta 9 in Kassel in 1992, where he built a Soviet public toilet outdoors; the interior was worn. Indoors, a ‘home’ was revealed, with household articles and furniture. Kabakov was met with shock and disbelief from the public, who could not believe that things were really so bad with the Soviet people. Did they really have to live in toilets? The quasi-biographical interest meant that a strong underlying metaphorical reading was more or less ignored by many people.

In all of Kabakov’s activity, including that of the last decades, one can see how he stages the former Soviet Union and juggles with conventional dualisms. His tactic has been *telling by showing* – a historical reality that had to take form by recreating milieus that were meant to resonate in any viewer. At the same time Kabakov has occasionally played cat and mouse with his western public, especially in the installations. At an early stage the West functioned as a counter-image that emphasized Kabakov’s distinctiveness. The exotic in the foreign (with a latent risk of romanticization) has an allure that runs deep, not least in the wake of totalitarian systems. The often constricted and labyrinthine installations thus remind the viewer of an unfreedom experienced *in extremis* under the Communist regime. The experience of

this gigantic and complex political project rubs off ambivalently on Kabakov's artworks by simulating totality and control. In equal measure his art has strong humanist elements, and a clear, consistent intention appears – involving the potential of art to heal traumas and the modern psyche.

### **Kateřina Ťedá – Social bonding**

The Czech artist Kateřina Ťedá (born 1977) has made a name for herself with projects that insist on the value of collective action, as a sort of social architecture. She frequently works with places where she lives, villages and towns, and aims to bring people, even her own family, closer together through simple means. There is a kind of eye-opening quality in this: she shows people the potential of everyday life that is already there. The temporary nature of her practice is consistently concerned with small, physical societies as more meaning-bearing than large, abstract systems like ideology and nationality. While Ťedá does come from a country that lay behind the Iron Curtain for a long time, she does not explicitly thematize the political past of her home country. Rather, her art seems to emerge critically from a more general experience of modern alienation with instrumental undercurrents. Working at the local level, and letting people commit to the social bonding that the various projects bring with them, creates many possible narratives and opportunities for communication.

Ťedá, who participated as an invited artist at LIAF 2019, and in 2011 did a presentation at the MOVE ON seminar at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts (about temporary art in public spheres), is described as combining city planning, daily life, politics and the private sphere in her art. Ťedá appears as a stage director of public space, an organizer who creates a narrative through assigning tasks, and then ties up the loose threads as the plot plays out. The process is as controlled as it is random and spontaneous. She aims to initiate actual changes in social patterns, as when in *Mirror Hill* (2010) she had 600 families participate who live in an area on the outskirts of Budapest with this name. Its inhabitants are known for being wealthy, celebrities and politicians, and the area lacked a common meeting place, with most people not knowing their neighbours, who were hidden away behind high walls. Every family was asked to make a drawing of the view from their main door, and all these were collected in a catalogue that they all received. The family that managed to identify the most houses won a two-week trip to Florida. In another work, *From Morning Till Night* (2011), she invited an entire Czech village to go to London together. 80 inhabitants of Bedřichovice were asked, over the course of three days, to recreate their everyday routines in the foreign environs stretching from Tate Modern to St Paul's Cathedral, which corresponds to the size of the village, and thereby explore behaviour and conventions that both separate and unite these two



starkly contrasting geographical locations. 80 UK-based professional and amateur artists were simultaneously looking at the London skyline whilst drawing a specific view of Bedřichovice in a realist style. One society was literally superimposed on another.

Šedá has stated that she almost always stumbles across these places and societies where she sees a problem or an untapped potential where she intervenes and tries to change it for the better. She considers it more important to create local participation and gently pick at small problems than to attract the attention of gallerists and curators. An exhibition is more like an extra bonus (Garutti 2011). She has repeatedly stated that her main space is a socially committing environment:

My projects ... react to a certain environment and it is there that they are the strongest. I keep saying that they each have a limited amount of viewers and these are the participants of the actions themselves. I very strongly feel ... that the gallery causes the spontaneity to disappear: it is an artificial space. (Atkinson 2013)

She focuses on the opportunity for social change and belonging, rather than documented details of the process involved in each piece. Šedá's projects question the ability of art to be therapeutic, they repair rather than add or subtract. Behind them lies her subjective role as an auteur and her own idiosyncratic value system. Rule six: 'No one wins, and no one is defeated' (Lange 2012).

## **New public spheres in Albania**

In Albania artists are trying to manoeuvre between a traumatic recent past and the present in a meaningful way, and to prepare new ground. The capital Tirana is a city undergoing rapid change with around 800,000 inhabitants. The weight of history is a very real factor for the city's art scene as well, which navigates a context still influenced by the country's close past. Many families were destroyed in the three generations of the long regime lasting until 1991 and this fact is definitely present as a looming shadow.

The Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama, is himself an artist and in the stable of the Marian Goodman Gallery, the heavyweight American venue. As mayor of Tirana, since the early 2000s, he has contributed to pulling the city up out of its grey Soviet depression. Painting facades in a broad colour palette eventually commissioned from artist superstars, made the slightly chaotic architecture of one of Europe's poorest cities an attraction. Anri Sala, the most famous contemporary artist in Albania, even

did a video project with the colourful buildings. Rama set his brand-building imprint on the work. Above the entrance to the building that houses his office hangs a Broadway-style light canopy by the French Philippe Parreno, one of the most lucrative names in contemporary art. The highlighting of a uniquely Albanian character exists in parallel with and in opposition to an internationally geared contemporary art scene, which belongs to an economically incompatible ecosystem as seen from the perspective of the local art scene. These divergent and not entirely unproblematic elements shape Albania's consciousness of the role assigned to art as a visual signal of renewal, as well as the specification of different public spheres.

The gallery scene of Tirana has a spartan economy and a steady influx of participants who quickly throw in the towel. Yet a certain activity and hope for the future seems to dominate, expressed through organized conversations, film screenings and publications. The activity also involves nearby countries, the contact with Italy being especially palpable. A majority of Albanian artists are educated in Italy rather than at the academy of their home country. Albanians switch to Italian easily, many being practically bilingual for historical reasons. Several artist-run venues have started to become relevant, like Bazament, where the Norwegian artist Ann Iren Buan exhibited new sculptures in November-December of 2018. Although it has only existed for a few years, this stands out as one of Tirana's most interesting galleries. The space wishes to create an independent and internationally oriented scene for Albanian contemporary art.

Bazament is in the Blloku neighbourhood, which was closed off to the general populace in the communist era but is now typically gentrified and energetic. Home to the Party heads in their luxurious villas, including the Communist head of state Enver Hoxha's (1908-1985) peach-coloured residence with a swimming pool in the garden. This bright decorative exterior seems unsettling when you know the historical facts. During the Cold War an ideologically conditioned architecture of bunkers prevailed, spread across the small country like a paranoid reminder of potential hostile confrontations – a bunker for every family, it was said. The control over the population needed to be total. Most of these small turtle-like structures of steel and concrete are now gone but in central Tirana you can visit one of the biggest, built in the 1980s in case of a nuclear attack. The museum Bunk' Art 2 contains chilling documentation of the collective fear that the citizens had to live with. You can find interviews with torture victims and examples of surveillance methods – like a camera facing a hole in the neighbour's wall.

The regime's almost incomprehensible brutality and informer culture is staged even more distinctively at the museum House of Leaves, opened in the spring of 2017, located at the former headquarters of the Sigurimi, the surveillance agency. Here, abuse and control of the citizens was rationalized and systematized. The facade of the historical museum of the city displays a monumental mosaic from 1981 depicting Illyrian warriors, opponents of Ottoman rule, victorious partisans, workers and farmers – in full anachronistic harmony. Even when you visit the art museum in Tirana you feel the echoes of Hoxha's regime: the permanent collection consists mainly of Social Realist propaganda pictures of hard-as-nails soldiers and resourceful workers.

### **The digital platform**

One question is especially pressing for Albanians today. How can the population and its art react to the difficult past of the country, apart from collections of objects, documents and statistics that can be found in the museums mentioned? Perhaps by creating archives for themselves, as the artistic institution Harabel has set out to do. This platform for contemporary art was established in 2018 to document the art of Albania following 1991 and is based in the previously-mentioned area Blloku in the heart of Tirana. In cooperation with the most important artistic institutions of the country they have collected portfolios of around 70 artists as well as information on exhibitions, as resources that are freely available online. Harabel with its key figure, the artist Driant Zeneli (who initiated the platform with Ajola Xoxa), works to create an institution around public art, in the form of an interdisciplinary space for artists, researchers, curators, architects and their likes.

Zeneli grew up in Albania with an artist father who was made to produce propaganda pictures and portraits of the dictator. After an education in Italy he has returned to help lift up Albanian art (he also represented Albania at the Venice Biennale of 2019). In this context the art becomes part of a larger societal transformation and helps to restart the country. In his own art Zeneli makes a theme of the politically repressed past of the country but also of visions and failed utopias in a more general sense. The way in which he does this does not seek out illustrations, but opens up enormous spaces, like exploring the cosmos and flying as a phenomenon, in the film *Don't Look at the Sun While You Are Expecting to Cross It* (2014) in which he glides across the sky on a wire. He also did a project at the above-mentioned historical museum in Tirana, where he held a workshop and invited students from the art academy in Tirana to think about propaganda and education in the light of the mosaic facade and to suggest possible representative images of the present. Zeneli asked them 'Who are your heroes today?' (*Atelier Albania*, 2015). A new generation

demands new answers and new views of reality, and education in this context is not neutral ground. The mediation of history must also be reconsidered from the bottom up and it is essential that the young students are allowed critical alternatives. In this context, knowledge and the ability for critical thought become crucial.

Harabel aims to utilize the city and involve those who live there – not just an audience specific to art. The programme is stated as follows: ‘Harabel aims to become a catalyzer of urban interventions and indoor reflections, by offering an interdisciplinary space for experimentation and research’.<sup>5</sup> This intention has led to a series of arrangements around the city with a focus on gathering knowledge and encouraging the strengthening of social bonds, even across borders. Another motivator is that the digital approach to Albanian artists and exhibitions works as a resource for involving foreign curators, visitors and others who might be interested. Harabel actively invites artists for stays, workshops and presentations. Iraqi artist Hiwa K was invited in 2018, when as a refugee he walked to Europe through Iran, Turkey, Greece and Italy to seek asylum in Germany.

Shkodër, the third largest city in Albania, in the country’s northernmost part, also shows exemplary artistic initiatives in projects like Art House, started by Adrian and Melisa Paci in 2015, with the intention to bring international artists and theoreticians to their hometown.<sup>6</sup> At the same time an ongoing work of translating central art-theoretical works into Albanian (such as Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*) is initiated. There are large gaps in availability and distribution due to economic circumstances, infrastructure and Communism’s condemnation of foreign culture alongside the homogenization and repression of the country’s own art.

On the whole in Albania, one notes a continued interest in exchanges and dialogue that arise from a need to make contemporary art available and free to all through open archives, made practically possible by the Internet. The rebuilding of common ground thus makes an impact on the art, which reacts to the big changes in society

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5. <http://harabel.com.al>

6. Marubi Museum, which opened in Shkodër in 2016 as Albania’s only museum devoted to photography, has a collection of c. 500,000 negatives. The Marubi family was forced to donate the collection to the state in 1970, as part of an aggressive rewriting of history.

and presupposes a fundamental freedom in opposition to all the years the population was subject to totalitarian dictatorship.

### About the author

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