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## Interview with Nikita Kadan

# The Historical Museum

Nikita Kadan in conversation with Björn Geldhof



**Björn Geldhof:** You are often described as an artist-activist. At the same time, we both know there is big difference between the two. How would you describe the relation between the role you take in society as an activist and your practice as an artist?

**Nikita Kadan:** In this period of Ukrainian life, the position of a citizen, a normal citizen, and the position of an activist have become very close. To be a conscious citizen means to be a social-political activist now. In regard to artistic practice, there is a big difference, though: contemporary art is in a place of quiet elitism, because of a certain regime of production, of presentation, of institutional support. A majority of citizens are excluded from the field of art. We have to be honest here: an absolute majority of people in Ukraine and in the world. They are not in a position to be in contact with art, because of the class structure and other social reasons.

*To be a conscious citizen means to be a social-political activist*

**BG:** If we go back to the early years of your practice, when you started with the artist group R.E.P. (revolutionary experimental space), the relation between activism and art was much closer.

**NK:** Yes. At that period we made a step out of the conservative environment of the art academies, where we studied a system of Ukrainian art education that still has a lot of Soviet elements. They still follow the structure of artists' unions, this post-Soviet institutional form irrelevant in contemporary society, which nevertheless also shows a potential for resistance to the social and economic conditions. So, in 2004, we made a step out of that. For us it was like an escape from something quite oppressive, where you miss the air to breathe, into an open space. At the same time, we had less of a feeling of reality and when I remember that period now, even the political struggle and the street politics were just vivid images sweeping by our eyes. We wanted to participate in that political imagination, but rather through commentary in a rather ironic and distant way.



**BG:** Nevertheless, you broke free from the structure that you had at the academy. It allowed you to think in a more contemporary way, not only about society, but also about your artistic practice and the freedom that you would aspire to as an artist.

**NK:** That is true. We did not think about being useful to society, but about developing our own style of describing Orange and post-Orange Ukrainian conditions. When we developed this ability to describe things in our collective work, we came closer to reality. I remember how I felt when I started this practice, which I consider maybe more serious, grown-up, mature. I felt that it happened in the moment when not the surface, not the decoration, not the facade, not the monitor of political reality became appealing to me, but the internal part: things which are hidden and open simultaneously – “open secrets of society”. When I became interested in internal processes. At that moment I started this kind of realistic practice... It was in the late 2000s with such works as *Procedure Room*.

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*There is always hope in a new big project, in a huge historical narrative.*

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**BG:** That was around 2009.

**NK:** Yes, in the late 2000s.

**BG:** In your works, you draw from the current social and political reality in Ukraine. Your structural critique addresses the abuse of power, as in the work *Procedure Room* mentioned above, or the commercialization of public space. Similarly, you draw from the socio-cultural heritage of the Soviet Union. I must say, you almost at times emancipate that cultural heritage.

**NK:** Yes. It was the same with R.E.P – we started from the image, then we went deeper, into the structure, into the reasons, to try and analyze conditions under which an image would emerge. I derived *Procedure Room* from the images of the Popular Medical Encyclopedia [Популярная Медицинская Энциклопедия] from Soviet times, and at the same time from social research. Today, I try talking to people from other disciplines, to have a dialogue with human rights activists, architects or sociologists. It is true that a certain imagery comes with certain cultural connotations, such as these anonymous Soviet drawings from medical books, or like the *PROUNs* of El Lissitzky.



**BG:** And it goes further. It is not simply the imagery that plays a part here, but as you say, the work is about the ideology as well.

**NK:** The imagery produced by a certain ideology has that ideology written into its form. On the other hand, I start from my research, from interest in hidden parts or, more often, open secrets of society, which people know about, but which are not in the centre of public discussion, because they are uncomfortable.

**BG:** If we go even deeper, the work is dealing with a conflict in Ukrainian society, perhaps leading to the divide we experience today: on one hand, we have an ideology from the past, on the other – a sort of neo-liberal capitalist ideology, which has taken power here as well. So Ukraine is confronted with this huge question of identity standing between those two ideologies. What is Ukraine about and where does Ukraine have to go? All the time you have a friction between the two major possibilities. Is this a part of what you are doing as an artist: to deal with that friction?

**NK:** In a way, yes. I work from a spirit that has lost the utopian dimension still strongly present in the 20th century, when there was no closed horizon. I always work from reality. A reality that has no way out. My method has actually become close to what is called apophatic theology, but transferred to a secular space. Apophatic theology is the way of negativity, of defining that which cannot be said. Thus I do not have a positive strategy at all. I am stable in negativity, in the way of reduction. I feel myself very connected with reductionist art of the 20th century, like conceptual art, minimal art, where you can reduce and reduce until you can touch the reality.

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*Living in a post-ideological society, where ideology still tries to return in many divergent ways, I have very little trust in words.*

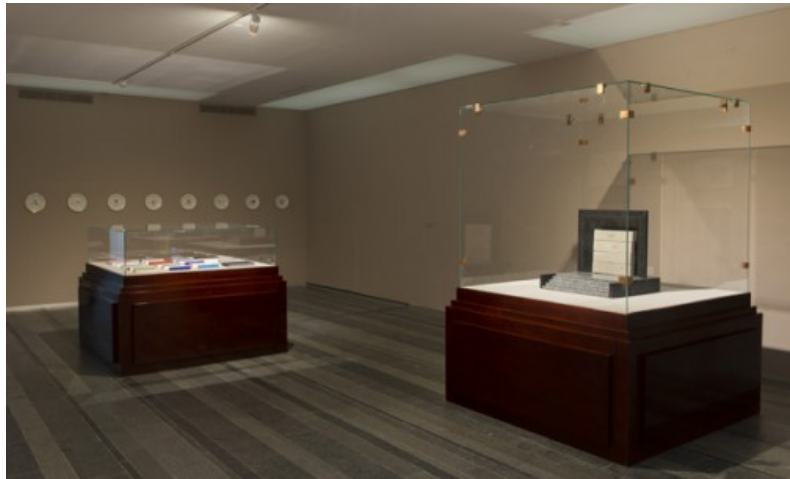
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**BG:** OK, I understand.

**NK:** This missing utopia makes my work realistic. I know that in the end it will be a dead body. I know that everything ends with a corpse.

**BG:** When you speak about a missing utopia, what are you referring to? To the utopia which started to develop during the early 20th century, when socialism came to power? Or are you also referring to a new utopia?

**NK:** This utopia is an idea of equality that is transforming constantly, often seduced by totalitarian practice. Then again, it finds expression in everyday life practices, so there is always hope in a new big project, in a huge historical narrative. Nevertheless, this utopia for equality planted all these current transformations, which will mutate many times and can make use any instrument.



**BG:** So throughout your artistic practice we can speak of a tension between reality – which, especially in Kyiv, is one of neo-liberal capitalism – and the opposite, a utopia for equality that finds its form in constructivist art, minimalist art. Giving structural critique to what is happening in a social-political reality in Ukraine is appropriate in this case. This idea is summarized in your work *Yesterday. Today. Today* (2012).

**NK:** It is also relevant to several other works, such as *Neoplasm* (2010) or *Small House of Giants* (2012), that have the same intentions: complicated, tense relations between the big narrative of social modernity of the 20th century and today's free market-based society. The problem is represented through the relations of materials, and somehow that is important for me: how materials can speak for themselves. Living in a post-ideological society, where ideology still tries to return in many divergent ways, I have very little trust in words.



**BG:** Do you think material is more honest?

**NK:** Yes, I am interested in the experience of feeling stones which were polished in a certain way, or glass, or metal, organic substances which destroy themselves... At the same time, I try to read the political narrative inside of these materials; like in old documents that are containers of words, of images, they lay open their character as a material. This gave me the idea for a museum.

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*Maidan made them visible for the whole world. The scope of police violence can serve as an example.*

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**BG:** Which brings us to the exhibition that we have now at PinchukArtCentre. There are four groups of works in the show, but in their combination, it seems to me, they become part of a whole. The complete exhibition follows a single thought, a single gesture referring to a historical museum. How do you see the historical tradition of museum practice here in Ukraine?

**NK:** There are two important positions here. Ukrainian museums are post-ideological, yet ideology tries to return to them in many ways. Museums are poor because of what is called "financing culture according to the left-over principle". My perfect example is one local history museum in one of the Eastern Ukrainian cities where they still had a display in the Soviet ideological structure telling people about the collectivization of Ukrainian villages in the 1930s. It was purely about the success of collectivization: very optimistic, very bright decorations. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the museum team wanted to have a more truthful narrative about Ukrainian villages in the 1930s and the terror famine, but they had no money for a renewal. Therefore, they added just a few documents and photographs about the terror famine: violence of collectivization, confiscation of crops, plenty of dying people, cannibalism in Ukrainian villages during Holodomor. They just added these few not very spectacular black-and-white images and prints of text to this Soviet-optimist museum design. That is a strong statement. For me, it is an example of what can be done, how to work with ideological myths, historical narration and how it can be re-articulated.

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*History is much too often adapted to current needs; all the time the narrative is cut down.*

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**BG:** It is a very critical question how history is remembered, how events are remembered. You deal with this in the works for our show – making a reference to the protests on Maidan square. It is clear that the responsibility of the historical museum is telling history. You gave your example of the museum in Eastern Ukraine, and your work shows how easily one can change history.

**NK:** When I use this kind of reference in my pieces, I put the Ukrainian uprising into a wider context. Actually, the uprising became so absolute for the masses, for most of the people. It felt as if we were living completely inside it. Maidan became total, lost redundancy. Now I try to find the references in contextualizing this experience and I'm asking how to deal with the potential of such a unique experience to totalize everything inside it. I try to embed events into the system of connections, indicating those processes which were present before. Maidan made them visible for the whole world. The scope of police violence can serve as an example. Similar tortures have long been known in Ukrainian society.



**BG:** Both of these moments are in the exhibition: you have violence, which is represented in *Procedure Room*, and the question of corruption and destruction of heritage in the works with light boxes. You have taken an incredible new step in dealing with the new conditions in the country. By using showcases and positioning them in a musicological context, they become almost abstract. It creates a distance.

**NK:** Distance is needed. This is a prolapse of the history which happened in post-socialist years. Ukraine became a non-historical zone, hiding the social problems and missing all subjectivity. Now, with the Ukrainian uprising, we experience a kind of return to history. History means narration. Furthermore, the practice of ideological correction continues with the amputation of "unwanted" parts. History is much too often adapted to current needs; all the time the narrative is cut down. It is an ousting of injury and, as a result, a break of connections.

**BG:** I think the idea of memory is something which for a long time was present in your work. You said it came from a negative strategy. I think now it is different. It comes not from negativism, but from trying to create a distance. Except the last work in the show, *Exhibit. Inseparable* (2014), complicates that reading. You've completely filled a vitrine with ash. Is there a distance in that work?

**NK:** The idea of a museum narrative, of narrating history, consists of acts of division, separation and differentiation. You make a composition out of the separate elements. At some moment everything starts to burn. After that you have an inseparable thing like ash. You come to a final state where reduction is already impossible. You are unable to reduce it further. You come to the ground level. The ash is this ground level.



**BG:** In the light boxes, the ash is interestingly enough related to the loss of historical buildings, the loss of heritage. And if we think about the connection between all the aspects of the exhibition, if we walk through your historical museum, it starts from a directly emotional impact (torture, police violence) but also includes medical books. As you have said already, *Procedure Room* brings us to how we deal with ideology and commercialism taking over the metro subway. And gradually the exhibition works itself to the last point, which is ash. We have to say the work was conceived before the Trade Union in Odessa burned down.

**NK:** I do not know for how long there will be so much fire and how many times this work would seem "within the context". When we come to a museum, the description of the objects on display can be manipulated. Ash is the level where you cannot manipulate.

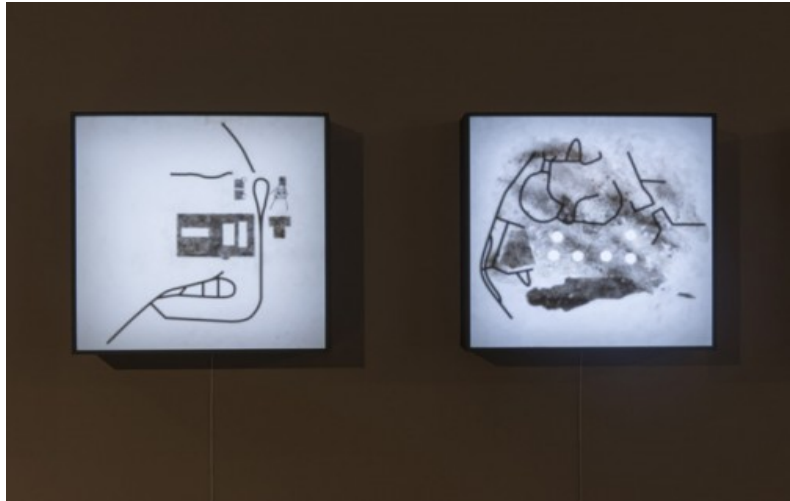
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*I prefer to refuse any personal contact with the public in my artistic practice*

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**BG:** When I think about your museum and how everything develops, one of the most important moments here is that there is no rush. Having lived through what was happening here in Ukraine, I think what defines it was the sudden rush of everything – it killed all the space for reflection, it killed all the space for memory.

**NK:** A museum gives you the opportunity to look at yourself, see yourself as a subject. Likewise, it lends a distance where the margin between reflection and action seems quite conditional. Revolution as acquisition of subjectivity, war as a comeback in the status of an object, belongings – all of it appears before your eyes; it can be looked at. A museum is similar to the uprising in that there is the needed element of “a historical comeback”. You learn how to act, narrate and develop a narration which can resist this ideology, resist propaganda and resist transforming into a kind of commodity. This moment is a comeback of history.



**BG:** You are trying to deal with the question of the social obligation of a historical museum.

**NK:** Yes, the museum has the social obligation of keeping what one may call the critical memory alive. It is a memory that is not fixed by a number of facts, but rather like a collection of flashes of memory. There are not only flashes with “good”, “useful” or “proper” facts, but others as well. No, it is rather like the images of events and documents, they co-exist in eternal critical dialogue – they continue the discussion inside the historical narrative. Thus, the narration is not stable through having a hard external structure – the structure inside is moving all the time. To come back to that village collectivization exhibition: adding even smallest elements can absolutely change the composition. Furthermore, all the elements have to co-exist in this way, to be in permanent dialogue...

**BG:** Changes all the time.

**NK:** In my view, the critical museum is a thinking memory. We are coming to a level of consciousness which is not about establishing stable vertical power, not about being successful, being effective, as in a market society. You are not competing with others as you are unable to take someone else’s place in a story. These are all singular places.

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*The chair is not for you only, but for everyone!*

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**BG:** The work is also about presentation.

**NK:** Yes, sure. But at the same time it is about being attentive, in the sense of an “attentive life”. It makes you less narcissistic. In a way it makes you almost invisible. The narrator hides.

**BG:** How then do you relate to the public in your works?

**NK:** I prefer to refuse any personal contact with the public in my artistic practice.

**BG:** I understand what you mean, but you have chosen a form of presenting the show that has very much to do with scenography. Scenography has to mean communication, relation to the public. In your previous works, we would never have talked about that. It would not come up, because the work would be about the object, about the work itself. Now, something has changed and this is why I ask that question.

**NK:** Now I make a museum.

**BG:** Now, the tools become different. It is not about placing a combination of objects anymore, which have a conceptual notion around themselves. When you talk about the work, you even use the word "narrative". And there really is a narrative. There is scenography, which means using the constructed relation to a viewer that you take along as an artistic tool.

**NK:** Kabakov once told a parable: "A guy wanted to sit on a chair in a museum, but a lady guard screamed at him: 'The chair is not for you only, but for everyone!'" Kabakov argues that museums are something not for you but for everybody. So, it is about avoiding personal contact. I worked with this indirect addressing of the public. Hence there is an obstacle for the audience in my museum.



**BG:** It is at a distance from you as an artist

**NK:** I relate to the museum, to the showcase itself. I am as much in a dialogue with the showcase as the viewer, but from the other side.

**BG:** Certainly the decision to make showcases gives your work a new dimension, as the relation of the viewer to the object becomes an essential part. It is the viewer and the object, the viewer and the idea of the abstract viewer inside the object. And the artist's fear of being personally present in the work, something we would never have discussed in the works you have made before...

**NK:** Maybe, yes. I want to hide myself and be in dialogue with materials; trying to find the combination for things simply to compose themselves. They start to tell the story and then this story can develop – tell itself without me.

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Nikita Kadan was born 1982 in Kyiv, Ukraine, where he lives and works today. Since 2004 he is a founding member of the R.E.P. artists group. In 2007 he graduated from the National Academy of Art and Architecture in Kyiv. Kadan was nominated for the PinchukArtCentre Prize in 2009 and won it in 2011. His work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, recently including:

- *Figures on White*, Karas Gallery, Kyiv;
- *Treatment Room/Fixation*, NORMA, Odessa (both 2011);
- *First Kyiv Biennale*, Art Arsenal, Kyiv;
- *The Crooked Mirror*, Lavra Gallery, Kyiv;
- *Kyiv Project*, collaboration with Lada Nakonechna, Kyiv Pop-up Galleries, Kyiv;
- *Corrections*, Centre of contemporary art Zamek Ujazdowski, Warsaw;
- *Language of the Silent*, Lab-gallery SOSka, Kharkiv (all 2012);
- *Before the Execution*, collaboration with Mykola Grokh and Eugenia Beloruset, Karas Gallery, Kyiv;
- *Erasing and Overposting*, Transit Gallery, Mechelen;
- *Kyiv Hotel, Bratislava Cinema*, Gandy Gallery, Bratislava (all 2013);
- *Engineering Hope*, solo exhibition, Transit Gallery @ Art Brussels (2014)

Nikita Kadan is a painter, graphic artist, author of objects and installations. He combines intellectual reflection with continuous social engagement, using his artistic practice to act in the social-political discussions in Ukraine. With a strong historical awareness, Kadan focuses his research on the urban transition of Kyiv, a city in continuous transformation losing its historical roots and its public spaces to commercialism. Kadan works mostly in painting and sculpture, and in his use of abstraction and modelling he references the Russian avant-garde movements from the turn of the 20th century.

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