

# In Conversation with Kateřina Šedá + BATEŽO MIKILU

**Esther Lu** I did not know there was a Czech town named Zastávka, and you probably did not know there was a Taiwan Pavilion in Venice either. What was the first connection between these two places for you, Kateřina? Before I invited you for this project, of course, I imagined so much in my mind about how you could possibly transform the social arena of the Taiwan Pavilion or highlight its problematic in your peculiar artistic practice. I have to say: I really didn't know what would result from our collaboration. But I was certain that you were probably the only person in the world who could do it with such inspiration, and do it on a scale so far beyond any common imagination. Your work reveals such deep concern for the connections of different lives, and I could never overlook how profoundly your art affects me. Therefore, I gathered my courage and challenged myself to take this agenda for this project, to connect (almost) impossible connections. In doing so, I believe our topological space can be transformed politically, socially, culturally, and even mentally. How would you describe your general artistic position in your work, especially when it takes place in a strange new context?

**Kateřina Šedá** At the outset I sought no connection between these two places. On the contrary, in a certain way I resisted the idea of such a connection. There were too many social signs, though, and the strength of their message grew in mirror images, so I basically had no other option.

The first common element was undoubtedly the "call from both sides," because it is usually only one side that calls (when curators invite me to do some happening or exhibition), but I myself have to call the second party. I try to involve, in my happenings, people who stand outside the field of art and generally cannot be bothered with it. Paradoxically, the less they are interested in it, the more I am. This time, though, I heard the call from both sides and both said the same thing:

BATEŽO MIKILU: "This is not our village." Esther Lu: "This is not a Taiwan Pavilion."

It seemed to me to be an important sign; for the first time I wasn't standing on the periphery with one side, but rather in the middle between two sides.

THE SURROUNDINGS HAD BECOME THE CENTER.

It took a long time before I realized that the very definition of my role in the project was also the definition of the main issue on both sides, but now I have no doubt of that.

It is this precise definition of my role in each of my happenings that often points out to me the direction in which I should go and sometimes even the method of the solution. It doesn't matter where I happen to be at that moment, nor is it about any context. I don't care to play the game of "Czech, Polish, or Chinese." In my actions I always try to go beyond the boundaries of my own possibilities and those of others, so I'm actually always in foreign territory. My role is constantly changing; in my happening *There is Nothing There*, in which 315 inhabitants of the village of Ponětovice did everything

together for a whole day, I was first the Pied Piper, then the friend, witness, or child. In *Over and Over*, in which in one day I climbed over more than 80 fences of my neighbors in Líšen, I was first the keyhole and then the key. In the action with my grandmother, who for three years drew tools from the shop where she had worked for 33 years, I was an ordinary granddaughter and not at all an artist. And I now approach things in the same way: I don't work in the Czech Republic or in Taiwan, but I am in the middle between two sides, the surroundings of which have become the center. For me it is a completely new space, and my role in it will be equally new.

**Lu** In this collaboration, there is a crucial transitional point in applying the concept of "mirror" to exchange perspectives inward out and vice versa. I know it is a kind of response from you, because I keep commenting on your observation in an oppositional way. Please share how this collaboration dynamics has become part of the work, and maybe depict this complex collaboration model?

**Šedá** When I was approached by six students from the high school in Zastávka to help them think up some action that would bring the locals together and improve the place in some way, I was sure I was working with the theme of CONSIDERATION of the surroundings. This fact was reinforced by the information that each of the students came from a different place in the surroundings, and therefore it was not their town that was involved. While Zastávka constitutes a certain center for the surroundings (it is an important transport hub and a place with many services), paradoxically it has no center itself (it is divided by a dense network of roads into a series of islands that do not communicate with each other much). The locals often behave unpleasantly towards visitors and the surrounding areas, and this fact led me to the conclusion that Zastávka is self-centered (it is the center of itself). From the outset, then, I set myself the task of finding a way to rid it of its self-centeredness.

During my visit to Taiwan, on the contrary, I noticed the great considerateness of people in public space. People often smiled, and in the metro or on the streets they didn't push or jump queues; people were able to behave as a single organism. Several times someone even pointed out to us that our shoelaces were undone. When I returned from the trip and listed my positive comments, however, you commented on nearly all my points with the opposite opinion. In the beginning I was annoyed and insisted on my own opinion. After all, I wasn't going to turn my opinion around! It wasn't until a few days later that I realized that your gesture had held up a mirror from one side, and therefore I must try to do the same from the other side: to see the situation from the opposite side. (Mirror I)

And then I saw something quite new: ZASTÁVKA IS NOT ITS OWN CENTER; THE CENTER OF ZASTÁVKA IS ITS SURROUNDINGS.

The crucial problem, then, is not the place itself, but the behavior of its surroundings. At once I understood my essential error: from the outset, I had regarded the six students representing the surroundings of Zastávka as a positive, considerate element, and Zastávka itself as the problematic issue they were complaining about. It was only when you held up a mirror to me that I saw the situation from the other side: the problem of Zastávka is actually in its surroundings, which itself had made contact via the six students.

At that moment it came to me that my view had been turned simultaneously in mirror image to your side (Mirror II). The considerateness of Taiwanese society, which I had originally judged positively, I suddenly saw in the opposite way. If the surroundings become the center of the whole society, then that very considerateness is its main problem.

**Lu** Now we are still in a long journey of artistic production. I have received great inspiration not only from you, but also from the group BATEŽO MIKILU, six young students from the outskirts of Zastávka trying to find their own roles in a dysfunctional old mining town. We have been exchanging one sentence each day to describe our circumstances to each other. I feel I have a one-minute trip to elsewhere every day due to this lovely sentence from BATEŽO MIKILU. What has been the greatest impact on you since you become BATEŽO MIKILU and started working with Kateřina? What was your first response when you heard about this Taiwan Pavilion project? How do you compare the situations of Taiwan and Zastávka?

**BATEŽO MIKILU** We have been very busy since we started to work with Kateřina, but we are happy about this opportunity. It has been changing our views on the world. We were extremely excited and couldn't believe that we got this opportunity. There are some similarities and differences between these two places. For example, they were established randomly; their surroundings had to accept their independence; and they are densely populated; but (Taiwanese) people don't want to leave the island while (Zastávka) people are still leaving the village.

**Lu** Why is it important for you to transform your town? It is so uncommon for 14- or 15-year-old young people to approach an artist and ask for this kind of collaboration. Do you want to be artists or politicians in the future? How do your friends, teachers, and parents respond to your idea? Is there any external pressure? What do you wish to achieve through this process?

**BATEŽO MIKILU** We want to help people, both a place and a "picture of the village," because the place is almost like home for us, and we all met there. Some of us want to develop in this area, but the rest are still wondering about their future. Some people we met misunderstand what we are doing; conversely, most people support our action. Yes, we have met with great pressure. We would like to achieve better connections in Zastávka, to create something from the Taiwan Pavilion at the center of the Venice Biennale, and to make people take care about their village and be interested in their community.

What was your first reaction when you were asked to cooperate with 15-year-old children? How big an effect will the project have on you? How have changed your plans since you discovered our collaboration? What do you think so far about Zastávka?

**Lu** I was shocked, but I couldn't be shocked by Kateřina. I was very curious about what she would propose, and it was my deep wish that she could find the big picture and a specific niche to develop her artistic practice in a wider transcultural context while retaining the spirit of her work, all in order to establish long term personal contacts and transform how we identify and associate ourselves with a place. It was quite a challenge for both of us. When she told me that there were six 15-year-old students trying to convince her that Taiwan or the Taiwan Pavilion was Zastávka—and when she in turn tried to convince me as well—I really had to digest this unfamiliar idea. My biggest question was: who are these young people? But the idea of Taiwan or the Taiwan Pavilion as Zastávka seemed really out of nowhere, if intriguing at the same time. Then my second thought was: Excellent! Since we do not have a real Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, why not make Zastávka the Taiwan Pavilion? Suddenly the spatial relationship became totally open-ended for me, and I realized this project could create a great movement to affect our conception of space. It creates such a free mindscape. I really think you are brilliant in making this wild connection, as your minds have not been worn out by the restrictions of any reality.

The idea that Zastávka can address the similar situations of Taiwan and the Taiwan Pavilion is very inspiring for me. I have to visit there soon! I am sure I have given you lots of information for you to imagine Taiwan, and you have done the same thing for me as well. I am so eager to learn everything about this little town whose name literally means "stop"!

Kateřina, when you made your research trip to Taipei, you mentioned more than once that the Chinese painter Qi Baishi was a great artistic inspiration for you. Can you say a bit more about how Qi's work influenced your practice? What is your conception of connection? Would you say that everything is relevant and connected?

**Šedá** As a child I already organized children in the street, and usually I would decide what games we would play and where. I'm convinced that I never chose my direction; there always existed only one possible path for me. For a long time, though, I could see no connection between my drawing and my activities outdoors. As a child I used drawing more as a way of capturing what was in front of me, or as an illustration of some idea. It was only much later, thanks to my tutor Vladimír Kokolia, that I got my hands on a book of paintings by Qi Baishi; it was like a revelation. All of a sudden I saw that even a word is a drawing, that I could think of things by means of drawing and give them new meaning. Thanks to his drawings I first comprehended the content of the word "form," and how to capture visible things by means of the invisible. It was precisely the ingeniously simple form of Qi Baishi's paintings that led me to seek form in interpersonal relationships. The key point for me, however, was the capture of groups in his pictures. It was the first time I realized that, if I didn't draw individual trees but rather focused primarily on the relationships between them, I could depict a forest. And that is what led me to enter into the space "between," which usually can't be seen.

I have no general concept of connection. In my work I have been fundamentally influenced by my parents and the image of harmonious cohabitation that I saw at home. Two normal people sparkled as a pair, and thanks to that I got the feeling that an essential force is contained in connections.

Then I was influenced by my native place, the grey (*šedá*), uninteresting periphery. I perceive society in the same way, because people who, at first glance, appear normal and unexceptional have a great gift. When you are able to lead them properly, they create splendid things together without the ambition of standing out independently in any way. During the actual process, they even think about others. I have always seen myself in this way as well. I have never stood out much, but I am fascinated by the idea that one can stand out in that very respect.

Obviously everything is connected, but the problem is that the majority of people are constantly repeating that line, while very few of us truly see the things around us in that way.

### **Kateřina Šedá**

Kateřina Šedá, born 1977 in Brno, Czech Republic, is a Czech artist based in Brno. Šedá's work often engages a community to explore subjects of relationships, cultural identity, and daily politics in an urban setting. Through creating social games and social sculpture, she invites individuals from a local community to participate in a process to resolve real, shared issues. When this process becomes a switching point to overturn reality and inspire new perceptions, the participatory experience becomes a process of subjectification: a new reality is born from a game. Šedá's practice sheds light on humanity and a better common tomorrow.

Selected exhibitions include *Talk to the sky 'cause the ground ain't listening*, Kunstmuseum Luzern, 2012; *From Morning Till Night*, Tate Modern, 2011; *MAM Project 013: Kateřina Šedá*, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, 2010; 10<sup>th</sup> Lyon Biennial, 2009; *Manifesta 7*, Bolzano, 2008; 5<sup>th</sup> Berlin Biennale, Berlin, 2008; *Documenta 12*, Kassel, 2007.

### **BATEŽO MIKILU ( Barča, Terka, Žorko, Milča, Kiki, Lucka)**

BATEŽO MIKILU, formed on December 12th 2012, is a sextet of schoolmates from high school in Zastávka, who decided in 2011 to change their role in this place and thus improve the relationships surrounding them. They were deterred neither by the reactions of the locals nor by the distance of their places of residence—each of them comes from another town in the vicinity.

The group consists of the following six students: Barbora Křivánková (born 1996) from Babice; Tereza Matulová (born 1996) from Ostrovačice; Georgi Dimitrov (born 1997) from Říčany; Milena Mařáková (born 1997) from Říčky by Domašov; Kristýna Fillová (born 1996) from Sudice and Lucie Stařková (born 1997) from Náměšť nad Oslavou.