

INTERVIEW

Interview with Ileana L. Selejan

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We met Ileana L. Selejan during the Ji.hlava 2021 International Documentary Film Festival (October 26-31) to speak to her about Romanian film collective Kinema Ikon, with which she is affiliated as a resident historian, curator, and critic. The collective, which arose around George Săbău in the early 1970s, is the origin of pioneering work in the history of experimental film in Romania. A sample of its output was featured among Ji.hlava 2021's Conference Fascinations program, which spotlighted experimental film work from Romania.

Could you tell me something about the origins of the Romanian film collective Kinema Ikon?

The group came about in the early 70s and basically it all started with George Săbău, who was a professor of art theory and aesthetics at a local art school in Arad, a city on the border with Hungary in western Romania. I'm not 100 percent sure if it's still like this now, but back then the local art school also had a high school, and there was also a popular school for the arts where as a kid, for example, I myself would go after school to learn painting and sculpture and ceramics, and this continued into the 90s at the very least. It was a very interdisciplinary, really cool place. So George Săbău was there and he got this idea, or rather this ambition, to work with experimental film. He was super interested in the notion of interdisciplinarity, so he felt like you could do all sorts of different things with film that you could also do through other media. Back then, art school was very specialized, and even now in Romania it's still quite rigidly divided into painting, sculpture, and the other disciplines, whereas it's more of a mishmash elsewhere. However, Săbău was very much aware of this more experimental approach, and he knew the history of avantgarde movements and schools like Bauhaus and even Black Mountain College. So I think part of the impetus for wanting to start a film workshop had to do with that, with thinking about that legacy.

So in 1970, he got the ball rolling, but then it took a while until he recruited enough students. It kind of spread through word-of-mouth. He had a few students whom he had targeted from the get-go. Then they brought in more people, and then gradually, this group kind of shaped around what they initially called Atelier 16. The name derived from 16 mm, because that's the film format they were using. But then they gradually grew and expanded, and the students went to university and started professional careers while the group stayed on.

They refined the project together, and eventually they started producing films. The group kind of split into people who were more interested in production and those who were more interested in storytelling. That also fit their personal trajectories because some people ended up studying graphic design and worked as graphic designers. There were people who were involved with the group just as critics or discussants. In some cases, they had had contact with early computer technology and cybernetics. There was a guy who was a DJ who produced the soundtracks for some of the films. The group itself was a bit of a production apparatus. The films are credited to different people, and I think that's very important. I think that that was also kind of a gesture to claim auteur cinema in a context where you were constantly asked to produce collaborative work. An auteur gesture implies that you have a certain vision and that there is something autonomous about it that is being acknowledged. So I think it's a bit complicated to capture that complexity. That's also why the films were credited to both author and group, whereas in reality they were produced by individual authors with the whole group contributing to the individual projects.

I've been watching these films for more than 10 years now, and it took a long time until I could recognize that. At first, when you watch them, especially in the context of the collective, they kind of blend. But actually, everyone's aesthetic is quite different, although it takes a while to realize that.

How did it fit into the wider context of experimental film in Romania at the time?

What is really confusing about Kinema Ikon is that art historians can't quite place it within the genealogy of art practice in the country. Not everyone, of course, but some people struggle with this because they're like, "No, but they were making experimental film, that's a different thing." But then, on the other hand, the filmmakers and the film historians struggle with really recognizing Kinema Ikon as part of a genealogy of film because they kind of operated in parallel to all of that. That was a very clear decision that was made, because at the time in Romania, in terms of what was available for audiences at the time, there was very, very little that could fit this label of experimental film, simply because of the fact that everything was pretty much monitored.

So, you know, there's this whole narrative about how people lived under totalitarianism, which is true. But then it is suggested that given totalitarianism, there were no possibilities for any kind of exchange with the West, that the system was impermeable. But we know that that's not the case. We know that that's not the full story. That's not to deny how extremely restrictive that regime was or to relativize what it did to people, that it was painful living through that and how painful working as an artist was because of those strictures. But people still found ways to make certain things happen, right? So I think that if you look at the history of film and at people who dabbled with experimental film, you can tell that there was an attempt to figure out what the boundaries are and what could work. But then on the other hand, you have people who had to go into exile. Then there was Săucan, who basically refused to work – there was nothing more of an affront to the Communist state at the time than to say, “I refuse to work”. Everyone had to work. So I feel like part of the impetus for starting the workshop was to define a sort of autonomous direction. Instead of operating within these very rigid structures and clear boundaries, they chose a medium that was experimental in and of itself. And then it was also about playfulness and about working with young people in a way that was kind of freeing.

Were they inspired by any particular film movements?

What they did for the first couple of years was more theoretical, and they watched and discussed films. And what I know from talking to Săbău is that they were able to get some films for the club from the Cinematheque in Bucharest. Speaking again about that permeability, things kind of seeped through. But what he also told me was that another place they got films from was the British and the French embassies, which had cultural centers. Roland Barthes famously did a stint as a professor in Bucharest through the French one. So they would get films from there that you could borrow. But also in that part of Romania you could watch Yugoslav TV, and there were certain TV shows where they showed some experimental work. So that was another source, and they referred to things like Buñuel and Richter, Léger's films, Ballet Mécanique... Those were all things they were aware of, that they knew well. Somehow, they managed to see them.

How did the group function on a practical level?

The trick that George Săbău pulled was that, in order to get film and camera equipment, he negotiated with the local authorities that the club would produce what was at the time called ethnographic documentaries. That's what they were commissioned to do. Basically they cut up bits from the film stock for these documentaries to use for their experiments. I've watched quite a few of

the documentaries that they produced and they're pretty boring. I mean, they're the standard stuff that they would show on TV, like activities at Factory X, whereupon you see a man with a lathe. Actually, that particular film is one of my favorites – you just watch this worker lathing something. It's very Rodchenko-like, observed with this very calm and quiet tone.

Anyhow, at least some of the films were screened, but in the end it didn't even matter that much for the ones that weren't. From the stories that I know about the period, oftentimes regime employees would want you to produce something just for the sake of producing it, even if it wouldn't actually be put to any use. Just to show that you are compliant. And they would watch the films and they'd be like, "OK, a demo" or, "OK, folk dances in the village of X", or, "Cleaning work in the city". So it looks all polite and like it's all working as it should, and it's all great. The part of the group that did these kinds of jobs were called the "*colectiv de sacrificiu*", the sacrifice team. They were the people in the group who volunteered to do the documentaries and to film them.

But the really fascinating part comes when Săbău develops this whole notion of the image bank, a bank of images where they actually keep some of the fragments from those ethnographic films for the experimental films. Whenever I talk to him, he always says, "no, there's a very clear distinction, there are 62 experimental films." He's very professorial. "Sixty-two experimental films. Sixty-two documentaries. They're two separate entities and that was a sacrifice we had to make in order to produce this work. But this is not valuable artistic work, whereas this is very valuable artistic work." But what's really interesting is that there's elements from the documentaries that come into the experimental films, and you see frames that jump in between the two. I really, really like that and what happens conceptually, metaphorically, and symbolically in that jump in between the two.

How did they manage to negotiate their position with the state?

That's an interesting question. Pretty much everyone agrees that the 60s were alright, then in the 70s things started getting more and more restrictive and by the 80s it was fucking awful and everyone felt like they were living in a prison, especially the people who were working in arts and culture. They were being targeted. They were being surveilled. They would get banned from screening their work abroad and the same thing happened to Kinema Ikon. I think they still had a relationship with the *Securitate* in the 70s, which was monitoring all cultural activity. It was a highly bureaucratized state at a local, regional, and national level.

So I think that in the 70s, Mr. Săbău – which is how we call him [George Săbău] – managed to negotiate a kind of a balance. They kind of let them do their

thing. But then by the 80s, the *Securitate* started asking questions. Mr. Săbău has a book that just came out where he talks about this as well, and he said that there was one instance in particular when they got paid a visit from the *Securitate*. An officer wanted to see the films because they heard that there was stuff in them that wasn't supposed to be there and that it was potentially disruptive. I don't think they used the terms anti-regime or anti-system that were used to refer to that kind of stuff. I've watched these films many times and there's nothing overt in them, and they avoided that on purpose because Mr. Săbău knew. He was like, "We need to avoid this because the moment we do that, they're going to shut us down." But there's references. There's subtle things. There's a lot of films that also talk about subliminality, it's in the title of some of the films. But anyhow, there was this encounter where basically they had to show some of the films to this officer from the *Securitate*. Some of the group members were in the screening room with the officer, who asked to see very specific films. The whole time Mr. Săbău was like, "What's going to happen?" As it turned out, the officer had studied humanities and he found the films quite cool. And so that earned them another breath of fresh air, they could go on a little bit longer. But it was always like, "We could go on a little bit longer, but who knows until when."

When Mr. Săbău tells these anecdotes, he comes off like a trickster. He was very clever in how he managed to make this stuff happen, and it only happened because of him. And that's maybe also the reason why there aren't more examples from Romania of people doing similar things, especially as a group. You're quite exposed.

Did the films get shown much outside of the collective or did they mostly stay within the group?

One thing that always gets brought up as something very, very painful in the history of the group was being invited abroad. They received a letter from the Centre Pompidou in Paris, which had a cinemathèque with a very important film program, to show their films there in the 80s. But the *Securitate* opposed that idea very vehemently. So they couldn't go. George Săbău was making films himself in the early 1970s. In '73, they showed his film in Brno, in the Czech Republic, and in '77 they participated in a festival in Kraków, Poland. But that was about it in terms of international screenings. Generally, their presence abroad in the 80s was just completely cut off. Also, the 80s overlapped with a period when a lot of people were defecting, just escaping. And this included a lot of the group members. I can't remember the exact number, but a significant amount attempted and succeeded in escaping by crossing the border illegally. Some ended up in the US, others across Europe. So they were being monitored closely.

But then the other question is about showing the works to an audience inside

the country. In the beginning, they were showing quite a bit of them at film festivals. I found some pretty interesting clippings in their archives. Most of the press outlets were very positive, and Săbău actually says that that is another reason why they were left alone, because the critics were very positive and said things about how they contributed to the growth of the Romanian youth, that kind of language. He says that there were certain domestic festivals where, if you were invited, there was an expectation that you would go, you couldn't say no. So then they would pick certain films. They had a group of films that they would show at those types of festivals and that was all good. But there's this whole notion of the artistic underground that shapes itself around the 1980s as things become more and more repressive. There's something known as the 80s generation in Romanian art and literature, where people were meeting and were doing conferences or exhibitions. These exhibitions were quite big, and people would meet there within less formal and official circuits. There were opportunities to meet and people were working actively to kind of keep those networks alive. So despite all the restrictions there was actually quite a lot of these networks being established in the 80s, very strong networks where everyone knew everyone. People say, "Of course we were under surveillance. Sometimes we even knew who the agents were in the room when a performance was staged."

So that was another way in which they showed the films. But as far as I'm aware, there was never really a general audience for any of them outside of those national festivals. When I talk to Săbău about them, he talks about them as very insignificant events that they just had to attend. But the interesting bit was when people came together around these exhibitions or these symposia, and that was where you got really interesting feedback.

Were there any similar or parallel groups working within Romania?

There was also this other group from Timișoara, which is a city close to Arad called Sigma. Sigma had a very parallel history in that they also came together around an art school. They did really interesting work with landscape, land art, and installations, things as ephemeral as bubbles. They filmed some of their performances. It was a more performative use of film. Film was here being used to film and document rather than as an experimental medium in itself, and I think that that is a big distinction between the two that is being discussed quite a lot. It was the same with Grigorescu, who was using film to record certain actions and certain performances that he did in his studio.

Kinema Ikon is definitely unique in terms of experimenting with film per se, and in that sense there are no parallels. If, at some point, we find one it would be someone or some group that was just completely unknown and was not integrated into these networks. There's also the great example of Mircea Săucan [*1928, filmmaker and writer], which is exemplary of many attempts to

do things differently, but in terms of its consistent program I think Kinema Ikon is very unique in Romania. Internationally, I think the closest parallel to what they were doing would be the Hungarian example of Béla Balázs Studio.

Over the course of 60 to 70 films, there must have been a lot of variation, but were there any kinds of ongoing trends or interests?

There are definitely themes that run across. Săbău talks about different typologies that they were exploring. On the one hand, you have animation and films where the artist intervened in the film material. Several people were doing things like painting directly onto the film stock or carving patterns into it, and those works were actually quite early. Then another thing that's very consistent across the whole time, I would say, is a kind of fragmented narrative. That's something that you see in many of the films. I feel like they linger somewhere in between autobiography and an absurdist take on life and everything that's going on around them.

Then Săbău himself used this cut-up aesthetic quite a lot. He made this film called *Cuts*. It's just extremely fragmented, there are these completely separate bits of film that are just weaved together into this narrative that doesn't really make any sense. And the beauty of it is that it doesn't really have a beginning or an end. I mean, it has a beginning and an end because that's the way that film works, but you could reassemble it inversely just as well. Obviously, the choices of the sequencing that he's doing are deliberate, but for you as the viewer, if you watch it in a loop, you have no idea where it begins and where it ends. It almost gives you vertigo. Interestingly, that's something that many people have commented on, especially since the 2000s. Săbău himself heard many people say that there's this particular feeling that you're left with after watching the films. It's an oppressive feeling and a sense of disorientation, which is obviously super, super subjective.

I also think it really depends on the people who see it. I showed some of the films to an audience in New York, and what was really interesting was that several people in the audience said, "Wow, it really shows you how working within very restrictive conditions makes people incredibly creative." And I thought, "Huh, what an interesting thing to say." I think that's a very Western thing to say. I think these perceptions are very subjective, but I do agree that there is a mood that unites the films. And to me, it's much more of a disorienting, absurdist, existentialist kind of take on things. Even if it looks completely absurd, you're also like, "This is serious. Whatever is going on, this is serious. It might look like a joke, but it's not a joke." It's very similar to like absurd theater, say Beckett or Ionescu. I think that would be the closest parallel to their work that makes sense to me.

Then another element found throughout the films is playfulness. Even in the

most oppressive scenario, there's something that shifts your perception. There's something that comes out of the image. There is this beautiful film called *Illuminations*, and basically, it's one of the guys who was really into animation and he's in his backyard filming himself and he's playing with what I'm guessing is a flashlight, recording the movement and tracing it. And he's creating these really beautiful motions and at the end he looks like he's taking off or like there's a firework that's being set off. It's an incredibly beautiful image, and it's in the darkness of the backyard of his house. So there's always that kind of playfulness that comes through.

Kinema Ikon is still going strong today, so what changes took place after 1989?

On the one hand, new people came in, and overall, I think in Romania at the time, there was this sense of, "OK, we're creating new worlds full of opportunities" – or rather possibilities, not opportunities. There were literally zero opportunities, but lots of possibilities. For a while, they published a magazine called *Conversație* ["The Conversation"], and it went into a more political place. It was about rebuilding civic society. It went more into the literary world. But at the same time, soon after 1990 they got a computer and they started doing all sorts of different experiments with it. They also used video, installations, and performance quite a bit, so they were just kind of playing around with different things. They produced quite a few computer-based art installations, and the person who was behind all that was Călin Man, who is an artist who has been associated with Kinema Ikon since then. He kind of runs the group now, since Mr. Săbău is in his 80s and retired. So Călin set this new direction where they were working with computers much more, with everything from graphics that you could create on a computer to net art, using different browsers and staging different situations and scenarios. In 2003 they showed a computer-based installation at the Venice Biennale, so that was a big shift. And then after that there was another generation that came in, and when I say different generations, I mean people who went to art school, high school and then university who originally came in to learn about the group, or friends of people who were in the group who joined later. It's very organic.

We have a space in the Art Museum in Arad, where we do exhibitions on quite a regular basis. Călin holds exhibitions regularly with different people and it's always a very collaborative, very open platform. For example, they did a project with students from Bucharest who came and held an exhibition in Arad. And since 2014, we've been running an international media arts festival, but we only have a very limited budget so sadly we can't do a lot of the things that we would want to do. But there's quite a lot of activity.

How is the legacy of the early period seen now?

There's a very clear interest in the films as symbols of that era, which can become quite problematic, I think, because it's almost like there's a nostalgic view of that period. We always have these conversations with current members about how we can shift this perception of Kinema Ikon as just being about those experimental films produced before 1989.

The films are still going around and they're part of the very important history of the group. However, there was a very clear decision made in 1990 to move on. And part of what motivated that decision was the fact that, as Mr. Săbău and Călin put it, we missed the train. There was no point in producing the type of experimental film they were producing anymore because it was kind of passé. They just wanted to upgrade. But it's interesting in terms of how the group is perceived internationally – and this is something that I've observed myself – as art historians in the West still have this narrative of a lag. There's a notion that until very recently, most of the art that was produced on the so-called “periphery” lagged behind, that there was just no way for it to be contemporaneous. I work a lot with Latin American art too, and I see the same thing there. So when Kinema Ikon showed at the Venice Biennial, some critics thought, “Well, this is really weird. Why would Romania show computer art?”

Săbău, Călin and other members of the group all agreed that the films are a relic from the past. That they are something that we used to do. It's not contemporary. But for outsiders, it was like, “No, but you're Romanian. Therefore, it makes perfect sense that those films are what you would be showing.” So there was this frustration that whatever you do you just can't be on the same level, and you're not on the same playing field.

Recently, they've been scanning their documentary films and kind of thinking about what to do with them. And there have been some young artists who've been tinkering with those films, but it's still a bit of a touchy subject, because it feels then that some view them as compromised films. So there's the question about how to engage with them in a critical way, without falling into celebrating that aesthetic which happens a lot, you know, kind of like in a Wes Anderson kind of way, but with the Eastern European Communist tinge. It could easily fall into some kind of nostalgia for that aesthetic, which is definitely something that nobody within Kinema Ikon wants to see. It's a very complicated process of revisiting your own archive, especially with materials that you have such complicated feelings about.

But anyhow, I'm giving you my personal view and obviously other people would have different readings of it. A lot of people are like, “Just set them loose, see what happens.” And there is a kind of fear, I think. I think Mr. Săbău's perception of the films has changed. He's curious and he's interested in what could happen to them, but I can understand one needs to control the narrative because it's a bit like playing with explosives.

I can imagine there's often a desire to politicize these works.

This is something that we've struggled with when showing the films, especially in the West, where there's this reductive tendency to see everything as anti-regime films. We all recognize that we could have made Kinema Ikon into a much greater name had we played that card. We could have easily said, "Oh yeah, this was totally anti-regime", and for a Western audience it would just fulfill the stereotypes that they already have. But at the same time, I think people within the group just always wanted more complexity and more critical thinking, so that was never an option.

Now it's a bit more relative, but I remember when I was doing my M.A., which was about artists working during the 1980s, people felt very defensive about how they were perceived, because there were a lot of accusations flying back and forth. "You were a collaborator." – "You were. I wasn't. I never collaborated..." And what you realize is that it's really not that black-and-white. People were coerced and forced to make decisions that we might find extremely problematic today. But I really think that Mr. Săbău and what the group did stood on ethically clear ground. I think that their approach to everything was ultimately very principled. For example, when they were presented with the chance to go to Paris – and he talks about this upfront – he was asked to rat out his colleagues, and that was the condition for letting let him go. And he said no. So while on the one hand, things are very relative, at the same time, we do have to acknowledge that a lot of brave decisions were taken. I'm extremely impressed when I read these stories because I think to myself, "That's a really big deal, right? It was the opportunity of your career." They ended up going to Paris later, but that was much later. It wasn't the same thing. Maybe if he had gone 10 years earlier, George Săbău would have become an extremely famous filmmaker, I don't know. But in any case, my point is he made an ethical decision, and it had consequences. I really admire the strength of doing that and of just standing by those decisions.

Thank you for the interview.