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The Kabakov Phenomenon

Ilya Kabakov by Boris Groys; David A. Ross; Iwona Blazwick; The Palace of Projects: 1995-1998 by Ilya Kabakov; Auf dem Dach/On the Roof by Ilya Kabakov; Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away by Amei Wallach; Installations 1983-1995 by Ilya Kabakov; Über die "Totale" Installation/On the "Total" Installation by Ilya Kabakov; Monument to a Lost Civilization/Monumento All Civiltà Perduta by Emilia Kabakov; Ilya ...

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## The Kabakov Phenomenon

### Amy Ingrid Schlegel

Boris Groys, David A. Ross, and Iwona Blazwick. *Ilya Kabakov*. London: Phaidon Press, 1998. 160 pp., color and b/w ills. \$29.95 paper.

Ilya Kabakov. *The Palace of Projects: 1995–1998*. Exh. cat. London: Artangel and Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 1998. 132 pp., color and b/w ills. \$50 paper.

Ilya Kabakov, *Auf dem Dach/On the Roof*. Exh. cat. Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 1997. 191 pp., b/w ills. \$95.

Amei Wallach. *Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996. Introduction by Robert Storr. 255 pp., color and b/w ills. \$65.

Ilya Kabakov. *Installations 1983–1995*. Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1995. 259 pp., color ills.

Ilya Kabakov. *Über die "Totale" Installation/On the "Total" Installation*. Stuttgart: Cantz, 1995. 398 pp., \$49.95.

Ilya and Emilia Kabakov. *Monument to a Lost Civilization/Monumento all civiltà perduta*. Exh. cat. Palermo: Cantieri Culturali alla Zisa and Milan: Edizioni Charta, 1999. 248 pp., color ills. \$49.95 paper.

Since Ilya Kabakov emigrated to the West little more than a decade ago, the rising tide of publications on the artist and his work—books, exhibition catalogues, artist's books, articles, and reviews—has helped make him a senior international art world star. Children on the streets of Amsterdam reportedly have rushed to ask for his autograph. During the last ten years he has had thirty-seven solo exhibitions (mostly in European museums) and seventeen commissions for permanent installations. He works every day, all day. Some might say he is a workaholic. Others would interpret his work habits as a form of flood control. But his fame has not come without a price. Kabakov had to wait more than thirty years to have his first solo gallery exhibition (in

1988 at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in New York), to receive his first international art magazine interview, and to be selected as the Russian representative at the Venice Biennale in 1993. The first museum retrospective of his installations is planned for 2001 at the Kunstmuseum Basel.

The substantial literature on the Russian émigré artist, some of which is reviewed here, has generated what might be called a "Kabakov phenomenon." This accumulated literature has reached critical mass, so that several genres of publications, each with its own usefulness, must be considered separately. Exhibition catalogues, such as the Pompidou's *Ilya Kabakov: Installations 1983–1995*, are valuable primarily for their documentation of Kabakov's ephemeral installations, since many readers will not have seen the work in person. But these catalogues, while valuable as books, are inherently imperfect substitutes for firsthand experience. Photographs, diagrams, drawings, and textual descriptions are ultimately only a conceptual aggregate of the actual installation/environment. The fragmentary nature of the documentation is, of course, not a new dilemma, but one that destroys the theatrical illusion and cannot replicate what Kabakov regards as the "integral, alive" qualities of his "Total Installations." Other catalogues, such as *The Palace of Projects: 1995–1998* and *Auf dem Dach/On the Roof*, tread a fine line between the facsimile artist's book and the documentation of site-specific works of art, and are valuable as hybrid publications.

So far, two monographs on Kabakov have been published: Amei Wallach's *Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* is more a traditional biography than an art historical exegesis. The other is an unconventional, multi-authored monograph from Phaidon Press, which provides a solid introduction to the artist's work. While the two books complement each other, ample room remains for deeper and more comprehensive art historical analyses of Kabakov's preeminent position in the second, postwar Soviet avant-garde and of his stature as a Conceptual artist of the first order. Future critics also will want to assess his contribution as a postmodernist to a new genre of installation art, the Total

Installation, and his theories about installation art.

The most brilliant of all the publications to date on Kabakov is his own treatise, *Über die "Totale" Installation/On the "Total" Installation*, a series of transcribed lectures in Russian, German, and English the artist delivered while in residence at the Städelschule in Frankfurt in 1992–93. This treatise contains theoretical musings on the "cosmology" of the installation, an historical explanation of why installation art supercedes modernist painting, and practical advice on how to develop and execute an installation within a museum context. On the "Total" Installation is of interest primarily to students, art historians, and curators who want to gain insight into the mastermind behind the complex, yet brilliantly straightforward, simulacra of Kabakov's world.

The aforementioned publications are partial evidence of Kabakov's staying power as a Russian artist in the West. To understand why his name has become a household word (at least in the art world), we need to understand how emigration has affected the development of his work, especially his installations, and why his work has "translated" better than virtually all the other twenty-eight artists introduced by Sotheby's to Western markets in its 1989 Moscow auction and public relations extravaganza.

Kabakov's difficult process of transition from Communist Soviet culture to democratic Western society is not complete, nor is it likely ever to be. Emigration has permanently changed the physical conditions of the artist's life and artistic production, though he claims that, at least psychologically, he remains a Soviet artist. "I have to say that today I have a comfortable feeling that I didn't emigrate, I didn't leave my country," he told David Ross in an interview published in the Phaidon Press monograph. "I simply work. . . . This has a long tradition. . . . In any case, I know for sure that I will never return."<sup>1</sup>

In fact, Kabakov had applied to emigrate three times, beginning in the early 1970s, but backed out each time. Reflecting on his life recently, he claims the decision to leave for the West in 1988 was no dif-

ferent than what he identifies as “other methods of dislocating and abandoning [which] are no less radical” than emigration.<sup>2</sup> The recent literature on Kabakov discusses the circumstances of his emigration (Ross’s interview is especially enlightening in this respect) but is generally hesitant to analyze the effects it has had on both the form and content of his work. Emigration has undeniably played a pivotal role in Kabakov’s life, one that has enabled him to realize his goals as an artist, to execute his Total Installations (instead of planning them conceptually in his albums), and to exhibit and travel internationally. Preferring the Communist system, with all its failures, to a post-Communist system with even greater failures, Kabakov did indeed choose to exile himself from Russia physically, socially, and linguistically once the policies of perestroika and glasnost took effect in the late 1980s.

Kabakov prefers to liken himself to “a stray dog.” “My mentality is Soviet; my birthplace is the Ukraine; my parents are Jewish; my school education and my language are Russian,”<sup>3</sup> he told Ross. In this respect, his identity has not changed as a result of his emigration. To a certain extent, he was an outsider in his own society. As Wallach points out in her biography, he is a Jew whose surname “Kabak” (meaning “beer joint” and “pigsty”) did not sound Jewish, although his internal passport labeled his nationality as Jewish. His first name, in contrast, is quintessentially Russian. He is from a poor, provincial family, often so destitute they had to live apart, and he was displaced for the first time when he was eight, during the 1941 Nazi invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, he never became a member of the official Soviet art world’s upper echelon of the Painting Section, preferring instead the second-tier Graphic Arts Section, with its benefit of steady work and minimal KGB scrutiny. He was, however, a member of the U.S.S.R. Union of Artists, which meant he was a “legalized” artist and given permission to build a studio for himself in 1968 with his own funds.

One major reason that Kabakov has been successful in the transition from East to West lies in his mastery of narrative

strategies—also his signature as a Conceptual artist. The Harvard sociologist and Russian émigré Svetlana Boym links Kabakov’s preferred mode of narration to a literary device called graphomania. In contrast to what Boym refers to as “institutionalized graphomania [as] a form of pre-modern writing of commonplaces,” Kabakov practices “self-conscious graphomania, with its multiple personae, pseudo-



nyms, and narrator-ventriloquists.”<sup>4</sup> Self-conscious graphomania is a narrative strategy that parallels Western post-structuralist theories of authorship. Both do away with the figure of the author endowed with individuality, subjectivity, and agency, in favor of open-ended, indeterminate polyvocality. Self-conscious graphomania can also be equated with the postmodernist strategies of appropriation, quotation, ventriloquism, and critical mimicry, though its political valence is entirely different, since these strategies depend heavily on both the cited source and the context(s) of reception. Apparently for this reason, in her book Wallach more than once describes Kabakov as an “unknowing postmodernist” but it is hard to tell whether she is being complimentary or disparaging. In these terms, then, Kabakov’s work made prior to his emigration translates well from one politically and historically specific context of production (both physically and

psychologically speaking) to other, radically different contexts of reception.

Boym claims that, during the 1970s, self-conscious graphomania was “the only honest artistic practice. Speaking in quotations was the only way of speaking sincerely, thereby estranging and questioning the possibility of sincerity in the highly compromised society of the era of stagnation.”<sup>5</sup> Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kabakov still employs this strategy, though clearly the code has changed and no longer is necessarily the best option for expressing oneself “honestly” and “sincerely.” While self-effacement and graphomania may have been personal and artistic survival strategies under the Soviet Communist regime, they now seem to be a good way for Kabakov to protect his right to privacy, which one can imagine he cherishes after having lived fifty-six years in a system that undermined it at every turn.

Because Kabakov is deeply interested in viewers’ responses, he has addressed the reception of his work by Western audiences as he develops his installations. He has focused on demystifying Western perceptions of the Soviet Union, Communism, and “the evil empire.” He thinks that his works are often misread as literal recreations of Soviet spaces, whereas he intends them to be metaphorical investigations of the social and psychological failures of Communist ideology as manifested spatially in Soviet institutions (especially the communal apartment). Kabakov told Boris Groys in a 1992 Parkett interview that “an orientation toward the Western public has led me . . . to emphasize the ‘sentimental’ aspects of my works, one could say, that

**Ilya Kabakov. *He Lost His Mind, Undressed, and Ran Away Naked*, 1990. Four socialist realist murals, acrylic on paper, and seven masonite panels. Installation view, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, January 6–February 3, 1990. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. Photo D. James Dee.**

which is common to all humankind, which did not have a place in Russia . . . That is, in the West, my art has turned out to be oriented toward normal, general humanistic values of the little person; . . . my works rouse the appropriate reaction when it ceases to be important that I am a Russian, American, or German.”<sup>6</sup> After several years of theorization as well as trial and error, Kabakov is evidently feeling more at home with his Total Installations. He even told Wallach that he predicts “there will come a time when there are only installations, and . . . everyone will live in an installation.”<sup>7</sup>

Within the past few years, Kabakov has moved away from specifically Soviet material and from *Homo Sovieticus* as his protagonist. He is now striving to universalize the subjects of his Total Installations by infusing them with a global, or at least postnationalist, perspective. He recently admitted in a catalogue interview for the Palermo exhibition *Monument to a Lost Civilization* that “I have worked on the memories of the Soviet Union for more than ten years. Now this memory is beginning to fade. . . . The Soviet world] is a metaphor for everyone. . . . My art has extremely open principles in which each aspect has a very clear level and which everyone can relate to according to their own interpretation.”<sup>8</sup>

*Auf dem Dach/On the Roof*, published in 1997 after the eponymous 1996 installation *Sur le toit/Op het dak* at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, is a good example of this shift. In each of the installation’s ten rooms, which viewers accessed sequentially from a simulated rooftop, slides of an ordinary family’s life cycle were projected chronologically. In the book’s introduction, Kabakov called the slide show a “‘family viewing’ that is familiar to everyone,” even though the viewer “has simply ‘come upon’ something which has nothing to do with him at all.”<sup>9</sup> The viewer’s position “on the roof” is symbolic of his or her outsider status, dropping in to someone’s home like a stranger. This is also our voyeuristic position as readers of this facsimile artist’s book, in which the slides are reproduced as photographs. Kabakov’s viewers are figuratively located “on the roof”—outside Russia—and literally in a

Western European art museum, just as his readers are German and English speakers, not Russian.

Kabakov (the male narrator) describes the relationship between the two characters as “two unconnected plot lines” which share a “common fate” in childhood, but which then diverged.<sup>10</sup> No social, historical, or political context is offered to help explain why these “plot lines” (the life trajectories of Kabakov himself and his wife Emilia, whom he married in 1994) diverged and how their common fate reunited them. By denying viewers and readers this information, Kabakov uses autobiographical material to universalize the installation’s message about family life while obscuring his own biography. What makes this “family viewing” universal is the banality of the photographs and the genre of the family photo album, the commonness of the experiences documented, and the very notion of familial relationships. These universal aspects do not, however, negate Kabakov’s indisputably autobiographical visual and verbal presentation. Their coexistence, and even deliberate confusion, allows the “borders between literary and literal [to be] easily transgressed,” as Boym puts it.<sup>11</sup>

Because *Auf dem Dach/On the Roof* uses actual family photographs (many of which also appear in Wallach’s biography), it is quite unlike Kabakov’s other artist’s books and exhibition catalogues. We are lured into viewing the family photographs transparently, as “real” traces of the artist’s existence in the Soviet Union prior to emigration and to Emilia’s parallel life in the Soviet Union and the United States since the mid-1970s. We are tempted to read the captions in the same, transparent way. Yet many questions remain unanswered, the status of the photographs remains ambivalent, and the relationship between text and photograph as signs is customarily arbitrary. When compared with Wallach’s account of Kabakov’s life, the two narratives do not concur. The story Wallach tells, based on her extensive interviews with the artist and his close friends, is, in fact, strikingly different.

Instead of an ahistorical portrayal of one “bourgeois” family’s happy, unevent-

ful history, Wallach’s engrossing narrative recounts Kabakov’s struggle to survive “on the street” during Stalinism. She follows her detailed account of an extraordinarily difficult childhood marked by war-time evacuation, hunger, homelessness, and poverty with a description of how, as a young adult, Kabakov was saddled with responsibility to support his mother and in-laws through his book illustration commissions. Wallach captures some precious details, such as Kabakov’s reaction when he saw Stalin’s corpse: “At the funeral, what struck Kabakov was how pockmarked and ravaged the face was, despite its waxen cosmetology. It was a metaphor for the irreconcilable gap, now impossible not to acknowledge, between lies and life.”<sup>12</sup> Wallach then reports how a period of relative professional and financial security allowed the artist to devote his energy to the development of his “unofficial” paintings, drawings, and albums. She also describes his status as one of the leading figures of NOMA, the Moscow Conceptual Circle of artists, during the 1970s and 1980s, and the development of his theory of Total Installation since leaving the Soviet Union.

In *Auf dem Dach/On the Roof*, Kabakov constructs a portrait of a Soviet artist’s life in both installation and book format. Common or not, the content of such a life was hidden from Westerners during the Cold War. There is also the female émigré’s parallel story, which bridges both worlds and signals the increasing dissolution of spatial boundaries at this historical moment, at the beginning of a new millennium. This artist’s book/exhibition catalogue is a salient illustration of Kabakov’s staying power; it demonstrates his mastery of narrative strategies that are simultaneously specific and universal.

Kabakov is now sixty-five years old—older than many people realize. Yet he is at the peak of his career with commissions, competitions, and invitations to exhibit across the globe. His installations serve as a warning to future generations, as Kabakov himself has pointed out: “Don’t repeat our mistakes, look at your dreams clearly, but don’t sacrifice the people in the name of ideology. Stay together and don’t forget

the past. Do everything possible not to repeat our mistakes and to make your dreams become reality.”<sup>13</sup>

1. David A. Ross, “Interview: David A. Ross in Conversation with Ilya Kabakov,” in *Ilya Kabakov* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), 17, 19.
2. Correspondence with the author, March 14, 1999.
3. Ross, 8.
4. Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 193; thanks to Marianne Hirsch of Dartmouth College for suggesting Boym’s work to me.
5. *Ibid.*, 193.
6. Boris Groys, “‘With Russian On Your Back’: A Conversation between Ilya Kabakov and Boris Groys,” *Parkett*, no. 34 (1992): 36.
7. Arnei Wallach, *Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 86; cited from a 1992 letter from Kabakov to Wallach.
8. Paolo Falcone interview with Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, in Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, *Monument to a Lost Civilization/Monumento all’civiltà perduta*, exh. cat. (Palermo: Cantieri Culturali alla Zisa and Milan: Edizioni Charta, 1999), 17–18.
9. Wallach, 84.
10. Ilya Kabakov, *Auf dem Dach/On the Roof*, exh. cat. (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 1997), 8.
11. Boym, 193.
12. Wallach, 29.
13. *Monument*, 19.

Amy Ingrid Schlegel is curator at the Philadelphia Art Alliance and organizer of the current traveling exhibition *You Can’t Go Home Again: The Art of Exile*, which includes the work of Ilya Kabakov, Włodzimierz Ksiazek, Dinh Q. Lê, Tanja Softić, Irene Sosa, and Ana Tiscornia. It was on view at the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center, Brattleboro, Vermont, from May 14 to July 18, 1999 and will be on view in Philadelphia from February 7 to March 19, 2000.

## Seeing Things Differently

### Grant H. Kester

Deborah Bright, ed. *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*. London: Routledge, 1998. 441 pp., 200 b/w and color ills. \$85.

As Jerry Falwell’s recent attack on the “gay subtext” in Teletubbies suggests, queer identity in our culture has a particularly close and complex relationship to questions of visual representation. Is that a television antenna on Tinky Winky’s head or a gay pride “pink triangle”? Is Tinky holding a purse or just a “magic bag”? And what are we to make of the Teletubby fascination with wearing skirts? Falwell’s decision to fixate on remarkably obscure (and perhaps nonexistent) signifiers of queerness in the Teletubbies, while such obvious examples as *Xena: Warrior Princess* captivate millions of children each week, tells us a great deal about straight, conservative fantasies of queerness as a discourse of subversion and seduction. It raises another question as well. Is there a specifically queer hermeneutics of the image? What are its conditions, and how is it different from either Falwell’s homophobic paranoia, or, for that matter, from mainstream art historical methodologies? In her book *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*, Deborah Bright provides an invaluable guide to the conditions of queer visibility in the specific context of photographic history and art practice.

Bright, a photo historian and artist who teaches at the Rhode Island School of Design, has combined a wide range of materials, including historical and archival studies, analyses of contemporary art activism, short stories, and an impressive selection of works by contemporary artists. Given this diversity, the writing throughout is fairly consistent, with relatively few lapses into excessively turgid academese. Though at eighty-five dollars, the hardback price is a bit steep, the book is heavily illustrated, with both black-and-white and color images. Among them are works by Lyle Ashton Harris, Rotimi Fani-Kayode,

Hanh Thi Pham, Sunil Gupta, Catherine Opie, and many others, making the book an excellent resource for courses on queer representation in general and contemporary art in particular. Contributing writers include Michael Anton Budd, Mark Alice Durant, Liz Kotz, Mysoon Rizk, James Smalls, and Alisa Solomon. The book also features a useful bibliography of sources on queer theory, photographic history, and visual culture.

Bright’s introduction reviews some of the political and theoretical questions surrounding the staging of gay sexuality in the mass media, political discourse, and art. Bright challenges what she describes as misinterpretations of the performative theories of sexuality and identity associated with writers such as Judith Butler, which tend to view the assumption of sexual identity as a kind of open-ended ludic play. She points instead to the material and political forces that impinge on and constrain what might be termed the “privilege of performance.” Bright is particularly concerned with diversifying the construction of queer sexuality to include vectors of class, race, and ethnicity. Thus the book includes essays and stories by Elizabeth Stephens, Paul Franklin, Linda Dittmar, Mark A. Reid, and Catherine Lord, among others, which do a superb job of outlining the complex effect of these forces.

One of the key points of articulation for a theory of queer visibility concerns the status of desire within intellectual discourse. Conventional art history, founded as it is on the myth of disinterested scholarship, must expel or suspend the desire of the historian, whose job it is to dispassionately situate the recalcitrant “work of art” within the already established narrative of art historical progress. This attempt to make the difference of the singular work intelligible within, or conformable to, the normative standard of artistic achievement, might be seen as particularly problematic for a viewer whose own identity is constructed against the grain of a heteronormative culture.

David Deitcher’s discussion of his relationship to an anonymous ambrotype of two (possibly) gay men from the 1850s, which opens Bright’s book, offers