

ilya kabakov



on art

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
MATTHEW JESSE JACKSON

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ILYA KABAKOV

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

*Matthew Jesse Jackson*

TRANSLATED BY

*Antonina W. Bouis* AND *Cynthia Martin*

WITH *Matthew Jesse Jackson*

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## Preface

This book encompasses a broad cross-section of Ilya Kabakov's writings on visual art, focusing on those originally produced for a reading public. The texts, presented in chronological order, date from 1980 to 2009, during which time the character of Kabakov's imagined public changed drastically. Most pre-1987 texts were not initially published but circulated as booklets among the artist's friends in Moscow. Often written to spur conversation or to examine relatively idiosyncratic, local themes, they were not addressed to a large-scale Soviet or Russian readership, much less an audience unfamiliar with late Soviet civilization. By contrast, practically all of the texts that follow 1987's "Art Has No Unloved Children" were created with a broader readership in mind, a public that was not even imagined as Soviet or Russian.

Twenty-first-century readers wishing to understand the context of the early texts might do well to allow Kabakov himself to introduce the atmosphere that surrounded his art and writing in Moscow. In particular, the autobiographical texts *The 1960s and the 1970s: Notes on Unofficial Life in Moscow* (1982–1984) and *An Apologia for Personalism in the Art of the 1960s: An Impassioned Monologue on 23 June 1986* (1986) offer riveting portraits of this bygone world. For a guide to the radical shifts in style, subject matter, and points of reference in the later period, they might turn to this collection's concluding text, a spirited dialogue between Kabakov and his longtime friend, the cultural theorist Mikhail Epstein. Kabakov viewed these conversations as an opportunity to review his ongoing relationship to visual art and the role of art in contemporary life. This multifarious discussion serves as a striking coda to the texts that precede it and a fascinating bookend to the artist's earlier autobiographical ruminations.



The present translations reproduce most of the texts in their entirety, preserving all repetitions and reiterations. (Where passages have been omitted due to spatial constraints, the excisions are indicated by bracketed ellipses—[ . . . ]—within the text.) It has been my goal as editor to allow readers to focus on the texts themselves, with minimal framing or exegesis. In my experience, Kabakov's art is powerfully alienating and strange, full of not-easily-digested otherness, and the fascination it generates has much to do with the frequent requirement that one engage, through a great deal of close looking and close reading, with sometimes bafflingly unfamiliar materials. I have also noticed over the years that the most effective curators of Kabakov's art allow the art to speak for itself. I have endeavored to follow their lead.

# Introduction

MATTHEW JESSE JACKSON

Ilya Kabakov came of age in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in the aftermath of the Second World War. Although born into a working-class Jewish family in Dnepropetrovsk, in the Ukrainian provinces, thanks to a dizzying string of fortuitous events, Kabakov eventually attended the most prestigious art school in the USSR, Moscow's Surikov Institute. He went on to earn a comfortable living as a children's book illustrator, though over time, alongside this "official" labor, he began to create artworks "for himself"—paintings, drawings, and sculptural objects—that strayed from the ideologically approved artistic method of Socialist Realism.

Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, Kabakov became a galvanizing figure for Moscow's underground art community, gaining prominence internationally in the 1980s as the perceived leader of a band of artists known as the Moscow Conceptual Circle. He acquired this status thanks, in no small part, to his skills as a conversationalist and theorist. In his memoirs, the underground artist Anatoly Brussilovsky recalls how Kabakov, "like the wise man of the shtetl," had a knack for inventing playful, exotic interpretations that accounted for nearly all features of a given artwork.<sup>1</sup> This skill, his ability to function improvisationally as a historian, critic, illustrator, or artist as the occasion demanded, would propel countless marathon discussions in Kabakov's large attic studio in central Moscow.

Ilya Kabakov notes that his generation of "unofficial" artists, with no access to galleries or museums, placed the utmost emphasis on the cultivation

1. Anatoly Brussilovsky, *Vremia khudozhnikov* (Moscow: Magazin iskusstva, 1999), 119–20.

of a conversational atmosphere around its art.<sup>2</sup> Over time, themes and observations from these conversations began to appear in typed texts that Kabakov distributed among his friends. A predilection for contemplating contradictions and paradoxes aligned with his growing interest in ever more expansive artistic forms. As he recounts, he first made “drawings, then ‘series of drawings,’ then ‘albums,’ then paintings, then boxes, then crates,” which finally led him on to “installations.”<sup>3</sup> By the late 1990s his art (produced from 1997 on in collaboration with his wife, Emilia Kabakov) frequently featured hundreds of pages of narrative and theoretical texts.



Following his landmark visit to Moscow in the winter of 1926–1927, Walter Benjamin wrote that life in the Soviet Union was bound to “endure experimentation to the point of exhaustion.”<sup>4</sup> And certainly the following generations lived in a society in which everyday experience itself began to seem fundamentally inhuman. Stern and anonymous, devoid of irony or self-parody, official Soviet culture inspired few sincere admirers. Without a domestic art market, only the decrees of a bureaucratic culture-machine, there was no sense that anyone in the USSR actually wanted any of the art officially on offer, which made living in Soviet Moscow akin to subsistence among the idols and rites of a religious cult in terminal decline. Kabakov writes, “If it were possible to define in a single word the chief characteristic of this place in which we live, it would be *wholeness* [*tselostnost*’]. A linking to, an interpenetration of, one thing by another turns up in every situation, on every level, from the most exalted to the most mundane.”<sup>5</sup> In Soviet Moscow, Kabakov argued, everything, everywhere was connected. In such a space, every transaction, great or small, involved a complex interweaving of incorporation and alienation, friendliness and hostility, truth and falsehood.

Within this slippery universe of daily double-think, the Word assumed disproportionate significance. As Slavoj Žižek writes:

2. Kabakov describes conceptualism as “a phenomenon that was at its heart, discursive, dialogic.” Ilya Kabakov and Boris Groys, “Beseda o Nome,” in Kabakov, *NOMA, ili, Moskovskii kontseptual’nyi krug*, exh. cat. (Ostfildern, Germany: Cantz, 1993), 19.

3. Ilya Kabakov, *The Boat of My Life* (Urbana-Champaign, IL: Krannert Art Museum, 1998), 160–62.

4. Walter Benjamin, “Moscow,” trans. Edmund Jephcott, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 2:28–29.

5. Ilya Kabakov, “Epistemological Thirst” (1982), translated in this volume.

Perhaps the key feature of the symbolic economy of the late ‘real’ socialism was . . . the almost paranoid *belief in the power of the Word*—the state and the ruling party reacted with utmost nervousness and panic at the slightest public criticism, as if some vague critical hints in an obscure poem published in a low-circulation literary journal, or an essay in an academic philosophical journal, possessed the potential capacity to trigger the explosion of the entire socialist system. . . . This, perhaps, was why it was possible to undermine ‘real Socialism’ by means of peaceful civil society movements that operated at the level of the Word—belief in the power of the Word was the system’s Achilles heel.<sup>6</sup>

Presuming the success of its constant exhortative demands, the Soviet Union unwittingly orchestrated its own rapid demise at the hands of a much more subtly enticing exhortative entity, the Global Market.<sup>7</sup> In tandem with this veneration of the Word, everyday life in the precomputerized Soviet Union depended on mountains of forms and documents. It is estimated that by the early 1980s, “800 billion scraps of official paperwork were in circulation, almost 3000 documents for every Soviet citizen.”<sup>8</sup> According to Kabakov, this pervasiveness of paper engendered a specific “technology of thinking,” a distinctive mixture of the creative and the administrative.<sup>9</sup> Trapped within an avalanche of bureaucratise, it seems only natural that Kabakov began producing his own documents, self-publishing a wide range of writings dedicated to making sense of his circumstances. Offering a perverse artistic intermingling of official and unofficial mentalities, as well as reportage and criticism from within the underground artworld, these texts attempted to map the social architecture of “alternative” Moscow. Devoted to themes as disparate as the “cosmism” of pre-revolutionary Russian modernism and the philosophical implications of Moscow’s garbage, Kabakov’s handmade booklets were typed, then stapled or sewn together using rough butcher’s paper for their covers.

Among these texts are faux–Socialist Realist verses (“Park of Culture”),

6. Slavoj Žižek, introduction to *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Žižek (London: Verso, 1994), 18–19.

7. As Fredric Jameson argues, “The Soviet Union ‘became’ inefficient and collapsed when it attempted to integrate itself into a world system that was passing from its modernizing to its postmodern age, a system that by its new rules of operation was therefore running at an incomparably higher rate of ‘productivity’ than anything inside the Soviet sphere.” Jameson, “Five Theses on Actually Existing Marxism,” in *The Jameson Reader*, ed. Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 169.

8. Mark Beissinger, *Scientific Management, Socialist Discipline, and Soviet Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 255–56.

9. Kabakov elaborates in “Discourse on the Perception of the Three Layers, Three Levels, into Which an Ordinary, Anonymous Written Product—Notices, Slips, Menus, Bills, Tickets, etc.—May Be Broken Down,” translated in this volume.



theoretical explorations (“Without Culture,” “Dust, Dirt, and Garbage”), art historical analyses of unofficial art (*The 1960s and the 1970s: Notes on Unofficial Life in Moscow*), and transcripts of dialogues with cultural theorist Mikhail Epstein.<sup>10</sup> There were as well texts incorporated into installations in the 1980s and 1990s and, following Kabakov’s emigration in 1987, lectures and texts presented in Western contexts. Set against the backdrop of the German Romantic conception of “the world as book,” the appearance of this eclectic hodgepodge of memoir, urban folk wisdom, and philosophically inclined criticism marked the culmination of Kabakov’s visual-textual art experiments of the 1970s.



In the 1980s Western curatorial and critical ambassadors began to arrive in unofficial Moscow, and the feature of Moscow’s environment that once seemed most backward—its lack of local collectors, curators and critics—began to be understood as having spurred artistic innovation and the development of idiosyncratic forms of aesthetic wisdom. With “no art market, no spectators from outside,” Boris Groys remarks, “these artists made their works for their colleagues—for other artists, writers, or intellectuals involved in the unofficial art scene.”<sup>11</sup> Kabakov describes the result: “A curious thing took place; during the process of its continuous discourse, all of [the Moscow Conceptual Circle’s] participants ‘observed’ at the very same moment that this discourse—the way that it was made, its structure and manipulation—presented in itself an entirely sufficiently developed artistic construction from an aesthetic point of view.”<sup>12</sup> Making a virtue of necessity, Kabakov and his friends positioned art not as a professional pastime but as something more akin to a shared hobby pursued with existential seriousness.

Glasnost and perestroika complicated the lives of Moscow’s artists. New freedoms arrived, as did new forms of intimidation. In August 1985, Kabakov’s first solo show opened for a three-month run at the Kunstmuseum Bern. He was, however, not allowed to travel to install his works, and he was later attacked by name in the Soviet press for involvement with “anti-Soviet” art.<sup>13</sup>

10. Pavel Pepperstein emphasizes the sickly quality of this literary production, the ways the booklets evoke entries in adolescent diaries and prison memoirs, in “Depressiia i literatura,” *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo* 7 (1991): 30.

11. Boris Groys and Anton Vidokle, “Art beyond the Art Market,” in *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, ed. IRWIN (London: Afterall, 2006), 403.

12. Kabakov and Groys, “Beseda o Nome,” 22.

13. See “Putushestvie ot ‘A’ do ‘Ia’ ili ot ‘neofitsial’nogo iskusstva do antisovetchiny,” *Moskovskaia pravda*, 20 April 1986.

Fed up with neglect of his work and baseless public denunciations, Kabakov finally took the bold step of submitting an essay, “Art Has No Unloved Children,” to an official publication in the summer of 1987. Lamenting Russia’s habitual neglect of its cultural patrimony, Kabakov pleaded for public recognition of the unofficial artists and sought to ameliorate their circumstances. He later claimed he had written the article “out of weakness,” assessing it as the yelp of a dog, too often kicked, that wanted its head patted instead.<sup>14</sup>

Hailing from the far edges of metropolitan European culture—a Ukrainian-born artist working in Moscow—Kabakov was preoccupied with questions of “provincial creativity.” In *Notes on Unofficial Life*, he explains that the provincial artist has two options when he arrives “in the capital”: try to replicate what is done in the metropolis, or ignore the capital’s standards and hope that individual genius will carry the day.<sup>15</sup> Neither option made much sense to Kabakov. By design, his art and writings never settle into an easily mapped formula; rather, they migrate continually from one position to another. Above all, Kabakov treats “superfluous things” and “superfluous people,” an idea straight out of nineteenth-century Russian literature.<sup>16</sup> Shot through with the small-scale imagination of the child, everything takes place in Kabakov’s art as if it were apprehended “from the side,” as if the art-maker himself had only partial control over the art object’s construction and no particular grasp of its significance. Most often, the point of view projected in his art, as well as in his writing, is that of a person who plays no active, constructive role in society—an observer, not an actor.

In 1988 Ilya Kabakov was transformed, almost overnight, from obscure Soviet illustrator into a hot commodity in an emerging sector of the international art market. Sotheby’s had initiated an unprecedented auction of Soviet contemporary art, and after much negotiation, the event was finally scheduled. Foreshadowing the drastic disorientations that were soon to shake the Soviet Union, three of Kabakov’s works left the country to be perused by potential Western buyers. Kabakov also met Ronald Feldman (gallerist to the formerly unofficial artists Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid), who offered him a solo exhibition in New York. Kabakov assumed it would be impossible to install this exhibition personally, but thanks to a series of serendipitous events and his long-standing connections to the Artists’ Union,

14. See Kabakov’s remarks in Matthew Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 228.

15. Ilya Kabakov, *60-e–70-e . . . Zapiski o neofitsial’noi zhizni v Moskve* (Moscow: NLO, 2008), 46–48.

16. The Superfluous Man is a stock figure in the nineteenth-century Russian novel, from Aleksandr Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* to Ivan Goncharov’s *Oblomov*.



1

he secured a visa to visit the United States.<sup>17</sup> Then, after much worry and labor, Kabakov unveiled the imposing installation *Ten Characters* on 30 April 1988 (fig. 1).

“Kabakov is a great artist. He is a harbinger of phoenix-like glories in liberated Russian culture. If you miss this show, you’ll feel obliged in the future to lie and say you saw it,” wrote the art critic Peter Schjeldahl.<sup>18</sup> Kabakov’s art racked up similarly ecstatic praise across Europe and North America. A few months later, the Sotheby’s auction took place. “The attention of the world, the galleries and collectors, makes it easier for artists to establish themselves in the Soviet Union,” Kabakov told the *New York Times* prior to the event. “The government starts to understand the importance and the price of the work. The ministry of culture starts to look at the work not only as some kind of trash, but as something that’s important and economic too.”<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, Sotheby’s foreign buyers knew little about unofficial art and exhibited scant curiosity to find out more. Described in *Art in America* as an

17. Amei Wallach provides a firsthand account of this period in *Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (New York: Abrams, 1996).

18. Peter Schjeldahl, “Ilya Kabakov,” in *The 7 Days Art Columns, 1988–1990* (Great Barrington, MA: The Figures, 1990), 28.

19. Ilya Kabakov, quoted in Douglas C. McGill, “Western Dealers Rush to Sign Soviet Artists,” *New York Times*, 19 May 1988, C23.

“art safari” undertaken by “wealthy foreigners,” the auction introduced the unofficial artists firsthand to the most problematic, colonializing tendencies within the contemporary art world.<sup>20</sup> As the unofficial artist Viktor Pivovarov later wrote:

Death came about in a very festive place. Everything was arranged in such a way that it did not occur to any of us, not the heroes, not the witnesses, that our euthanasia had been agreed upon behind our backs. But why am I speaking such nonsense? Behind what back! All were asked and all agreed. And how could one not agree . . . at the end of the tunnel, the heavenly kingdom was shining, the fulfillment of all our desires, our innermost dreams. You, of course, have already guessed what I am talking about. Yes, the Sotheby’s auction on the seventh of July 1988. On that day what we called art was buried forever.<sup>21</sup>



In the three decades since the auction, many of the unofficial artists have emigrated to far-flung locales. Kabakov, for one, has settled permanently on Long Island, seventy miles outside New York City. Although he created his first such work at the age of fifty-one, he is now perhaps the most famous installation artist of the later twentieth century. Soon after arriving in the West, Kabakov took to describing his installations as a new type of art altogether, what he came to describe as “total installation.”<sup>22</sup> For Kabakov, post-Renaissance painting had too often been segregated from its surroundings, made over into academicized hackwork or trivial commodities. In Kabakov’s installations, paintings never entirely disappeared, they just ended up quite often on or near the floor, rather than hanging on the wall, as if the artist were daring the viewer to elevate them, both figuratively and literally. Nonetheless, in more recent years, Kabakov has largely abandoned installation art to engage in an ongoing “return to painting.”<sup>23</sup>

With his self-imposed exile in the West, Kabakov confronted a funda-

20. Jamey Gambrell, “Perestroika Shock,” *Art in America* 77, no. 2 (February 1989): 126. In the publicity surrounding the event, Kabakov is even described as the “leader of a tribe.”

21. Viktor Pivovarov, “Iz pis'ma izdatel'iu zhurnala A-Ia Igoriu Shelkovskomu,” in Pivovarov, *Shagi mekhanika* (Moscow: Tretyakov, 2004), 48.

22. He formalized this conception of the medium in 1992–1993 in a series of lectures for art students at the Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Frankfurt. They were published in Russian with German and English translations in *Über die “totale” Installation* (On “Total” Installation) (Ostfildern, Germany: Cantz, 1995).

23. See Ilya Kabakov, *Ilya Kabakov: Eine Rückkehr Zur Malerei, 1961–2011/A Return to Painting, 1961–2011*. Bielefeld, Germany: Kerber, 2012.

mental dilemma: how could he convert his art into gestures that would make sense within the larger arena of world art history? Which meant, practically, how could he reframe his art for critics, historians, collectors, and curators from Asia, Western Europe, and North America? On this score, Kabakov approached the international art community much as he had treated the official Soviet art bureaucracy before it: he ascertained what was expected of him and then attempted to provide “it,” as he explains in his 1994 text “A Story about a ‘Culturally Relocated’ Person.”<sup>24</sup> Kabakov quickly realized that the typical Western art institution had little use for a Soviet conceptual artist who produced enigmatic objects and Russian-language texts of a theoretical and philosophical character. Better, he concluded, to conform to the art world’s ethnographic expectations of a contemporary Russian artist: the “Western” Kabakov thus assumed the role of an extravagant Russian storyteller who portrayed “communal Soviet life,” but in a sensorily overwhelming medium that evoked the mix of sentiment and philosophy found in the classics of nineteenth-century Russian literature, as well as the cosmic ambitions of the historical Soviet avant-garde. Though no longer obligated to work as an official illustrator and unofficial artist, he continued to deploy both personas in his art and writing. In the end, Kabakov self-consciously translated his ideas into what he deemed generically “Russian/Soviet” forms so that an international public could consume his art without great difficulty; this public could rely on what it already knew, because he doubted that it would be interested in learning much more. For some artists, such self-censorship would be intolerable, but Kabakov took it for granted that attaining access to Western art institutions would not be that different from working within the Union of Soviet Artists. Thus, Kabakov the Russian storyteller–installation artist was born, while Kabakov the exiled Soviet conceptual artist embarked on what might someday be described as an elaborate work of performance art within the global circuit of contemporary art institutions.

Today, Kabakov’s art has been exhibited at hundreds of venues globally and featured in the most prestigious sites for contemporary art, from the Venice Biennale to Documenta. Ilya Kabakov is thus an artist who in many ways embodies the prototypical subjectivity of the twenty-first-century international, multidisciplinary artist. Where constructions of national identity, medium-specificity, and site-specificity were once the key terms for the contemporary artist and contemporary art history, it could now be argued that most often it is the dialogue *between* mediums, *between* national traditions,

24. Delivered as a speech at the IAAC/AICA Congress in Stockholm, 22 September 1994.

and *between* art contexts that catalyzes the crucial drama of art-making. In this sense, Kabakov's writings are particularly illuminating, as they engage critically with such transformations in the symbolic construction of "global art." Ilya Kabakov has referred to himself frequently as an "author," and this collection aims to allow the artist's distinctive authorial voice to appear in all of its wide-ranging, ever challenging heterogeneity.

## Culture, “I,” “It,” and Favorsky’s Light (“Rhombus”)

1980

In the early 1980s Kabakov began taking stock of Moscow’s unofficial art community, its deficits and achievements. This self-investigatory project arose partly in response to his perception that there was an absence of insightful critical writing on unofficial art, but also as an effort to define more precisely how local art related to its surrounding atmosphere. More concretely, this text seeks to diagram the psychic and aesthetic landscape of unofficial art by describing and interpreting the practices of several celebrated local artists (Kabakov among them). Originally intended to be shared within Kabakov’s extended circle of friends, this essay was not published until after the fall of the Soviet Union.

It is difficult to define the theme of this essay, but let us let it emerge in its current disconnected, muddled rendering. Over the course of many years of twists and turns, conversations and imaginings about all sorts of different things, a few centers, a few nests of concepts have accumulated and concentrated in themselves significant questions. These centers can be separated into four groups, four heaps. Each group has formed its own images and its own distinctive concepts.

Here are the four groups:

1. The first group could be called “I,” as it includes all possible problems and issues connected to the meaning of “I”: What specifically can the “I” do? What is it capable of? How does it solve its problems? How does it evaluate itself? An entire series of questions emanates from this “I.” How do these questions present themselves to this “I”? What are the tasks of this “I”? In general, this group includes endeavors that focus on phenomena in relation to their being devoured by and reflected within this “I,” and on the reaction of this “I.” As a general rule, it includes everything that is referred to by this wonderful word “I.”
2. The second nest is related to the concept of culture. The endless circulation around this word begins with the purely theoretical and ends with all kinds of complex intricacies connected to the following question: Is a given phenomenon connected to culture, or is the phenomenon *not* cultural? Is it established by culture? Is it located in the light of culture? These

endless maneuverings indicate that the word “culture” is no less capacious than the others, that it is one of the most important among these energy centers, nests of concepts.

3. The third concept is the concept of “it.” “It” is everything that possesses energy and pressure; from it emanates and flows incredible power, ambiguity, and connectedness, i.e., everything that is connected to unbelievable force and at the same time remains impossible to name: it can only be perceived and cannot be defined insofar as it is terribly diffuse, vague, present everywhere and nowhere. It has the quality of being the foundation, soil, a kind of backdrop that stands behind everything. It is a tormenting demand that requires a response, a definition, a description of itself—in general, “it” involves everything that is connected with the unconscious, with that which we feel but which remains impossible to define. The concept of place belongs here too in that it can be perceived as “it” as well, as a demand for a definition of itself in this place, etc.
4. The fourth nest, the fourth center around which everything revolves, moving endlessly nearer and further away, is the concept of Favorsky’s light.<sup>1</sup> This is what we call the concept that includes the metaphysical: it is the concept of something higher, the concept of the absolute, the concept of the idea, of the spirit, and of all possible strata that are understood as elevated, ideal; we have to aspire toward it, toward that which soars, shines, and dominates.

It is these four centers that, in one way or another, in various distillations, in all kinds of combinations, serve as the constant subject of our endless conversations. In turn, these centers can be arranged in a kind of quadrangle, which is actually what I want to discuss here. We shall try to arrange these four centers in a rhombus—not a square—a rhombus that stands on one edge or, more accurately, that stands on one of its points. This point we will call south, using a geographic term, and at this lowest point we shall place the term “it.” “It” will be at the bottom of the rhombus. Directly above it will be Favorsky’s light, in its natural position, above and most exalted, our topological north. Naturally, we will place culture in the west, i.e., to the left, if we are facing north. That is its place, as one would naturally presume. “I” will be in the east, and that’s how it should be since it continually rises and everything begins with it, and everything, of course, ends in the west.

Now, having defined this rhombus topologically, let us outline the north-

1. The term refers to Vladimir Favorsky (1886–1964), a Moscow-born painter and graphic artist who studied in Western Europe before the Revolution and was later associated with the Soviet avant-garde; one of the key exemplars of “formalist” tendencies in post-revolutionary Soviet culture.



south and east-west axes. What we immediately end up with is a cross; we discover that in our circle—and this is no secret to anyone—there exist two main characters, two organically emerging, active ideologues who in a way represent the two axes of our rhombus, our quadrangle placed on its point. They are Shiffers and Groys, our two spiritual ideologues, our two thinkers.<sup>2</sup> In our schema they are perpendicular to one another. Shiffers will be located, as should be anticipated, along the vertical, north-south axis, that is, he will run from “it”—from the impersonal, foundational, profoundly ontological root—upward toward spiritual radiance and enlightenment, whereas Groys will lie along the horizontal plane, setting up this perpendicular structure, maneuvering from culture to “I” and back again. Arranging everything this way and discussing it rather ironically, you nonetheless discover a certain curious naturalness, a sort of predeterminedness to such a situation. Shiffers’s field of activity really does ignore the problem of “I,” as well as the cultural problematic, as though passing right by it (of course, he knows about it, but he considers it an inessential element when related to the more important axis, the one that is ontological and spiritual), whereas Groys is located on the plane of culture and the relations between personality and culture; for him, the activation of “it,” as well as Favorsky’s light, serve as extraneous relationships.

Now we will turn to the four identified points and look to see whether we can find any figures who personify them. Quickly enough, we discover four such personages. There is nothing objective here, so I will accept the risk of naming names. Steinberg will represent Favorsky’s light. Below him, “it” will be represented by Yankilevsky. Bulatov will represent the cultural structure, and perhaps the point going by the name of “I” might be arrogantly represented by Kabakov.<sup>3</sup> Now I will say a few words about why these personages were chosen, why they, perhaps, have reason to be represented by these points.

Least subject to any doubt is the place of Steinberg. It is well known and widely recognized that Favorsky’s light and its presence is the main actor and

2. Evgeny Shiffers (1934–1997), a Moscow-based writer, philosopher, theologian, theater director, and mystic; Boris Groys (b. 1947), an art critic, media theorist, and philosopher who went on to emigrate to Germany and the United States.

3. Eduard Steinberg (1937–2012), an unofficial artist whose abstract paintings often feature primarily white surfaces dotted with colorful abstract forms; Vladimir Yankilevsky (1938–2018), an unofficial artist who typically produced surreal and grotesque canvases; Erik Bulatov (b. 1933), one of the foremost artist-practitioners of Sots-Art, an unofficial idiom grounded in a loosely satirical doubling of official Socialist Realist representation.

genuine content not only of the figure of Steinberg himself but of his art. Everything, strictly speaking, is built on this. Favorsky's light comprises the main subject, the main origin that is present in his art; it shapes it, arranges and conditions all of the other elements, all of the other categories in his art. His painting is built on the presupposition that Favorsky's light shines behind everything as a significant, primordial element that must be reckoned with and anticipated.

Why has Yankilevsky been chosen as an antipode, below Steinberg, yet located on the same vertical line? Why does he personify "it"? Only because that indivisible, thick, unbelievably all-encompassing force that swallows up all elements, dissolving them in some extraordinarily viscous, suggestive, compressed, yet living plasma—this force that doesn't have any name—is the foundation, the primary image, the overwhelming impression, as well as the major effect, brought about by his art. We cannot say exactly what his art, his images, or his word might speak about—these all appear to be of little significance. Yes, there are conceptual structures, signs, and images there, but everyone understands perfectly well that all of these are dissolved into something much more holistic and that they are basically insignificant and unimportant in relation to the whole. They are like clumps in your cream of wheat [*kasha*] that when you start mixing them, dissolve into something more uniform, into something that, in essence, cannot have a name, but that in terms of its mass, power, and energy is perceived and experienced by everyone. The feeling of "it" that has no name—in which all elements dissolve—is overwhelmingly present in Yankilevsky's art. For this reason, I want to place Yankilevsky in the location labeled "it" at the bottom of the quadrangle.

Why does Bulatov personify the point of culture? It is not only because there is in his work a complete absence of everything mystical, irrational, and impersonal, as well as an absence of any layers that might activate a super-consciousness or the unconscious. It is not only because he is extraordinarily clear but also because, if we understand culture as an extraordinarily complex yet extraordinarily distinct sign structure, a structure that may boldly be called a language, in which each element signifies something and in this sense is understood not only as a sign but also as a network of familiar, well-elucidated concepts standing behind that sign, then the operating of these sign structures, this calculation in terms of meaning and content of each sign, makes it possible to consider Bulatov as a personage who personifies the very essence of culture. Bulatov also relates to culture because these interactions of concepts and sign structures are so significant, so self-sufficient that they ignore both the impersonal layers and any layers associated with psychology,

with personal acts that might muddy things, etc. That is to say, elements are presented here in their blunt, clear and self-sufficient potency and in their mutual relationships with each another.

Why can Kabakov occupy the point called "I"? Because the main impulse in his endeavors and maneuverings is connected primarily with the impulse emanating from "I." Here all phenomena, everything that is done, have their origins in subjectivity, in the subjectivity of the "I." Beginning with arbitrariness, games, nonsense, or simply with a gesture—which is particularly characteristic of the "I"—all phenomena at their base are understood, both in their initial stirrings and in their final analysis, through psychology, and a certain psychologism becomes the basis for everything, which is the truest sign that everything occurring is evaluated through the "I." All contemplation begins with analysis from inside the "I," and ends with the "I" as well. "I" is the first and last stage in the contemplation of everything. It is as if it has both centripetal and centrifugal origins: everything begins and ends with "I."

With these four items roughly sketched out, let us move on to a curious question analyzed in an article by Lotman in which he argues that our ordinary language is distinguished by the fusion of two other languages.<sup>4</sup> Lotman precisely differentiates and names these languages. The first is connected to mythological consciousness. Here one is dealing with a childlike, mythological, holistic, and undifferentiated consciousness, and with a language that is, above all, undifferentiated, whose foundation is a primordial, indivisible wholeness, a certain visual representation that in principle cannot be analyzed except holistically. Wholeness and unity, the total incarnation of any material, is the basis of this language. It is ancient and primal, but as it develops it transforms into its opposite—a language that is discrete, where the sign is of a form that no longer signifies itself but instead signifies something else. The sign functions in this language as a signifier of another concept. This language serves in a subordinate position, subordinate in relation to the first language. It acquires different qualities: discreteness, pieces of distinct expressiveness, parts, elements, an extraordinarily high degree of signedness, wherein each sign very emphatically signifies something. A temporal aspect appears, whereas in the first language time does not exist, only eternity exists. An age-related structure exists as well: if the first language is likened to the forms of a child's consciousness, then the second one is akin to a more mature one. The first is prehistoric, the second, historical. Thus, the language in

4. Yuri Lotman (1922–1993) was a pioneer in Soviet semiotic theory; see the essays collected in *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, trans. Ann Shukman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

which we interact with one another consists of two languages—discrete and mythological—that exist in superimposition and struggle, one functioning against the backdrop of the other.

If we pay attention to this idea, then, returning to our rhombus, we discover the following feature: in an unexpected way, the four separate structures at its corners function in the same way as the two languages discussed by Lotman. Forming a kind of integral whole, they embody these two origins, these two languages. It is not difficult to understand that the north-south vertical, belonging theoretically to Shiffers and personally to the work of Steinberg and Yankilevsky, represents the area of ontology and mythological consciousness, a mythological understanding of the world and of reality. Here are regions that are nonreflective, nonsigned, noncultural, nonsecondary, regions that belong to an intensely integrated, primordial whole, distinguished by its power and unity. This language, without a doubt, relates to the second language in our rhombus, the language of culture and individuality, as to something extraordinarily insignificant and nonnecessary, and quite naturally swallows it up as something random and unimportant. We see this in Shiffers's attitude toward the problem of personality and culture. Recognizing these categories formally, he nonetheless perceives them as a kind of interference, as an exception, as something insignificant against the backdrop of the important ontological, spiritual axis. In all likelihood, the same could be said about the art of these two artists: its holistic and all-consuming quality is so great that, in this structure, such phenomena as ideas, signs, personal origin, culture, etc. are either not perceived at all or are perceived as secondary and insignificant.

If, on the contrary, we examine the horizontal, east-west axis that Groys represents, what becomes clear is that sign-meaning functions as the backdrop or the chief active component, while signless mythological structure serves only to muddy the water, and so may be left out of our analysis altogether. What we have here are the regions of consciousness, the regions of culture, the regions in which the personage himself functions inside culture. The primary, mythological axis is no longer in focus insofar as it has been surmounted; the secondary stage, newer in terms of time, cannot return to the first. If for mythology, culture is a nuisance, and at the same time an exhausting element, then for the axis of culture/"I," the mythological element is a stage that has already been traversed. It is better now not to perceive it at all.

One might think that we are dealing here with a classical structure, a model of human existence that is also, in part, a model of artistic activity. In essence, artistic activity consists of movement between these two poles—between

mythology and particularity, between a proto-language and the language of culture—but this is only in the ideal; what exists in reality is either a tendency that we have called mythological, or one that is cultural-personalized. Is a balanced center possible, an ideal calm spot in this whirlwind, in the midst of these incomprehensible twists and turns? Could there be someone—the question is posed purely theoretically—who might stand at the intersection of the Shiffers and Groys axes, who successfully integrates these four separate points of the rhombus within himself? There is in fact such a personage, located precisely at the center of these painful, polemicizing debates. Perhaps it would be sufficient for me to somewhat arbitrarily cite the name Pivovarov as one who stands at the very center of this entire topology, topography and geography.<sup>5</sup> It remains only to prove that this location is ideal or successfully resolves these lacerating conflicts. We really do discover in the personality of Pivovarov all four points of origin; it is as though his image stands directly at their intersection, binding them all together. In him is combined both the personalized and the cultural point of view and an enormous, latently powerful "it" origin, as well as a very spiritualized, enlightened element. Can we consider all of these tensions to have been resolved in this personage? Here appears a very curious circumstance, which consists in the fact that in order to perceive anything one must apparently back up. What we see has to be in focus, but we can focus only from a certain distance. What results is a curious situation wherein we can only make out origins that are diluted with additions of some kind, while it is possible that the actual crosshairs, the integrating locus itself, might not be perceived by us at all.

This schema is extraordinarily capacious, and once it is recognized, the following becomes clear: from a distanced perspective, these diverse directions represent a unity, perhaps even a complementarity, even if in real life, in the cauldron of everyday interactions, they embody incompatible origins, juxtaposed most often in hostile confrontation with one another. Perhaps with historical perspective they will come together like a couple tenderly and courteously supporting each other over a puddle, but at the moment they are still perceived as polarized. I want to emphasize this subjective moment: our current point of view is not art historical, where one pets both the ram and the goat; these poles perceive each other in terms of contrast, in terms of repulsion. This disposition toward polarities that has emerged, in a historical sense, may form a kind of stable structure, or at least a frame on which to

5. Viktor Pivovarov (b.1937) is an unofficial artist who has worked primarily in the mediums of drawing and painting. His production tends toward a vocabulary that is both representational and absurd.

build honeycombs, to weave, to sew fabric, the weft running in one direction, the warp another.

We could say much that is interesting about the interaction of top and bottom, of right and left. Why is culture in a certain sense located beyond personality? And why must personality in some sense be juxtaposed to culture? Why is Favorsky's light opposed to the impersonal "it," the mass? Even if all of this may seem theoretically clear, nevertheless it still demands new thinking. These two axes have important meanings for local artistic life, and they touch on a curious problem, a theme that is fundamental for our conversation: just what might local Russian art be? We must not fear this question. Despite having been posed unsuccessfully many times in the past, this monstrous question appears in a fresh light when we begin looking at it from the perspective of our new, rhombus-like construction.

For the vertical axis, what art might be is not a problem at all, insofar as it already is, so to speak. In this case, we don't need to think of art as something in the future, since it has already taken shape. It is as though it has existed on this axis from the beginning of time. This is the extraordinary power of a soil that perpetually bears fruit, that endlessly gives rise to unbelievably strong talents, geniuses, and all kinds of masterpieces in large quantities. Hence, "it," by definition, represents an unbelievably fecund and creative origin. This is an inexhaustible womb, incessantly giving birth to all kinds of offspring, works of art and ideas. Since "it" exists, and we already clearly know it does, the question of whether or not it bears fruit is secondary. Everything it does, no matter what, is potent, powerful, and therefore other parameters need not be considered when analyzing it. "It" always lives and creates. What kinds of fruit come from this soil? "It" does not need any sort of definitions of a cultural nature. This axis—and this is completely wonderful—ignores both the "I" and culture, relating to them in a distinctive way: it relates to "I" with disdain and disgust, since "it" does not need "I" for its realization. "I" functions merely as a translator, a random and inevitable reproducer, a conduit for the unbelievably powerful impulse inherent in "it": if not this personage, then another will express and realize those forces, those currents, those powerful movements, but how this is expressed and in whom it is expressed is entirely random. "It" can be expressed by anyone at all: it could be Pushkin, Dostoevsky, any personage, as long as "it" can break through, breathe, and resound.

"It" is also juxtaposed to culture. And not just juxtaposed, but hostile, to every kind of culture, insofar as culture is something extraordinarily withered from the point of view of "it." "It" is opposed to any form of reflection, evaluation, stratification, to the introduction of any parameters, channels,

definitions, opposed, that is, to everything that impedes "it" from emanating in its own primacy and primordial power. That is why the question of how "it" relates to culture is traditionally resolved such that "it" destroys culture, or we might say, basically ignores it. "It" exists outside culture. In what forms does "it" express itself? What difference does it make? After all, the problem of form and the problem of language are cultural phenomena. "It" is a kind of concealed intention, selecting random forms, and perhaps a form isn't even necessary. Form is a kind of interference and has a distorting, even muddying origin; therefore the question of how "it" can be expressed doesn't really even exist. In an organic sense, "it" is connected with an elevated spiritual origin. But how can "it" express this spiritual origin? Why is this axis authoritative? Why does the impersonal "it," filled with darkness, tragism, gloom, and all kinds of organically pulsating origins, end up in the same place at the same time with an enlightened, metaphysical, otherworldly, surreal current of energy? How can both be combined on a single axis?

They may have entirely different origins, but this light is also impersonal. Herein lies the nature, so to speak, of a potential irony and mistrust. Favorovsky's light also functions as an impersonality that does not require a personality. It appears in an unexpected way; even if it is on the other side of "it," its antipode, so to speak, the light's origin, its characteristics, strangely correlate with "it." This is the case precisely along the line of impersonality. On this mythological, "mystical" level, the spirit functions in the form of an origin that is innately impersonal, like the innate "it." However, since we are not talking about some kind of abstract theorizing, but rather about actual artists who are pursuing their craft and who actually create artworks, it is necessary to note that along the vertical—on the vertical line of "it" and "spirit"—these objects function in a manner completely distinct from something magical. That is, their function consists of enticing and entrapping us, creating a certain field with the purpose of affecting us within the context of ritualistic, magical signs and objects. Here we are talking about a limit, about new kinds of cult mechanisms, about objects that should lead us to mystical, extraordinarily complex levels and states; moreover, on the level of "it," they should apparently thrust us into states of inner cataclysm, profound movement, the most subterranean, most sub-fundamental stirrings of being, with their characteristic transfusion and translocation of a terrifying, powerful, yet completely indeterminate force—a force with a capacity for a special, terrifying vitality. At its upper, so to speak, point—at the point of spirit—they should submerge us in a special, enlightened silence and spiritual contemplation. They should function as a gracious, extremely quiet, incandescent sort of anticipation, an almost luminous feeling approximating the ecstasy of some-

thing illuminated, elevated, quiet and benevolent, something emanating and flowing toward us. But once again, this is most likely in the form of a state and sensation that is only possible during tender and gracious moments in our life, at the best, quietest, most contemplative and illuminated moments.

And that is all that can be said about such works. At their limits, they, it still seems, can create such semi-cultish, semi-mystical feelings and states. I want to emphasize that it is difficult to talk about these things as works of art standing alongside the artificial mechanisms of culture. If they were to be assigned to this set of things, perhaps, they wouldn't even know which place to occupy or how to behave.

Now I would like to say that works of art and other works that belong to the horizontal axis—the one we call “culture” and “I”—behave completely differently. I shall again return to the central, painful question about how works that are made here, on our soil, relate to works in the West. I think that along the first axis, in the case of magical ontology, this question is crucial. Along this axis any notion of the West whatsoever is ignored, or the art of the West is victoriously cast aside as false, petty, formal, earthly, and devoid of all profundity, mysticism, power, etc. In this way, the question is triumphantly resolved with regard to the first axis. In relation to the second axis, the question is resolved not so simply or triumphantly. It is more likely resolved comparatively; moreover, it might be said that the word “resolved” has been uttered too boldly here, since the question is posed rather than resolved. It is not as though it is posed arbitrarily. This is the only possible orientation of this axis, and it is from this moment that it, this axis, starts to exist. It is precisely by being posited in relation to the West that it, in fact, for the first time discovers its parameters, its categories, and itself; that is, without the light, without the presence of Western art, it, perhaps, cannot name itself. In fact, by definition, our culture—in this case our local artistic culture—is that which is perceived against the backdrop of, in light of, and in relation to a culture presumed to exist in the West. All reflexes, all reactions and attitudes, are connected with the fact that what happens here, in its capacity as a cultural object, relates to a cultural object already existing in the West. Whether it is formally, that is, materially, the same as something in the West, or is something different—this is the first and most important question. And the second question: is it used as it is used in the West, or is there a completely specific form of usage of this culture on local soil? These are two extraordinarily painful questions that, I repeat, demand an answer on this plane, on the plane of the analysis of “I” and culture.

I am familiar with Groys' ideas based on a few articles and am so much in agreement with how they posit these questions that I can simply refer the



reader to them.<sup>6</sup> Groys superbly analyzes the relationship of the local attitude to culture and the culture of the West, while the "I" in culture is addressed less robustly. What is the confounding, or perhaps, on the contrary, animating role of "I"? Groys argues that in formal terms things made here are analogous to things made in the West, but the ways these things are used on local soil differ sharply from the uses of their Western analogues. The use of these things here has a specific structure and goal. I also agree with Groys that painting connected exclusively with local flora has emerged here only recently, and it might be said that even in the Western garden, marked by so much abundant and diverse growth, such a fruit has never grown and cannot grow. We are talking here about the fact that the many-branched tree of ideology—the ideological production that literally covers all of our ravines, mountains, valleys, and cities—has been utilized as artistic material by Erik Bulatov.

Despite the fact that ideological production hits us continuously right in the face, it should be said that its use as an artistic product and artistic element with corresponding artistic goals has emerged only recently. It can be said why it arose. In earlier times, this ideological production (slogans, posters, placards with ideological content) was contrasted with those artistic works that did not seem to be ideological. That is, they were always innovative, something new, inviting us to move onward toward some new distance. This *new* was perceived as an extraordinarily active sign, a sort of beginning against the backdrop of all that was *not* this new beginning. For artists it was as if you had two layers. The first layer consisted of vital ideological production to move forward those new ideas and perspectives that were proclaimed and embodied by these new productions. (We need only remember Deineka, Sokolov-Skalia, and the enormous number of artists who approached this production as something extraordinarily new, that summoned us forward, i.e., as something that was coming, commencing, and any minute about to replace the old, etc.)<sup>7</sup> At the same time many artists resisted and ignored this new production, as if considering it to be nonartistic or excessively coarse, and for various reasons tried to ignore it. Our reality was covered with these two types of products—the ignored, everyday, old, familiar production, and the new program inserted into various corners, regions, floors, etc.

6. By 1980 several of Boris Groys's articles had appeared in unofficial publications such as the journals *37* and *A-Ya*.

7. Aleksandr Deineka (1899–1969) and Pavel Sokolov-Skalia (1899–1961) were celebrated artists within the Soviet art system, although Deineka's work exceeded the bounds of official representation and later influenced Kabakov's own painterly practice in the 1990s and 2000s.

Now a relatively short period of time has passed, and we live in a world where this ideological production covers virtually the entire surface of our life like a blanket. It is not just a selection of random and individual signs against the backdrop of reality; it is an all-pervasive and all-saturating element that has entered not only into our visual life but into our consciousness, into our speech, into our behavior. Our reaction to life takes into consideration this ideology completely; it is ideological through and through. Groys has some wonderful texts about this. Ideology, evenly and calmly, covers our entire life like a cassock, and this ideology can then become an artistic product due to its role as a natural spokesman, an actively performing character and representative of our whole life. We cannot ignore it as a purely cultural phenomenon.

Now a moment has arisen when it has become possible to work with this material for the first time, which, in fact, Bulatov was the first to do. What does it mean to be the first? Of course, there are now artists, some of whom are still living here in Russia and some of whom, unfortunately, have gone abroad, who have worked with this ideological material. Among those who have left, I want to name most of all Komar and Melamid, and among those who have stayed, Prigov, Sokov, who has also unfortunately left, Lebedev, and Orlov.<sup>8</sup> But why then do I want to name Bulatov first and foremost? The thing is that he leads chronologically—the first such painting by Erik dates to the 1960s, if I am not prevaricating, while the appearance of works by Komar and Melamid date to the end of the 1970s, a different generation.<sup>9</sup>

But it's not just a matter of chronology, of temporal precedent. We are also talking about a deeper stratum, about a special cultural interpretation of ideological production. Komar and Melamid's consistent appeal, their maneuvering, can be referred to as traditional for our era in a certain sense, in that for them there still exists a special attitude toward this ideological material that has its origins in the very first years after the revolution. This was most powerfully embodied by Zoshchenko and also, in part, by Ilf and Petrov.<sup>10</sup> We are talking about a sort of chiding, pejorative attitude toward

8. Vitaly Komar (b. 1943) and Aleksandr Melamid (b. 1945), multimedia artists and the founders of Sots-Art (typically manifested as a satirical melding of Socialist Realism and pop art), emigrated from the USSR in 1977. Leonid Sokov (b. 1941) is an unofficial sculptor; Dmitri Prigov (1940–2007), an unofficial artist and poet; Rostislav Lebedev (b. 1946) and Boris Orlov (b. 1941), unofficial multimedia artists who came to prominence in the 1970s.

9. In fact, Kabakov's dating is not accurate. It is generally accepted that Bulatov, as well as Komar and Melamid, began working in their Sots-Art styles around 1972.

10. Mikhail Zoshchenko (1895–1958) was an acclaimed Soviet satirist. Ilya Ilf (1897–1937) and Evgeny Petrov (1903–1942) were Soviet authors of humorous satires, including the widely

all of these slogans. All we need to do is recall the scene with the sower that Ostap Bender draws on the ship, or all of the various advertisements and slogans that Zoshchenko makes use of in his work. Everyone understands that all of this is more or less funny, scandalous, and idiotic, and that a normal person immediately grasps that this ideological production is ridiculous, something that has nothing to do with normal human life. It is a temporary debt imposed on life, but life itself goes on in its very human way. Komar and Melamid exhibit such an understanding of this production with their famous facetiousness, their witty mocking and rephrasing. Something similar happens with Prigov, with his many clever discoveries. Understanding, in this case, rests precisely in the fact that we, human beings, all winking at each other, know that these slogans and exhortations have nothing to do with us. They concern some abstract activity produced by someone out of obligation, something to be calmly ignored and passed over by us, real people.

Bulatov used this production in a completely different way, with a different understanding. He understood ideological production not as something external to human consciousness but as one of the essential strata of our human consciousness and our cultural being. A person does not say, "Put it back," as in Zoshchenko, all of us laughing at him; instead, he says this with the full understanding that this is important, lyrical, human language.<sup>11</sup> The language we use, according to Bulatov, whether we admit it or not, has become completely ideologized over time, and to disassociate it from normal human language has become impossible. Our landscape is not the landscape of previous times. It has itself become a product of ideology. Our consciousness encounters a landscape that is ideologized through and through. Our streets, our buildings, our everyday reality, our life and our environment have by now taken shape as products of ideology. This newness has permeated virtually all pores of our consciousness, our language. Bulatov reveals an important thing: the language in which all things speak—from the loftiest to the lowliest, from the most everyday to the most otherworldly—all of these texts are spoken in the language of contemporary ideology. You cannot get away from it—it is an all-pervasive, all-formative origin—and this discovery functions as astounding evidence. Only with Bulatov do we begin to work

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acclaimed comic novel *Twelve Chairs* (1928), which chronicles the adventures of the picaresque con man Ostap Bender. At one point in the novel (chapter 32), Bender must create an advertisement on a ship for a "sower of bonds."

11. In Zoshchenko's story "The Aristocrat," barked admonitions have replaced traditional human communication; in Mikhail Zoshchenko, *Scenes from the Bathhouse and Other Stories of Communist Russia*, trans. Sidney Monas (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961), 20–23.

with this ideology as a specifically local cultural tradition, and it is precisely from this moment that we can begin to compare this cultural tradition with the cultural tradition that exists in the West. We realize that we already possessed a culture, sign, and language that could enter into a competitive position with Western culture.

Bulatov is a pioneer in this area. Having revealed the potential of the serious, deep, and genuinely complex interaction between this cultural layer and the human being, he posited a new potential, revealed an entire area in which many discoveries would be made, all kinds of evolutions and maneuverings with material that is not facetiously unique, but rather calmly and evenly extant, areas in which, after him, it became possible to work. If we are talking about culture, then this point is no longer hypothetical but *real*, thanks to the existence of Bulatov's paintings.

The final element of the rhombus is "I." Up until now, I have tried to function in the capacity of personal origin, a gesture that relates to any phenomenon: "I" participates in any painting, in quotes—"I" adds a personal slant, a winking that is supposed to propose altering something constructively. But these days I lean more toward Bulatov's ideas and hope to find some sort of distinctive interpretation in the stratum that he revealed. I think there is an aspect here that imparts a particular inflection to the problem I have been talking about. I am cognizant that this is necessary for further development in the region of culture. What place does the "I" occupy in the domain of the impersonal, anonymous production of an ideological product? Does such ideological production secure an opportunity, sustenance, for the maneuvering and insertion of the "I" into these primarily impersonal programs? These well-known programs of answering "yes" or "no" to every question, programs that ignore as a matter of principle all individualistic origins? The question is complicated, and an answer may only be possible in the future. Can this undertaking be pulled off at all? I think that individualization within this material—material that appeals only to an abstract person or sign, devoid of individuality—is possible. I would frame the problem this way: Is it possible to activate the "I"'s angle of vision, the concept of the "I," in relation to the impersonal structure of an ideological product that is taken as a point of cultural origin? I have nothing to rely on here, because individuation in art, in culture, is a complex matter that constantly slips away toward disappearance. As a rule, only stylistic origins exist and they function impersonally (impressionism, fauvism). The history of art is filled with styles, not individuals; nonetheless, steps forward, caprices, individual approaches recur in history (Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys). This is a painful, ambiguous question and there is no correct way to pose it.

## Nozdrev and Pliushkin

1981

Throughout his career Ilya Kabakov has invoked the classics of nineteenth-century Russian literature. In this case, he narrates a fanciful description of contemporary art in the Soviet Union and the West that is grounded in his interpretation of Nozdrev and Pliushkin, two characters in Nikolai Gogol's 1842 novel *Dead Souls*.

To this day, Nozdrev and Pliushkin—the two immortal heroes from *Dead Souls*—keep nagging at us because they can be analyzed from the most diverse perspectives and dissected in such diverse ways. What results is not only always curious, but important, and since this is how it has been, this is probably how it will be. For my part, I am aware of, at the very least, two different analytical angles:

1. Nozdrev and Pliushkin presented as immortal characters
2. Nozdrev and Pliushkin presented as social, not immortal, types

In the former case, Nozdrev personifies recklessness, lack of restraint, muddle-headedness, pointless energy, and, in the final analysis, insanity and delirium. Pliushkin personifies a proclivity for miserliness, curmudgeonly behavior, overwhelming pettiness, and, in the final analysis, the very same delirium and insanity.

From the latter perspective, as social types, Nozdrev and Pliushkin are brilliantly depicted as typical provincial landlords who embody all the contemporaneous defects of Gogol's Russia.

Now what happens if we look at Nozdrev and Pliushkin—dissect them—from the perspective of their “types of consciousness.”

From this point of view, Nozdrev and Pliushkin are like complimentary colors, opposite sides of one and the same type of consciousness.

Let us try to name them. Nozdrev expresses himself by embodying “public consciousness.” With this type of consciousness, all things, events, relationships between people, tempo, tone—in short, the entire meaning of life in all of its particulars—is permeated with social, public significance. Nozdrev, as presented in *Dead Souls*, is not a *character* but a *person* overcome by

a convivial attitude. One must insist that social consciousness (both in *Dead Souls* and in our everyday life) should not be understood here as something abstract or philosophical, as something comprised of familiar rules of behavior, societal attitudes, or relationships between society and the individual, etc.

Rather, here social consciousness represents a special kind of obsession, in the sense of a passion, a kind of demonic force that overtakes the whole person, inflaming each and every moment of his entire life on “the altar of social life,” in “social service.” Every person knows this state, almost crazed in its despotism and its violent enthusiasm, having seen it, if not in oneself, then in someone else, when some social mission seizes a person and he fixates on some “social matter,” either temporarily or perpetually. There are, in fact, people who never emerge from this state of hyperexcitement, of artificially exaggerated cheerfulness. From our schooldays we know and fear the incomprehensible energy of the do-gooder-young-pioneer leaders—the ones who always started the group singing and led evening festivities; those who then went on to spend the rest of their lives as “social spirits,” toastmaster volunteers, the commanders in charge of hikes, camping trips, birthday parties, celebrations at industrial establishments, etc.

Observing a human being in this state, entirely seized by it, we, from our detached position, might at first evaluate him as being thoroughly drunk or under the influence of a narcotic. He feels infinitely free, unfettered, happy, excited, but simultaneously concerned, attentive in a special kind of way; one might even say, in a certain sense, he becomes tenaciously suspicious. His suspiciousness and tenacity are aimed at the following: everyone in society should be, according to the thinking of this “civic-minded one,” in a special state that one might call a “social trance.” From this moment forward, each and every person in this situation who was once an individual becomes part of a unified body—one that was previously called “society” and is now referred to as the “collective.” It is precisely to this, to this new body, that the attention of the social-minded being is turned, and from it is extracted that emanation, that very energy that lives in his consciousness. Being at once both a medium and a director, he perceives this state, this spirit, is filled to the brim with it, and turns it back toward others. It is all up to him, this public one, to excite, sustain, and organize this body, to struggle with those who are malingering, to encourage those out front, to chide the negligent—but the main thing is to keep them all together, not allowing them release from that state of public trance and neurosis. This is what engenders this enthusiasm, this infinite cheerfulness and energy, and simultaneously, the cold suspicion that is aimed toward those who are present in the field of “society” only pro forma, not wishing to be sucked into this state.

Everything that has been said about this public trance applies to the state in which Nozdrev finds himself. Both literally and figuratively, his perpetual whereabouts are at the fair in a provincial city. The fair represents that state in which this trance emerges, this trance of semi-being, semi-sleep, in which “communities” emerge and live. We know what people do there, or more accurately, what is done there, from Nozdrev’s ecstatic, half-excerpted stories, but it is clear that it is not at all about the binges, exchanges, purchases, flitting about from place to place, friendships, but rather about being in that peculiar state which is full of fire, smoke, life, happiness, where a miracle or death might arise at any moment. Everything transpires “in public,” among people who are all dancing, submerged in this world, in a “public state,” a “public trance.” Nozdrev is one of them.

What does Gogol do with Nozdrev? He spins him around in front of us three times. The first time we see him is at the fair in his very own story—a crazy, enchanting, almost fairy-tale life passes before us, but in a sort of silhouette, as though on the other side of a screen. The second time we see him, he is at home, so to speak, “in reality,” and the third time he is at the governor’s ball.

The third episode, “At the Ball,” gives a classic depiction of the ball itself as total dissolution, the obscuring of each and every person in “public.” The twirls, crawling across the floor, “grabbing for legs” by Nozdrev are not only indecorous and scandalous (of course, he behaves improbably; a nobleman would never grab others by the legs and so forth), but just the opposite—normal, natural, as it should be in such a situation, since he, Nozdrev, as a person most receptive to the moment, to the situation, as “the spirit of society” (today one would say “the spirit of the collective”), is only expressing in the fullest, sharpest sense of the word that which has matured, has built up inside the offspring of the “public.”

I would like to say a bit more about the spirit of “outrageousness” that always hovers over public places, connected to the spirit of civic-mindedness, within the unique situation of a society closed in on itself. This condition leads to an apogee at two most important points: first, at the point of recognition of oneself by society—it is unimportant whether this is a friendly party, a ball, a party at one’s factory, or a trolley filled with people. The steward, the organizer, the master of ceremonies, embodies this place, this ceremony of the recognition by society of itself as a whole. The second point emerges as the air of the unnatural, of artificiality, of falsity, in a familiar sense, of that transgression that any gathering carries inside itself, any grouping, any “public” having gathered supposedly for a certain occasion, but really just on account of itself. This spirit does not emerge immediately, but it definitely

must arise, and the person who embodies it, expresses it, must also emerge. Often this “sweet scamp” is intentionally invited into “society.” Sometimes he emerges unexpectedly, suddenly, society naming someone from within itself for its own reasons. What is important is something else: the spirit of outrageousness is directly connected to, emerges from within, the evolution of the social state as it migrates from initial happiness to outrageousness. It functions as an inevitable push-pull engine—first one, then the other.

There are millions of examples from life and history. Take the terrible carousing of Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great. Or today’s drunken bashes, birthday celebrations, new and old years, weddings, and the like. Ivan Bunin’s description of Vladimir Mayakovsky barking like a dog in a state of oblivion at the reception for a Finnish art exhibition perfectly replicates Nozdrev’s behavior at the ball: Mayakovsky, just like Nozdrev, was a kind of medium receptive to the air, to the climate in a large auditorium; he was able to express it, to “take the game on himself.”<sup>1</sup> Nikolai Leskov’s story “The Devil-Chase” belongs here as well, with its beating of mirrors and all that befalls the merchants of its guild.<sup>2</sup>

The second scene, where Gogol presents Nozdrev at home, is not presented gratuitously as some slice of life. Here the comic relief and effect comes from allowing the viewer to see the functioning of a “public” state of mind, public euphoria, in the place least appropriate for it, not in the arena in which it usually is realized, but quite the contrary, in a place where such behavior is completely out of place, where such a state of mind is totally wild and contrary to nature. The domestic state, the state of being at home as such, located outside “society,” is juxtaposed to the social. Home, by definition, cannot be thrust into, submerged by, a public state, but herein lies the effect produced by Gogol: Nozdrev does not relax. He does not alter his consciousness. He is loyal to his social vocation no matter where he is. The entire world for him is society, even his private life. At the fair, everything is spinning and changing, moving, and it is the same in his home. His son-in-law Mezhuev is a member of society, and he cannot “abandon” it. He doesn’t have the right to—that would be a crime against society, which social consciousness will not understand or forgive. (We must recall how difficult and “vile” it is to leave a birthday party to go home, “you don’t like us,” etc.)

So when Chichikov comes to visit Nozdrev “privately,” then, he comes to

1. Ivan Bunin, *Cursed Days: Diary of a Revolution*, trans. Thomas Galton Marullo (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998), 117.

2. Nikolai Leskov, “The Devil-Chase,” in *The Enchanted Wanderer and Other Stories*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Knopf, 2013).



visit him at home, separately, to visit this actual landowner. The collision and outrageousness that arise occur not as a result of an encounter between the “bad,” daffy, dim-witted, do-nothing character Nozdrev and the quiet, reflective, “good” character Chichikov, but of the encounter between two consciousnesses: the incandescent, cheery (in a familiar sense, *wonderful*) social consciousness presented by Nozdrev’s social state—the classic social person, the life of the party, the happy fellow, the organizer of happiness and levity—and the consciousness of Chichikov, one closed to society who actualizes himself only in “face-to-face” circumstances.

Nozdrev proposes a cheery, happy game, in which Mezhuev, Chichikov, Nozdrev, and the rest will be equals and brothers.<sup>3</sup> Chichikov does not like the game, abandoning it. According to Gogol, Chichikov passes, and that is how it should be. The social state is omnipresent: everywhere it exists, it is victorious; the power and resistance of its opponents mean nothing to it. It doesn’t even notice such power, ignoring it. It is only possible to hide from it, to run away from it, but not without sustaining damage, which is most likely what happens to Chichikov. Won’t this social state perish, disappear? Perhaps because of some external influence?

In Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita*, a striptease during “a social evening” is interrupted by the sudden appearance of the “owner of the house,” who raises the blinds, and the morning light chases away the “social spirit” like a rooster’s cry. In our life, where the blinds are securely lowered and no one can raise them, the end of “social consciousness,” the “trance,” rests in its transition into “formlessness,” into dust, into nonsense, but then, apparently, back again into a new “public” consciousness, and then . . . But here Gogol covers everything with a film of uncertainty, which, as we know, is how the scene between Nozdrev and Chichikov ends.

Pliushkin’s “state of consciousness” is directly opposed to that of Nozdrev. Whereas Nozdrev’s consciousness is directed entirely outward, Pliushkin’s is inwardly directed. If Nozdrev sees, seized by a sea of things and events, then Pliushkin is bereft of any contact whatsoever with anything around him; everything for him is unanticipated and difficult. If Nozdrev is constantly on some sort of stage, then Pliushkin is perpetually in the corner, backstage. Nozdrev is in the bright lights. Pliushkin is in the shadows, in semidarkness. Nozdrev is simply impossible without people. Pliushkin is not possible with people. Nozdrev flits around like a fly in many places at once, easily flying beyond the horizon. Pliushkin is eternally immobile in his musty corner. And so on. The comparisons could go on forever. . . .

3. Mezhuev is a provincial landowner.

In short, Nozdrev is a classic extrovert, Pliushkin, a classic introvert.

Pliushkin demonstrates a type of consciousness that is eternally submerged inside itself, that is, it has its own center and its only natural focus is inward. Everything surrounding it is connected to this center, and this movement toward the center, toward oneself, inward, leads to the total immobility and immutability of Pliushkin himself. But this is not a dead, petrified immobility—it is filled with a tense, dynamic energy, a certain kind of dramatism. In this particular consciousness, a life that seems to be immobile, gray and dusty actually derives from the special attitude of the surrounding world toward this consciousness, toward this center where one and the same process keeps happening. In our opinion, it consists in a special renewal of life behind each object, in an object's renewal in memory and the preservation of this memory as a living part of consciousness, and because of this static preservation, because the objects stand still before the owner of this memory, a force that they had already lost in life is renewed within them. Things that do not appear dead are arranged and preserved around Pliushkin. It doesn't matter if there is gloom, dust, and oblivion covering this assemblage of things and their owner. Underneath this ash exists an infinite connection; a dialogue takes place between the thing and the memory that preserves the life of this thing, and one might speak about a constant current of life, even if it is a strange life that is sweet, subtle, in some sense spiritual. Things, the world fixed in them, do not flit about, forming a void in consciousness. Rather they fill it, give it sustenance for contemplation, and warm it.

Each thing—paper, feather, nail—is connected in this consciousness with such recollections and circumstances, so that to part with them, to discard them, would mean to discard and ruin this life. But this is past life, past circumstances, right? That's the whole point: there is neither past, present, or future for one's consciousness. In the present, there are new things, new circumstances, but they are not better or fuller than those that have already been crowded out—they are merely “new!” Given this kind of orientation of one's consciousness, things pile up on one another. They form a unique kind of museum, a unique kind of library, a museum and library that do not have general significance for the entire world. This is a museum and library only for a single person, for a single memory. What kind of misfortune is this! Is the life recovered from this single situation poorer and weaker than the life that takes place in public museums and collections? In this sense, it is entirely immaterial what is public here—museums are sweet, illuminated, there are guards in them. The objects are arranged and exhibited in an orderly fashion, and there are informational labels on everything. “The Pliushkin Museum” is frightening, disorderly, dirty, and dark for Chichikov, who is accidentally

dropping by, but for its owner it is organized down to the tiniest exhibited item and is in no way inferior to the Louvre.

What involuntarily comes to mind in this situation is the juxtaposition of artists living in the West and those in our country. In Western society—a society that is limitlessly open, brimming with possibilities—all artists, or at least it seems so from here, rush about, flashing by, igniting and extinguishing, similar to Nozdrev. They find themselves inside society, excited by it, and they themselves stir it up in turn, surprising it, terrorizing it with happenings and other “public” acts, constantly searching for contact between art and life, mixing things up, dislocating things, pushing the boundaries of art, invading life with art’s help, becoming insolent sorts, similar to Nozdrev, if only for an instant. (Recall Komar and Melamid’s telegram “*We take responsibility for the earthquake*” or Christo’s wrapping of rocks, etc.).<sup>4</sup>

In life here [in Moscow], impervious and airless, all artists arrive at self-isolation, suffocating self-absorption, an exaggerated attention to nonsense, and an imparting to garbage and dust of those superthoughts and meanings that are inherent to Pliushkin’s consciousness. It only remains to be added that unlike, and in addition to, the fantasies of Pliushkin, artistic consciousness aesthetically appreciates and assimilates this dust and garbage, these dirty stains, and is capable of “meditating” endlessly over them.

4. A 1978 artwork by Komar and Melamid consisted of a telegram sent to German chancellor Helmut Schmidt announcing the duo’s first TERR-ART MAGIC ASSAULT and taking responsibility for an earthquake that occurred on 3 September 1978 in Germany. Kabakov says that he had in mind Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s *Wrapped Coast, One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia, 1968–69* (1969). Interview with editor, Mattituck, NY, 28 February 2016.

## . . . Everything Is in the Turning of the Pages

1981

In the early 1970s Kabakov began experimenting with a new “genre” that he described as “the album.” These objects consisted of boxes containing oversize, thick cardboard pages—usually around thirty per album—to which were mounted, among other things, drawings, paintings, small, glued objects, and texts. Kabakov would “perform” his albums for his friends by reading the texts and “turning the pages.” The present work offers a lyrical, retrospective evaluation of the albums at the moment Kabakov ceased producing them. He has never again returned to the album as a medium.

1. The entire essence of the albums is in the turning of the pages.
2. In order to understand something, at least.
  1. While you are turning the pages, something happens.
  2. In the gray albums, I wanted to describe, to escape, but it turns out that all of this was just like reality.
  3. We keep on turning the pages.
  9. Gray happens when there’s no black, no white.
  10. There is neither black nor white in gray.
1. Something is about to “happen,” and then it will suddenly become clear.  
But nothing will be clear.
2. Gray is life without fate.
  1. White is the description of freedom, the possibilities of choice . . .
  2. But also emptiness.
  3. And simply nothingness.
  4. Possibilities to draw something on it.
  5. The place where what was drawn disappeared.
  6. The end of everything.
  7. But also the beginning . . .
  8. A place where there is nothing on it yet . . .
  9. Solar energy, energy transformed into trees, and through them into paper in which this solar energy is preserved, lives on . . .
  10. The image of death.
  11. It underlies everything that may be drawn on it, written on it (but black can also underlie everything); only gray cannot be there under any circumstances, since everything comes together in “it.”

12. White transforms easily, instantaneously into light. It is good light in which everything good is hidden, invisible.
13. White that contains everything, gives birth to total completeness, gives it life, always, at every instant and even now.
14. White that gives all life and even now at this instant when I am looking at it.
15. White has neither a past nor a future and is always “now.”
16. It is always ready to create something new out of absolutely anything, indiscriminately.



1. When there will be fate—there will be white and black.
2. Time is drawn out in albums, and viewing it is the pure time of our life.
3. One page after another is turned, at the same rate as the movement of a second hand.
4. During this activity, time moves among other objects that surround the album throughout the day, objects that appear to be standing still.
5. Something might happen during this time, but it might not.
6. But so what, this is not the main thing.
7. Everything comes back to the motion that cannot be quelled—the turning of the pages in the album.
8. Something is about to happen, and then it will suddenly become clear. But nothing will be clear.
9. The turning of the pages is not a real (everyday) action—it is an “artistic” action.
10. The artistic action (leafing through the album) is a higher one, more concentrated than the common everyday one.
11. But more fluid than a state of total clarity and lucidity.
12. It is located in the interval between everyday reality, the ticking of the clock, and “nothingness.”
13. And clarification, the possession of meaning . . .
14. That’s why it is not clear what it is.
15. It could be the “Artistic Phenomenon” as the spokesperson for the artistic style of its time, and then become something . . .
16. But to do that it should not self-destruct and denude itself, and turn into emptiness.
17. In which only one mechanical action remains—to turn page after page.
18. And it does not become something—even something artistic—by virtue of being a tedious repetition.
19. The artistic style emerges not when repetition occurs, but when a depiction or text appears on the pages.

20. Both of these can be correlated with other artistic phenomena of the same order—and the potential for the formation of a style emerges.
  21. It can be correlated in such cases with other artistic phenomena.
  22. A connection with the past and the surroundings arises.
  - 23.
  - 24.
  - 25.
  26. But the beginning and the end are one and the same—at zero.
  27. And what remains is one foundation—turning the pages.
  28. We then have to return to the very turning of the pages and look at what that is.
  29. Turning the pages resembles fate in its importunity and imposition.
  30. We should recognize fate not as freedom but as an imposition.
  31. Turning the pages unfolds in time, again like fate.
  32. But perhaps this is a “model” of fate, its image?
  33. And so is it understandable for every person? For everyone?
  34. And it turns out to be onerous, bleak, and oppressive?
  35. And without any eyes and without meaning?
  36. . . . .
  37. And it functions like mechanical blows, like melancholy and tedium, as soon as there is turning of the pages.
  38. And an understanding of “why” does not emerge. Is it beyond our grasp?
  39. But fortunately, this is not the model.
  40. Not an image.
  41. This really is not a depiction that is “artistic.” It is fate itself.
  42. But it is for one person only; only he recognizes it. This turning of the pages was for me alone.
  43. Like for another person in another instance, but again, only for that person.
- 
7. Here the depiction as an image quickly migrates into formlessness, into an everyday action.
  8. But perhaps into a sacral action?
  9. Into a ritual, but what kind, of what?
- 
1. To attempt to describe everything “from outside.” How it looks “from outside.”
  2. Everything taken as a whole is comprised of an arrival, presence, and departure.
  3. What frightens us “here” is not reality but the quantity and unavoidability of the operations that we cannot avoid performing.
  4. The unavoidability of those operations that we cannot *not* perform.

1. On the outside of life there is no life, but on the inside there is no life either.
2. For emptiness to emerge, so much has to be reordered and redrawn.
3. Everything has to be brought to the point of being everyday “belongings.”
4. If they had been born inside “culture,” then all processes would occur inside it, but it turns out there has been an enormous slice of life without culture, then inside it, and finally coming back out of it again. But perhaps all of this is just a big illusion. After all, everything is done in the light of culture.

## On Emptiness

1982

Produced in the aftermath of Kabakov's stay in Czechoslovakia in 1981, "On Emptiness" reflects on perhaps the most "Western" outpost of the Eastern Bloc and the significant differences between life inside and outside Soviet borders. This lengthy trip abroad had a catalyzing effect on the artist's thinking about Soviet civilization. Although Kabakov's engagement with the theme of "emptiness" extends far beyond narrow questions of visual art, the essay also presents a succinct and compelling statement about the aesthetic sensibilities that have guided his work in various media.

I was in Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1981, and among my most interesting observations came from looking at "our place" from a different place, from the position of one who has left it. How does it look "from the side"? The situation is like riding in a train for an interminable amount of time, sitting the whole time in the compartment without ever exiting, and then all of a sudden, we get out at a stop, climb out on the station platform, and look in through the glass at the same compartment in which we were just sitting.

This gives an instant feeling that we are undergoing an important experience, an experience that unites everything, that defines itself and grants everything its proper place—a clear, comprehensive vision of emptiness, of the state of emptiness in that place in which we regularly live.

First and foremost in this conception, of course, is a spatial representation, and this experience of space is characteristic for an artist, giving him an almost familiar feeling, since this is the way he tends to look at things . . . etc. But the conception of emptiness that I am discussing is not simply spatial or optical. Its substance is of an entirely different sort.

The gigantic reservoir, the expanse of emptiness that represents "our place," is not emptiness per se, that is, "a vacant place," according to the European meaning of the word. Such an approach would characterize emptiness as a space not yet filled, not yet mastered, undeveloped or underdeveloped, etc. In short, it would see emptiness as a table upon which nothing has been placed but upon which something could be placed, as land that has not yet been cultivated but that could be cultivated. This European, rationalist notion of emptiness as a field "awaiting human labor," a place potentially



to be mastered through the application of human capacities, seems entirely inadequate for the phenomenon of which I wish to speak. The emptiness of “our place” is of an entirely different character. It cannot be described in terms of mastery, settlement, application of labor, economics, i.e., in the terms of European rationalist consciousness.

Instead, this emptiness presents itself as an extraordinarily active volume — as a reservoir of emptiness, as a particular void-like state of being, tremendously active but opposed to genuine existence, genuine life, indeed, the absolute antipode to any living existence. As is well known, “nature abhors a vacuum.” To this I would add, “a vacuum abhors nature.” The emptiness of which I speak is not zero, not simply “nothing.” The emptiness in question is not a neutrally charged, passive border. Absolutely not. “Emptiness” is tremendously active, its activeness equal to that of affirmative existence, be it the activeness of nature or of human endeavors or of even greater forces. Although focused in another direction, this activeness possesses the same energy and strength that characterize the striving of living existence, a striving to be, become, grow, build, exist. By way of this ineradicable activeness, force, and constancy, emptiness “lives,” transforming being into its antithesis, destroying construction, mystifying reality, turning everything into dust and emptiness. This emptiness, I repeat, is the transferring of active being into active nonbeing. Most importantly, this emptiness lives and exists not on its own power, but on power drawn from the life which surrounds it, which it transforms, pulverizes, collapses into itself. Emptiness adheres to, merges with, and sucks up being; its mighty, sticky, nauseating anti-energy derives from transferring into itself, like a vampire, all that it gleans and extracts from the life around it. Searching for a metaphor, I see a table covered with a tablecloth at which people sit conversing, a table set with dishes and food at which these people are taking lunch, and upon which a hostess sets new dishes. And I see an unnoticed person who constantly, inexorably pulls that tablecloth off, causing everything on it to fall to the floor in a rhythmic crashing of plates, glasses, and cups. Why? What is the purpose? This question can be put only to the living, the intelligent, the natural, but not to emptiness. Emptiness is the other, antithetical side of any question. It is the inside out, the opposite, the eternal “no” that we cannot name, yet which has meaning and a name, which lies beneath everything small and large, whole and individual, intelligent and mindless.

This very emptiness actually inhabits the place in which we live, from Brest to the Pacific Ocean. It is a “special” (however bombastic the word) hole in space, in the world, in the fabric of being, with its own location that differentiates it from the world as a reservoir of emptiness, carrying out its

terrible duty in relation to the entire remaining world. This, I repeat, is not the result of someone's evil will. As I already said, the condition of the existence of emptiness is its vampirism of energy in relation to being and the world.

As for the territory where emptiness dwells, its physical surface is firm and dense, covered with trees, earth, mountains, people, and beasts. It is occupied in a physical sense. Millions live on its surface with their cities, houses, and other things. What kind of life transpires in this place when its residents interact with emptiness? This is precisely what I propose to examine.

First and foremost, I would like to speak about a peculiar psychic mold, a psychological condition afflicting those born into and residing in emptiness. It is as if emptiness penetrates these residents' experiences and sensations completely, entering into every reaction and deed, combining with every task, word, and desire. Every person living here lives, consciously or not, in two dimensions—whether in relation to another person, in daily life, in nature, or in relation to emptiness. Moreover, these two dimensions are opposed, as I stated earlier, to one another. The first is “construction” and organization; the second, destruction and annihilation of the first. On the everyday, worldly level, this separation, bifurcation, and fatal disconnectedness of the two dimensions, is experienced as a feeling of the universal destruction of everything that man would do, the uselessness, groundlessness, and senselessness of what he would build and undertake. In all of this there is a feeling of ephemerality, absurdity, and fragility. This life in two dimensions creates, with no exceptions, the peculiar neuroticism and psychopathy of all those residents of emptiness. Emptiness creates a peculiar atmosphere of stress, excitedness, strengthlessness, apathy, and causeless terror. These are the properties of those residing in emptiness.

Their mental state resembles the psychic stress experienced by small, primitive tribes in central Africa awaiting whatever may come from the terrifying, vital, endless world of the jungle. But there is a big difference between the consciousness of a neurotic surrounded by a jungle and that of a person living in emptiness. Sooner or later the resident of the jungle learns how to relate to the spirits of the forest, to name them, to produce incantations and prohibitions, since the forces of the jungle are real for him, part of his real existence. However enormous and terrible they may be, he can live with them, deal with them, cajole, battle, destroy, and escape them. Such is not the case with the resident of emptiness. The emptiness that he experiences is of an entirely different nature: first and foremost, one is, by definition, incapable of recognizing, naming, or by any other means signifying it. After all, emptiness is neither natural nor supernatural, it is *ANTINATURAL*, and to live with it

constantly is to not live. It is impossible and unbearable. The dwellers' sensation of emptiness is the nauseating terror of the blood donor whose blood is continually pumped out and taken away. But the denizens of emptiness have their own technique, the psychotechnique of life in emptiness. They have produced their own set of discriminations regarding emptiness. They have, so to speak, personified and named it. For them, nature has an absolutely firm appearance, a fantastic yet defined aspect, but we shall discuss that later.

Now I would like to discuss a possible topographical form of residence in emptiness. Topographically this form is expressed and exists in the principally insular character of the habitation of emptiness. We can speak of an ocean, of an archipelago of small and large settlements, lost and scattered about the expanse of emptiness, resembling some sort of Philippines. These are islands, not in a warm ocean, but in an ocean of uncertainty, an ocean of emptiness. Here, in our case, the image, the essence of emptiness, assumes the very dimensions of the territory; its invisibility, endlessness, unenclosability, and immeasurability representing not simply a "large" space that one could calculate, comprehend, and assimilate, but rather a groundless, interminable blending together with emptiness, a transformation into emptiness. These islands of habitation contract and huddle together, protecting and preserving themselves from the surrounding emptiness. This applies to the configuration of villages and hamlets, where houses are pressed up against one another, as well as to gigantic cities, the very dimension of which speaks to the multitude of refugees crowded within them, fleeing, trying to save themselves from emptiness.

As is the custom in insular culture, these islands of habitation are united by systems of communication, bridges across emptiness, but all of these roads, paths, highways, rivers, and railroads belong to a somewhat different form of emptiness and are, in a certain sense, the opposite of the life of the islands. We shall discuss that a bit later. Just now I would like to emphasize a peculiar state of mind among these island residents that inheres in the special knowledge that emptiness and nonexistence begin immediately beyond the border of the island, beyond its final home.

Let us move on to an examination of an island itself, of the place in which the "colonists of emptiness" are crowded, its permanent residents, islanders for many generations. What does this community, this fellowship of people "swimming in emptiness," this "society in a canoe," constitute? Does this community present a certain unity and continuity, in short, a single, interacting human social body in the face of emptiness?

Nothing of the sort.

Scrutinizing an island on which there are from a hundred to a thousand

people, as in villages, or from one to seven million, as in enormous cities, that which is most important in them comes to light: a man on this island, in this village, city, or megalopolis conducts himself JUST AS HE WOULD IN EMPTINESS, not noticing the tens, hundreds, or millions crowded alongside him, resembling him. This feeling, the terror of the experience of emptiness within him, is so great that he even sees and experiences the people around him as emptiness. The sea of people around him does not lead to the formation of ties between himself and others, nor to benevolent harmony with the other. Everything around him is equally the other's—the streets, houses, today's tasks and yesterday's, the things surrounding him—everything is void-like. Everything incarnates emptiness. Inside the island, salvation from emptiness is the same emptiness, and thus for each denizen of the island all that is outside and inside the island, without exception, is nothing, emptiness.

Let us move on to the next topographic level, the topography inside the island.

All of the inhabitants of the islands, feeling themselves to be surrounded by emptiness, take refuge in BURROWS.

These burrows constitute the most important cell, what one might call the basic atom, in the construction of the island. The burrow is the sole place of residence for the inhabitant of emptiness, a relatively hopeful refuge from emptiness and its bearer, Man. And just as the island is an asylum from spatial emptiness, so too the burrow is the asylum of the individual man from the island's other inhabitants. This structure is principally nonsocial and antisocial, as it should be, since emptiness, the arena in which all of this takes place, is ubiquitous, active in every cage, penetrating everything inside it. The other inhabitants around the "Burrow Man" represent a source of danger. They are inimical, or, in the best case, neutral, harmless, and bland. The movements of the "Burrow Man" reproduce the communicational structure of the insular culture as a whole. He moves about the island as though in emptiness, from his own burrow to that of one of the few residents close to him, those whom he trusts, traversing as best he can the dangerous zone between burrows, the zone beyond the threshold of the burrow, the threshold where his security ends and emptiness begins. The streets, roads, and sidewalks of these islands, villages, cities, and settlements are filled with burrow residents rushing from one burrow to another, neither seeing, nor noticing others, but still fearing them, as they shove and collide with those similar to themselves.

There are almost no interactions or interrelations between the inhabitants of one burrow and those of other burrows, except among acquaintances. There is less sociability here than among animals living in the forest, where there are spatial zones of influence of every sort, an autonomy of particular

paths, a regulated spatial stratification of being. Earlier we talked about the personification and identification of this feeling among these islands' denizens. For the burrow residents, this identification is connected with the concept of "stateness" [*gosudarstvennost'*].

Stateness in the topography of this place is that which belongs to an unseen impersonality, the elements of space, in short, all that serves as an embodiment of emptiness, combines with it and expresses it. A metaphor comes closest to defining stateness: the image of wind blowing interminably alongside and between houses, blowing through everything, an icy wind sowing cold and destruction, howling and crushing, with an unchangeable composition.

The aim and meaning of the wind are incomprehensible to the burrow dwellers, as are its terrible fits, its changes of direction, its movement. In precisely the same way, the constant, ferocious pressure of stateness, the menace and terror directly beyond the burrow's door, inspires constant horror in the soul of the person sequestered within, and for good reason. In these fits, in these claps of thunder, in this implacable, irrepressible movement inaccessible to either comprehension or entreaties, the timid resident of these places recognizes the voice of emptiness. Stateness is itself emptiness, not materially or substantially given to the denizen of these regions, but all the while instilling terror, fear, and appearing as punishment. Above all, stateness, an operation incomprehensible to the Burrow Man, is inherently opposed and inaccessible to him. It demands from him the execution of its own, fixed "governmental aims," known only to it, promising only mercy in return. What sorts of goals, if there are goals, does this wind, this stateness, set for itself? These goals always bear in mind the mastery of the scope of all territory occupied by emptiness as a SINGLE WHOLE. The inhabitants of this place are cast into this sweeping stream, themselves becoming powerless elements inside the whirlwind.

For just this reason authentically governmental acts often have to do with superhuman, megalomaniacal projects and constructions: Peter the Great's canals flowing across the entire country from north to south; the standardization of civil militarization along the border of Nicholas I's empire; Stalin's forest-protection zones, his razing of mountains and changing the flow of rivers; the passage of skiers from Khabarovsk to Moscow and back again; Khrushchev's development of virgin soil and space flights; the Sevmorput; and other such ventures.<sup>1</sup> But all of these constructions and projects, one

1. Sevmorput (*severnii morskoi put'*) refers to the usually ice-bound northern sea route that connects the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans by way of the Arctic Ocean.

replacing the other like terrifying gusts of wind, have changed nothing in the territory itself, nor in the situation and states of mind of the burrows' inhabitants, although the residents themselves are the ones who completed the projects. The residents always feel themselves thrown into these dislocations, into these gusts and great deeds, sensing them as gloom, as violence, or as senseless intoxication.

It follows from the above, and goes without saying, that all communications and links between burrows and islands also belong to this wind, to this stateness.

Do these places, this insular archipelago arranged on emptiness, have a history? No. Its islands disappear into the past, as if into emptiness, dissolving like clouds, losing their form and configuration. The memory of bygone islands disappears, another appears, but on the edge of today, just as at the edge of an island, the same emptiness gapes. There exists no history, no sedimentary deposits, no continuity. Only simple poetic recollections remain: there were monasteries as hearths of culture, there were cities, there was a certain life at one time . . . where . . . but everything, like smoke, has melted into emptiness. Nothing results from anything. Nothing is connected to anything. Nothing means anything. Everything hangs and vanishes in emptiness, borne off by the icy wind of emptiness.

And the most important signs of life for all of the local inhabitants are escape, dislocation, and drivenness. The wind of emptiness carries off and blows residents from their burrows. It drives them like leaves along the uniform face of the enormous surface of this country, countenancing no delay, letting no one become rooted. Each person is provisionally present here, as if arrived from nowhere very recently, a foreigner on someone else's land.

How do the inhabitants of these places relate to this feeling of emptiness, to the restlessness?

Something like four forms of relationship can be distinguished. The first is to attempt, in general, not to notice emptiness with one's consciousness, to live "naturally" in it and to consider all events, causes, and connections of life in emptiness simply "as they are," natural and necessary.

The second is to consider this void-like state unworthy and unacceptable for a person, for human life. In this case, all possible projects and reforms, from the economic to the legal, are necessary in order to change this place and the living conditions by means of construction, displacement, labor, and yet newer reforms.

The third relationship is mystical-religious, according to which this place of emptiness and insecurity is extremely useful for the human soul. Precisely here, in this place devoid of existence—the place of "evil, lies, and nonexis-

tence”—it is easier to be saved, to experience “heavenly heights,” to search for and find higher truth.<sup>2</sup>

The fourth is simply to see this place as it in fact is and describe it as a doctor might describe the history of an illness with which he is terminally afflicted.

If we return to the image of emptiness as an ocean, it may be said that what we have here always was, is, and always will be. Life here recalls the life of scholars in tents in uninhabited, icy Antarctica. Of course, one can go visiting, drink tea, or go dancing, moving from one tent to another, from the Soviet to the American and vice versa, and be unselfconsciously carried away by this activity, but true, authentic relations will consist in the sensation of the place in which these tents stand, a relation to a deathly, five-kilometer thickness of ice, from which one may await anything one pleases but, first and foremost, destruction and death.

2. An invocation of Nikolai Berdyaev's philosophical writings, and, more generally, a reference to the typical vocabulary of religious philosophy in prerevolutionary Russia, a popular enthusiasm among the unofficial artists.

## The Creator Looks at His Work Twice

1982

A melancholic analysis of the complexities of art, “The Creator Looks at His Work Twice” seeks to understand how the author/artist, the work of art, and the reader/viewer should ideally interact, while simultaneously lamenting the cloistered atmosphere of unofficial Moscow. Kabakov describes this “sealed-off” world that he shares with other local artists as a gloomy, “cursed” place, yet one that paradoxically gives rise to urges toward the spiritual and the sacred.

Embarking on a work, the creator unconsciously or consciously has in mind a viewer, literally “another,” with whom he will communicate by means of his work, to whom his work is addressed.<sup>1</sup> If we accept the definition that a work of art appears between the painting made by the creator and the viewer—literally “between” them—for this contact to take place, then it is clear that in starting, carrying out, and completing the work, the creator keeps in mind this “other” viewer, tells him something, shows him something, converses with him, and so on. This is particularly evident in periods when the viewer-buyer is not imagined or hypothetical, but concrete and fully known to the artist. Then that contact, conversation, meeting is particularly strong and concrete. To a certain degree this also involves a narrowing of the range of communication. With a hypothetical viewer the breadth of communication is much bigger.

But that’s not the point.

The whole “creator-viewer” situation was possible in happy times when the work’s “entrance” into the “world,” “outside,” took place continually, that is to say, naturally, and the work—whether a play, painting, or drawing—left the creator and sought out a meeting with the viewer, awaiting acceptance or fisticuffs.

But let us look at a different situation.

What if a play, literary work, musical work, painting, or drawing has no hope of reaching the viewer, of entering into communication, into contact?

1. Throughout the text, the terms *avtor* (author, creator) and *khudozhnik* (artist) are employed interchangeably.



Right now, this is the situation that we are in: it has been this way and apparently will remain this way for an endlessly long time. What happens in this case? What happens is that the “other” viewer is replaced by a substitute viewer *who is the artist himself*, the one who makes the work, and so imperceptibly a second stage of the work begins, one that in some ways is completely different in content and even contradicts the first.

During this second stage, communication takes place between the artist-maker and the work itself, a communication that for all intents and purposes should not take place. The viewer is replaced, but it is impossible to look from the outside and perceive *as not one’s own* the work that the creator offered in the first place as his appeal to another. These are basically two movements in different directions, traveling at full speed in reverse, but this miserable state is entirely typical of the situation [in unofficial Moscow] today.

A work created becomes the object of meditation by the creator himself. He contemplates it endlessly in silence and solitude, looks at his object, and so it seems to him, improves it, brings it to completion; however, the basis of this exercise is not clarity and the expressiveness of the work, but immersion in the process of communing between maker and painting.

But that is not the worst part. The worst thing about this miserable, sealed-off situation is that an idiosyncratic understanding develops about what making a work means—a situation in which the artist takes for granted his solitary communing with the picture and methodically builds it up, giving it form. From the very start the “method” of making the picture is calculated with this solitary meditation and communing in mind. The painting itself, its text, arises from the process of that “ritual.”

The exaltation that inevitably arises from the creator’s extended hanging around with his own canvas is inevitably identified with a higher, extremely spiritual state, perceived as something from beyond, something true, and in the final analysis as a “revelation.” The studio becomes a temple, random visitors deemed worthy of communion become parishioners, and the paintings become hazy imprints of something alien, of which they are accidental, spontaneous, yet faithful traces.

This is one step away from treating your own works as something sacred.

And this is our cursed lot—dust, dirt, muddy, dark smears on stretched canvases, and the sensation of ecstasy and revelation of a sacred bird caught in painfully stretched nerves.

## Dust, Dirt, and Garbage (Dust as an Object of Contemplation)

1982

In response to the cult of the spiritual that accompanied the reception of much unofficial art, Kabakov offered this ironic rumination on the interpenetration of high and low, sacred and profane, ethereal and worldly in the local art scene. The text also demonstrates Kabakov's increasing willingness over the course of the 1980s to describe the conditions surrounding the intimate unofficial art world in critical, even negative, terms. His irreverent interpretations of his friends' artworks no doubt surprised—and in some cases offended—Kabakov's compatriots in the underground.

A distinctive feature of the local culture is its tendency to employ one image to describe a great many phenomena and concepts. This is the role played by dust and, more generally, garbage, dirt, and trash. In this order of things, dust has a special, one might even say *universal*, significance. I am not just talking about dust in some figurative sense, as an *image* of dust, but concrete, actual dust: dust, so to speak, *in real life*. Dust. Digging around in dust, examining dust, working on dust, all of this comprises a special artistic, aesthetic, almost irrational activity on local ground. Examining and repositioning dust, mixing it—in general, the artist's relationship to dust can swallow up a whole art practice—these actions serve as an object of the artist's unconscious, aestheticizing, elevated, mystical meditation.

First, let me introduce a few examples.

The work of Shvartsman can be described practically in its entirety as “dusty” meditation, a special creative contemplation of dust.<sup>1</sup> Given a special excited state of the imagination, these accidental clumps and furrows, the mixing of this mysterious dusty medium, are capable of engendering the most diverse phantoms. Glimmering and moving around, gliding and transforming into one another, these specks of dust and the way they float can engender the most unexpected fantasies. Dust, mysteriously shimmering from

1. Mikhail Shvartsman (1926–1997), an unofficial painter who gained notoriety for his quasi-religious, vaguely representational paintings, was known for the dramatic, ritualistic presentation of his art in his Moscow studio-apartment.

within and capable of changing under various kinds of illumination, from bright in some spots to colorless and dead in others, participates in aesthetic transmutations in a special fairy-tale way.

Dust has two traits that attract attention that are manifested in Shvartsman's art. In a very particular way, one might say that dust is intimately connected with time. A thing—any thing—located under various layers and types of dust recedes a certain distance into the depths of time. It is as though it looks back at us from a distant past, transforming itself—as virtually all ancient things do—into a magical secret, a priceless treasure. Given this interaction between dust and the mysterious object underneath it, it is as if we are present at the exciting moment of the first glimmer of an ancient vessel under the archeologist's cautious brush, when the object's value is already obvious but the whole is not yet visible. But that's not all. The shroud that is eternally connected with the object itself somehow becomes valuable in and of itself, inseparable from the thing. It forms rich stains and diverse shadows, spots, lines, and cracks.

This is the beauty of the "patina of time" on ancient objects, on paintings—craquelures, darkenings, fadings. The valuable object, like any ancient thing, is disintegrating, turning into dust. We don't even really like an ancient masterpiece that is not a bit battered, that is not disintegrating a bit. It is the presence of the dust of the past, in a literal sense, "the dust of the ages," that Shvartsman makes use of as an indispensable attribute of the "priceless miraculous masterpiece." But that is not all. The viscous, indeterminate, thick structure of dust is capable like nothing else of evoking, during its contemplation, all sorts of cultural reminiscences that are not fixed, that migrate incessantly, evoking ever newer associations, floating from one image to the next, replacing one "cultural" mirage with another, like a bush at twilight or stains on a dirty wall. The question is merely one of the power of the viewer's imagination or the sheer volume of his "library of associations." In any case, while scrutinizing the spellbinding curlicues and swirlings on Shvartsman's paintings, the viewer finds himself in a special state of semiconsciousness, semisleep. He is not sure whether he is actually seeing special "spiritual revelations" or whether all of this just "seems" to be the case.

Let us look at the role of dust, or more precisely, of garbage, in Steinberg's art.<sup>2</sup> Garbage, although it is in the same crate as dust, is nonetheless a bit different: keys, scraps, pieces of something or other. As is well known, Edik's paintings consist of two elements: the background-medium and geometric

2. Eduard Steinberg (1937–2012), an unofficial artist whose abstract paintings often feature primarily white surfaces dotted with colorful abstract forms.

shapes that float about in it. There is nothing to say about the medium, this is taboo for me—I am full of unbelievable piety toward this medium. But the medium does not just coexist; it is positioned externally to the elements that are submerged in it, or more accurately, that float in it—quietly flying about, slowly moving around, one near the other, moving from the depths toward us and back again, always at one and the same speed. Each person who has found himself in the presence of these paintings has experienced the magic of the quiet, mysterious movement of these particles.

But what are these elements that are moving around? In a sense, these are “primary symbols,” parts of original creation, metaphysical, originary ideas of being. They are triangles, arcs, circles, lines, squares, and other primary symbols. The aforementioned medium, their birthplace, is where they wander about, moving freely, even whimsically, unconstrained, like fish in an aquarium. Individually, they are formidable, heavy, full of significance, capable on their own of “immobilizing, pacifying, ruling.” It is as though these are “ontological” symbols at rest, not at work, rather like cabinet ministers on a fishing trip. They form accidental groups, garlands, not according to rules of subordination as in, for example, medieval works. Perhaps this is good. Perhaps in these paintings they exist at such heights that they are entirely innocuous and calm, but for us, down here below, we are not allowed to look. It’s like looking at a marshal in a public bath, or not at marshals but at former ones, at dismissed marshals.

If we presume the latter, then again, as was the case with Shvartsman, we see the quiet, calm meditation on garbage, for what else besides garbage could float around, moving in such whimsical, accidental, free, boundless connections and combinations. And it is not at all important in which environment—on a quiet sunny morning on the asphalt or tossed upward toward the sky. In the artist’s imagination garbage again turns out to be transformed. Here our local culture is displayed from the very best angle, here we see its enormous range, from simple beautiful fragments to “symbolic” things, right up to metaphysical essences.

There is an enormous role played by dust and garbage, as well as dirt and slop, in the art of Yankilevsky.<sup>3</sup> Pails of various shapes and sizes are placed at each landing along the stairwell in my building; there is a pair near each door with “For Garbage” written on one and “For Food Scraps” on the other. People walking past turn away in disgust, not wishing to see either of them, but in art, as for the janitor, these two pails are far from the same. Although

3. Vladimir Yankilevsky (1938–2018), an unofficial Soviet artist who produced surreal and grotesque canvases throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

both are disparagingly called “garbage,” their inner meaning, their content, is not the same at all, and their journeys, their addressees, are different. If the pail labeled “For Garbage” holds dry scraps, so to speak—jars, books, magazines, packaging, etc., scraps of everyday reality, everyday life, including stuff from its highest stages, objects of culture—then in the pail labeled “For Food Scraps” there are things that are disgusting and nauseating to look at, that serve our metabolism or, more accurately, that can no longer serve. This latter is the very lowest in our existence, stuff that even the most curious and nonsqueamish garbage specialist, with a long metal hook in one hand and a sack in the other, won’t begin to dig around in. In truth, “dry” cultural garbage will go to the dump, whereas food scraps will go as feed to the pigsty for fattening up new pigs, for turning the eternal wheel of life, doomed to give birth, die, and feed a new circle of life, new generations with one’s own remnants. Oh, begetting and dying flesh. Oh, eternal inextinguishable “cycle of matter in nature.” How much profundity and philosophy there is in you!

That it is possible to digress for so long and go so far into philosophical meditation over a bucket for food scraps “casts light” on Volodya’s [Yankilevsky’s] paintings. If the paintings of Shvartsman, Steinberg, Kabakov (and others that I cannot analyze in this article) belong to the enormous, bottomless sphere of “the garbage pail” and “dry” garbage, then the works of Yankilevsky, Sooster, and other artists belong to the sphere of the pail for food scraps.<sup>4</sup>

What will we see if we hold our nose and lift the lid of this pail a bit and look inside? (Of course, this has to be done on a philosophical, ontological level of contemplation, because on a primitive level we won’t see anything and will close the lid quickly so as not to become nauseated.)

We will see the aforementioned live, pulsing medium, a kind of magma filled with the transmutations of decomposition, some sort of liquid pus. But for a philosopher and “ontologist,” it is a repositioning, the transformation of complex organic matter from one state to another. It is the special overflowing of some objects and forms into others, into smaller ones and ultimately into impalpability, into some special sort of semiliquid medium that perhaps represents a “primary material” in which everything is only temporary, transforming clumps arising for an instant, then dissolving again, disappearing back into it. It is namely here, in this garbage pail that the eternal connection, the problem of “the eternal” and “the temporal,” is demonstrated. This liquid, according to some definitions, is “pus” and, according to others, is

4. Ülo Sooster (1924–1970), an Estonian unofficial artist who worked in a painterly language rooted in the depiction of surrealist archetypes, was Kabakov’s studiomate in the 1960s.

a “nutritious bullion,” embodying the eternal, whereas all the elements in it—all the skins, leftovers, crusts, etc.—are temporary. Yankilevsky’s paintings represent, it seems, this living medium, only it has been poured onto a flat surface with edges, a kind of oven pan, but as soon as this thick, viscous medium sets, after its fermentation, then this pan can be placed vertically and hung on the wall. It is not at all important whether its cooled-off surface appears empty to our sight, or whether a large quantity of sticks, spheres, and nails protrude from it, or whether it is covered with paint. The important thing is that they exist inside, submerged in this living medium, barely sticking out of it, and are themselves formed by it.

The artist labors over this breathing magma, over its “life.” He pumps his own energy, his own “eros,” into it. He cuts it, fertilizes it, plows it with his brush, plants objects in it like seeds so that they might germinate and grow. He divides it into various sections for different seedlings, again and again, layering on newer and newer nutritious layers. He gives each garden bed either an endearing or a fearsome name: “Man,” “Woman,” “Shostakovich’s Memory,” “Triptych.” The behavior of these “cultural names” given to the living garden allotments is interesting. They, having wound up in this impersonal “primary material,” instantaneously lose their cultural signification, like a tractor fallen into a swamp.

Under these conditions, all categories and concepts—cultural, historical, social—are “not taken into account.” Everything is covered by the dull monotonous howl of the “living medium” waiting to suck everything into itself, to swallow everything up and dissolve it, not knowing the meanings of “hierarchy.” Here, everything has no meaning, except life itself, except the life of its body that has grown out to infinity, to cosmic dimensions, where, as in the cosmos, its life is occurring and where everything except for it is insignificant.

But if you look at Kabakov’s works, we return to the pail that we left aside for a while, the pail labeled “For Garbage.”

## Discourse on the Perception of the Three Layers, Three Levels, into Which an Ordinary, Anonymous Written Product—Notices, Slips, Menus, Bills, Tickets, etc.—May Be Broken Down

1982

This text was among the first of Kabakov's writings to be published abroad, appearing in the émigré art publication *A-Ya* in the original Russian, alongside an English translation, in 1984. Its downbeat yet lighthearted tone recurs throughout Kabakov's art and writing. In this case, the artist's elaborate philosophical interpretations of banal bureaucratic documents zigzag from incisive analysis to absurd extrapolation and back again.

Let us call them "levels." The first level is the level of the paper from which this product has been made (good quality, bad quality, smooth, rough, and so on).

The second level is the level of "white" or of the empty, that whiteness on which the text appears, the white surface itself.

The third level is the message that will be printed on that whiteness: all kinds of graphs, instructions, notes, sections, figures, texts, and so on.

We have described these three layers one after the other as if they stand in a row, but it is possible to place them one on top of the other. In this case, we can speak about them as levels of perception. Let us try to describe the meaning of each level separately.

The first level, the cardstock, the paper itself, is presented as a thing, that is, in its lowest, natural form. As we know from experience, it quickly changes from new to old, from clean to dirty, from whole to torn, crumpled, and wrinkled. I would especially like to note the inevitable future it is heading toward—it will become garbage, filth, refuse that can be easily crammed into the wastepaper basket. This "paper future" can be seen very clearly in the present of every paper, especially if it carries the stamp of short-term use: packing paper, newspaper, tissue paper, and such.

Thus, the paper itself provides an ideal example of a thing that is taken

from nature for a short time and then goes back, disappearing again into nature. It is taken out for something and then returns to nonexistence.

This duality that exists in the stock, the duality of “nothing” and “for something,” divides this thing into two poles between which it vacillates: the very same paper as an object can become priceless in some circumstances and worthless in others.



We shall move on to examine the second level, what we have called the “whiteness” of the paper, its empty field.

The whiteness also splits in two in our consciousness and can act within its two meanings, remaining the same in appearance but sharply differentiated depending on our mindset.

The first and most widespread attitude toward whiteness, toward a white sheet of paper, is toward it as an emptiness on which nothing has yet been written, drawn, or marked. This is a completely utilitarian mindset, and in this view the white sheet really is nothing. It awaits its real use, to be written or drawn upon, or whatever. In this sense the white sheet does not have its present, its independent existence, but receives it only in the future. It carries no message, since we await the message on top of the sheet, and while there is no message, there is no point in looking at the white sheet. But according to another mindset, this same emptiness, this whiteness, might have an independent weight, one that is furthermore full of content and capable of drawing and feeding our attention in a special way associated with a particular emotional experience. The kinds of perceptions that occur while contemplating the white sheet could in themselves be sufficiently complex, and considering this complexity, we will try to examine it on three levels.

We shall call the first *energistic*. I call it this because when we look in a certain way at the white sheet, a flow of energy appears to come at us. This energy is contained in the white sheet as an object that has maintained, accumulated, and preserved the energy of the sun. This energy was absorbed by ancient trees as they stood under the sun until they were cut down, splintered into little pieces, and molded into a thin mass on a flat table. Through all these evolutions, from tree to white sheet, this solar energy and its light never disappeared. Preserved in the white sheet, they come to us, at us. Thus the white sheet, in the most direct, physical sense of the word, preserves and carries this energy and light when we look at it.

The second level—I will call it *symbolic*—is the level in which the white sheet, the whiteness, acts as a color, and as a color that carries with



it a semantic weight—possibly (in the broadest sense) an image of death. Here the whiteness acts in its meaning as the end, the end of a life lived through, the end of all that was. It acts as a kind of summation, a concluding feature. The color white negates, cancels the past. The nothingness of the white sheet on this level acts to negate all. It is absolute emptiness, the repudiation of life, its opposite.

The third level of the examination of the white sheet could be called metaphysical, and in contrast to the above, it can have a positive meaning. It can have the characteristic of absolute fullness, which is connected with the understanding of white as the experience of light. In this apprehension of whiteness as a color, a powerful flood of pulsing energy comes at us, but this is not just the energy we have already described, the preserved energy of the sun. This energy is of an entirely different origin. It gives the impression of simultaneously disappearing and being preserved. From this, the feeling of a particular fullness appears, a fullness that exceeds any description and definition, since the fullness of light envelops and preserves description and definition in itself. This light is contained within itself without negating a whole multitude of other objects and phenomena: it serves as a source of their strength and existence. This understanding of whiteness as a light is not presented as a hypothesis but as a genuine, powerful, active experience.

Now after such a lengthy examination of whiteness, we will move on to the level of the text that is placed on the whiteness and how to understand it. And again, as in the examination of the first two levels, those of the stock and the whiteness, this splits in two, giving us the choice of how to consider it. This choice is correspondingly connected to how we understand the whiteness that the text will be placed on. If we consider the whiteness as “flat,” a nothingness, that is, as a sheet in the most utilitarian sense of the word, then the text placed on it acquires the most direct, literal, functional meaning. It is, in the most exact sense, a bill for international phone calls, or a warning notice for failure to pay the telephone bill, or a movie ticket, and so on. After its use, its role is exhausted and it can be discarded. Degenerating to the level of a thing, material, it disappears and merges with the paper that is thrown in the garbage can.

But if whiteness is understood as self-sufficient fullness, an independent reality, the very same text receives instead a broadened meaning, revealing its subtexts and overtones. Ordinary, mundane texts—the telephone bill, or a listing of entrees, or a train schedule—acquire another meaning that is not the same as the literal one.

The visual aspect of these texts also accrues a new meaning: all of the geometry—the columns, signs, tables, and letters—becomes, in this case, a

grid, to some extent a hindrance, through which the light and energy of the whiteness come at us.

Here, the whole taken all together—the paper, the whiteness, and the text—acquires a new value, exceeding the initial value of an ordinary, non-descript, bureaucratic document.

# Epistemological Thirst

1982

An ambitious attempt to define the psychological landscape inhabited by the Soviet citizenry, this essay contends that a distinctive maximalism, an all-encompassing sense of “wholeness,” defines the USSR. Within this space, all local efforts to understand and express this sense of wholeness inevitably fail, because these attempts themselves necessarily participate in the same psychological totality. As a result, the self-aware Soviet unofficial artist exists, as Kabakov wrote in “On Emptiness,” in a state akin to that of a doctor who describes “the history of an illness with which he himself is terminally afflicted.”

If it were possible to define in a single word the chief characteristic of this place in which we live, it would be *wholeness* [*tselostnost'*]. A linking to, an interpenetration of, one thing by another turns up in every situation, on every level, from the most exalted to the most mundane. This peculiar characteristic of *amalgamation*, of interpenetration, does not allow for any single opinion to keep itself aloof, to find its own authentic momentum, or to develop its own autonomous discipline. In this way our world-sensitive body cannot find, as it were, an organ that would work out its own individual judgment; it remains, because of this, always on the level of “collective consciousness.”

Thus, the sea metaphor appears apt as an image of obfuscation, but at the same time as an image of an incessant thirst to know, most of all to know about itself—an image of a gigantic body, a type of plasmodium, a *Solaris*.<sup>1</sup>

For this reason all of these questions, incessantly forming chains and garlands of words directed toward the very bottom of the chasm, toward this impenetrability, are, on top of all of this, also the questions' own offspring.

This sea itself gave birth to them so as to discover something about itself, so as to give itself a name, so as to know and define itself.

But with this same fateful inevitability, and precisely because of this wholeness, which it has possessed from the very beginning, this aggregate body does not allow anything to articulate itself or develop into anything defined, into a method, a system, or a discrete organ of perception. In the end,

1. Kabakov alludes here to Andrei Tarkovsky's classic 1972 science fiction film *Solaris*. Interview with editor, Mattituck, NY, 28 February 2016.

everything dissolves and implodes, so as to throw up once again onto the surface new problems, all of which share the same fate, much as an amoeba extends its pseudopodia only to draw them back in a moment later.

Here, where we live, I feel that we get the rare chance to observe the only incidence in the world of an initial epistemological act, the act of forming self-consciousness.

This initial epistemological act, completed with the force of the fully self-conscious body, can be compared in uniqueness and importance to observing magma when staring into the ashy crater of a volcano. The observer, in awe, notices the overpowering shimmering of lava, sees the inchoate forms and the disappearance of forms in explosions and the forming of ever newer forms.

So it is for us in our life. Wishing to know ourselves, in tense terror, we cast away our self-description, our self-judgments, but not confident of finding anything new, we plunge into ourselves, into our plans, opinions, and hypotheses so as to replace them with new ones. . . . The process is permanent, tortuous, and hopeless because the single whole is always the first and final judge, behind each process at its beginning, middle, and end, and because of its power, nothing is able to bring about a change in this whole. As a result, everything remains in place; everything once again turns out to be equal to itself.

Words, the bearers and inventors of all of those ideas, the all-powerful project-originators, are themselves tediously and systematically absorbed in this blind nothingness. Having been "sent out" precisely to find out about this nothing, they turn out to be plunged into it also, absorbed, lost without a trace. An image comes to mind of Cronus, fattened on his children, or of a sow who eats her own litter if it is not taken away from her in time.

One peculiarity of our cognition of existence is the stubborn desire to know "everything," "to the end," "once and for all."

In our primordial totality, our distrust of, and the inadequacy of, our cognitive method stands out. We tend toward exposition and toward faith, toward knowledge that can appear in a flash, at any moment. We exclude history from our epistemology and conflate the beginning with the end, dispensing with and canceling time. More than anything else this is reminiscent of the questioning of a child who demands answers to every question immediately.

We are not content (like the child but on a larger scale) with partial truth; to us, this is intolerable. We need our knowledge to appear in an exhaustive and final form. We must know it to the end . . . and to the end in another sense, because when we know it to the end, then we can start to live, no longer

needing to find out more, and no longer questioning—then we know that this tortured, questioning state of not knowing will end, and a joyous, mercifully *simple life* can begin.

Our third pretension to cognition is especially interesting: the need to know everything once and for all. This is some sort of special hope that this epistemological torture has been visited upon us as a sort of curse, like a spell. We do not need this epistemology and we do not want it, and since it must have been bestowed on us by someone, it will be taken away from us by someone as well, perhaps all of a sudden—so that it will never again appear to us, will dissolve and disappear to God knows where . . . forever.

In the thinking of every one of us exists this torturing bifurcation. We, as it were, at one and the same time, think in two parallel ways: behind each discrete thought, idea, or private judgment stands a second one, judging and discrediting everything, a universal and indivisible consciousness. And before this powerful and indivisible judge, this paralyzing presence, any thinking appears pathetically trivial, petty, and paltry; everything appears accidental, temporary, and inconsequential.

But one must talk, express oneself, and speak, again and again . . .

# Not Everyone Will Be Taken into the Future

1983

Originally appearing in the Moscow, Paris, and New York–based art journal *A-Ya* in 1983, this ironic evocation of Kazimir Malevich and the heroic Soviet avant-garde speaks to Kabakov’s skeptical attitude toward the revolutionary utopianism characteristic of much early twentieth-century art.

You don’t even know what to say about Malevich. The great artist. An inspirer of terror. The big boss.

At school, we had a headmaster, very stern, fierce. In spring, as the end of the year approached, he said, “Only those who have deserved it will go to the school’s Young Pioneer camp for the summer. The others will remain here.”

Everything collapsed inside me.

Everything depends on the boss. He can—and I cannot. He knows—and I don’t know. He knows how to do it—and I don’t.

We had a lot of bosses at school: headmaster Karrenberg, head of studies Sukiasian, the poet Pushkin, head of military studies Petrov, the artists Repin and Surikov, the composers Bach, Mozart, and Tchaikovsky. . . . And if you didn’t obey them, if you didn’t do what they said or recommended: “You will remain here.”<sup>1</sup>

“Not Everyone Will Be Taken into the Future!”

This chilling sentence contains the primordial division of all people, like children, into three categories:

1. He who takes.
2. He who will be taken.
3. He who will not be taken . . .

. . . I will not be taken.

. . . A great, epoch-making picture appears in my imagination: 1913. Europe. A high mountain. Well, not really even a mountain, more like a kind

1. Some of these figures were actual teachers from Kabakov’s youth. Ilya Repin (1844–1930) and Vasily Surikov (1848–1916) were both leading representatives of socially engaged nineteenth-century Russian painting.

of a plateau. A knot of grim people stands at the very edge of the plateau, where it falls away as if sliced off like a piece of cheese. In front of them, right at their feet, where the land going downhill breaks off, a sea of mist spreads out. How are they to go forward and to where? Behind the group of leaders stands frightened, huddled humanity, at a respectful distance in order not to interfere with the conference. What will be the leadership's decision? Silence. A great historical moment.

. . . If one draws close with all of one's trembling body to the small, high-level meeting, there among the great helmsmen one sees Malevich. Calm. Self-controlled. Fully prepared for the immense responsibility that has fallen upon him.

He recommends that they go on, straight at the sky. He regards the edge of the precipice at his feet as the end of the past life. The entire history of mankind, all of its affairs, its art, has ended right here, right now. The old land has ended. Ahead is the "new land," the breath of the cosmos, a new class of being.

He is completely overwhelmed by this new spirit, of which he himself is the embodiment. At this great moment, the horizon is open to him in both directions. The future is clear and so, therefore, is the past. He has completely mastered the old existence and knows it, has squeezed it in his fist, and now there it lies, placid, wrinkled, a little square on his broad palm. There will be no repeat. Ahead is only the "other."

A few will go with him into this new, mountainous world. These "new men" will live in the future, standing tightly together around their teacher, given wings by his spirit, his ideas. How is this select company to be penetrated? How is a ticket to be bought for the departing train?

There is a system of tests for this, which will determine one's preparedness for spiritual flight. If for those left behind a square remains simply a square and five colored rectangles simply five rectangles, then for those who have grasped the new spirit, who have entered into it, these are signs of a new spiritual space, beyond whose gates lies the new land, a koan, the solving of which will occur on a new, unprecedented plane.

The new men, in touch with the new life, will have their task there: to mark the "new" (formerly old) land, the "earthlings" (former people), and their "planits" (former homes), their clothes, furniture, and utensils, with supreme signs, imbuing everything with energy, as it were, so that nothing on this planet, and on whatever other planets there may be in the cosmos, will be without the vivifying force of supreme consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

2. Kazimir Malevich designed his architectural plans for *Planits* (man-made planets) in the 1920s.

“It is finished here. Further.”

And what will happen to the “unpromising” citizens left behind?

One more recollection from my schooldays: I lived in a dormitory at school. When the headmaster said, at the assembly I’ve already mentioned, that not everyone would go to the Young Pioneer camp, only the best, one of the pupils asked meekly whether he could stay in the dormitory for the summer. “Absolutely not,” the headmaster replied. “The dormitory will be closed all summer for repairs, and it will be forbidden to stay there.”

To sum up:

The way ahead is only with Malevich.

But only a few will be taken—the best, those whom the headmaster chooses—and HE KNOWS WHOM. It is also impossible to remain. Everything will be shut up and sealed off after the “Supremes” fly away into the future.



Two squares flying to earth.  
 They see: anguished, black  
 A blow. Everything scattered.  
 Black made red and clear.  
 It is finished here. Further.

— E L L I S S I T Z K Y ,  
 “A Tale of Two Squares”<sup>3</sup>

3. El Lissitzky, *Suprematicheskii skaz* (Berlin: Skify, 1922).



## New Rhombus

1983

An addendum to the longer 1980 essay “Culture, ‘I,’ ‘It,’ and Favorsky’s Light (Rhombus),” this brief text offers a comprehensive interpretation of the history of Russian art in the course of a few paragraphs. For Kabakov the essential “rhombus” of Russian art is made up of the dramatic interplay of its four contrasting vertexes: Westernizing tendencies, Easternizing tendencies, movement toward the sacred, and movement toward the profane.

Young Russian art has its beginnings in the Petrine *parsuna*, eighteenth-century Central European court painting, and, up to the end of the nineteenth century, a standard version of “academic art.”<sup>1</sup> The problem of “West and East,” their juxtaposition and similarity, their repulsion and attraction, begins at the very end of the nineteenth century with the artists of the “World of Art” movement, and continues to the present. (The work of the Wanderers belongs entirely to the sphere of “genre painting” on a traditional academic scale. They simply switched from sentimental subjects to denunciatory ones.)<sup>2</sup>

No doubt, this unresolved “here/there”/“from here/from there” is connected to the absence of a painterly “language” that is specifically local, as had fortunately been the case with Russian literature since the time of Pushkin. But that is not all. The indecisiveness of artistic language relating to the here/there question is exacerbated by an indecisiveness, or more accurately, an ambiguity, in the way the question of the sacred and the profane is addressed—a phenomenon that involves, as well, all of our fine arts. The idea that there should be a holy, spiritual emanation within the artwork, a

1. The *parsuna*, a genre of social portraiture on canvas that appeared in Russia in the seventeenth century and developed further during the lifetime of Peter the Great (1672–1725), represents a transition in Russian painting from religious icons toward more secular themes.

2. “The Wanderers” (*Peredvizhniki*) refers to the artists who formed the Society for Traveling Exhibitions (*Obshchestvo peredvizhnykh vystavok*), which aimed to present contemporary life in Russia while also exhibiting visual art in the provinces. The first *Peredvizhnik* exhibition opened in St. Petersburg in 1871. “World of Art” (*Mir iskusstva*) refers to an Art Nouveau–influenced journal and a broader art movement that appeared in early twentieth-century Russia; among its members were Alexandre Benois, Leon Bakst, and Konstantin Somov.

remarkable sacred meaning—everything that comes from the tradition of icon painting—complicates the reception of the artwork’s purported results.

Hence, the situation of “what they have, we have too,” dating from the time of Peter the Great, has complicated things in the sphere of “culture,” while in the sphere of “the spirit” things have been complicated by the dream of an “iconic” spirituality and its influence—not by some canonical art object made by an artist who left the icon-painting workshops, but rather by the absence of such works. (Hybrids wishing to unite these two tendencies emerge constantly; one need only mention Petrov-Vodkin.)<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, in the period that we are considering, that is, from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century, there appeared within the first tendency—the “cultural” one (we will call it “cultural,” though from the point of view of the second tendency it would be called “profane”)—two lines, two streams, that can be isolated and designated as specifically local:

1. The line running from Zorianko/Fedotov to Laktionov.<sup>4</sup>
2. The line running from Vasnetsov to Kustodiev.<sup>5</sup>

The first line offers a particularly uninflected, self-effacing story devoid of special effects or overarching synthesis.

The second line is where the artist creates his work as if it were a popular print (*lubok*) with a surface similar to a carpet in a bazaar, also devoid of any sort of “artistic,” aesthetic refinement.<sup>6</sup>



The second tendency, the one toward “spiritual striving” [*dukhovka*], also does not doze in the history of more recent painting, manifesting itself in flashes of visionary prophecy (Chekrygin, Malevich, Steinberg).<sup>7</sup>

3. Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin (1878–1939), a Russian and Soviet artist and writer whose work typically explored blends of religious iconography and nineteenth-century realism.

4. Sergei Zorianko (1818–1871), a Russian realist painter; Pavel Fedotov (1815–1852), a painter of humorous genre scenes; Aleksandr Laktionov (1910–1972), a widely exhibited, Soviet Socialist Realist artist.

5. Viktor Vasnetsov (1848–1926), an artist who specialized in dramatic scenes from Russian history; Boris Kustodiev (1878–1927), a painter whose work frequently depicted national themes with drama and color.

6. The *lubok* is an inexpensive woodcut print made popular in Russia over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

7. *Dukhovka* is a term that denotes spiritual striving. Vasily Chekrygin (1897–1922), a Russian avant-garde artist who set forth many utopian proposals concerning the relationship of art and technology; Eduard Steinberg (1937–2012), an unofficial artist whose abstract paintings often feature primarily white surfaces dotted with colorful abstract forms.

Hence, we can depict the unresolved situation in Russian “fine art” in the shape of a rhombus, wherein the horizontal axis—the axis of local culture—quivers from West to East and back again, while the vertical axis quivers upward toward the sky and downward toward the earth, toward filth and dust.

## Without Culture

1983

A wide-ranging, ambitious meditation on cultural production, this essay sketches out Kabakov's understanding of the interrelations between art and its environment. The author also implicitly narrates his skeptical understanding of contemporaneous Soviet reality and its apparent lack of the sensibilities discernible in moments of rich cultural expression, such as, for example, ancient Greece or Renaissance Italy. The text originally appeared as a booklet intended to be shared with friends.

Times are happy when there is culture. No matter how much they may curse it when it exists, no matter how shy culture may be, no matter how provisional, still, by supporting one floor on top of another, it creates a kind of carcass, a kind of architecture of the universe (literally, “an edifice of the world”).<sup>1</sup> Within this “edifice” there are entrances and exits, rooms with support beams, upper and lower floors, and as is the case with any edifice, a foundation upon which the entire structure stands.

It is in this sense that architecture has such a dominant meaning in every culture, that is, when culture is understood as a “universe” (“world building”). In its broadest sense, architecture entails more than blueprints for the construction of cities, villages, and the landscape that has been conquered by man. One might say that any developed culture is, by definition, *architectural*. Everything in such a culture is permeated by architecture, located in strict subordination to it, and all of the “ideal” elements within this culture are expressed in their strictly architectural connections, as if embedded in them, as in the culture of ancient Greece. The ancient Greeks' lives were not adorned with buildings and “architecture”; rather *everything*—the entire cultural cosmos of their consciousness—was architectural, and that is the only way it could have been.

This is what gives rise to such a deep attraction toward imitation, toward replication of the architectural masterpieces of other social formations, by those who have not independently attained those same levels of “culture.”

1. There is an untranslatable wordplay in the original: the word for “universe,” *mirozdanie*, is comprised of the words *mir* (world) and *zdanie* (building).

Communing with architecture, even if only imitatively, they unconsciously appropriate “all of culture as a whole.” Communing with architecture, they commune with the structurality hidden within it, with its stability, with its ability to observe everything.

In a well-developed culture, all of the components of the culture’s subordination are clearly manifested in its architecture. Everything coordinates with everything else and with everything as a whole, and, most important, each element, while remaining true to itself, simultaneously preserves and “brings out” its connections with other elements in horizontal, as well as vertical, relations. The whole, as it should be in architecture, is the result of this subordination, the integration of these separate autonomous elements in their specific connections and in their interrelations to one another.

The whole, the result, functions here precisely as an integration and not as the swallowing up, the dissolution of everything into this whole.

Hence, in a given cultural (architectural) “thing,” this connection with other things and with the entire edifice of culture is preserved, embedded from the outset, visibly obvious.

It is in this sense that each genuinely “cultural” thing is, in its very essence, “symbolic,” that is, both “material” and “ideal” at the same time. Although created from some sort of material—stones, fabric, wood, etc.—the thing compensates, de-materializes its “natural origins” with its “ideality,” that is, with its inclusion, its participation in the entire multilayered, branching, enormous edifice of culture.

But that is only during happy, “cultural” times.

During times when culture does not exist, even in a way that is imitative or emulative, connections among the elements become coincidental, intermittent, and, above all, unclear, ambiguous, arbitrary. Connections are not established for everyone. They are not recognized even approximately, and the whole begins to prevail, to dissolve the parts inside itself.

The most interesting thing is what happens to each individual object when this is the case, be it an impersonal, everyday object or a “cultural” one. If in a “cultural” social milieu a thing is completely loaded with symbolic cultural significances, as if bundled up, protected from “nature,” in a social milieu devoid of “culture,” it loses that symbolic shell. It, this thing, functions therefore in two ways that are connected to one another directly, via a single line, like two sides of the same thing—these are the qualities of being “sacred” and of being “garbage.” We can see the sanctification of an acultural thing in its being loaded with inordinate special significance, an infinite multitude of meanings that are, as a rule, of the most irrational and “metaphysical” kind. In calling the thing “garbage,” we understand it to be deprived of

even the most utilitarian significance; the thing in this situation lacks any cultural “conventionality” and becomes a part of “nature,” utterly dissolving, disappearing inside it. In this case, it, the thing, having emerged from “nature” for a moment, strives uncontrollably to disappear, to dissolve into it.

And another thing: the very same object that, in culture, was “architectural,” becomes, in nonculture, “psychological.” It *is* less and less, and more and more just *seems* to be.

This all becomes especially noticeable when analyzing the evolution of “painting” from the sixteenth century to today. If in sixteenth-century Italy painting was part of architecture (albeit far from its main component), by the seventeenth century, painting was already an independent, autonomous thing, and as such it was capable of being transported, exhibited, preserved, etc.

In recent times, especially in our country, “painting” has lost that self-sufficiency, the quality of having its own, isolated life, and instead has become a problematic object that depends entirely on the “point of view” from which it is seen, on the choice that communicates this or that meaning. In general, it is in need of subjective judgment, contemplation, knowledge, “conceptions,” and so on. In this situation, “painting” stops being a part of “culture” and becomes an implement of local, often strange, “ethnography.”

Having written all of this, I now understand why I want to provide some sort of commentary to photographs of my work. It is not that “understanding” would be incomplete without such commentary, but that explanation, commentaries, footnotes are embedded in the very making of these works. They have arisen for some reason while contemplating these works, and without these “explanations” the works themselves would perhaps not exist at all.

# Park of Culture

1984

A satirical, pseudo–Socialist Realist poem intended to be shared with friends.

Here is the park of culture  
And relaxation! And in it  
I'm strolling about. All around me are trees.  
I'm eating cool ice cream.  
And I'm enjoying a fine winter day.

Park of culture? Well, of course, there's culture here too.  
All around wonderful sculptures soar:  
There's a discus thrower, there's a woman with an oar.  
There's the bust of a scholar, there's a cosmonaut's profile,  
A miner having extracted anthracite from the depths of the mine.  
There's a marble deer, frozen above a pond.

And I see the traces of relaxation all around.  
The clank of metal, a happy family  
Rushes, light-winged, along the icy banks.  
A string of lights shines in a colorful line  
And following them in a great flock  
A herd of children, all in fuzzy sweaters.

It used to be like this, I hear: Culture, oh, is so hard.  
Classical music! It  
Demands from the listener expenditures, great efforts.  
But what kind of "culture" is this, if in it  
Knowledge alone is valuable  
And the softness of chairs for the physically afflicted.

But if we don't understand relaxation correctly,  
Then we can also lose time here,  
How many are there among us not protecting it!

Lying drunk, vomiting into urns.  
Or in stuffy rooms dancing and drinking,  
Going to bed with a random woman!

Park of relaxation! Culture!  
Only in it, are we under the influence of nature and *plein air*,  
Racing on skates, we will find culture,  
In the fresh air we will be rested in a cultured way  
And create the conditions for staying in shape!



*From The 1960s and the 1970s:  
Notes on Unofficial Life in Moscow*

1982–1984

This confessional, often self-critical narrative offers an illuminating portrait of art and everyday life in unofficial Moscow during the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras. Imagined as entries in a still-developing artist's memoir, Kabakov's notes confront the compromises, concessions, and confusions that accompanied the life of an unofficial artist who nonetheless maintained "official" employment. These notes also provide the artist's most detailed account and analysis of his own working method and professional career.

**Before 1961**

Today is 7 August 1982.

I am going to try to recall my independent work "for myself" and not "for them," because all of my studies in art school and at the art institute were always for them and not for me, done so that "they" would be satisfied and would not kick me out (of school or the institute), so everything resembled what they wanted. The division, the incompatibility, of "for them" and "for me," complete and total, started back in school and at the institute. Gradually, like a trained rabbit, I developed clarity about what "they" wanted from me, and thus, the drawing that "I" appeared to be doing was entirely their creation, the work of teachers and other role models, including Raphael and Rembrandt. I did all this and prepared it all for "them," but somehow without being personally engaged. I do not remember a single occasion where "for myself" and "for them" coexisted, and therefore I do not remember deriving any satisfaction from my work and the results. It was more a feeling of relief that I had managed to trick them once again, that I had gotten away with it once more.

But the inner desire to learn who I was, why I was, what this work that I was forced into without my "presence" was, all of that tormented me continually, and of course it had to manifest itself above all as an inartistic thing, as "non-art."

Gradually I came to feel, and by now have felt for a long time, that I am

an “artist,” but back then, during those years, I was only a blind, helpless, badgered man, because the profession of artist was “for them,” and I did art for their approval.

However, the things I tried and tested eventually became part of my own personal experience, acquired independent of any high authorities and not based on any of their rules. For these things I alone bore responsibility.

This attitude of alienation, of not blending in, remained with me forever, even when I discovered and encountered “on the outside” not only the dead tormenting rules of my teachers and the scary, horrible, and incomprehensible production of the last of the Stalinist “hacks,” but also contemporary Western art and the Russian art of the 1920s and 1930s.

The first thing that I “encountered” in myself was the appearance of an unconscious impulse to move and wave pencil and pen across small pieces of paper, about the size of a page; some sort of impulses would emerge from within, from my psyche, that merged somehow with those scrawls. After doing five or six pages like that I felt a discharge of powerful energy coming from somewhere deep inside me. It was impossible to predict the results of the movements of the pen, of that “waving about”—they arose on their own—but the gradually emerging configuration and pattern retained the memory and feelings of that energy coming from deep inside. I want to repeat that it was impossible to “see” the results of that work. The net preserved only memory and only my memory for me. I couldn’t see it “from the outside” at all. (This was 1953, 1954, 1955, and 1956; I did this only in the winter, when I came home from the institute. Of course, I later learned that this style had a name, “abstract expressionism,” and its own masters—Soulages, Kline, Mathieu, and others.)<sup>1</sup> I made six or seven hundred such sketches. Fortunately I saved them, and they became part of the *On Gray Paper* albums in the group “Four Albums.”<sup>2</sup>

These “products” were “organic,” “unpremeditated,” “uncontrolled,” and “mine.” But they had a major fault—or rather, I did in my attitude toward them: they lacked “reflection,” of which I always had more than my fair share, but especially then. In making those little drawings, I could see that the essential, basic part of me was not involved in the process, and I did not wish to reject “consciousness,” reflection. I never had the desire to be freed and become a “natural” idiot, even if as an “artist.”

1. The postwar abstract painters Pierre Soulages (French, b. 1919), Franz Kline (American, 1910–1962), and Georges Mathieu (French, 1921–2012) are invoked here.

2. “Four Albums” appears in the album series *On Gray Paper*, itself part of the larger series *On Gray and White Paper* (1977–1980), see Jackson, *Experimental Group*, 172–77.

This reflective part found expression in endless notes in the little notebooks we students were supposed to fill with drafts and sketches. Mine (I still have them all) were half full of thoughts about art and life, sometimes ambitious, sometimes tentative and pathetic. Now they all seem uninteresting, but that was the level of internal consciousness of a young man of twenty-one to twenty-five studying in a closed artistic seminary in the last years of the Stalin era.

Perhaps this *textlust* led to the idea of introducing text into the image, to the participation of image and text in a painting as equals.

I have described two forms of “production” in those days: (1) abstract drawings and (2) endless texts in little notebooks.

There were also two problems that tormented me, like splinters, in that period. They were “painting from nature” and “the masterpiece.” I will describe both consecutively.

While I tried to fit the results of painting from nature to “their” demands at school and at the institute, the situation of painting from nature remained unclear to me. I did not dare discard this kind of drawing, and at the time it did not even occur to me to do so. But what was in this drawing for me? How could I merge with nature through painting, find contact with it, that is, find both “nature” and “painting” truly for myself? And what was “painting” anyway? I have to say that the fetishism of the word was very powerfully in the air—constant discussions of what was painting, true, not true, what was its relationship with “nature,” with the truth of life in nature, and so on. As I remember it today, in those years (that is, in the late 1950s), the solution to those questions swung between two extremes:

1. Painting that solves its own “painterly” problems: texture, color, harmony, and generally “art.”
2. Painting as a means for depicting the “truth of life,” that is, depicting what is before us, before the canvas, with all of its air, space, chiaroscuro; painting with plot, documentary details, and so on.

The first and second, for all their differences in focus, were tied to each other by the fact that both “painting” and the “truth of life” meant “nature,” that genuine life beyond the canvas that could not be dismissed, in relation to which the first and second problems were mirror images of each other: “painting” could be seen as allotting care and attention to issues of plane, painterliness, harmony, while “nature,” as what is depicted, was something that was self-evident and inevitably present in painting, like a background, which while it exists is not worth talking about. Or it could be just the oppo-

site: the background—that is, the inevitable albeit vexing aspect—was painting itself, while one’s interest was concentrated on the staging of the “truth of life,” the details, psychology, and so on.

Thus, in each of the two approaches, that which was the main interest of the other was insignificant. The war between the two, which was a struggle to the death in the 1930s, had quieted down by the late 1950s due to the total victory of the “seconds,” while the “firsts,” vanquished, existed as solitary artists huddled in corners and attics. Vrubel and the impressionists were banned—we knew very little about them, to say nothing of Cézanne. But right after the institute, in 1957, we, that is, a few friends—Bulatov, Vassiliev, Mezhaninov, and I—got to know a classic of “painting.”<sup>3</sup> That was Robert Rafailovich Falk.<sup>4</sup> We visited him regularly, twice a week, in his attic studio on the embankment, and for us this was “penetration and contact with Great Painting.” We each had our own experience. I was very excited by the powerful and mysterious “painterliness” that emerged from the pathetic and meaningless (or so it seemed to me at the time) arrangement of objects and people, in general, of “nature,” on the canvas. Poorly and slapdashedly put together, it was a nature that was basically ineffectual.

The second direction—“truth of life”—was widely represented in those years by a powerful armada of official art in exhibitions in all genres, from the solemn paintings by Aleksandr Gerasimov and Boris Ioganson to the portraits by Vasily Efanov and Petr Kotov, landscapes by Isaak Brodsky and Nikolai Romadin, genre paintings by Vladimir Gavrilov and Fedor Reshetnikov, and still lifes by Petr Konchalovsky.

Those two approaches to the arts were very clear to us, but woe to anyone who wanted to combine the first and the second. I tried doing it after the institute. (That attempt—to harmoniously combine “nature” and “painterliness,” good painting and real truth—was also made, as I later learned, by a new generation of painters, older than me, the so-called Seven: Andronov, Nikonov, Egorshina, who appeared in 1963.<sup>5</sup> In principle, such attempts are

3. Mikhail Vrubel (1856–1910), a multifaceted artist of the Symbolist era; Erik Bulatov (b. 1933), Oleg Vassiliev (1931–2013), and Mikhail Mezhaninov (b. 1930) all became unofficial artists; on the environment surrounding Robert Falk, see, in this volume, “On Cézannism.”

4. Robert Falk (1886–1958), one of the foremost modernist painters in twentieth-century Russia.

5. Nikolai Andronov (1929–1998), Pavel Nikonov (b.1930), and Natalia Egorshina (1926–2010) were members of the Seven group in the 1960s. These artists produced paintings in “the severe style” (*surovyi stijl’*), a downbeat, expressive mode characteristic of formally innovative official art in the post-Stalin era.

being made to this day by those in a certain state of mind—and that was the state I was in then.) My attempt took two forms: “painting a masterpiece” and painting landscapes, portraits, and still lifes from nature.

Producing a “masterpiece” is, in general, apparently, very important for the transition from an infantile age to the next stage, since it combines into one knot a multitude of problems and complexes, primarily psychological ones. This is a decision to gather up your entire tiny experience, fragmented among the many areas that exist in your consciousness. This is the determination to do something in a world that has managed without you until now, that has not known of your existence and still does not want to know. This is action “in the world,” outside, and not only inside, “for yourself.” And most importantly, it is the declaration of a unique and astonishing self that will make everyone turn to you and be astonished. All of your power, subtlety, profundity, and omniscience will be revealed in the masterpiece. It will shine like a new star among already existing stars, enshrined, from this day forward and forever, in the catalog of indisputable masterpieces, thereby ensuring your place in this world, easing what had heretofore been so problematic. In general, apparently, in normal, official life, given a mind integrated into real social life, the masterpiece is supposed to be your diploma work (which was the case for Bulatov). But with my “underground” mindset, the diploma work was also made “for them.” I illustrated Sholem Aleichem’s novel *Wandering Stars*. It had “a lot of Jews,” but everything turned out okay.

I started work on my masterpiece in 1957. As my account of “painting” and the “truth of life” must have made clear, it was supposed to combine Falk’s painting with a compositional subject of infinite depth and significance.

The canvas, 140 centimeters high by 200 centimeters wide, depicted an empty lot on the edge of some town. There were buildings and narrow streets in the background. Evening, the last rays of the sun, which had set, but the sky was still light. An old blue circus van. The door is open. A clown sits inside. A small performance in front of the van—Pierrot in white smock waves his arms about, a small gymnast in pink tights raises her leg, an acrobat in costume is doing a handstand. There are a few viewers: on the left, several urban old women sitting and standing; on the right, a village group—a “villager” in a broad-brimmed hat leans on a donkey with a load on its back, next to him someone else, I think, a woman. Everything is immersed in the glowing “Falkian” semi-evening haze. (Apparently, the assumption is that Falk’s painting depicts the illumination between day and night, when the shimmering light begins.) Everything is imbued with profundity and metaphysics; everything is full of significance (they are not old women, they are old age; not a clown, but self-abasement; not a ballerina, but “the eternal feminine”;

etc.). The important thing is that deep thought and lofty significance be shown, imbued in the very flesh of the picture.

I painted this “masterpiece” after the institute, that is, in 1957, first in Solnechnogorsk, where mother and I rented a tiny room, then after I got married [to Irina Rubanova], in the studio in Sviblovo, where [ . . . ] I rented an empty apartment in a barracks and traveled an hour and a half each way.<sup>6</sup> I continued later in the apartment on Mashkova, amid my mother-in-law and wife, while I was waiting for our cooperative apartment to be built, and I kept painting it until 1961. Despite reworking each section, the whole remained just as raw, indefinite, and helpless. No one was bowled over, thrilled, or astonished, and I gradually got sick of all the messing around, so the “masterpiece” was taken off the stretcher—peeling, black—and rolled up. It is still lying there in the studio. Several (maybe four) pastels, 70 by 50 centimeters, portentous in subject matter (a woman looks out the window, a man sits in profile), were also done in the masterpiece vein, overdrawn and bleak in the “nature-Falkian” manner, but also “mine.”

Where was nature in this masterpiece? I did not use any sketches from nature to produce it; everything just “fell out of my head.” The whole subject came from my imagination, infused only with emotions and impressions from my own mind. (I did not even do a sketch, just started painting.) Nature here was more like a memory about nature, already processed and surrounded by cultural and psychological wrappings, and into that “cloud” I insensitively mixed the “mystical” and the “metaphysical.” . . .

In terms of time, I worked on the “masterpiece” in bursts, two or three months at a time, since by then I was already zealously ensconcing myself at the Detgiz and Malysh children’s publishing houses: I had to make books, earn money for a living and for the cooperative apartment, but first for a house for Mama. At that time, starting in 1957, I had to do five or six, sometimes even eight, books a year.<sup>7</sup>

That is about all I have to say about the “masterpiece,” except to add that the action it depicts takes place on the city’s outskirts, in an empty lot, that is, “by the fence.” It is full of contemplation, and everything—the walls, the windows, the people, the donkey—stands separately and on its own. A big flat wall takes up much more space than the characters. The painting

6. Irina Rubanova (b. 1933), a scholar of foreign cinema, was Ilya Kabakov’s first wife. Solnechnogorsk and Sviblovo are towns on the outskirts of Moscow.

7. Kabakov enjoyed a successful career as a children’s book illustrator, receiving regular commissions from the prestigious Detskaia Literatura (Children’s Literature) and Malysh (Little One) publishing houses.

appeared instantly in my imagination, in its entirety—which is the way it would be from then on with everything else. Only for some reason the execution did not always match the desired result.



That leaves painting “from nature.” The same task permeates this endeavor as well: combining “good” painting and the truth of reality, but reality in a weakened (that is, passive) state—landscape, portrait, still life—that serves as an excuse for making “a work of art.” I would do this in the summer. It was like this: summer—the outdoors, life, nature; and winter—plunging into myself, paintings “from me.”

At first I did pastel landscapes with random compositions. In 1960–1961, in the summer at the dacha in Khost, there were small canvases (50 by 40 centimeters) in oils, views of the sea and cypresses, but I did most of my painting from nature (with increasing awareness that this was an unnecessary and alien occupation for me) at Erik Bulatov’s dacha from 1957 through 1961, when I put a complete stop to it.<sup>8</sup> [ . . . ] In 1961 I painted several canvases with particular assiduousness from the upper terrace at Erik’s, and then I spent late autumn and winter at his dacha alone; for heating we brought in Falk’s *burzhuika* [free-standing stove], which was a gift from Angelina Vasilevna [Falk], at Erik’s request. I dragged that ancient cast-iron stove along the ground all the way from the train station to the dacha.

I had a shameful incident at that time involving a painting by Robert Rafailovich. After Falk’s death in 1958, Angelina Vasilevna, his wife, decided to give a painting to each of his young admirers—Bulatov, Vassiliev, Mezhaninov, and me. She set out several works in front of us at the studio, and we each chose one. I selected a marvelous landscape with an embankment from his Paris period. We all took our paintings away. But I spent that summer at Erik’s dacha. I had no home, and I asked Erik to keep the painting for me. Sometime in late autumn, Erik asked me what to do with the painting. I was in a dark and dreary mood. “I don’t know.” “Then, maybe you should give it back?” “Give it back.” Erik did. Angelina Vasilevna was naturally offended.

In the fall of 1966,<sup>9</sup> I did a still life with a black bottle (it’s on the wall at home) and, later, in the winter when it was cold, a self-portrait in a ski cap. [ . . . ] With that last portrait, my interest in painting from nature dimmed completely. As Erik likes to say in such situations, “It’s not mine, it’s alien to me.” All those years were also marked by making children’s books—two or

8. Khost is a Crimean village on the Black Sea.

9. The date should be noted as the fall of 1961, not 1966.

three months in a row, so the work “for myself” had to be done in snatches, two or three months at a time.

### The 1960s

I consider the start of my independent work, “my own,” to be the winter of 1961–1962, when I was denied a studio near the Nikitsky Gates. (Yuri Gagarin had just made his flight, so it would be easy to check the date.)<sup>10</sup> For a long time, until summer 1962, I was in a studio on Novoslobodskaya, across from the metro. By that time everything had been exhausted, both the “masterpiece” and painting from nature. Suddenly, like a revelation, there appeared the series with a shower, about fifteen or twenty pages (on lousy paper, 20 by 13 centimeters, in pencil) (fig. 2). Somehow everything about this series suited me: unexpected, made “without my participation,” original (I hadn’t seen anything like it anywhere), and—most important—the confident, joyous feeling that “It was mine!” and no one else’s, mine, that I had an inner connection to the result, that some unbreakable thread went through the drawings from my depths, and that this connection would not be broken but could be extended, farther and farther, without cease, as long as I kept unspooling it. And this established itself forever: that thread coming out of me, from the dark, unknown depths, outside and up. How and why that happened, I do not know, but I remember well the suddenness and the real joy I felt. The criterion of that joy and its realness has remained a special criterion for me since that very moment.

The first to see the series was Leonard Daniltsev.<sup>11</sup> He dropped by my studio, and he evaluated it as being real and original, or something of that sort. (Unlike me, Leonard is never indulgent or false in these situations; he says what he thinks, no matter how much you beg for leniency.)

Later Antonello Trombadori (a member of the Central Committee of the Italian Communist Party) asked me for the series.<sup>12</sup> I gave it to him, around twenty-one or twenty-two pieces. This is when Sooster and I were sharing a studio. He took them with him and exhibited them in L’Aquila in one of the first shows of Moscow unofficial art.<sup>13</sup>

In the summer of 1962 I was left without a studio again. That same summer

10. The cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin first orbited the earth on 12 April 1961.

11. Leonard Daniltsev (1931–1997) was a Moscow-based writer and artist.

12. Antonello Trombadori (1917–1993) was an Italian antifascist politician, art critic, and journalist.

13. The exhibition *Contemporary Alternatives/2* opened at the Castello Spagnolo in L’Aquila, Italy, in 1965.





at the Detgiz publishing house, I met Sooster, who was also without a studio at the time, and we decided to look around and share one.<sup>14</sup> In the fall we found the first of our three joint studios, on Taganka on Malye Kamenshchiki Street—the woman who was the head of the local ZhEK [housing administration] had a soft spot and pity for us—and we moved into a horrible, damp basement, where a big repulsive white mushroom would grow in the course of a day at the foot of the chair.

Through Sooster in 1962, I met Yuri Sobolev and Ernst Neizvestny and the circle at Znanie publishers, where Sobolev was chief artist. [ . . . ] At that time I also met Vladimir Yankilevsky, who had a one-man show in 1962 at a scientific institute.<sup>15</sup> My acquaintance with Mikhail Grobman and the Lianozovo artistic association also belongs to that period. That is, a new artistic life started to flow for me from the winter of 1962.<sup>16</sup>



My works of the 1960s can be divided into two groups: drawings and paintings. [ . . . ]

When we moved into our new studio in the fall of 1962, Sooster already had an enormous number of works (his previous studio near Dinamo Stadium, when I first saw him, was piled with drawings and paintings on cardboard), and he moved all of that with him: thousands of drawings in crates and piles of paintings that he placed on his paint box and along the walls; I literally had nothing. I set up a desk near the window and placed a pack of paper, India ink, and colored pencils on top and also a second table where I started preparing three big paintings: *Hand with a Broken Mirror* (fig. 3) [ . . . ], *Head with a Balloon* (fig. 4), and *The Boy* (fig. 5). [ . . . ] But most of my time was spent sitting at the desk and making little drawings that came

14. Ülo Sooster (1924–1970), an Estonian unofficial artist, was Kabakov’s studiomate in the 1960s.

15. Yuri Sobolev (1928–2002) and Ernst Neizvestny (1925–2016), important unofficial artists in the 1960s; Vladimir Yankilevsky (1938–2018), an unofficial Soviet artist who became well-known for his surreal and grotesque pictorial language. The Znanie (Knowledge) publishing house was a major “progressive” cultural entity that employed many unofficial artists; see Jackson, *Experimental Group*, 42–52.

16. Mikhail Grobman (b. 1939), a Moscow-based unofficial artist. By the late 1950s, the first organized assemblage of underground artists, the Lianozovo group, formed under Oskar Rabin’s leadership. The collective included Vladimir Nemukhin, Lidiya Masterkova, Dmitri Plavinsky, Lev Kropivnitsky, and Rabin’s wife Valentina Kropivnitskaya, as well as the poets Genrikh Sapgir and Igor Kholin. Named after the bleak northern suburb where most of the artists lived, the group’s art aimed for a “barracks style” veering toward the gritty and grim.

into my head one after the other. Most of them were given away; few are left. There were some variations on *The Shower*, but for the most part they were compositions relating to symmetrical geometry and little human figures tied up in some way to this geometry, hooked up into it.

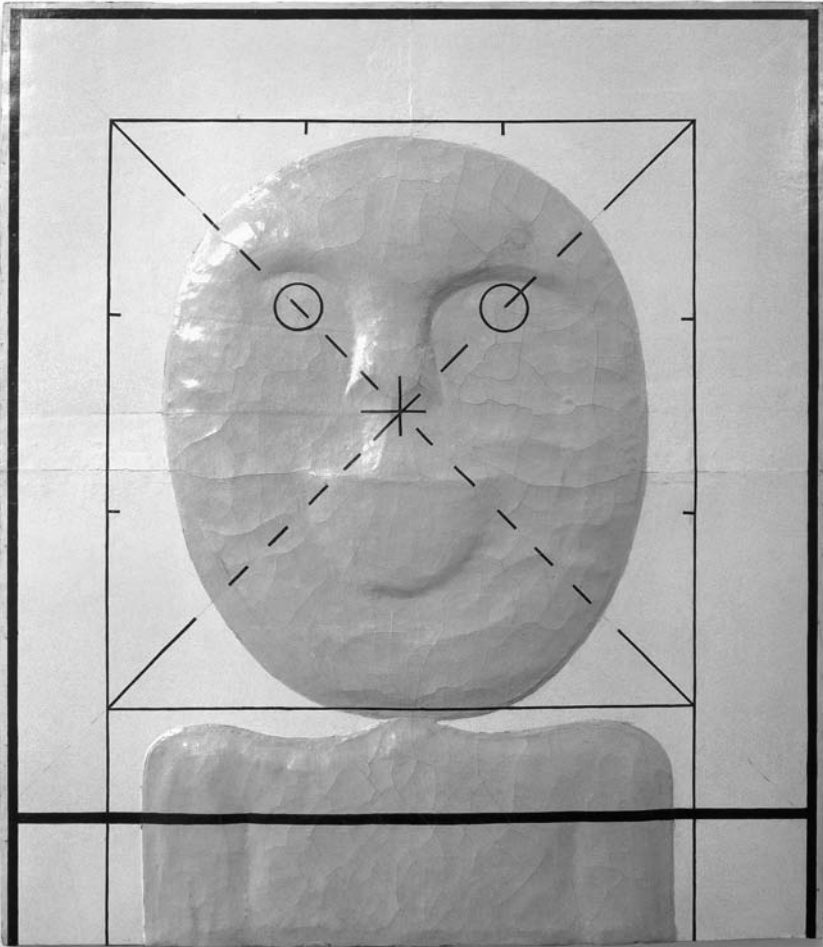
Some drawings formed small series. Several small paintings (50 by 60 centimeters) on plywood from crates that I found near the studio were based on such series. The plywood from the crates served as the base for the paintings, and the boards nailed on top were also incorporated. That the foundations for the “paintings” were crate lids from the garbage—no longer needed by anyone—and that with their pathetic roughness became part of the painting, was very natural to me: it was not a Painting with a capital P but something pathetic, dismal, leftovers, remains of life arranged in a poor, funny order, tarted up and painted, covered in lines and colored designs for no appar-





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ent reason. Beneath the “makeup” you can clearly see paucity, ineptness, and uselessness. A ridiculous, awkward, pathetically ornamented object was what was supposed to result from this artistic work, a thrown-out plywood lid that remains itself despite pathetic manipulations on it. This duality: a ridiculous and pathetic thing as the basis of everything, and some painted ornamentation—even significant ornamentation—that does not recognize or even notice its rotten and pathetic foundation. This dichotomy and mutual incompatibility, as I see it now, attracted me and forced me at the time to do those works.



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I remember, in the winter of 1962, I made *Colored Cubes on Gray Board* (fig. 6) [ . . . ], a composition of painted boards in a square frame [ . . . ] and *Three Colored Ovals* (fig. 7). [ . . . ]

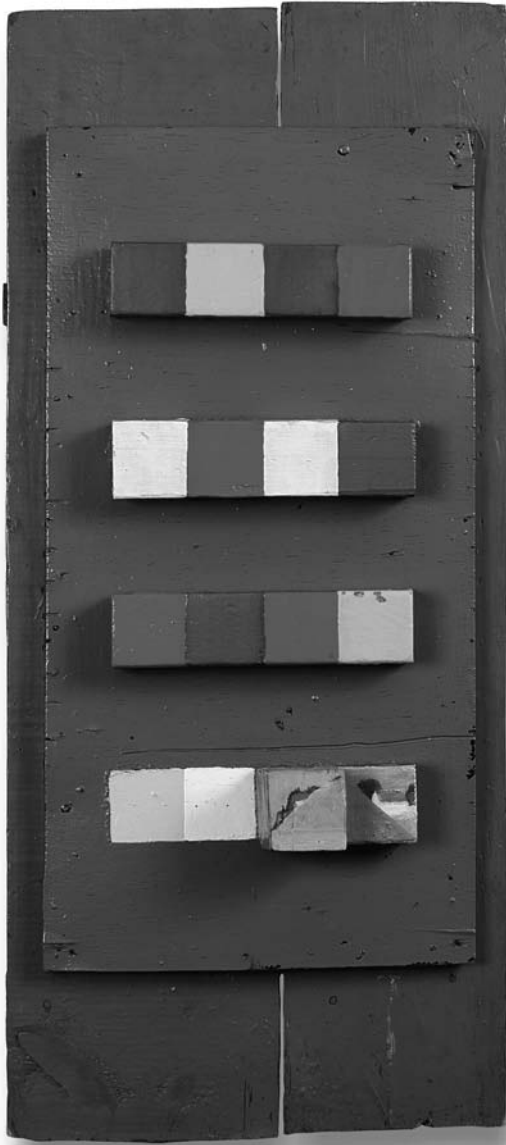
I made the first paintings on the covers of the plywood crates at the same time I was doing those drawings that kept popping into my head. Some, I thought, could be paintings. (Of course, for my consciousness, they were not paintings, not anything artistic at all. I wasn't sure what they were.)

As I remember it now, at the time I was warmed and pleased that this was all "inartistic," "non-art," just something that came to me, for which I was responsible not as an artist but as a human being.

The first such painting, *Conditional Reflex* (fig. 8), I did in, I think, the

winter of 1962 [ . . . ] and the second, *Walk (Bicyclists)* (fig. 9), at the same time. [ . . . ] Later that winter I did *Queen Fly* (fig. 10), [ . . . ] *In the Room* (fig. 11), and another *In the Room*.

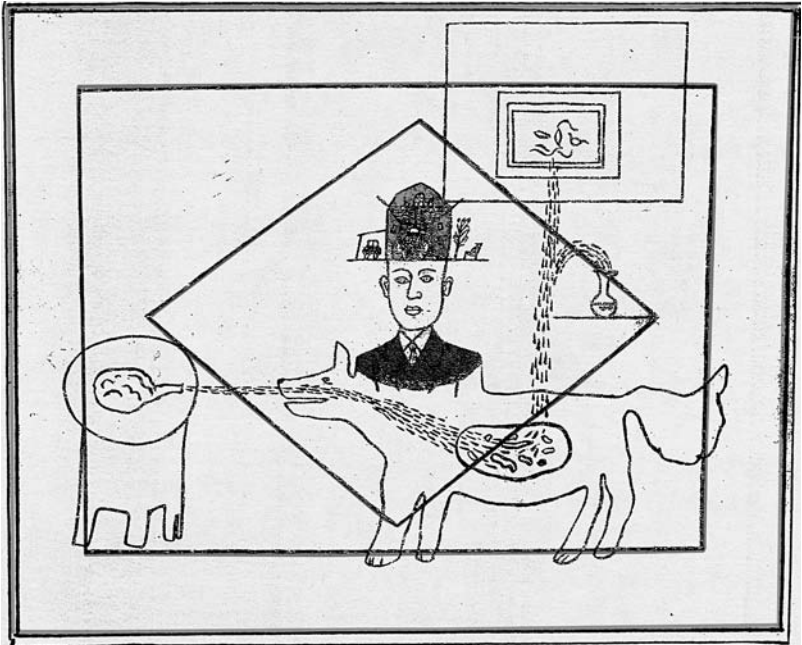
Basically that winter I did ten to twelve drawings a day and showed them to Sooster. The winter and spring of 1963 were the time of my series of drawings with “circles on a grid,” of which I made very many (one or two drawings



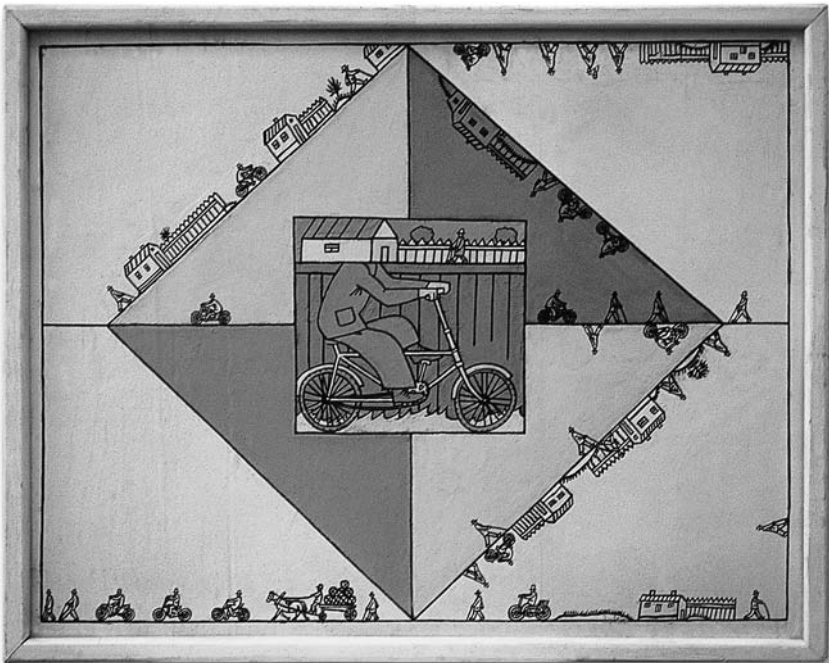


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exist to this day). Also, the series of flying body parts [ . . . ] and drawings with pipe and stick, sticks, lines, and circles flying over hills. In a sense they can be defined as the “metaphysics” of objects in absurd relations, joined in imposed geometric connections. A frequent motif is that the objects look “objective” but are placed along lines of imposed geometry, the metrics of the

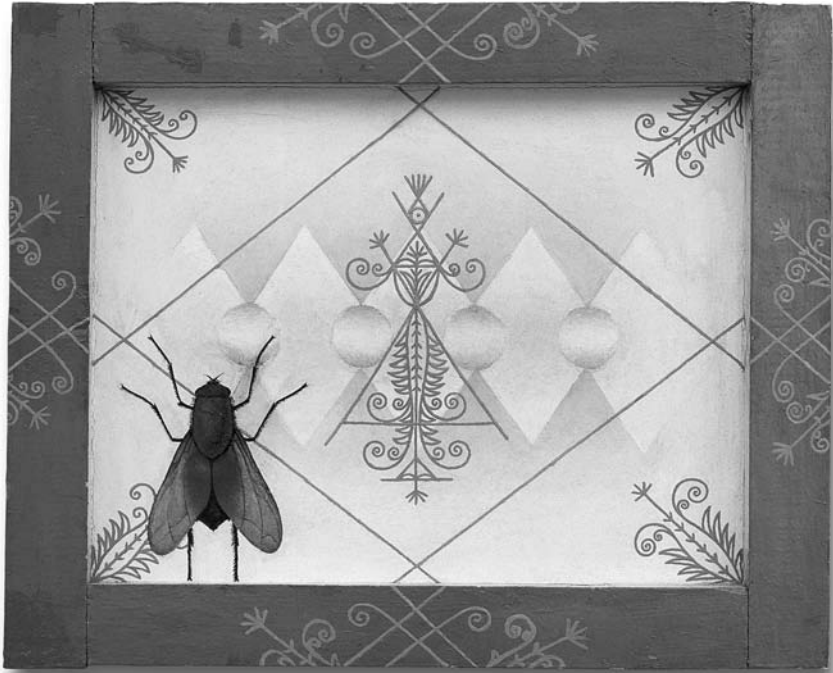


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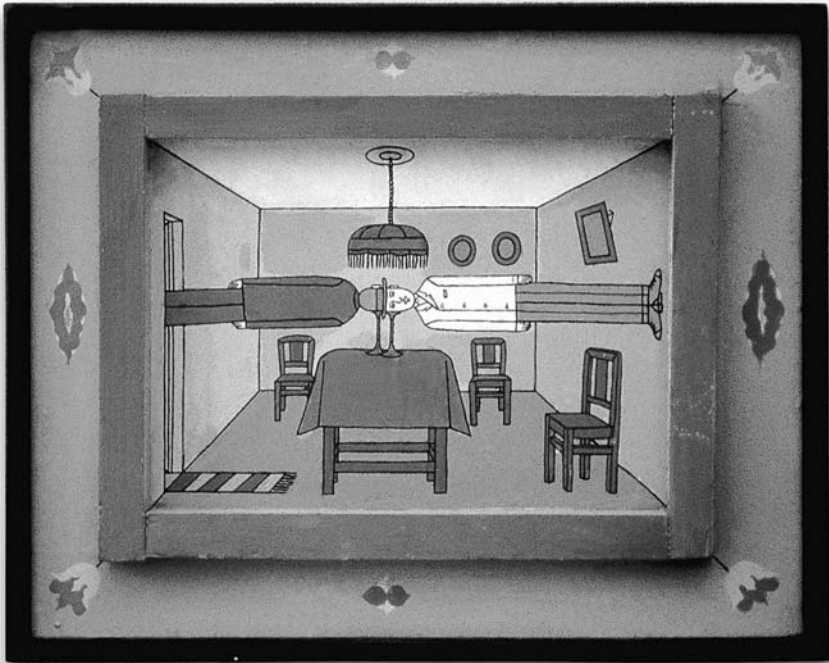


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paper (diagonals, crosses, angles, frames, etc.), that is, playing with the space “beyond the paper” and the space of the paper. [ . . . ]

The space beyond the paper and the space of the paper were always white, and from that, out of the meeting of equivalent visualities (color) and different semantics (meaning) came interesting results. [ . . . ]



The spring of 1963 is connected with the exhibition on the Highway of the Enthusiasts.<sup>17</sup> Before it, there was one exhibition after another in scientific institutes—Yankilevsky, Rabin, and others—a turbulent, active life in the artistic underground, which on the wave of the Thaw seemed on the verge of emerging and obtaining a normal life, a normal artistic existence.<sup>18</sup> The exhibition on the Highway of the Enthusiasts, attended by foreign correspondents, cramped but well organized, seemed to herald new times: the interest was enormous. Hurriedly, overnight, Sooster made frames for his works out of simple boards (I still have those frames, with typewritten labels, in my studio).

That summer I was at the dacha, then at my mother’s in Berdyansk.<sup>19</sup> The main events began that fall.

The disoriented authorities first banned, then permitted, an exhibit of “unofficial artists” at the Youth Hotel. Then, I think in October, we finally had the show at the Manezh.<sup>20</sup> At the time, Ernst Neizvestny, who worked ceaselessly, was of great import, and the Manezh was his crowning moment, his highest peak.

This was all related to the general flow of unofficial art at the time. The 1960s, without any doubt, saw the flourishing of underground culture in all spheres, primarily in painting, poetry, and prose. It is easiest for me to speak to the first. That decade falls into three spheres in my imagination: I suppose you would call them sociopolitical, artistic, and spiritual/substantive.

The artists working in the 1960s all knew one another, and I can firmly state that on the whole they represented a single generation, with nuances of

17. Organized at the Friendship Club on the Highway of the Enthusiasts, this exhibition offered one of the earliest public appearances of unofficial art in Moscow.

18. On 1962 and art in the Soviet Union, see chapter 2 in Jackson, *Experimental Group*. Oskar Rabin (b. 1928) was perhaps the leading figure among the dissident artists in the USSR in the 1960s and 1970s.

19. Kabakov’s mother lived in Berdyansk on the Azov Sea in Ukraine.

20. Soviet officials invited the abstract painter Elii Beliutin (1925–2012) to repeat the hanging of an earlier, canceled exhibition at the Youth Hotel in the exhibition halls of the Manezh (near Red Square) on 1 December 1962. He agreed and his students, the so-called Beliutin group, were featured there.

age that divided it into “oldest,” “middle,” and “youngest.” As I look back, that distinction had fairly serious implications.

It meant that in 1963 each artist arrived at the Manezh in his own way. The most mature artistically at that time were the members of the Lianozovo group, Neizvestny, the Beliutin group, Sobolev, Yankilevsky, Sooster, and Brussilovsky.<sup>21</sup>

Before the Manezh was a time of great expectations—terrible fear, but also great expectations. After it, only fear, fear that at any moment something could happen, occur; it was a matter of living in fear day after day. Only after the Bulldozer Exhibition and the appearance of the City Committee was there a little less fear.<sup>22</sup>



The most interesting aspect of the 1960s was the special atmosphere of underground artistic life that was present, like a thick infusion, in all of the basement studios and tiny rooms of the artistic bohemia. Existence was made up of a crazy, intense sense of “them” (“they” were the bosses, employers, and managers), who were perceived as an alien, hostile, and dangerous species of people who lived “upstairs,” in the official “other” world, and, below that world, in a close community, loving and respectful, another world, a special tribe “under the ground of life.” This climate of community was characteristic of the life of these artists, poets, jazz musicians, and writers, who seemed by lucky happenstance to have met in a single stratum of Moscow at that time. There were no daily-grind concerns; the meetings and conversations dealt only with artistic or poetic issues. At the same time, everyone was of a “wonderful” age, and all the studios and apartments roared with sprees and turbulent parties with dancing, wine, songs, and poetry readings. Many homes, not just those belonging to artists, were the sites of these wild parties. Let’s go to the Shterns tonight, to Kuperman. Wednesday was always (for many years) the night for Sooster on Krasina, to Grobman in Tekstilshchiki, to Stesin, to Sobolev, to Rabin, to Sapgir, to Bulatov’s dacha.<sup>23</sup> There was an extraordinary, close, and constant communing at the time, a total knowledge and discussion of everything that went on in the studios, an open and steady display of everything to each other, an electrifying and neurotic atmosphere

21. Anatoly Brussilovsky (b. 1938), a Moscow-based unofficial artist.

22. The so-called Bulldozer Exhibition took place in the Beliaev region of Moscow on 15 September 1974. Afterward, the Painting Section of the Moscow City Committee of Graphic Artists, became the city’s de facto state-monitored alternative arts organization.

23. This group included the painter Yuri Kuperman, a.k.a. Yuri Kuper (b. 1940), and the unofficial poet and writer Genrikh Sapgir (1928–1999).

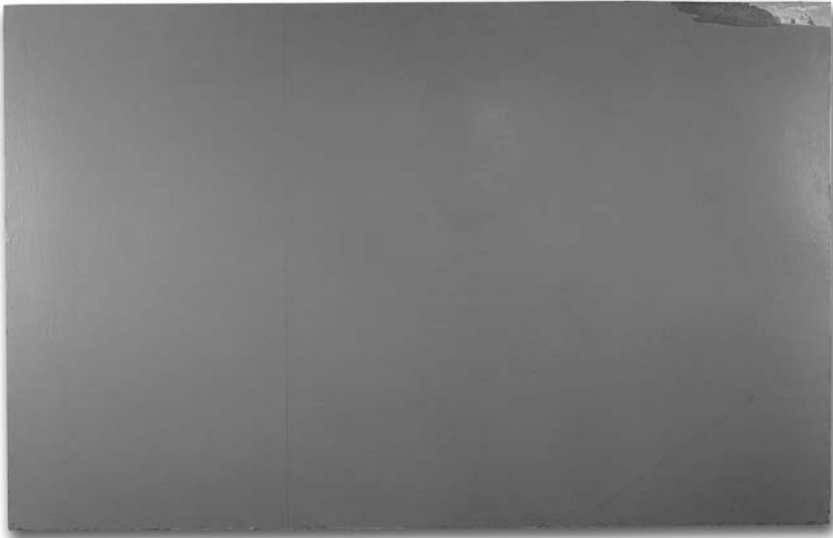
of danger from “above,” from “them,” from those who were ready to destroy our entire, “unsanctioned” life.

There were three ways to deal with the “upstairs people”: first, showing them that we also exist; second, calm indifference and acceptance of this division into upper and lower, aboveground and underground; and third, a panicked feeling of danger and the desire to hide and be invisible, so that they don’t finish you off. I belonged to the last group, the ones who didn’t stick their necks out.

The continual desire to exhibit “like everyone else” created a special air in the social life relating to the “underground.” I must tell you that those artists became known as “unofficial” only after the Bulldozer Exhibition, before that they were “underground,” as if they lived below the floor.

After the Manezh show, there were constant shows in institutes, which were shut down as a rule, and then in apartments, and also occasional “outcroppings”—the Bluebird Café from 1963 until 1966, where Erik Bulatov and I exhibited together. First, I think in 1965, I exhibited the paintings *Arm and a Reproduction of a Ruysdael* (fig. 12), *In the Corner* (fig. 13) from the *Russian Series*, and *The Boy* (fig. 5), and then a few evenings later Bulatov showed paintings and I various drawings that were hung on the curtains over





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the windows.<sup>24</sup> I remember that at one of these “discussion evenings,” Komar and Melamid showed early works in “good” frames.<sup>25</sup>

✱

For two years, Sooster and I were in the studio on Malye Kamenshchiki, but in the fall of 1964 they started demolishing the building and the softhearted head of the ZhEK moved us to another basement, just as dark and damp, in a two-story building across from the Mayakovsky Museum on Taganka.<sup>26</sup> At that time Gennady Aygi worked in the museum.<sup>27</sup> In fact, that museum in those years was a refuge for all the persecuted talented wretches. It housed “progressive” exhibitions, and I remember there was even a small show of Malevich in 1964 or 1965. Our studio across the street became even more animated because of this proximity, especially during exhibitions and concerts offered by the museum.

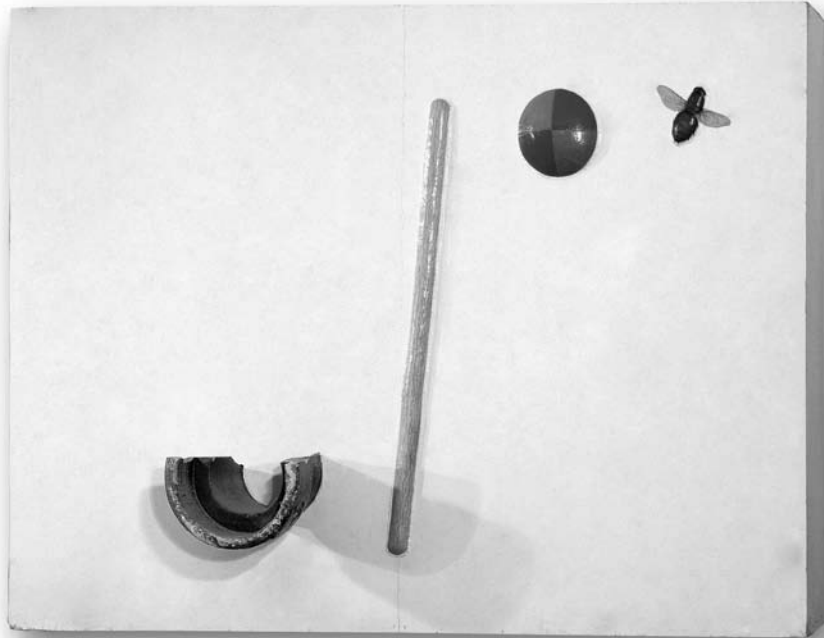
Here, we at least had two rooms. Sooster took the front one, and I took the back. In the fall, winter, and spring I used it to make books, numerous drawings, and large paintings or, rather, “strange” objects. I don’t remember

24. This date appears to be inaccurate. The three paintings were included in Kabakov’s 1968 exhibition with Bulatov at the café. See Jackson, *Experimental Group*, 93–95.

25. Vitaly Komar (b. 1943) and Aleksandr Melamid (b. 1945), multimedia artists and the founders of Sots-Art, left the USSR in 1977.

26. The State Mayakovsky Museum on Taganka was located in the poet’s former home.

27. Gennady Aygi (1934–2006) was a widely celebrated Soviet poet and translator.



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the dating exactly, but it was approximately the 1965–1966 seasons. We were in that basement for about two years.

I began making “big white objects” there. I made *Pipe, Stick, Ball, and Fly* (140 by 200 by 30 centimeters) (fig. 14), *Couch-Painting* (fig. 15), *Arm and a Reproduction of a Ruysdael* (fig. 12), *Machine Gun and Chicks* (fig. 16). I think that was also when I made the small paintings *Day and Night* (fig. 17), *Whose Fly Is This?* (fig. 18), *Who Wrote This Poem?* (fig. 19) (each 70 by 50 centimeters). [ . . . ]

What else can I say about those “painting-objects”? At the time I called it “absurdism.” In 1970, when Dina Vierny first saw them, she called it “Russian pop art.”<sup>28</sup>

The way I remember it now, this is what it was for me: by that time, continually making drawings, I had a growing awareness that when I was working on a drawing, light was shining on me, a kind of energy in the light. From the depth of the sheet of paper on which I was drawing, a special light of extraordinary origin was coming straight at me. I kept thinking that I was drawing on a surface that was perpendicular to the light.

Therefore any depiction on the paper was floating in light, and flat inking

28. Dina Vierny (1919–2009) was a prominent Parisian collector of unofficial Russian art.



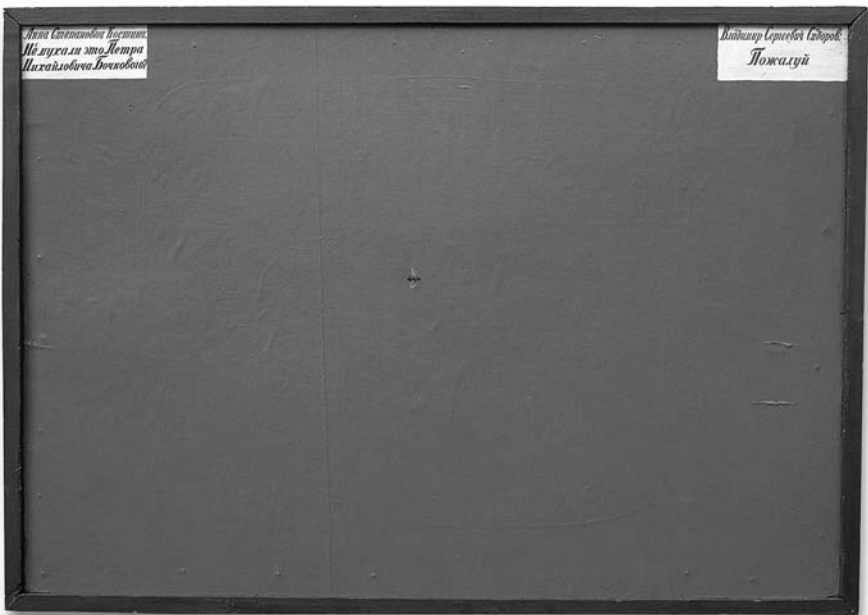
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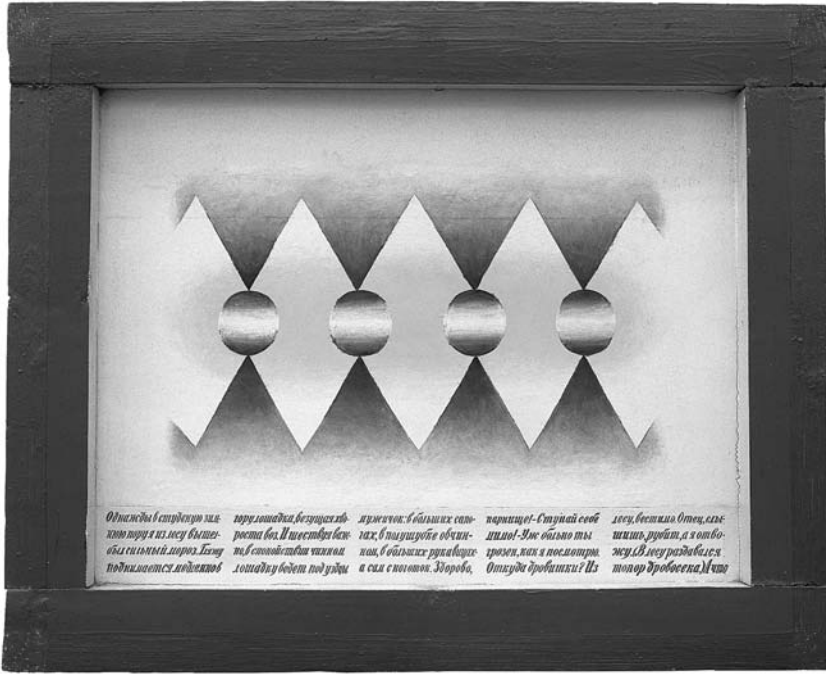


Людмила Степановна Кустинская  
Не забудь про Петра  
Михайловича Бочковца

Иванову Сергееву Гаврилу  
Пожалуй

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dirtied, muddied, and blocked out the light, like a murky window. Every drawing seemed like dirty glass to me, preventing light from coming through from the depths to us out here. But paradoxically, that light appeared and moved only when I started drawing something on paper; it apparently needed a few elements on the paper, in a certain balanced distribution, in order to pour out of the depth forward at me with blinding force. The drawing was finished when an even pulsing light emanated from the entire paper in front of me. Of course, it would be wrong to say that the drawing became finished. It appeared in my imagination already done in combination with that light, such that if it were executed on paper, the proper effect would be achieved.

It was always that way. For that entire period from 1965 to the end of the decade, I did all of my drawings with the experience of light being revealed behind the drawing. That is the source of the “flatness” of the drawings, the contouring of the drawing—a steady hatching, as in stained-glass windows, and if I depicted a three-dimensional object (ball, fly), it “floated” in the depth of that light. If there was space, it thickened or melted, also surrounded by that light.

In short, the several hundred drawings made in those years have the light that showed through the “other” as their impulse, joy, and justification.

Judging by the character of my experience of that light, it had a special origin, but the word “metaphysical” and the discussion of problems relating to it came later. At the time, there was just a multitude of drawings. [ . . . ]

I think that’s all about the drawings. [ . . . ]

What can I say about the paintings?

It was easy producing light in a drawing, on a small white piece of paper. Paper, like everything in the graphic arts, easily becomes notional, and we readily accept it: the paper does not exist when we look at a drawing.

That is not the case when we are faced with something as large as a painting. The first thing I encountered when I started making the first three “paintings” was the object itself, the thing that appears in the process of its production. I had to deal with the stupid and annoying “non-eliminability” of the thing that exists externally, beside me, and which does not exist in a sheet of paper. The most important, interesting, and main point is that this thing that appears had no name. When we depict something, we have the proto-image before us—ball, fly—and we copy it. If we intend something “on the other side of reality,” something “different,” then in principle, it has not been depicted but only experienced; but the viewer, like the artist, knows where it is found and where to seek it. But a thing, product, that has nothing to do with objects of actual reality or reality “beyond,” literally just hangs there like an absolute absurdity, like a failed, unfunny joke.

It’s not even a utilitarian thing that becomes “artistic” from a change of placement, as with Duchamp’s readymades.

No, it is simply and forever absurd.

And that’s exactly how my product-things felt to me. They were supposed to exist only thanks to interpretation. Yet every explanation was just a weak explanation of the “thing” from a single point of view, without covering over or excusing its bare incongruity.

At the same time, for me these “things” represented a concentration of distinctive psychological feelings. I felt as if pushed, squashed into that world filled with mystery and emptiness, where everything was suspended in silent, uncomfortable anticipation. Everything was pushed into that world only halfway, as if into a suitcase that won’t close. All of it is a question addressed to some unknown person; everyone is visible but not to one another, everyone communicates with another but not with their neighbor. That “something” in which everything is immersed, or on which everything is based, or on which something is daubed, was exactly what I wanted to depict or, rather, to produce. Moreover, I was convinced that this interpretation of a totally material and, for me, tangible “something,” so significant and important, was only for me and my perception. I readily allowed (and therefore played with the con-

cept) that my “objects,” from a different, impartial, and fleeting, I suppose, point of view (which is no less correct and weighty than mine, spectrally but hysterically partial), may look like crazy, pathetic, rubbishy things, made for no apparent reason and worthy of being thrown away or torn apart as unneeded.

I repeat that this point of view could be absolutely correct. After all, a thing that has no protected status as either an aesthetic object or a utilitarian one “flickers” in our consciousness, refusing to be taken anywhere, equally suggesting any possible interpretation and equally quelling any choice. It creates a tormenting situation, in which one vector is equal in force to the opposite one, and therefore it leads consciousness into a stupor, dooming it to immobility and insolubility.

The main character in each “painting” was the thing, and all the added objects merely formed a garland for the ridiculous subject, which prompted the response: so what? The thing in its absurd presence once again turned out to be unmotivated and inexplicable.

The way a thief, caught red-handed by the apartment owner, tries to justify his presence with explanations of confusing doors, similar keys . . .

Thus, the most important point is that the interpretation is stupid, not covering the reasons for the appearance of the painting, and moreover, that it creates the impression that any interpretation would be impotent and unnecessary.

Yes, but why are all the paintings white? At the time, I thought that the same effect might occur as with paper: with the right inner tuning light emanates from the paper. Why then, with the same frame of mind, would not that flow be possible when the “painting” is externally represented by a crate, box, or mattress?

That light is possible everywhere, not only beyond the plane of a piece of paper or a board, but beyond an object that might be standing on the floor in the middle of the room or in a corner, like a table or refrigerator, or simply hanging on the wall. Here, perhaps, it is not a question of interpretation but of verification, something close to faith, yet that smacks of mysticism, and at that time I was very . . .



Sooster and I had to leave this second studio, too, since the building was going to be torn down or turned over to some company. We went to beg the head of the ZhEK again, and she gave us a new place on Bolshie Kamenshchiki in the same neighborhood, but this studio was horrible. It was almost totally underground, dark and tiny, and Ūlo, who lived and slept in the studio, began to give out despite his iron constitution. Nevertheless, we spent the whole

winter of 1966–1967 there in impossibly cramped and damp quarters. My big works were stacked in a closet, and it was so tight that a corner of a frame scraped the white *Couch*, whose surface was supposed to be ideal. A ton of time went into restoring it. I must say that we managed to work in those four-by-five-meter rooms, although we were disturbed by the sound of women's heels on the asphalt of that quiet lane. We could hear the click approaching; finally it drew level with the top edge of our windows (the windows were almost completely below ground, and the room, naturally, was even lower), and lovely ankles flashed by, the rest inaccessible to our eyes, so we had to fill in the picture in our imagination, since it was impossible to check. The clicking heels, coming from the left, vanished to the right forever. [ . . . ]

I don't remember how we spent that winter of 1966–1967. I was at the dacha in the summer, and here's what happened in the fall. One morning I came to the studio. Ülo was out, and I sat at my table but didn't start drawing. Instead I got up and went wherever my eyes took me, as they say—a brilliant, sunny morning. I went along the boulevards up to Sretensky Boulevard, and as I remember it now, I wandered into the courtyard of a big building and like a somnambulist went up the back staircase and, at the last landing, just stopped. Silence and dusty railings in the rays of the morning sun. Suddenly I heard steps following me up, slow, aged steps. Below, coming toward me, moving with difficulty and taking breaks, was an old man who looked up at me and smiled, even from a distance. We introduced ourselves. "I'd like to build a studio." "A big one?" "Yes." "When do you want to start?" "Today." "All right. Bring permission from the Fund. I'll be waiting for you in the courtyard at one." I ran to the Fund. Everyone was there. I got permission in twenty minutes with all the signatures. I brought it over exactly at 1 p.m. The old man was waiting for me. He put the permission in his pocket without looking at it. That evening, the first boards were delivered to the courtyard.

It was like a dream, mystical, the secret ways of Providence. The old man who came toward me up the stairs was David Grigorevich Kogan, the mysterious and omnipotent builder of studios in those years, who was impossible to meet without special recommendations. The building I had wandered into was the Russia [Insurance] Building, where studios were under construction in the attic, all a deep secret so no artists would find out about it. To top it off, getting permission from the Fund, just like that, without commissions and innumerable "important" friends, was simply impossible, especially in one day, but . . . that's what makes a miracle a miracle—it is a leap over everything. Of course, David Grigorevich was the embodiment of mysticism, a miraculous source, since building under those conditions—and he built over two hundred studios—was a job for a magician. He had an amazing

sense for people, purely intuitive, and he brought happiness to a huge number of artists by building them studios, while he himself was a profoundly ill and miserable man. Later he built studios for Bulatov and Vassiliev and found studios for Yankilevsky and Pivovarov.<sup>29</sup>

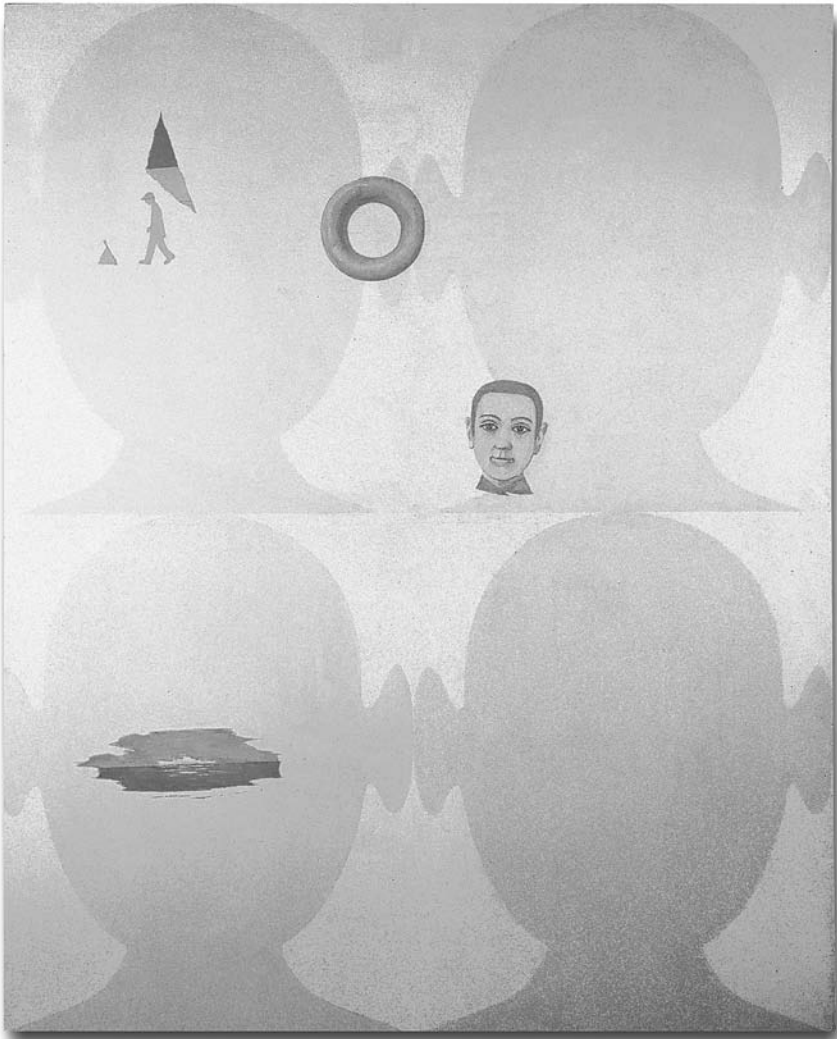
The very next day I persuaded Sooster to start construction next to me. There were still free spaces in the attic. Ülo had three rubles in his pocket. He agreed, and Kogan started building for him too. At the time I didn't have much money, and you had to pay a lot of money up front for the construction. Fortunately, I had a large manuscript on hand for Detgiz, Samuil Marshak's *The House That Jack Built*. I was going to get around four thousand rubles when I turned it in. Construction began in September. The work was done in the evenings, between 5 p.m. and 9 or 10 p.m. So I divided my time between the old studio on Kamenshchiki, where I did the Marshak, and the attic, where the carpenters raised the walls and new roof before my very eyes.

Of course, there was no plan, so I could just say, "Raise it up here. Put the window there," and the studio was built literally the way I wanted. The carpenters were marvelous craftsmen. They didn't drink, and when they finished work, when they had put in the windows and doors (they did it all themselves) and came to be paid, I gasped: all five were dressed practically in tuxedos. They wore ties. It turned out that they were five construction contractors who moonlighted after their real jobs.

Soon afterward, the plumbing and electricity were put in and everything was plastered. I decided not to whitewash, and I could move in by November. Sooster's studio was being built at the same time, but it was delayed a bit and Ülo spent some time living and working in my studio and supervising the work going on next door. What a joyous, amazing time! (There are photographs of works standing in the still empty, un-lived-in studio in the winter of 1967–1968, photographs of Ülo sitting among crates that served as shelves and a library and drawing repository, and at his desk by the window.)

In the new studio, in the winter of 1967–1968, having moved everything from the old one, I didn't start working on "three-dimensional" large works, moving right away to flat large formats, covered in white enamel. The first was *Bublik* (fig. 20): four heads in two rows, pink and yellow on the diagonal, but flat; on them, as if they are the background, "float" a *bublik* [bagel], a head, and a fragment of a seascape. I painted this on plywood, but all the subsequent ones are on Masonite. I made this painting from the motifs of

29. Viktor Pivovarov (b.1937), an unofficial artist who has worked primarily in the mediums of drawing and painting. His works tend toward a vocabulary that is both representational and absurd.

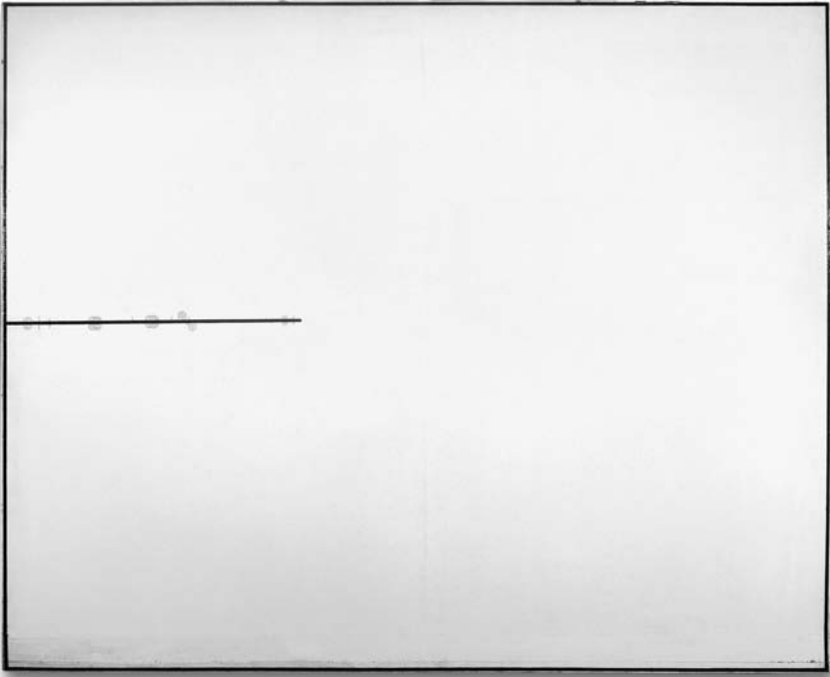


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the drawing series “Paired Heads in Two Stories.” I even hung this series on the wall in my studio. I remember, this series was one of the first to have a certain internal development. [ . . . ]

After working on this painting a long time, I spent a rather long time on *Berdyansk Spit* (fig. 21), adding and subtracting white. Ūlo was very unhappy with these works. The summer of 1968 was spent earning money and on trips to the dacha and travels in Svaneti [in Georgia] with Bulatov, Vassiliev, and Mezhaninov. In the fall of 1968 I went back to making large, flat works. [ . . . ]

In the winter of 1969–1970, I did *All About It* (fig. 22), a larger work, also



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flat, on Masonite, which consists in text-opinions over its entire surface. All of the voices are talking “about it,” but each opinion is about something else (a hedgehog, a house, a person, etc.). The bits of text are sentence fragments, taken from the middle of an opinion or story of each character. With that fragmentation, what is created is like a residue of semi-meaning, a semi-hint, smoke consisting of hope and disappointment, which normally remains outside the text and can be heard only in the intonation. Though each fragment, in its rectangle, talks only about its own topic, the painting derives meaning and significance from these remnants that are beyond meaning in each individual fragment.

The speakers don’t know this, but we outsiders can learn it. And also who “it” is. “It” is not who each phrase is about. The whole does not consist of its parts but is somehow derived from them. That was my concept. Visually the painting was supposed to create an optical noise, even though each one in his “cell” voices only one phrase.

The next painting in this group—*Where Are They?* (fig. 23)—was made in exactly the same way as the drawing. [ . . . ] The painting is related to the drawings where the texts have lists. [ . . . ] It is related as well to the drawings





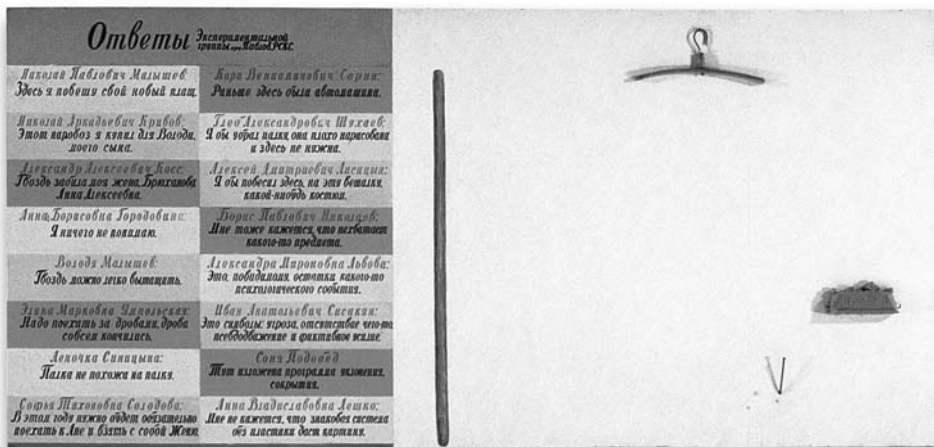


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book and by July had started doing the drawings for *Flying*. Two or three had been done earlier, I think in winter 1969. [ . . . ]

So, in July 1970, while I was in a particularly agitated state, the entire *Flying* (fig. 24) series came to me from beginning to end (or rather in twelve to fifteen sheets). Most important, an expanded plot had emerged—a story in pictures (text came later). I began making drawings one after the other and putting them next to each other. Suddenly, I realized that I could put two more between the fifth and the sixth to stretch out the story, I could add one before the first one; in other words, the whole “feel” of the albums arose and defined itself in those weeks. I consider that period the birth of the album technique as a genre. I used the *Flying* series to test out all the aspects of “directing” the albums: plot, intrigue, length of series, speed of movement through the whole album, given the speed of examining each picture separately. From those two times, two speeds—for the whole album and for each page—comes the point, the spice, of the album as a “temporal” genre: the discovery of the “residual” interest after looking at an individual page, and the commentaries to the picture, which picks up that “residual” interest. I understood much of this with my first album series, but I was still far from my real albums; this was just the kernel of my future work.

I remember the pleasure with which I was working on the end of this



25

series when I got a telegram in late October: “Come quickly. Ülo is in very bad shape.” I flew back to Moscow.<sup>31</sup>

★

What can I say about the “flat” works, essentially paintings, that I started making after the three-dimensional works, starting with *Bublik* and *Berdyansk Spit* and ending with *Answers of the Experimental Group* (fig. 25)?

I perceived them as white planes from which light came at me, radiating from the depths of the surface. It was that special, mysterious, light-bearing of the white surface that had attracted me. These big rectangles were filled with irrational light for me. Their large size meant a magnification of intensity, the screen of light in an interior. That’s the right word, “screen.” The white board was a screen. It “screened” light that was steadily and continually emitted. All that was left of the “thingness” of the flat board was its thickness (3.5 centimeters). It was not covered by anything, no frame, not color; in other words, it was a white sheet of paper, only solid, massive, and very smooth.

The lacquered, polished surface of the “white” was very important. The white light was better if the surface was smooth, full of sparkles and reflections, and not matte. On the other hand, obvious and not very well covered seams in the surface did not annoy me. I don’t know why. Perhaps because those panels were made here, in our country, where nothing precise and ideal exists or ever will—that is, those white panels contain a hint of their social nature. In any case, if spackling showed through several layers of white

31. Ülo Sooster died in Moscow on 25 October 1970.

enamel, if you could see the effort to “smooth over the cracks,” that assiduousness suited me, and the result seemed adequate.

As for the image, as a rule quite minimal, I built it so that it would be on the board’s surface but would sink, drown in the white light that I was feeling so strongly. Later, I considered the work “done” when that light broke uninterrupted through the entire depiction, embracing and enveloping everything.

Unfortunately, whites turn yellow when kept in the dark, and the original idea becomes incomprehensible (*Bublik*, etc.).

As for the *Russian Series* (fig. 13), its even, disgusting brown background makes it the first of the ZhEK panels that I began in 1979.<sup>32</sup> Before that, it had just been a curiosity among the “white works.” The same holds for *This Is the Sea. This Is the Sky . . .* (fig. 26). That painting found its place in the 1982 series *Dialogues*.

The last three works, *Answers*, *All about It*, and *Where Are They?*—the lettered ones, the ones with text—if you set aside their irrational, metaphysical underpinnings, belong to an important group of works with written names on boards, which arose ten years later. They are also related to the ZhEK panels: *Taking Out the Garbage Pail* (fig. 27), *Sunday Evening* (1979) (fig. 28), and *List of Persons* (1982) (fig. 29). [ . . . ]



32. These were works that, according to Kabakov, aimed to appear as if they were decoration for a ZhEK (Zhilishchno-Ekspluatatsionnaia Kontora), a building belonging to the Soviet-era public housing administration.

**За чистоту!**



**Расписание выноса подойного бедра по дому № 24 подъезд № 6 улицы и.в.Бардина ЖЭБ № 8 Бичаинского р-на.**

Год	Чубарь Фабриал	Нарт Ларель	Май Ивны	Илья Алыст	Ситыгорь Фактор	Масора Дасорь
1979 г.	1) Пратаров И.А. № 20	1) Гауд Е.С. № 20	1) Жаппа И.С. № 20	1) Лебучи С.Е. № 20	1) Жаппан И.В. № 20	1) Заспан И.С. № 20
	2) Зуркова И. № 17	2) Акмаченов И. № 17	2) Газова И.В. № 17	2) Ситкой И.И. № 17	2) Зурова И.В. № 17	2) Горюхи И. № 17
	3) Жаппан И.В. № 19	3) Заспан И.С. № 19	3) Акмаченов И. № 19	3) Пратаров И.А. № 19	3) Гауд Е.С. № 19	3) Жаппа И.С. № 19
	4) Зурова И.В. № 17	4) Горюхи И. № 17	4) Май С.И. № 17	4) Зуркова И. № 17	4) Акмаченов И. № 17	4) Газова И.В. № 17
	5) Жаппан И.В. № 19	5) Заспан И.С. № 19	5) Горюхи И. № 19	5) Май С.И. № 19	5) Пратаров И.А. № 19	5) Акмаченов И. № 19
1980 г.	1) Акмаченов И. № 17	1) Пратаров И.А. № 17	1) Гауд Е.С. № 17	1) Жаппа И.С. № 17	1) Лебучи С.Е. № 17	1) Жаппан И.В. № 17
	2) Май С.И. № 17	2) Зуркова И. № 17	2) Акмаченов И. № 17	2) Газова И.В. № 17	2) Ситкой И.И. № 17	2) Зурова И.В. № 17
	3) Лебучи С.Е. № 17	3) Жаппан И.В. № 17	3) Заспан И.С. № 17	3) Акмаченов И. № 17	3) Пратаров И.А. № 17	3) Гауд Е.С. № 17
	4) Ситкой И.И. № 17	4) Зурова И.В. № 17	4) Горюхи И. № 17	4) Май С.И. № 17	4) Зуркова И. № 17	4) Акмаченов И. № 17
	5) Жаппан И.В. № 17	5) Заспан И.С. № 17	5) Пратаров И.А. № 17	5) Гауд Е.С. № 17	5) Лебучи С.Е. № 17	5) Жаппан И.В. № 17
1981 г.	1) Заспан И.С. № 20	1) Акмаченов И. № 20	1) Пратаров И.А. № 20	1) Гауд Е.С. № 20	1) Жаппа И.С. № 20	1) Лебучи С.Е. № 20
	2) Горюхи И. № 17	2) Май С.И. № 17	2) Зуркова И. № 17	2) Акмаченов И. № 17	2) Газова И.В. № 17	2) Ситкой И.И. № 17
	3) Жаппа И.С. № 20	3) Лебучи С.Е. № 20	3) Жаппан И.В. № 20	3) Заспан И.С. № 20	3) Акмаченов И. № 20	3) Пратаров И.А. № 20
	4) Ситкой И.И. № 17	4) Зурова И.В. № 17	4) Горюхи И. № 17	4) Май С.И. № 17	4) Зуркова И. № 17	4) Акмаченов И. № 17
	5) Заспан И.С. № 20	5) Пратаров И.А. № 20	5) Гауд Е.С. № 20	5) Лебучи С.Е. № 20	5) Жаппан И.В. № 20	5) Жаппа И.С. № 20
1982 г.	1) Жаппан И.В. № 17	1) Заспан И.С. № 17	1) Акмаченов И. № 17	1) Пратаров И.А. № 17	1) Гауд Е.С. № 17	1) Жаппа И.С. № 17
	2) Зурова И.В. № 17	2) Горюхи И. № 17	2) Май С.И. № 17	2) Зуркова И. № 17	2) Акмаченов И. № 17	2) Газова И.В. № 17
	3) Гауд Е.С. № 17	3) Жаппан И.В. № 17	3) Заспан И.С. № 17	3) Акмаченов И. № 17	3) Пратаров И.А. № 17	3) Гауд Е.С. № 17
	4) Акмаченов И. № 17	4) Зурова И.В. № 17	4) Ситкой И.И. № 17	4) Зурова И.В. № 17	4) Горюхи И. № 17	4) Май С.И. № 17
	5) Жаппан И.В. № 17	5) Заспан И.С. № 17	5) Пратаров И.А. № 17	5) Гауд Е.С. № 17	5) Лебучи С.Е. № 17	5) Жаппан И.В. № 17
1983 г.	1) Лебучи С.Е. № 20	1) Жаппан И.В. № 20	1) Заспан И.С. № 20	1) Акмаченов И. № 20	1) Пратаров И.А. № 20	1) Гауд Е.С. № 20
	2) Ситкой И.И. № 17	2) Зурова И.В. № 17	2) Горюхи И. № 17	2) Май С.И. № 17	2) Зуркова И. № 17	2) Акмаченов И. № 17
	3) Пратаров И.А. № 17	3) Гауд Е.С. № 17	3) Жаппа И.С. № 17	3) Лебучи С.Е. № 17	3) Жаппан И.В. № 17	3) Заспан И.С. № 17
	4) Зуркова И. № 17	4) Акмаченов И. № 17	4) Газова И.В. № 17	4) Ситкой И.И. № 17	4) Зурова И.В. № 17	4) Горюхи И. № 17
	5) Пратаров И.А. № 17	5) Гауд Е.С. № 17	5) Жаппа И.С. № 17	5) Лебучи С.Е. № 17	5) Жаппан И.В. № 17	5) Заспан И.С. № 17
1984 г.	1) Жаппа И.С. № 20	1) Лебучи С.Е. № 20	1) Жаппан И.В. № 20	1) Заспан И.С. № 20	1) Акмаченов И. № 20	1) Пратаров И.А. № 20
	2) Зурова И.В. № 17	2) Ситкой И.И. № 17	2) Зурова И.В. № 17	2) Горюхи И. № 17	2) Май С.И. № 17	2) Зуркова И. № 17
	3) Акмаченов И. № 17	3) Зурова И.В. № 17	3) Гауд Е.С. № 17	3) Жаппа И.С. № 17	3) Лебучи С.Е. № 17	3) Жаппан И.В. № 17
	4) Май С.И. № 17	4) Зуркова И. № 17	4) Акмаченов И. № 17	4) Газова И.В. № 17	4) Ситкой И.И. № 17	4) Зурова И.В. № 17
	5) Пратаров И.А. № 17	5) Гауд Е.С. № 17	5) Жаппа И.С. № 17	5) Лебучи С.Е. № 17	5) Жаппан И.В. № 17	5) Заспан И.С. № 17

**35. Воскресный вечер.**

**12 февраля 1979 г.**

	Что был	Во что одеты	Что съели	Куда шли:
	Ламадинская Рида Петровна (жена)	Корна беж. чыкы капр. ожерелье (с.кость)	Сагат из сб. общей, суп. паштет, грибы, картоф. колпот	З
	Лобин Яков Израйлович	Китель, брюки сер. обтники, часы зол.	Сагат из сб. общей, сельдь, оливки с пирожек, грибы, чай с пирогами	23 ч. 45 м.
	Якимчук Тераси Семенович	Лид жак, рубашка ш. брюки сер. тупри кож.	Сагат из сб. общей, сельдь, колбаса, овощи, картофж, грибы, колпот, пирожки	23 ч. 05 м.
	Якимчук Елена Марковна	Нальто (воротн. выдры), платье синее, шерст., трупн. медальон, золото	Сагат из сб. общей, оливки, картофель жар. грибы, чай с пирогами	23 ч. 05 м.
	Якимчук Марина Терасимовна	Нальто кож. воротн. мех., платье белое шелков. чыкы капр.	Сельдь, колбаса, паштет, оборж, картоф. жар. грибы, чай с пирогами	23 ч. 05 м.
	Зарайская Лина Фелимоновна	Платье, корна зелен. юбка черная, шерст.	Сагат из сб. общей, суп. паштет, чай с пирогами	23 ч. 10 м.
	Коврова Зинаида Яковлевна	Нальто черное драп., корна серая, чык. капр., тупри черные	Сагат из сб. общей, суп. картофель жар. грибы, чай с пирогами	22 ч. 08 м.
	<b>Оценка: Уд</b>			

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What else can I add about my paintings from the 1960s?

First, there is the idea of duality or ambiguity while looking at the works, which is present in the volumetric “thing paintings” and the flat “alleged paintings.” They presume two irreconcilable, incompatible points of view. The first is the deep or spatial method of looking. This, of course, is not a natural view into the distance where there is a landscape depicted in a painting and “you see something there in the distance, beyond the river . . .” In my case, when I say “there,” “in the depths of the painting,” in the “white,” I mean the very principle of looking at something, into its depths. Looking without seeing with our eyes means that we are unable to distinguish whether the “distance” is in front, before us, or deep inside us. I don’t know how to describe it better, but with a certain mindset it works. By the concept of space and depth, I mean the equality of the infinitely far and the infinitely internal and hidden.

The plane itself, the surface, in relation to which this “distant-inside” fluctuation arises, stands before us like a thing, an absolutely immobile line, a plane that serves merely as the means for this important movement.

The plane can be compared to a mirror into which we gaze. But a painting is not an invisible surface like a mirror. It is not at all transparent, but that is very good for my intentions. Here, a choice is offered: if you are set for the back and forth between “in the distance and in the depths,” if you accept it, it will happen. If you are not, if the proposal to “stare into emptiness” seems stupid, then you’ve chosen the second variant: before you is a poorly white-washed, cracked board with nails sticking out, with badly daubed, absurd, and pathetic images, in other words, a ridiculous and unnecessary thing.

All that is fine, but a work of art is not a psychological text with a semi-psychopathic-semimystical orientation, though apparently that’s what “doing art” boiled down to for me.

#### PROVINCIALISM

A few more words about my works of that period, or rather, about the thinking that created them. It can be considered totally provincial. Let me explain what I mean by that concept.

“Provincial” and “metropolitan” as categories of consciousness or methods of existence are, along with well-known pairings like “city” and “country,” “village” and “fortress,” variations on “peripheral” and “central.” While the metropolitan is not aware of, or does not know, its surroundings, its periphery; the periphery, the provincial, is acutely aware of the existence of the

capital, at every moment and in every action, and continually compares itself to the capital, but it can never become the capital or enter the inner circle.

On the artistic level this leads to the appearance of products not made in the capital but *like* in the capital. This “like” has four aspects:

1. The product must be “not worse than” . . . that is, all the reasons and methods underlying production “over there,” in the capital, must be borne in mind, re-created, and restored in the local way.
2. The norm, the model, is an object that was made “there,” by “them,” in the capital.
3. That object always takes on “ahistorical” qualities: Beauty in general, Truth, Art, Painting—all with capital letters.
4. There is a special provincial “criticality” toward everything “metropolitan”: discussion, pointing out flaws, demands for change or overthrow, etc.

The capital doesn’t know or hear about any of this, just as the millionairess in the novel *Twelve Chairs* was oblivious to what her rival Ellochka, from Malaya Meshchanskaya Street, was doing. This leads to a special psychological state that could be called the “provincial’s complex.”<sup>33</sup>

The first requirement creates incredible pressure and effort to re-create the entire historical path and all the circumstances that led to the creation of the “normal metropolitan work.” It’s obvious that you can’t do either in a short time, but the provincial can’t wait; he doesn’t have time. This leads to gigantic gaps and blanks that he fills with his own crazy guesses and discoveries, throwing invented bridges over the gaps.

The second circumstance breeds a profound tormented sense of primordial, congenital unsuitability in relation to that norm, the “bastard effect,” being in the presence of a cake that is not for you. “Beautiful and Great Art” already exists, but not for you. It’s for a different sensibility, and your lot at best is to repeat something similar, with the operative word being “similar.” At any moment you could be caught out as a forger. Best case scenario: it won’t be noticed; worst case: you’ll be caught red-handed.

The third aspect refers to the particular maximalism and radicalism of the provincial mind, the desire to define everything “once and for all,” to solve the eternal tormenting questions finally and “essentially.” Satisfaction can be found only in the absolute.

Finally, the fourth aspect leads to criticism and reflection on the “normative” product, not rivalry (which is fundamentally impossible under the rules

33. Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov’s 1928 comic novel *Twelve Chairs*, which Kabakov earlier referenced in “Culture, ‘I,’ ‘It,’ and Favorsky’s Light (‘Rhombus’),” chronicles the adventures of the picaresque con man Ostap Bender.

of provincialism) but a continual uninterrupted attention, a kind of sucking up that is jealous, impassioned, and critical. Thus the product of the provincial becomes a kind of footnote, commentary, and response to the “normative object.” This object is painfully, inexorably present in every consideration, and inherent in the provincial’s consciousness. This leads to two kinds of production, which are always dichotomous and in dialogue. The first appears when the metropolitan, normative thing is introduced inside the provincial one, and the result is a symbiosis: the metropolitan part “is improved,” deformed, and given nuances and shades. The second leaves the normative thing outside the parentheses, like the person everyone talks about the minute he leaves the room. In that case the object made by the provincial looks like pure reflection, a replica, while the object of the reflection remains unseen.

This is a great risk for the provincial. He has to be certain that the object on which he is expressing his opinion is well known, clear in everyone’s mind in every detail; otherwise his polemic will not be understood. But this is the miserable peculiarity of the provincial mind: he is inherently certain that the object of his passionate and ceaseless interest is known well and in its every subtlety to everyone, for it is “central,” “true,” and “beautiful” for everyone, although of course, centrality and truth are the fruits of his own inflamed imagination.

Everything I have said about provincialism naturally applies completely to me. I was “pushed” into Moscow artistic life from the start as twice removed. First of all, I came to Moscow from Dnepropetrovsk (in 1946, when I was thirteen). And second, I don’t remember being passionately drawn to art but found myself in it as the result of certain circumstances, and once there, always considered the situation “external,” something that I had to catch up with and jump onto, like a train, finding inner resources for diligence, desire, and talent, and all that seemed hard, imposed, and nonobligatory.

Here we approach yet another topic, yet another circumstance that is also embedded in all the production of the 1960s and which might be interesting to describe.

#### O B F U S C A T I O N

In general, by this I mean a situation in which something other than what is meant is said and expressed.

Naturally, in normal, everyday life, obfuscation is often encountered and used in the pursuit of various goals, but this method of communication in the fine arts seems rather strange and actually unpleasant. . . . How is it even possible? After all, we assume that the very concept of “art” refers to what is



visible and apparent and not what was intended, wanted, presumed, etc. How could that mindset even appear?

The point is that it already exists and is ideally realized in a field adjacent to the visual arts: today's language is a wonderful demonstration of the divergence between the word and its content. We are the fortunate witnesses of the moment of the total separation between the word and its semantics. We come across texts that mean nothing. In this situation, meaning, unable to find a "link" with the word, seeks to emerge in proximate, indirect forms of expression, turning to euphemisms and metaphors, but most frequently to a special figure of preterition that I would call "the field of the ban on expression."

Something like that occurred with me when I started doing large works. They immediately appeared in a situation of saying, depicting, something that was not "direct" speech. A gap appeared between the thing and me, not in the sense that I didn't manage to express myself, or wasn't clear, or couldn't find the form, etc. Not at all.

The situation of the gap between what I am doing and what I have in mind I accepted as normal, and moreover, it seemed to be most interesting and fruitful. These products started actually "to work" only when the gap was fully established, that is, when the thing existed separately from me, when it was completed. But its separateness as I saw it was not its independent life without me.

Just the opposite. At that moment, a special, rather strange dialogue began between the completed work and my consciousness. A conversation similar to Pushkin's line: "Where did you bloom? When? Which spring?"<sup>34</sup> A terrible agitation at the sight of the painting was in fact its main meaning, the main attraction. It was not a contemplative state but, on the contrary, active research into often remote areas of culturology, philosophy, and social psychology. All kinds of associations and connections tumbled into my mind. . . .

With that, I had the strange impression that all of these connections, these meanings, this "richness" was in my work as well. But that was an empty hope, since I had not done any of it, did not try, did not even know how.

That may be so, I would tell myself, but the desire was there! The intention was there! Would not another person looking at this find and sense my "intentions," understand what I wanted to put in there?

But intention, and this is the most important part in the law of obfuscation, must be detached from realization; it is pleasing only because it is not realized and the possibility of realization remains. That, apparently, is the

34. The line is from Aleksandr Pushkin's poem "The Flower" (1828).

most important point, the essence of the attitude of the consciousness to the completed thing. Let it fail to realize my intentions, let it be bad, ridiculous, totally insignificant. At least my consciousness is now free of this thing. I did not move into it, and I can always stand apart from it and discuss it. Of course, this leads to a special kind of duality. I myself made this thing, yet I want to be, and can be, free of it.

I don't know how to resolve this contradiction. I like the "optionality" of the work for me, and naturally for the viewer, who is always free in relation to the product. But, coming back to the producer, it should be said that often part of himself is included in the completed work, "enthralled" by it (otherwise, he wouldn't be able to make it), yet with another part he regards the work and himself from the side, totally outside the process, retaining the right to discuss both the work and the creator.

That means that these two "parts," these two "egos," have created two types of product: the first "producer" makes the thing itself, the second provides judgment of the thing. But both states can be objectivized, and then the possibility arises of dealing with word and image on equal terms.

The constant separation between judgment and the work itself led to two circumstances on which I would like to dwell in detail, recalling the 1960s. They are the "bad work" and "word and image on equal terms."

#### WORD AND IMAGE ON EQUAL TERMS

A word and an image located in a single visual field can be understood in a way similar to a word and an object. The two become equal in the viewer's consciousness when the opportunity to see them in a single field arises. But even in our memory, an object appears visually, really, as if externally, while judgment of it always comes from within. How can they be perceived as one? Only inside the "field of consciousness" or "inner space of consciousness" can the most varied classes—things, opinions, ideas, concepts, etc.—integrate equally.

The painting under discussion appears as one such field of consciousness, brought outside and therefore seemingly existing objectively. That objectivity is, of course, only a seeming objectivity. It is calculated to involve the viewer's "inner" imagination, similarly to the way a surrealist painting counts on the subconscious and the impressionists' multicolored dots require color synthesis inside the eye.

On that field, I repeat, phenomena of various orders—for example, objects and opinions about them—can exist on equal terms. With some effort you can picture and find that inner field with all of its associations, percep-

tions, and opinions intertwining, creating a single unified net in which one knot drags the next along (similar to Proust's single field of memory).

But why should a work built on this principle be understood as a field? The very separation of the produced work from the walls and the surrounding space places it in the situation of being a thing, an object, and as a result of the presence of many images on it, places it into the system of collateral subordination of those images.

The most important role belongs to the text that is included among the other images on the paintings. It does not allow the work to be detached from consciousness; it puts it in a vague, "slippery" situation in relation to the inner field of opinions. The text turns the work inward, "locks" it there, while the objects bring it outside. It is like the cat in Daniil Kharm's poem, which "partially walks on the road and partly flies smoothly through the air."<sup>35</sup> This uncertainty and lack of clarity about where the painting should be filed—inside or outside—creates the attractive opportunity of the "painting with text," because the choice is always there, even though it's illusory, of course, as it is in any game.

There is yet another circumstance here. The text in these paintings is not just the written word, but speech, spoken words. This sounded expression, which belongs to a concrete person, whose full name is often written right there as well, creates a special effect when the phrase is read: we hear it, but we do not see who is saying it. But the authenticity and abruptness of those words creates the feeling that the speaker is somewhere nearby. A substitution occurs, the illusion of the reality of the person we do not see but hear well, and thus the written can substitute for the object.

There is still one more quality of spoken words. They are incredibly "spacious." Indeed, people are continually surrounded in their daily lives by a heaving sea of pronounced words, never still, whether they are seated in a lecture hall or wandering in the mountains. We are immersed in an endless chorus of voices and participate in it ourselves. Moreover, if you listen to yourself, you will find that you are filled inside with those voices, which resound in all of us, voices arguing, countering, soothing. . . . The "external" and "inner" voices combine, separate, and overwhelm each other in various intersections, levels, responses, and echoes.

We can state that the external and inner spaces represent a single field, a cosmos of spoken voices.

Therefore, as soon as you write down two or three fragments of those

35. Daniil Kharm's, "Verses about a Cat," in *Today I Wrote Nothing: The Selected Writings of Daniil Kharm's*, trans. Matvei Yankelevich (New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2007).

sounds, each of us will instantly find the gigantic sea of voices moving and alive, and that “detonation” will give rise to a three-dimensional, spatial, and constantly undulating environment, even though it is nothing but an illusion of our imagination.

#### THE BADLY MADE THING

In conclusion I want to talk about another concept that I formulated for myself in those years—the concept of the “bad work.”

I’m talking about a work that is made “badly” from the start. The point is not that is made in the aesthetic of “imprecise” or “careless”—for if it did belong to that aesthetic, it would be a “normal” work of art. The point lies elsewhere.

The concept of the “bad work” comes from the following assumption, I believe. First, it relates to the perception of the thing in the world around us. Observing “things” (I mean ordinary objects), I have always had the feeling that every thing, every object, is not an object in a series of other objects, “a thing among things,” neatly separated from one another, with their own contours and their own completed forms—no, each object represents something completely different for me.

To understand what I mean, I want to turn to a way of doing marble sculpture frequently used by Rodin, Golubkina, and the impressionists in general.<sup>36</sup> They have the body, head, or hands growing out of, sticking out of, painfully escaping from, the formless, viscous, monolithic mass, the mainland, from which they cannot separate or free themselves completely. Some parts are free and completed, others fully submerged, drowning in the shapeless whole, but fundamentally we constantly see the relationship and the duel, the hostility between two principles: the intelligent living thing and the mindless dead block.

All things that surround us I consider “bad” in that “sculptural” sense. They have only partial shape and the function of cups, televisions, chairs, trolleys, houses, etc., but the greater part of them belong to that eyeless, wordless, ugly “nothing,” the chaos that subsumes and imbues everything that surrounds us. That “nothing” is many times more whole, solid, active, and significant than the things that want to separate out of it, the things that oppose it. That “nothing” mocks every object, justly seeing its miserable and pathetic nature as well as the randomness and ephemerality of these “objects,” even if they are as permanent as iron or as huge as cities. They, the

36. Anna Golubkina (1864–1927), a Russian and Soviet sculptor.

“nothing,” represent the constancy of the humdrum, yet whole and powerful, “mainland” condition.

We do not compare a thing to another thing but to the general integral that stands behind everything and imbues everything—the universal rubbish heap, to which inevitably everything will return that had briefly tried to escape from it, calling itself a glass, pipe, house, etc. The best example of that brief appearance and return to oblivion is the image of the “construction site/demolition site,” where “construction”—that is, resistance and release—turns out to be illusory and the actual construction contains elements of destruction, collapse, and disappearance in the primordial chaos of nonexistence.

I felt this when I began doing my painting-things, which in the final analysis were supposed to fully preserve this duality. On the one hand, the “thing” had to say something, hint at connections, appear to be something (painting, subject, joke), to have some meaning. On the other hand, it had to completely float away into the faceless unified something or nothing, along with the other objects in the room where it was located: walls, chairs, coat, tables, and so on, with which it comprised a sad temporary family; it was meant to spend only a minute telling us something. We were supposed to think that it was “speaking,” but its continual slow floating away was with them, the objects of our daily life, into the universal dreary pile of rubbish and dust.

This continual duality—shimmering, brief “seeming,” accidental and nonobligatory, coupled with permanent, meaningless ugliness—juxtaposes the components of what I call a “bad work.” A bad work in the artistic sense, of course. Since I am certain that a work of art amid other things cannot be completely finished, that it is open at both ends, having two “windows”: one looking toward a free and nonobligatory interpretation of its meaning, thanks to which it appeared in the world, and one facing the work’s dissolution into the enormous reservoir of matter, meaningless, silent, and eternally ready for anything.

### The 1970s

Today is 8 December 1983.

How—in what way—can I convey the atmosphere of despair, despondency, hopelessness, and horror in the air around the so-called unofficial “artistic” life of that time, that is, the entire 1960s and the beginning, middle, and end of the 1970s? Of course, the feeling—and the air that the artists breathed—had its flows, amplitudes, and condensations that turned into paroxysms and releases. The years from 1957 to 1962 were a period of hope,

of anticipated relief; after that, steady despair, a badgered, hopeless condition that lasted until 1974, the year of the bulldozers, a time when you expected to be caught and squashed for no reason: for drawing “the wrong way,” for showing your works “to the wrong people.”<sup>37</sup> Before 1974, time passed with the inexorable sensation of the end, of your inevitable destruction and the destruction of the artists close to you, but after 1974—Oskar’s exploit, the shows at Izmailovo and at the Beekeeping Pavilion, the formation of the City Committee—the sense of death and destruction lessened. There was less fear, though the sense of the incongruity and hopelessness of your destiny remained the same.

Nevertheless, simultaneous with that feeling, and perhaps because of it (who can explain this connection, yet it is always there), there was a tumultuous explosion, with the force of a released spring, of an enormous number of paintings, poems, texts, drawings, ceaseless compositions and works from the most varied artists, poets, and writers. There was an incredibly intense and heated creative atmosphere, feverishly productive and varied.

In terms of the processes’ complexity, their heterogeneous and multidirectional nature, the explosion’s spontaneity and unexpectedness, the numerousness of causes and interconnections that appeared at the same time and linked up in a phenomenon that was later named “unofficial” art, the 1960s may be compared to the 1920s—but, of course, this will be clear, as usual, only in the distant future (even though it is now already the 1980s). I would like to make an attempt while the trail is still hot, as they say, to note and name, at least approximately, those artistic tendencies that formed in the 1960s, then developed and transformed throughout the 1970s. Naturally, this will be how they seem from here and now—that is, from Moscow in 1983, from my attic. [ . . . ]



Thinking back from the end of 1983 on the social climate of the 1970s, strangely enough I can’t recall any special watersheds, upswings, or crashes, any unusual expectations or subsequent disappointments, even though the 1970s was replete with tensions within the dissident movement: arrests and

37. In the aftermath of the chaos of the Bulldozer Exhibition, organized by the artist Oskar Rabin, on 15 September 1974 (so called because the authorities’ violent interruption of the display included the use of bulldozers), an outpouring of international indignation led to the approval of a second exhibition in Izmailovsky Park (Izmailovo) on Sunday, 29 September. Later, the Soviet authorities granted permission for an exhibition to be held in the Beekeeping Pavilion of the VDNKh (Exhibition of Economic Achievements) on 19–22 February 1975.

trials, Solzhenitsyn's exile, the "human rights" movement.<sup>38</sup> In our "underground" artistic world, perhaps the most important event was 1974's Bulldozer Exhibition, after which underground artistic life, having reached the relative "surface," took on a different character. The event itself was a turning point in the course of artistic life, with many ramifications far beyond the framework of "unofficial" art.

As for the problems that "fed" my work and the "states of mind" in which I existed, all of those events, though quite important in a public sense, existed for me in a different stratum, even in a different "space." And the active processes that I sensed taking place were rather different. Not "just personal" processes, they took place outside and around me, and I plugged into them; although, as the 1970s went on, these processes differed from those of the past more and more, they related to "public" events only tangentially. I "plugged into" them, into these strata, and as I feel now, the climate of these "airier," "atmospheric" (I want to say "auratic"), that is, *imperceptible*, currents that enveloped us, thickened in a special way over our city. I always felt these changes—and *perceived* changes in those currents—over the years more strongly, and I tried to be plugged into them, to transmit them. . . .

But, having written this, I feel that I have run too far ahead, these thoughts and ideas are recent, starting in 1979, the year when I started working completely differently, but before that time everything had not been like that. . . .

Nevertheless, I want to repeat that for me, and not only for me but for several artists close to me, these "social" tensions, full of drama and heroic exploits, were perceived like a sound coming from outside that had nothing to do with us, that took place in another space, perhaps in another country, and they [the artists] were totally convinced that there was nothing to be done to change the steady, inevitable state of reality. Regarding Oskar Rabin's action in 1974, even though I am convinced that it was a real exploit, a true public exploit by a Real Man, I repeat that this turbulent era in the mid-1970s passed as if over my head, perhaps because of my sense of hopelessness due to my environment, perhaps because I was involved in my "inner" problems, or perhaps, and most likely, because of the "normal" human animal fear, the fear that lived in each of us. That fear was particularly powerful and indomitable. (I did not participate in the Bulldozer Exhibition. I remember the panicky fear I felt when I sat next to Oskar [Rabin] on the couch and he proposed "that" to me—but I also remember the feeling of hopelessness in the face of all that and the feeling that "art itself" as I understood it did not

38. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008), the foremost literary dissident of the late Soviet period, was exiled from the USSR in 1974.



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depend on proclamations and demonstrations.) The general situation in artistic life seemed pathological and crazy *absolutely and irreversibly*, and no heroic action could change anything about it. But I was wrong, as it turns out. While the essence of the “art situation” did not change (and has remained unchanged to this day), the entire upper stratum, what I would call the predatory, “oversight and punitive” layer, changed gradually after 1974, and the degree and substance of fear, if I can put it that way, became different after 1974. What do I mean? The quality of fear, which never went away and never vanished, took on new qualities. I can sketch a graph of the mental feelings of the “underground” artists, where one line is the index of “fear” and the other the line of “hope for a normal artistic life.”

As you can see from the graph, the breakthrough for the “fear” line was 1974, the year of the Bulldozer Exhibition, when it seemed that everything would end with the final and immediate destruction of all “unofficial” artistic life. We expected it every day, and then the fear diminished a bit—actually, it remained the same, but the impression was that the “unofficials” would be left alone for an unknown length of time. At the same time, as the graph shows, hopes for a “natural flow of artistic life” reached their peak in 1963, the year of the Manezh show, and after that hope was always equal to zero, because the “victory of Rabin,” the formation of the City Committee, and exhibits there, continuing to this day, did nothing to promote a serious artistic life, it seems to me, but on the contrary, gave rise to an ambivalence, a watered-down experience, a new set of expectations, an “imposition.” . . .



Be that as it may, in my actions I felt an unconquerable revulsion toward any social and public manifestations. I considered them to be alien to me, and as soon as I sensed a “public flavor,” I tried to flee, although externally they seemed to be “normal, natural exhibitions of paintings” by people who were close to you in spirit and fate. . . .

. . . What was the “air” like, the intangible atmosphere, the subtle “Noosphere” that hung over our city, composing and covertly forming its “artistic climate,” which is important yet so difficult, it turns out, to capture, which has such a great influence on certain artists who seem to be predestined to capture it and reflect it?<sup>39</sup> The “air,” which is always “here and now,” “contemporary” air, changes—tomorrow’s is already not completely the same as yesterday’s. Over certain periods, it even becomes completely different. The air is an emanation, the side-effect radiation of local History, always flowing, and by plugging in or attuning oneself to receive it, the artist, poet, or musician becomes synchronized with the most essential and important “events” of his time. This being “plugged in” and “receptive” to the currents serves, I am now firmly convinced, as the source and, however self-deceiving the word may be, the “guarantor” of an artist’s place in his time forever: a source, because those currents are charged with maximal energy, and if you catch them they give you incredible power to express them; a guarantor, because as it seems to me now, the only thing that lasts forever or at least for a long time is what belongs to the narrowly temporal or, rather, to the local time that is fixed and included in those currents and radiation of the concrete associated with “this” place at “this” time.

Of course, in order for these currents (and they are by nature weak and almost imperceptible) to be discerned and heard by such imperfect receivers as the artistic inner ear, the “air” must be extremely concentrated, having an unusually tense and active “field,” in order to condense those “image signals” so that they can be caught. . . . But fortunately, the “field” over our city in our time was so extremely concentrated and thick that you couldn’t hope for better reception. . . . The question remains open about the character of that “field” and the “quality” or “sign” of that energy. . . . But those are special questions and have no direct bearing on artistic expression or exhibitions. . . . They are questions of ethics, the responsibility borne by the artists for these “manifestations,” punishment for them. That’s something else. . . .

The presence of this situation (the discovery of the “field”), its revelation, direct dealings with it, depicting it in “cultural signs”—this is all possible for the artist once he has fairly completely solved his “inner” problems,

39. “Noosphere” refers to the Russian and Soviet scientist Vladimir Vernadsky’s conception of a sphere of human thought that encases the earth.

problems of inner growth, for then he is capable of making contact with that “field,” receiving it and reflecting it. But, alas, everyone knows that before any apparatus can work normally it takes a lot of time for fine-tuning, and in this case, self-tuning. Often this endless work and related problems make you lose the point, the meaning of the apparatus, and it may never start to work. . . .

Therefore, if my metaphor of the apparatus is clear enough, I will move on to describe in detail the character of the 1970s, the changes in the “Noo-sphere” over Moscow, and the most significant “expressers” of this artistic sphere, the sphere of unofficial visual art. I will then discuss the conditions and work of my own “art apparatus” in the most general way, starting in 1970 and until 1980, and how I myself, of course, see this work.

#### “THE AIR OVER MOSCOW”

The “air” I am talking about, the air of the 1970s—it seems to me now—changed twice and therefore had two “phases,” two states, one after the other, which I would call the “metaphysical” and the “social.”

The first state begins approximately in the late 1960s and ends, “exhales,” in 1973–1974. The second starts in 1973–1974, and I would name as its end, its exhalation, the period around 1982–1983.

In calling the first state “metaphysical,” I mean to evoke the thickened issues hanging in the air, issues of experiencing and expressing in art production everything “transcendental” and irrational, which in this period was not, I repeat, the fruit of invention and frivolous depiction, arising from “nothing else to do,” but literally appeared on its own, formed “above us” and “around us.” Many of us felt, discussed, and lived with what was affecting us. It forced us to talk about it, to think about it, to read about it, to harken to it, but most importantly to try to express it, to react to it in our work. Now, ten years later, it is hard for me to reenter or even recall that tense atmosphere of spiritual searching, all kinds of intuitions and improvisations that arose on their own, with an inexorable inevitability. Something irrational and at the same time almost palpable existed around us then; the common experience bonded us and found a response in others, some total strangers, who felt that state too. The poetry of the later 1960s and early 1970s, especially in Leningrad, passed under the sign of those emotions; there were many people who simultaneously combined that sense of the irrational and transcendental with a totally rational, almost academic reflection on the subject, who later came to be called “home philosophers” and “home theologians.” This period also saw a universal resurgence of interest in the Silver Age of Russian philosophy—everyone read, studied, passed along like a holy object the works of Bulgakov,

Berdyayev, Shestov, and Florensky.<sup>40</sup> We were attracted by their two, complementary sides: theology expressed in modern language, and revelation described in rational, philosophical terms. Naturally, there were no discussions or lectures in those days, for the obvious reasons, but the echoes of those discussions, that “wave,” were still heard in 1978–1979 in the period of “liberalism” inside the City Committee, where the chairman, Viktor Ashcheulov, gave permission for holding a “philosophical lectorium,” which was to be held in parallel with “serious” exhibitions. So, at an exhibition in 1979, Boris Groys and Evgeny Shiffers held a unique debate.<sup>41</sup> In Leningrad, where this atmosphere held a bit longer than in Moscow, a literary philosophical magazine called *37* dealt with these issues. This same period, in the orthodox sphere, was a time that seemed to anticipate a “religious renaissance,” and some of my close friends became real, churchgoing Christians.

In artistic practice, artists expressed that time with a particularly fiery interest in all transcendental problems, depicting everything “under the sign of Eternity.” There was a tendency toward “maximal expansion of significance,” an interest in a “higher meaning” behind what was depicted and, generally, in the “higher significance” of the artistic object, the work of art itself, and the role of the artist as creator and demiurge. But most of all, I think, there was interest in the “metaphysics of light.”

It is interesting that this canonical philosophical term was not popular among us in that period, even though it should have occurred inevitably—but our minds and speech used “theological” words and definitions—the Light of Tabor, “divine,” “benevolent” light, “kind” light, and so on.

I do not know how it was in Leningrad, but in Moscow, in what I would call the unofficial art circles, that “light” found its expression and most importantly, its almost-depiction, in the paintings by certain artists who touch on the problem of “white” in its various interpretations: “white nothingness,” “white background,” “white radiation,” “white light,” and so on, but what all of these elaborations had in common, what characterized them, was their relationship with a transcendental understanding of this “white.”  
[ . . . ]

40. Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944), Nikolai Berdyayev (1874–1948), Lev Shestov (1866–1938), and Pavel Florensky (1882–1937) were influential religious philosophers who gained popularity among underground intellectual circles in the late Soviet period.

41. Evgeny Shiffers (1934–1997), a Moscow-based writer, philosopher, theologian, and theater director; Boris Groys (b. 1947), an art critic, media theorist, and philosopher who later emigrated to Germany and the United States.

## THE PERIOD OF SOCIAL ART

I will move on to describe what seems to me to be the second most important period in the 1970s. It fell like snow on our heads, with no preliminaries, and it was immediately clear, complete, definite, and apparent to all. I am talking about the sudden, unpredictable, and unexpected incursion of frank, naked, totally unadorned themes of social production into His Majesty Art, into Grand Art, and most horribly, the incursion of the most nightmarish ideological forms, taken as they were in situ—as they were found on the streets, in houses, in offices, in newspapers, and so on—and not reworked artistically at all. How could this have happened in the infinitely spiritual, artistic, “high,” “esoteric” world of underground art? What were the “ethereal” causes?

First of all, let me list the artistic “facts” of this “phenomenon” as I see them from the vantage point of “today.”

This phenomenon, that is, the incursion of social orientation into the artistic life of “unofficial” art, begins for me around 1972 with the appearance of Erik Bulatov’s paintings *Horizon*, *Danger*, and *Two Landscapes against the Background of the Red Banner*, and the first paintings by Komar and Melamid, *Good!* and *Two Profiles* (which, I think, were “exhibited” at the Beliaev lot [at the Bulldozer Exhibition], therefore, circa 1974) and also their apartment installation *Paradise*, which I might have seen a little earlier, maybe in 1973. After Beliaev, I saw the works of Leonid Sokov at his apartment exhibition in his studio and soon learned of a whole artistic group with this “social” tendency, but I never knew the “main protagonist,” Kosolapov, who apparently had started working in this style somewhat earlier. He had already left, and I didn’t see his works and objects until much later, in reproduction. At that time, Roginsky worked in this style too—but he came to it on his own, independently (he painted Primus stoves, tramways, tiled kitchen walls). At approximately the same time several other artists began working, also friends—Prigov, Lebedev, and Orlov.<sup>42</sup>

In general, during that time, the second half of the 1970s, completely different, new artists began working actively and realizing their ideas in Moscow’s artistic life—Ivan Chuikov, Viktor Pivovarov, Rimma and Valery Gerlovin, Eduard Gorokhovskiy, the Collective Actions group, among others—but

42. Aleksandr Kosolapov (b. 1943), an unofficial artist working in a Sots-Art style who immigrated to the United States in 1975; Mikhail Roginsky (1931–2004), an unofficial painter of everyday life in a pop art idiom; Rostislav Lebedev (b. 1946), an unofficial sculptor; Dmitri Prigov (1940–2007), a widely celebrated unofficial artist and poet; Boris Orlov (b. 1941), an unofficial multimedia artist who came to prominence in the 1970s.

I want to limit my narrative of that period to examining the very important phenomenon, as I see it, of the turn toward a clearly social form and the appearance of new paintings and objects, since almost all of the artists on my last list worked in the spirit I examined earlier, that is, in the spirit of metaphysical-contemplative art.<sup>43</sup> It was only much later, around 1979–1980, that some—Pivovarov, Chuikov—approached this new theme in their works. Gorokhovskiy was even later, around 1982, and Collective Actions and the Gerlovins (before their departure) were not involved in it at all.

The most significant, in terms of results, I consider to have been Erik Bulatov, Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid, and Leonid Sokov. (Dmitri Prigov expressed this “climate,” or “inundation,” if you will, much more clearly in the “poetry field.”)

First, it would be good to understand why this “social” theme appeared at all and what created the need to realize it (naturally, I mean the need arising within the artist, not an external “commission” from someone). There are several reasons. One is that the squalling winds of ideological propaganda roaring out of the loudspeakers, newspapers, posters—visual and other forms of agitation—began to grow quiet. Their beckoning call of “Stronger and Higher!” no longer corresponded—the divergence at first growing gradually, then faster and more sharply—to the general direction of “everything,” which was “Weaker and Lower.” Our whole society was gradually moving, or better put, slipping. A “circumstance” appeared that had once seemed impossible: it turned out that you could not only look where the propaganda finger was pointing but turn your head and look at the finger itself, not march to the music pouring out of the loudspeaker, but look at and even examine the loudspeaker itself. . . . In other words, all those threatening objects of propaganda that stared at us and that we could not look at, somehow turned into objects of examination. (This was how, in my distant childhood, I regarded with sweet terror an airplane on display in front of the Mechanization Pavilion, a real airplane from a faraway, inaccessible, and invisible aerodrome.) Nowadays, very few people pay serious attention to the threatening ideological attributes of our streets and storefronts. They have almost completely lost their energetic charge and stand there practically like museum exhibits. During the period I am describing this process of “dying out”

43. Ivan Chuikov (b. 1935), an unofficial painter; Rimma and Valery Gerlovin (b. 1951 and 1945), multimedia artists who left the Soviet Union in 1980; Eduard Gorokhovskiy (1929–2004), an unofficial artist who worked with photographs and technologies of reproduction; Collective Actions (Nikita Alekseev, Georgy Kizevalter, Andrei Monastyrsky, and Nikolai Panitkov, later joined by Igor Makarevich, Elena Elagina, and Sergei Romashko), an important conceptual and performance art group formed in 1976.

had only just begun. The propaganda still erupted with smoke and flames. The air above us was still thoroughly and seriously “ideologized,” horror and real fear still emanated from it and spread all around us. At the same time, the propaganda arsenal was changing; old words and slogans were replaced with new ones, and the thick, all-permeating ideological atmosphere received new color and nuances. This general situation in our life, the transition from incitement to dreary conformity, from “movement” forward to a defensive state and shuffling in place—this “new climate” in our life had to be felt and expressed by “unofficial” artists in their works.

In the most general outline, this period can be seen as the end, the finale, of the “charismatic” cycle that had begun in 1917, peaked in the 1940s and 1950s, and then swiftly slid down a slope to its total dimming by the end of the 1980s. That downward sliding branch is what I am describing here.

I want to add: this fiery interest, this almost instantaneous discovery of new issues, which began around 1973–1974, went through a phase of “flowering,” or rather, of “embodiment”—primarily in paintings, poetry, and prose (and more in the first two)—and today, that is, ten years later, it seems finished to me. The acute burning of this question is gone, primarily because the language has lost its energy and ideological charge, and not only in its propaganda and agitational vocabulary—today all official language is perceived as devoid of meaning, just empty form. Empty, but still all-permeating, all-describing, and all-encompassing.

That is why this form has a new image, and now the contemporary artist can “deal” with it—with all of those graphs, paragraphs, reports, and schedules. The artist can use them if the socially obvious themes and forms can be reformulated to express his own ideas. . . . We’re running far ahead here, to 1983, to “today” (which will quickly become yesterday, as soon as you notice!). Let’s return, for the sake of our reminiscences, to where we began, to 1973–1974, to the time of the powerful ideological cannonade, which thundered seriously but somehow “missed,” to the time when the air was saturated by electrified “ideological” charges that did not manage to reach “earth” in the form of lightning. The intensity, the state of the “air over Moscow” (if we return to our definition), was precisely that: it expressed that transitional, intermediate period in our ideological atmosphere, where everything was moving from hysterical enthusiasm to a drab, mechanical, and dead-ritualized state. [ . . . ]



With this exposition, which I consider preliminary, I wanted to describe the background of the 1970s. Now I will move on to a description of my own out-

put and how I understand it. At least, in brief, before starting on the works, I will list, recalling them, the most important events of life then. [ . . . ]

In the winter of 1972–1973 [ . . . ] I was on the verge of leaving myself. I had serious proposals from [the collector] Dina Vierny, a studio, a contract, etc., or so it seemed from here. [ . . . ] But it turned out differently. The only step I took in that direction was to return two manuscripts to the Detgiz editors, which in those days was construed in only one way. But things didn't get any farther, and not because of any external circumstances, or fear, or anything like that. Here once again, as had happened several times in my life already, I sensed something irrational, incomprehensible, hanging over me. As in the fairy tale—"I want to step, but my feet won't go"—it didn't "go," it didn't work, and all of my preparations, attempts, trying it on, and conversations, all melted away, as if it never had happened. It was hard to wheedle work out of Detgiz again; they wouldn't give me anything for three years. In the fall of 1973, I married Vika.<sup>44</sup> The three of us, with Anton, lived in the studio.<sup>45</sup> In the summer of 1974 I don't think we went anywhere, and in the fall came the Most Important Artistic Events—the Bulldozer show, in September, I think, followed by Izmailovo, and then the Beekeeping Pavilion, but that all passed me by somehow. I didn't participate in any of these Actions of the Century, even though I was a passionate and excited viewer. . . . Vika and I went everywhere. It was all unusual, incredible, risky. . . . Just the whole epic story with Glezer's departure was something.<sup>46</sup> He would burst into the studio grabbing everything—without money—"For History!"—photographing and rushing off like a storm, surrounded by snitches in the streets, a fiery gaze, fearlessness—the Current of History flowed through him in those days, the wings of History flapped and waved just above him. . . . Life seemed endlessly dangerous in those days, like a rope stretched to the breaking point. . . . Spring of 1975 was the struggle between the authorities and Rabin, and in the fall came the formation of the City Committee, where the "incomprehensible" underground artists joined with the rights of the painting section. The mysterious chairman Viktor Ashcheulov appeared; he showed up right at the beginning of things, after the Beekeeping show, and organized an opening banquet for "his artists." [ . . . ]

The 1970s were characterized by an attenuated, zealous interest in the

44. Victoria Mochalova (b. 1946), a philologist and scholar of Jewish culture, was Ilya Kabakov's second wife.

45. Anton Nosik (b. 1966), son of Victoria Mochalova, was Kabakov's stepson.

46. Aleksandr Glezer (1934–2016), an enthusiastic curator of unofficial art who left the Soviet Union in 1975 and eventually set up a museum of unofficial art in Montgeron, outside Paris.

exhibitions that appeared here and abroad and the publications connected with them. This interest here, in Russia, had its own trajectory, tied at first to a passionate and vainglorious curiosity—well, how are “we” doing there? Maybe “we’ll show them” and “show off”? Later, in the mid-1970s, it seemed that the interest in the West would be real, “serious,” especially after Glezer left, bringing out so many works. There were exhibitions in London and at the Grand Palais in Paris, numerous shows of “the ones who left” in various countries, as well as collective group shows combining them all, artists from here and from there. Our attention and passionate interest did not weaken—there were so many hopes, fantasies, bold suppositions! Gradually interest in our little art world—both here and there—began to fade and withered to nothing, and then came the cold clarity, which fortunately did not interfere with the work of those who remained: no one needed us either here or there; the most significant result, commercial “success” (as it seems from here), was for Kuper and Chemiakin, but it had little to do with Grand Art, serious success.<sup>47</sup> Visits to our studios by art connoisseurs—foreigners—were episodic, and their reactions were, most likely, false. Getting permission for a show of representative works (and these came periodically from one gallery or another) from our “authorities” would be impossible for artists of our type, so these hopes, already very weak, gradually died out too. “You should be grateful that you’re allowed to work at all, but instead you want to exhibit your stuff too, you wretches!” That was the voice we heard quite clearly, having developed the skill to hear it, having heard about much worse times. However, there were “shows.” [ . . . ] In 1982, in the winter, three times I showed a single painting for three hours, one evening at a time at “creative” evenings at the MOSKh movie theater on Kuznetsky Bridge at the invitation of the organizers.<sup>48</sup>

*What more do you want, you ungrateful swine!* All that time I had been publishing work to make money “for life”—usually two books from Detgiz and one from Malyshev annually—so I had “enough.” I usually worked on them in a hut on the Vetluga River near Ed and Galya Steinberg that I bought in, I think, 1979. I think that covers everything about life then. I may have left out a lot. I left out a description of the rather interesting artistic and “intellectual” life at night in my studio and the performances there of the marvelous

47. Kabakov’s friend, the painter Yuri Kuperman, a.k.a. Yuri Kuper (b. 1940), left the USSR in 1972, while Mikhail Chemiakin (b. 1943), an unofficial artist from Leningrad, emigrated in 1971.

48. On Kabakov’s various group exhibitions in the Soviet Union, see Jackson, *Experimental Group*, 191–95.



bards—Aleksandr Galich, Bulat Okudzhava, and Evgeny Bachurin, who was always there (he performed his first songs on my couch next to his beauties; he often gave concerts in my studio).<sup>49</sup> There were seminars—lectures by Boris Groys, Oleg Genisaretsky, and Evgeny Shiffers; before he emigrated, Sasha Piatigorsky gave a lecture on Buddhism; there was much that was interesting over those years in my studio at night!<sup>50</sup> Poetry was always read there. The poets included Vsevolod Nekrasov, Dmitri Prigov, Viktor Krivulin, and Elena Shvarts, who had come to perform in Moscow and did not please the Muscovites. There were frequent readings by Genrikh Sapgir, Evgeny Popov, and Eduard Limonov, who hid “an important letter” before he emigrated, which was supposed to be published in case of his arrest. . . .<sup>51</sup> Oh, yes! In December 1974 I bought a yellow Zhiguli, which fell apart completely. [ . . . ]



I have already spoken of that incredibly metaphysical, strange, and special air—you could even call it a climate—that reigned over Moscow from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s and captured the minds, or rather, the consciousness of a certain part of the artistic, but not only artistic, “public.” It was a special state that was felt by many people, an almost physical sensation. Maybe the rupture that was occurring in some greater, global sense had already been absorbed, but that is hard to judge, even after ten years. And it is hard to establish any particular pattern demonstrating that when there is a change in eras, a consciousness tending toward cosmic thought arises, a particular interest in elevated, unearthly, supersensitive fluids. Nevertheless, they write that something similar had occurred at the beginning of the century, from 1900 to 1910. . . .

Without delving into this unclear and controversial area, at the very least I can say that these lofty questions and related speculation were the linchpin around which all of our internal problems swirled; they seemed like the only important and significant problems, and for artists it was the visual demonstration and expression of these problems that became most important. (I almost used the word “manifestation,” but remembered that this little word comes from a later period of jargon.)

49. Aleksandr Galich (1918–1977), Bulat Okudzhava (1924–1997), and Evgeny Bachurin (1934–2015) were well-known singer-songwriters or “bards” in 1960s and 1970s Moscow.

50. Oleg Genisaretsky (b. 1942), a well-known Russian mathematician and philosopher; Aleksandr Piatigorsky (1929–2009), a prominent Soviet academic.

51. Vsevolod Nekrasov (1934–2009), Viktor Krivulin (1944–2001), and Elena Shvarts (1948–2010) were well-regarded unofficial poets during the late Soviet era. Evgeny Popov (b. 1946) and Eduard Limonov (b. 1943) both became prominent writers in the late and post-Soviet periods.

Thus, for me, everything I have been talking about expressed itself in a triad where everything came together on its own—"white," "emptiness," and "light." As I have addressed the meaning and importance of "white" and "light" and their role many times before [e.g., in the preceding excerpts on the 1960s], there is no point in repeating what a white painting and a white sheet of paper mean in this context. Instead, I would like to concentrate on the empty page that means so much for the foundation of almost all of my albums. The emptiness of a white sheet of paper appears here as an almost exact equivalent to silence; silence not as denial but instead as a fullness that surpasses speech. In this sense the emptiness that lies beneath any depiction is greater in strength and substantive meaning than anything drawn on top of it, though I don't mean "emptiness" in the sense of "nothing," as universal denial or annihilation. On the contrary, emptiness appears filled with power and maximal meaning in conjunction with "light" and "white"—that white, luminous emptiness, an emptiness filled with radiant white, the brightest light, because of which we can make nothing out. "So bright that you can't see anything." In that sense, "emptiness" can be a substitute for the word "fullness."

That is why in most of the albums there is a frame, drawn in ink, a thin black frame, going right up to the edge of the white sheet. It not only accentuates the edge but outlines the limit of the emptiness, the boundary of the space, at once endlessly deep and pouring light from beyond that edge at me, at the viewer.

Now I want to talk about the fate of any "depiction" that appears on a white field understood this way, a field that seems empty. Be the depiction flat or in volume, solitary or filling up the whole page, in the corner or across the entire surface, it will undergo certain changes when entering that field, but one change is the most important and significant: *any* image will be immeasurably weaker and "less important" in terms of power and significance. The power and significance of the white light pouring out around it will be greater and will give everything depicted on the page a scandalously small and insignificant meaning. You can say that this light gives everything an "enlightening" and simultaneously "diminishing" rank and meaning. Everything that comes within its field grows quieter, smaller, weaker, and more transparent. That is understandable. All the energy and power belongs only to the light and not to the dense, dangerous-looking objects (an axe and others), or serious or mysterious "signs" and "figures." Nothing dangerous or mysterious, much less anything densely material, can exist in that light. (This in part is the difference between the meaning of the objects I place in the "white" and the meaning objects receive in Eduard Steinberg's pictures. Steinberg allots them



31

too much meaning in that space, almost absolute “semiotic” meaning, while for me the meaning of objects and images is close to zero.)

Thus, repeating myself, I want to say that all of these objects, their images, exist in that white space as temporary floaters, like clouds that have moved in *from the side*, not from the depth, that floated in from one side and will float away to the other side. Or like darkened window glass, placed “on top” of the whiteness. Or like gnats crowding in a ray of sunlight. In each of these cases, IT IS ALL TEMPORARY, FOR NOW. The time will come when that *depiction* will float off to the side and vanish, the gnats will fly away, but the white light will remain undisturbed.

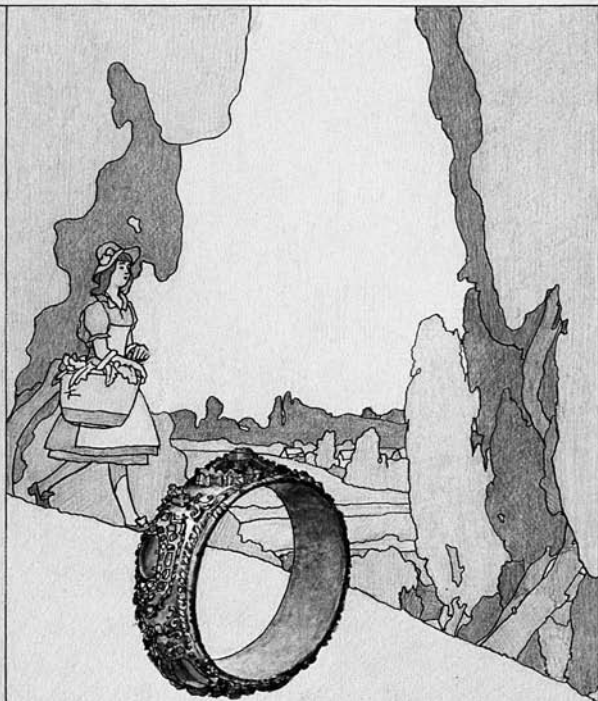
. . . I have tried to explain the interrelation between an image and the “white” that exists in the albums (and the particular dramaturgy of their relations; to wit, the appearance and then the departure of those images), which forms the deep, internal action during the entire “inner” play of the *Ten Characters* cycle (figs. 31–33).<sup>52</sup>

But beyond that, there is also the external plot line in each album, and I will try to move to a description of that.

52. The *Ten Characters* album cycle (1972–1975) represented Kabakov’s first foray into a time-based medium.

# „Совпадения Льва Львовича.“

*Кажется, что Вия споткнется о оракул и упадет.*

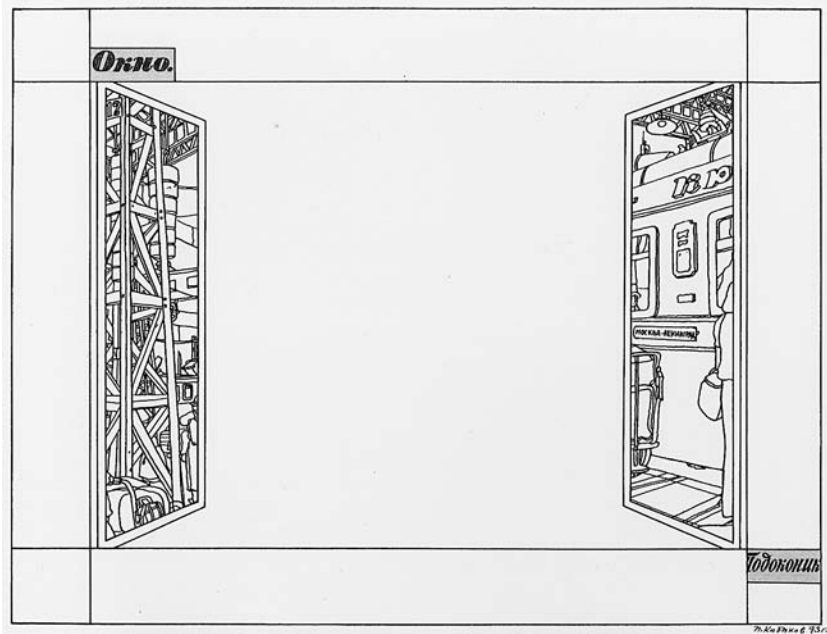


**Беда, как Судно, неизбежна.\***

ПРИМЕЧАНИЕ:

\*Учитывая большой уклон тропинки.

И.И. ДАК-67.1



Where did all those themes come from, the plots for *Ten Characters*? Apparently, by 1970 I had begun to weary of the many unrelated pictures drawn on small pieces of paper, and I had the desire to make a big “sphere” that could encompass a large field of problems and their complex interrelations. I must say that even before then I could never “squeeze” into an individual drawing or painting; it always seemed to me that, first of all, the individual drawing was part of some multitude of similar drawings comprising a more significant whole—*greater than the individual drawing*—and, secondly, that this multitude of drawings formed a connected text, a “sentence,” a statement that I always repeated inside me, expressing it on a verbal level. It was as if two levels occurred at the same time, the visual and—*parallel* to it, inside me, related to it, coming from it, but then supporting it and perhaps even giving birth to it—a second level, a verbal one, discussing the first, commenting on it, diagramming its meanings, and so on. I will speak more about this second, verbal layer, its parallel nature, and its floating up to the “obvious” level, its “visualization” and coexistence “as equals” with the other, traditionally visual level. But now I will only say that the unfolding into a big and complex story filled with many expanding and branching meanings also existed as a potential possibility in my imagination whenever something swelled up in my intention to make something big and comprehensible.

The most important part is that I already knew by then that the unit, the elementary particle—a more complex “molecule” and perhaps “matter”—was that very individual drawing, already filled with many meanings and capable of extending long chains of “parable plots” already inside it. Producing that already complex, polysemantic “drawing atom” came easily; these drawings flowed freely out of me, like a continuous filmstrip, ready to be used in any direction, in any “film.” At the same time, like a child who cannot distinguish the sounds of the outside world because of the constant deafening internal noise—inner “voices” clashing, shouting one another, muting one another without any sequence or connection, the roars that form the chaos and painful meaninglessness of inner life—I had a passionate desire to separate those voices and themes, to tease out and unspool those filmstrips that were mixed up and yet sounding inside me. I had a fiery need, bordering on illness, to present all those voices of my consciousness, its tormenting and screaming contents, *first and foremost to my own consciousness*. It felt as if there were several “themes,” equal in importance and primacy, clamoring and howling, and if I were to lay them out, hear them out in a certain order, one after the other, their connection, their interrelations, would be clear—or at any rate, things would “quiet down.” Their objectification in the form of chains of drawings was a godsend for bringing order and, more importantly, revealing them to myself.

As I understand it now, I was thinking about creating a unique description, an “inventory,” of the warehouse entrusted to me, the warehouse of my consciousness. Thus the “image themes” that led to the making of *Ten Characters* are the themes of my consciousness, which now, from a greater distance, can be presented as the basic “mythemes” of my complexes, neuroses, even hysterics. I don’t know how best to name them. These “thememyths” arose quite early, before the album technique revealed itself to me, in the summer of 1970 in Gurzuf [in Crimea], with the first series of albums, *The Flying Ones*. The plan and order for most of these themes was sketched in Khost [in Crimea] the following spring, in 1971. These themes immediately took on a human form and immediately became “characters”—Komarov, Barmin, et al. That is, I decided even then that the “character” was like a fully literary hero, overwhelmed by a condition-theme and living in that condition-theme from beginning to end as the only content of his life. To put it another way: the theme that apparently represents the story of how the character gets sick with his “idea” reaches its apex and culminating tension and after a while the hero dies, destroyed from within by that illness-idea. At first, the “illness-idea” is vague and undefined; in the middle it is all-encompassing, flourishing, not an illness but a kind of superhealthy state,

enlightenment that reveals “everything and everyone”; and finally come the exhaustion and finale, where everything, which turns out to be the result of empty exuberance, vanishes and departs.

Here are the themes in an approximate explication, most of which appeared at the beginning of 1971:

1. “Sitting in the Closet.” The theme of the darkness of consciousness, its immersion in blind nothingness. The idea that nothing is the same when fully “locked up” and in “empty” aloneness.
2. “The Joker.” The stupidity and not moving into the depths of a joke; irony which only appears to be meaningful with all of its allusions. The particular tasteless ephemeral nature of every witticism.
3. “The Generous One.” The nightmare of the “name,” understood in the social aspect, the name placed in the social milieu. The maniacal listing and going over of names, without any understanding of the point of “naming.” The nonsacred giving of a “name.” The frivolous and therefore dangerous “initiation.”
4. “The Agonizing One.” Consciousness beyond the “veil.” Hiding everything that is real “behind a curtain.” Tearing those “veils,” enlarging the “openings,” revealing one veil after another, the new one behind the old. . . .
5. “Sees a Dream.” Voyage, flight of the soul, alien to everything, moving from one space to another, going ever deeper into refined, rarefied worlds.
6. “Who Flew.” More an interlude than a “theme,” about a painful and somehow ephemeral joy, the possibility of fleshless floating, soaring above the ground. . . .
7. “Mathematical” How everything in life is part of a “set,” is in some set; and about not being part of a “set,” “alienation,” falling out of a set and ending up in another, different set.
8. “Decorator.” Of everyone and everything’s place “on the edge”; the inability and impossibility of having a place in the “center”; the eternal, marginal misery, which, however, is fully just in the “cosmic” sense.
9. “Released.” About the consciousness filled “from within” by various “voices,” which, as silence is established, begin to sound each in its turn, each coming from a deeper, previously hidden level. . . .
10. “Looking Out the Window.” About visions if you look from the consciousness straight into the light, as if examining slides against a lamp. The visions of “life” under the direct gaze against the “light” become fleshless, colorless, and finally simply wash away, vanishing in the increasingly strong, blinding light. . . .

These themes, so clearly defined in my imagination and even having “personifications,” nevertheless needed something more than simple “character-

hood” for their realization, precisely because I and any viewer would see that all the events took place *only and solely inside consciousness itself*. They arise there and end there. The play of the consciousness is performed inside the consciousness and is ended by it, where viewer and actor are essentially the same “person,” changing places in turn, and there is no exit from the “theater,” as there can be no exit from the consciousness. Bearing all of this in mind, I, as the artist (the meaning of “artistic” activity I see, even now, in establishing “clarity” to replace the confused, and the “evinced” and the “visible” to replace the “unclear” and “unobvious”), needed to use stronger methods than simple “personification” and “characterizing” for these theme-myths. This method of increasing objectification turned out to be a way to introduce into the fabric of the album the opinions and commentaries of others about the character. Naturally, the commentators “from outside” are also characters, but their discussions from various sides of the main character increase his “realness,” his real-life genuineness, because it is this very aspect, the physical side of the character, that is discussed by the other, naturally, allegedly physically real people: neighbors, friends, wives, mothers, and so on. The introduction of “side” characters creates the opportunity to create a social “spectrum” for the whole and a social portrait of the main character, which is particularly important for the objectification that we so desire (and what objectifies a character more than his social status?) and creates a situation of social complexity and conflict between his existence “for others” and his existence “for himself” inside himself. The additional contradiction that arises also helps bring about the “modus of reality” for our character.

Another method I introduced, besides the appearance of outside commentators, was the “completion” of the theme and relating it in time in the form of a story or parable where the end of the parable is the end of the album. Here, in the cycle *Ten Characters*, we are told and simultaneously shown, as in a medieval edifying tale, the life story of so-and-so, which begins with this, consists of that, and ends with this. The viewer is told the “simple” story of a completely specific person with a known and usually sad end. This method also works to create the effect of an outside view of the events—“it’s not happening to me, it’s happening to him”—and that effect and playful confidence are very important in those situations (as in these albums) where the thought being imposed covertly on the viewer is that the action is happening only to him, inside him, inside his consciousness.

So, to summarize: the cycle of *Ten Characters* is made up of ten “plays of consciousness” performed for the viewer; viewing each album takes approximately ten to twelve minutes.



1. The dramaturgy of each consists of consecutive changes within the scenes or acts, in which other characters perform (their “voices” are heard in the form of commentaries).
2. The scenes and the voices between them are spatially antithetical (the scene takes place inside the character; the voices of the proscenium come from outside).
3. The entire play—the theme and its visual expression—ends twice—the character’s fate ends, and so too the visual material of the visual play vanishes, ends, is washed away. (This is as if in a real theater, at the end of a play, not only did the plot end, but the astonished audience saw first the stage and sets and actors vanish, then the whole theater—roof, walls, hall, and seats.)
4. But after the vanishing of the character and the visual materials, and the end of the plot, the viewer still has something before him—albeit not much—the last (and in each album it’s the same), the last white page glued into a mat, the significance of which, as we determined earlier, is completely up to the interpretation of the viewer.
5. The dramaturgy of the albums, beyond the juxtaposed scenes and the “proscenium” scenes, is also expressed in the juxtaposition of “image” and “text,” the object of discussion and the discussion itself.

It remains only to add that even though the appearance of “characterhood” comes at the very beginning of my work, that is, in the spring of 1972, the appearance of “commentators, relatives, and friends of the character” comes from the ten albums of 1974, when things became clearer and my understanding grew of the possibility of integrating “on equal terms” written text (always handwritten) into the “visual flow.” This text was not only understandable, but visible, giving me a commentator who existed only in words. The words appeared as words, pronounced “just now,” represented as being snippets of something said at that moment, literally a part of speech—in the manner of the effect created by turning on a tape recorder and instantly turning it off. Thus, the commentators, and particularly the last ones—Kogan, Shefner, and Lunina, who finish up each of the ten albums—not only explicate and comment on each series of drawings but create the idea that no end to these discussions is in sight, that each speaker has no “last” and “final” “word or judgment.” Therefore, there isn’t one, and the viewer of the album can’t have one either; these opinions, like rings on water, simply follow one another, expanding and moving farther away from their center. [ . . . ]

By the end of 1978 [ . . . ] my entire album activity ended unnoticed. I had thought that there were still so many opportunities for this new and seemingly unique technique, this genre that I had invented and in which no one else yet worked! But my interest vanished, evaporated. The issue wasn’t the

formal exhaustion of the genre so much as that it had appeared as a means of addressing specific tasks: clarifying the locked-up inner life, the *inner*, inward-looking orientation of the consciousness, looking only at itself and describing only itself. Once the “essence of the work” was clear, described, and “made public” (for myself, primarily), the whole impulse gradually vanished, the light in the now-empty building was turned off, and all interest in this invented mechanism, the “album genre,” also vanished. What was important here was exhausting the theme and giving a complete description: I thought that everything had been described and nothing was left. I didn’t want to repeat myself out of formal considerations. So it all ended by 1978.

What’s left for me to say, in connection with the idea of the “air over Moscow,” is that, having been immersed (as you can see from this long explication) only in “myself”—having fallen into myself as if into a mine, and been held up, crawling there, in that mine shaft—when I climbed out, having done my lesson, my quota, the “air,” the spiritual climate, had long since changed, changed back in 1973. I stepped out into it, into that new, different air, and started “breathing” it, after great delay, only in 1978. [ . . . ]



Now the time has come to talk about a brief period at the very end of the 1970s, which in my structure belongs to the second theme of the 1970s, the theme of “social” art. Unexpectedly, as if without any preparation, I dived headlong in this direction, about which I have written earlier, toward a mode in which Bulatov, Komar and Melamid, Sokov, Prigov, and many other artists in our “unofficial” world had been working, each in his own way. I caught that train later than the rest, after the basis of this style had been started and elaborated by others. But the theme was limitless, and the number of researchers was insultingly small, so each of us elaborated it in his own way, from his own seat, so to speak.

I’ll first try to list and examine the works that I did in this style in 1979 and 1980. I suddenly started making them, and I have continued to do only “that,” without cease, to this day. Now, in 1983, I want to repeat that this “air” has passed, lost steam, and the style itself has undergone significant changes.

The first painting I started in that direction was begun in 1979 and it was called *Bunny*. It should be described because I started redoing it and the original idea was changed until it simply vanished.

The whole thing was conceived as a big, spacious “painting” of a realist sort, depicting industrial-transport “enthusiasm,” a locomotive with tank cars, racing from the lower right corner to the upper left, a classic poster composition. But this Socialist Realist picture had one confusing element:

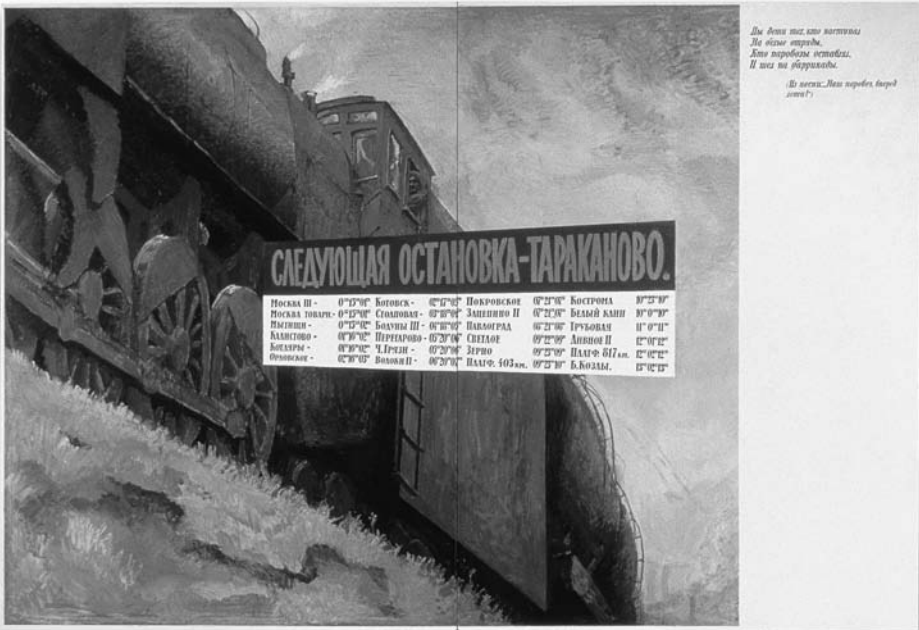
in the lower right corner was a drawing of a small white rabbit, drawn flat, like an applique. A thin white stripe passed along the very edge of the painting. My idea was that the white frame and white rabbit were actors from “another space” that would discredit the natural paintings of “reality” and the powerful, unstoppable thrust of the steam engine. [ . . . ] But none of that worked, as it turned out. The reason was that the “realism” of the sky, locomotive, and track bed was unconvincing, slapped on. I had drawn them out of my head, of course (without sketches from nature, without materials). Reality was “imitated” twice over—first as it appeared in my memory, and then once again in its depiction in the Socialist Realist style—and that technique, rather, the carelessness and hopelessness of my personal daubing (it was a double imitation: socialist painting imitated the depiction of “truth of life,” and I was imitating the socialist painting style), did not allow me to do it convincingly enough (in essence, I had never had practice in the big, or even the small, practice of “painterly” painting, and I began making one as I imagined it was done). I should have made this kind of painting by copying a reproduction of some painter like Bubnov or Sokolov-Skalia, and then the effect of the meeting of the rabbit and the steam engine would have been convincing; instead, it was fairly rough daubing, “amateur style.”<sup>53</sup> (In 1982 and 1983 I kept trying to improve it and removed the rabbit, but as of now nothing’s come of it [fig. 34].)

Be that as it may, despite the failure of this idea, it was my first painting in the “social direction,” which was followed by a strange stimulation that resembled inspiration, and other ideas came. I want to explain right here why this “social” painting appeared with such odd speed.

I think there were two reasons. The first was, as I have said, the artistic air was saturated with the issue, and many people were already working in this field, sensing it—especially, in a close and substantive way for me, Erik Bulatov. So I didn’t have to seek out or invent anything, just breathe in and find my place in that current. The second reason was that I had completed the description of inner space and with tremendous effort *leaped* out of my personal underground (my consciousness), out of my “cave,” with a cry—“Here I am! So what’s going on out here?” I seemed now to see the external world, since the inner one was left behind, already *described* and therefore no longer interesting. I was reborn. I totally forgot about it and did not want to return inside.

So what was this new space, this “outside” space where I found myself,

53. Aleksandr Bubnov (1908–1964) and Pavel Sokolov-Skalia (1899–1961) were official Soviet artists.



“ready to describe,” to express it the same way that I had expressed the old, inner one?

I can say for sure what it was, because this new place I found myself in during my travels has extended and remains the same in my experience to this day.

There was no lightness, no positioning myself as an outsider and viewer in that view “looking outward,” just as there had been none of the outsider looking “inward” before. In writing about the first, “inner” period, I described it as infinitely difficult, agonizing, and impassible due to its viscosity, a “sack” of inner noise, the inner roar of my inner essence, my personal consciousness, my ego alone. This noise and roar separated me first of all from the rest of the world and other egos. I was strange, unconnected, and unrelated to anything in the outside world, locked up, and nothing from the outside world could seep in.

When that ended (I am convinced that the album technique helped), I immediately fell into a different state—*no less tight and amorphous*, and no less powerful, just as demanding of immediate expression and description. This state I could call the state of a “person,” of “someone,” or “some ones,” that enveloped and captured me as soon as I left my “ego.” I found myself in a fully impersonal state, a state that is characteristic of us all, myself and

the people around me. It would be better to call it the state of a normal, average inhabitant of our country. But not just “an ordinary Soviet man,” as invented and fantasized by our scientific propaganda, the one addressed by the “authorities,” the one who smiles from newspapers and posters; rather, the “Soviet man” who is now each and every one of us, who exists and is dissolved in every cell and in our blood—cowardly, cowed, lying, sneaky, proper looking—“in case anything happens,” scurrying, angry, helpless, sentimental, happy over the slightest thing, meaninglessly and violently cruel, “one of the many” from Brest to Vladivostok, strict, vigilantly watching himself and others so as to not to stand out in any way, God forbid . . .

Reading over this list, you could say that these are the traits of any person dependent on a social structure “to the marrow of his bones,” one unable to visualize himself outside of it. That is absolutely true, but especially true of we who live “here.”

It is now 1983, and the possibilities for a private life, a life on the periphery, a social life, seem more realistic and plausible and less punishable than before, and the bravura ideological howling does not sound so loudly and ubiquitously, penetrating every pore of your existence, making you shiver and jump as it does on the morning of May Day in the city, when the roar of the loudspeakers on every corner penetrates the walls of buildings. But that is exactly how it was in the period of 1974–1983 that I am describing, when the consciousness of the “ordinary Soviet man” was thoroughly socialized and permeated by all of the currents of ideology and fear, by orders that fell on him from morning till night. This common gloom that formed what’s called the “mentality” of the Soviet man, present in everyone, I began to feel as a persistent, ever-present condition that had to be expressed and depicted.

But the most interesting part is that I began depicting and describing it not from the inside but from the outside, in this sense: Previously, I saw my drawings and paintings, picturing them first inside me, in some distant depth, and then dragged them outside and placed them, incongruous and incomprehensible, in the outside space, room, or wall, not knowing “what they were.” But once I started describing and scrutinizing this “common self,” the object did not “arise” from inside; instead, I found it outside, readymade. It was as if *it already existed without me*, and I merely brought it from the outside world into my studio and set it up, or I repeated what was visible and known to everyone without me. I didn’t have to invent anything—neither form nor type. Everyone knew this “readymade” well and was sick of it, everyone who was the “no one” I had become—or rather, like every inhabitant of our country, had been for a long time, from the moment of my birth. From birth, I had seen these things, made by “no one” for “no one,” staring

at every local resident, belonging to “no one” but peering out of every corner. Previously I had looked at my old albums and drawings, had seen them “from inside,” and I was the “subject” of frequently very active action, attention, and interest. Now everything was the reverse: the “things” themselves, seemingly brought in and placed, “looked at me,” without any particular interest or attention, and I was asking not *them* (there was no point asking them; they were “always silent”) but *myself* what it all meant, why were they there, near me, when this would end, and so on. It was like a tank that is dragged into a room, that everyone stares at and studies, even though “in another place and another time” it would stare at everyone and study them and most likely squash them, and no one would even think about studying it, only about hiding or dying. The parable of the tank, which came to me as I was writing these lines, seems appropriate. In Stalin’s or Khrushchev’s time, the things of our social world, charged with ideological gunpowder, literally shot at us, roaring about happiness and calling for even more. In the late 1970s these weapons still stood there, as on “the day after the battle,” no longer shooting, but still smoking and capable of shooting. Now, in the 1980s, they are gradually receding into history, turning into strange and incomprehensible monsters, like knights’ armor, and any day now, according to the general laws of life, they will elicit only a nostalgic shiver. But then, in the 1970s, all those things were completely alive and meaningful in our minds, in the consciousness of the “Soviet man,” and each object that I “dragged” into the studio was alive, timely, prodding not only me but all other Soviet viewers who visited my studio (exhibiting these things was out of the question).

I’d like to add this: from the point of view of “artistry,” there doesn’t seem to be anything new in this. “Readymade” art, dragging objects of low reality into exhibition halls and museums, started at the beginning of the century with Duchamp, and now it is an ordinary, everyday kind of thing. So no discoveries here.

But there is a shade here, a nuance, and we’re not giving up that nuance to anyone—“We don’t want a foot of foreign land, but we won’t give up an inch of our own.”<sup>54</sup>

The nuance is in the following: while the natural things of mundane use exhibited in museums describe some particular, often substantive, aspects of “life,” and works of Pop Art play off advertisements for something, relating to things “inside” a store, our advertisements, appeals, explanations, instructions, and timetables—as everyone knows—never, ever correlate with any reality anywhere. What we are dealing with here is an object that is a pure

54. A slogan made popular by Joseph Stalin in the years before the Second World War.

expression of self-referential TEXT, in the literal meaning of the word. This TEXT, which from its inception is addressed to no one, means nothing, and corresponds to nothing, nevertheless means a great deal “in and of itself,” and the interest in, attention to, and “work” with such texts distinguishes our turn to this visual production. It is even more important because text permeates our lives: everyone here talks or writes; everything is permeated with texts—instructions, orders, appeals, explanations—so that we could call our culture primarily didactic. But it would be careless to think that these texts are addressed to some human subject, addressed to “Soviet Man.” Our phenomenon is even more unique than would appear at first glance. *Our texts are addressed only to other texts*, and any text is a text that covers the preceding one. In that sense we have a truly Wittgensteinian hermeneutics—it is as if we all live inside a single Text.

That is why verbalism is dominant in the social sphere, in public life, and everything with us becomes a “language,” sounding and intersecting on various levels. In that sense, I began to understand my paintings as soon as I started making them—they were a specific, ready, and inherently alien ideological or visual language (it doesn’t matter what we’re looking at: image or word). These languages—“classical,” “Muscovite,” “Wanderer,” “Western contemporary”—in that sense are all “equal” among themselves (they all exist already, and they are all “foreign”), but among them, as is the case for our country, there is a metalanguage, a language that is “first among equals,” the language of anonymous, disposable products, the language that integrates, averages, that serves as the “only barrel” and support, the language that covers everyone and everything. Call it the Main Language, if you like, the language of anonymous street production, where everything finds its expression: “rule” and “flight” and “document” and “cultivation” and “calm” and “sentiment,” and there’s even a place for “individual creativity.” It’s the language of poster stands, schedules, explanations, and so on and so forth, our ubiquitous, all-encompassing, all-permeating common language, which—and this is the most important thing—makes it possible for everyone to understand everyone else, the Great Sought-for and Desired, our Esperanto. [ . . . ]



I will make an overall analysis of this “social” period, when—well, it’s hard to guess—maybe when it’s possible to describe the 1980s. . . .

## The Artist-Character

1985

In this text, Kabakov investigates one of his most fertile and long-running areas of interest: the relation between art-making and role-playing. Ruminations on performance, acting, and impersonation have appeared repeatedly throughout his career, not surprising given the bifurcated nature of his position as an unofficial artist and official illustrator. Kabakov has stated more than once that he views himself not so much as a “real person,” but as a character. Here he attempts to articulate the artistic and psychological sensibilities that lie behind such statements.

In his foreword to an exhibit at Nikita Alekseev’s (it seems that it was in 1983; Alekseev, Konstantin Zvezdochetov, and others participated), Sven Gundlakh put forth the idea for the first time (for me, in any case) that the paintings displayed at the exhibition were done, not by the artists themselves, but by “artist-characters.”<sup>1</sup> The author himself—the artist—merely invents this character, and then the actual works, as “things,” are prepared by this invented character.

In itself, the idea isn’t all that new. It has been developed thoroughly in literature for God knows how long already (“the false narrator,” found manuscripts by “others,” stories told by the “hero” himself, etc.).

Why, then, insofar as I know, did this idea emerge only relatively recently in our “art” world, and (again, insofar as I know), specifically here, in our country?

First, let us look at why such a phenomenon was possible in our country in particular. It seems to me that this occurred because when an artist is part of a unified, uninterrupted artistic process where one movement replaces another, that artist (not the “character,” but the actual real artist) simply doesn’t need such a stratification, a splitting of himself simply for the sake of participating more fully in the realization of a particular movement or, what is more

1. Nikita Alekseev (b. 1953), Konstantin Zvezdochetov (b. 1958), and Sven Gundlakh (b. 1959) were all members of the younger generation of unofficial artists who came to prominence shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union. See Sven Gundlakh, “APT ART (Pictures from an Exhibition),” *A-Ya*, 5 (1983): 3–5.



likely, the realization of his own unique “I.” Of course, I am referring here to the artist “there,” in the West (where I have never been). In the “East,” in turn, this stratification seems implausible because of the rigid inclusion of the artist’s consciousness, his “I,” in traditional and “absolute” systems that define his activity both from within and without (I had never been there, either).

Why, then, I repeat, did this phenomenon turn out to be possible “here” and, even more importantly, “now”? (Of course, we are talking, as always, about “unofficial” art). It seems to me that there are three reasons for this, three unique circumstances:

1. I would like to refer to the first reason as a refutation of the “absolutization of the painting” or, more precisely, of the imparting to it, “the painting,” of all possible “absolute” meanings. This is the refusal to see “the entire world” in the painting, a rejection of the idea of a “fullness of meaning” contained in the single painting hanging before us. It is the refusal to see “ontological” and “metaphysical” depths contained in this “complete” and “absolute” painting. It is the rejection of the “perfection of art” embodied in the idea of the “beautiful” and the “perfect” in one single work.
2. The second reason is the artists’ reaction, a general reaction of “unofficial” art up to that point, to “official” painting as a fiction, as a unique kind of “lie”—and not a lie in some partial sense (in terms of subject, technique, etc.), but a total lie, a thing that has been perfected in its own lie.
3. The third reason is the impossibility of exhibiting one’s works, despite which paintings were still being made for some reason. This situation, in which it is physically impossible to participate in the normal cycle of artist–painting–exhibit–viewer, is pathological for the artist, whose activity is ripped out of the natural process, the battle of movements and tendencies, yanked away from contact with the external environment, which in other circumstances would inform the reaction of the artist and the emergence of new paintings. This situation, the absence of all feedback, appears to produce two consequences: (1) The artist is plunged into his own works. There is an intentional or involuntary rupture of contact with the external world that leads either to a total extinguishing of his activity or to an insane fetishization of his “work,” to the imputing of all sorts of “elevated,” “absolute,” “mystical,” and other meanings to his work and its results. (2) The artist’s imagination is inflamed by the picture of an artistic life taking place beyond the border, beyond a boundary he will never manage to cross, in a world in which he will never participate before he dies. Such a “fatal” rupture leads to a particular circumstance: the artistic life that is imagined in such a case is resurrected, re-created in the imagination—not in its living, mutable, constantly changing processes, but in the form of isolated, immobile “painting-images” within an enormous panorama of such image-representations, a vivid, immo-

bile spectacle that might resemble a prisoner's re-creation of his past or an imagined life. The word "panorama" here is particularly appropriate, since in its stationary state all of the painting-images that have been ripped out of their historical flow, works of all possible styles, schools, countries, and historical epochs, are all equally visible and equally radiant.<sup>2</sup>

Each "unofficial" artist living in our country has the requisite skills to view such a stationary panorama, an assertion attested to by its being continually discussed. As a rule, the differences among various artists' views of this phenomenon consist in the size of the "panorama," and in the fragment a particular artist selects and with which he attempts to coordinate his own activity.

Let us return to the issues at hand. The emergence of the "artist-character" is rooted in the prolonged experience of interacting with this shining panorama of art. It continually exists, I repeat, in the imagination of every artist working here. Having been plunged inside the work itself, made by the artist himself, leads to fantastic, heretofore unseen flourishes, connections in which one fragment unites with another, flows into the other as in a psychedelic dream.

But this very experience can lead to other results. By exploiting this experience, it turns out to be possible to "insert" one's work into the general panorama of art, albeit only in one's imagination. But that very same imagination that "sees" before it the whole panorama of art is capable of seeing its own yet-to-be-made painting and placing it next to the works of others that already exist in reality, placing it in the general order of things, into the panorama, as though it were already finished.

In the world of the imagination, the panorama of all the paintings that have already been created by other artists up to that moment easily accepts the new, imagined but yet not created thing.

But, inserted into such a panorama (if only in the imagination), the new painting is easily subjected to being viewed against the backdrop of other works. It is compared to them, examined (as in "where did you grow up? when? in what year? . . .") and discussed as an element of the overall panorama.

By whom is it viewed, compared, discussed? Whoever sees the "panorama" as a whole, as well as the new, not yet made yet already prepared painting that has been inserted into it. Already entrusted with all possibilities of judgment and comparison, with various excursions and notions, he is genuinely free to make "judgments" about the place and significance of a new painting alongside others, as though hovering and rising above it. He sees it

2. Author's note: see Boris Groys, "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism," *A-Ya* 1 (1979).

as if it is already “later,” as if after a certain amount of time has passed, from a distance, as if encountering it fortuitously: “And just what do we have here?”

And now a bit more about this “new painting” itself. Who should make it? Produce it? Of course, not the contemplator of the “panorama.” In the fullness of his reflection, he views, compares, reflects, of course, not only the actual results—the things, the paintings—but naturally, also their causes, the artists themselves, situations that engendered them, the epochs, as well as the situations, motifs, and concepts that led to their emergence. He judges these things as inevitable, self-generating, internally determined, whereas he perceives and imagines his own position as being completely free of constraints.

But after all, the new “painting” product, if it seeks to be viewed next to “naturally,” “necessarily” emerging things (and only such a painting-thing can be an object of viewing, a reflection of consciousness, and only such things will the artist permit to be seen in his “panorama”), has to “emerge” in a natural, unreflective way, determined entirely externally: by all of the circumstances of “place” and “time,” by “everything,” so to speak, by the entire historical complex; and from within, by passion, self-oblivion, inspiration, and deeper still, by the artist’s “natural gift” and talents, ontological justification, and all such things that a distinguished, high-quality artistic work is supposed to have.

So who will be the creator of such an astounding, amazing, emerging-out-of-nothing-by-means-of-inspiration painting? Who is this profound, wise, subtle, talented person, sophisticated in the craft of making paintings, who knows the secrets of that craft, commanding brush, drawing, space, surface, proportions, shading, decorativeness, balance, expressiveness, expression, texture, points of convergence, who tirelessly works on perfecting the painting, adding finishing details, taking everything to its ultimate conclusion, or to a state of inspired incompleteness, passionately loving his work, thinking about it constantly, studying the life around him or the works of great masters, insecure about his own results, aspiring to fix his imperfections and become better and better in his beloved craft, and so on and so forth. . . . Who is this?

It is the artist-character.

This very character appeared in the dream of imagination. He himself, like a dream, has separated from the one who dreamed him up, has taken on his own life, his own biography, personality, all by himself; by his own internal compulsion he became an artist and now produces paintings. A lot is known about him, virtually everything. He is very visible, he is the natural offspring of his era, his environment, he is its “mouthpiece”—everyone knows him, at least in the close circle of his venerators and “consumers.”

Here is what might be said about the artist-character created by Kostya Zvezdochetov. (Of course, in a certain sense he *is* Kostya Zvezdochetov, but “not entirely.”) This is a talented autodidact from the outlying districts, the resident of a tiny kennel in a *kommunalka* [communal apartment] who draws “for himself” and gives his “paintings” to the janitors and maintenance men from the ZhEK who happen to drop by “with a bottle.”<sup>3</sup> He draws on scrap cardboard with any materials he can get his hands on and shoves his works behind the bed. His paintings depict only “the beautiful,” “ritzy life”—beautiful girls, warriors, white ships on a blue sea. He is drawn to the magnificent, pompous, heroic—tsarist, royal faces, knights, honors, medals, ribbons, hats with plumage. He has a predilection for great epochs and countries—Rome, England, Russia during the time of conquest in the Caucasus. Then his paintings on shabby cardboard begin to resemble ceremonious state portraits, and along their edges appear the depictions of gilded rocaille, monograms, cartouches. . . .

A talented self-taught artist, a Moscow Pirosmeni, only without the café-life feasts and the abundance of nature—in the work of Zvezdochetov’s artist-character, everything is pitiful, gray, like the communal life surrounding him.<sup>4</sup>

Now, after all that has been said, it will be easier to describe the “character” who made my paintings, beginning in 1979 and continuing through 1983. When I started to produce these paintings, it was as though I didn’t know that this character was making them, and I tried to do them myself. My understanding of the “character-ness” of their preparation came significantly later, starting roughly with the painting *Hello, Morning of Our Motherland!* The first painting, *Rabbit*, was a hybrid—“I” and “he” produced it equally. The painting itself—the train, the distance, the sky, etc.—“he” drew, but “I” drew the rabbit into the painting, and what resulted was a mixture of “I” and the “character.” When I redid it in 1982, it was the “character” who did it that time.

Who is he, after all?

His brief image-biography is contained in the foreword-explanation to that very same painting, *Hello, Morning* . . . I will repeat it here:

He is now far from young. He has been over fifty for a while now, and he lived a complex “artistic” life prior to becoming an artist-designer for the

3. ZhEK (Zhilishchno-Eksploatatsionnaia Kontora) is the Soviet-era public housing authority.

4. Niko Pirosmeni (1862–1918) was a celebrated “outsider artist” at the turn of the century in the Russian Empire.

Communist Party executive committee (perhaps for an apartment he was promised or even received). Perhaps he actually completed some sort of “courses” in his youth. He had an elementary artistic education, but then life tossed him around, pushed him, “sucked him in,” and then “to become a real artist,” well . . .

But his talents are still alive. The “talents of youth” reveal themselves here and there . . .

He must improve what everyone knows is obvious “hackwork.” “Andriusha” pretends that he has “given it his absolute all,” asserts and swears that there has never been anything better, that “we’ll just put some shading here and everything will come together. After all, it is only going up for two days.” We have to give the artist his just desserts—sensing the scale and the importance of the order, he ambitiously gives free rein to his intuition, his visual memory, and his “elementary artistic education,” rejecting pathetic copies of the kind that have long since been done, and he does a lot of things, virtually everything, “wholeheartedly.” This “creative” initiative in large part betrays him; he does many elements in a rather perfunctory manner—he thinks that is how the great masters worked. Some elements he omits, not even guessing that they exist, but some scenarios turn out very well (“The Game at the Stadium” and a few others). As a result, there is a strange, dubious mixture of clear hackwork, simple lack of ability, and artistic illumination.

It remains to say a few words about the paintings themselves that were made by this “character.”

They, these paintings, are “products” (as we say in our country) of common ZhEK production from the end of the 1950s to the beginning of the 1970s, when according to the laws of the inevitable and mysterious “curve” of our life, it (this production) began to change indolently, and now appears to be a bit different, while remaining in essence the same (even ZhEK, the housing utilization office, came to be called something else; it is now DEZ, just as it had previously been called ZhAKT).<sup>5</sup>

The products made by this character, one might say, exist in two forms: (1) natural, normal, and (2) containing some sort of shortcoming, some internal fault.

The “natural” paintings are those that could be perceived as ordinary products, not remarkable in any way, made for the ZhEK. “ZhEK produc-

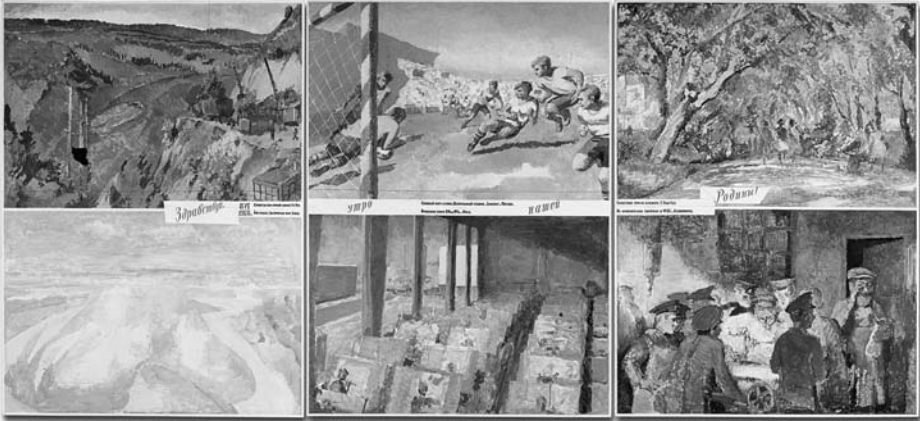
5. ZhAKT (Zhilishchno-Arendnoe Kooperativnoe Tovarishchestvo, the Housing-Lease Cooperative Society, or simply the Housing Board) was an earlier name for the Soviet-era housing authority, while DEZ (Direktsiia Edinogo Zakazchika, Community Housing Management) was a later designation.

tion,” so to speak. To this category belong *The Little Water Sprite* (fig. 35), *Hello, Morning of Our Motherland!* (fig. 36), *Deluxe Room* (fig. 37), *Gastronom (Grocery Store)* (fig. 38), [ . . . ] *Tested!* (fig. 39), *Taking Out the Garbage Pail* (fig. 27), *The Beetle* (fig. 40), *Abramtsevo* (fig. 41), [ . . . ] and others.

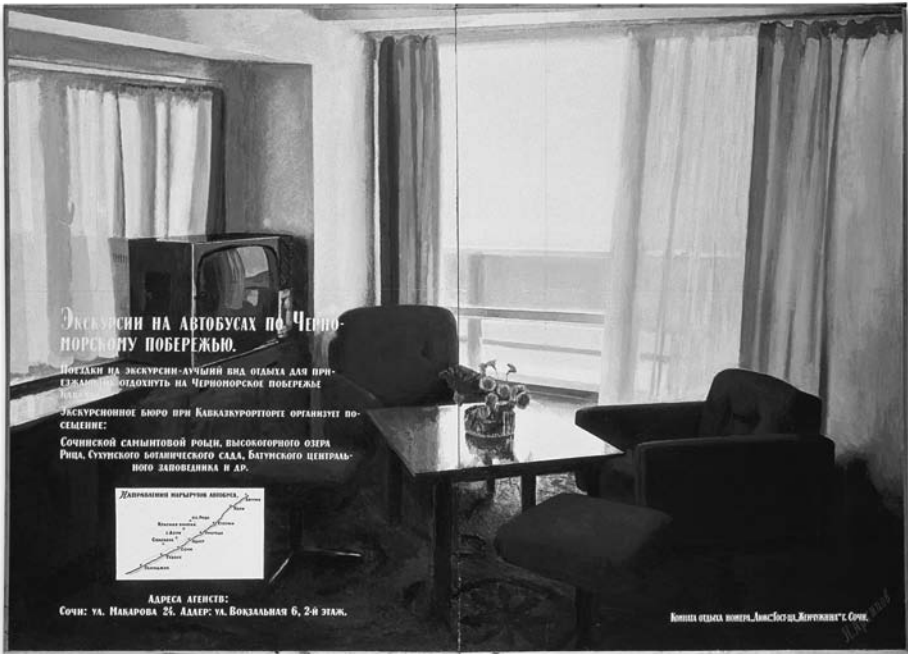
If these paintings were hanging on fences, on the walls of buildings, or in the corridor of the ZhEK, no one would pay any attention to them. Indeed,



**Когда они добежали до пруда, Маленький военный варит молниеносно обернулся. схватил Договезого за ноги и — раз, два, три! — утащил его в воду.**



36



37

it seems that they have been brought to the artist's studio from such walls: *Deluxe Room* is from a three-star hotel; *Gastronom* (*Grocery Store*) comes from an actual grocery store; *The Beetle*, *Glue*, and *The Little Water Sprite* all come from a children's playground where, of course, they were concealing holes in the fence.



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В МАГАЗИНАХ 79,1% АГРОСТОРА.**

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Колбаса вареницкая 4,30	Новый палец 0,40	Карп свежий реч. 2,40	Икра полушпичная в/ст 0,40	Торт «Юбилейный» в/д 2,60	Картофель «Яс. 0,22
Колбаса похлебная 3,80	Новый маринованный 0,40	Салам озерный свежий 2,60	Икра полушпичная в/ст 0,55	Торт «Московский» 2,40	Капуста 0,48
Колбаса вареницкая 3,80	Адамо-Финн 0,15	Икра речная св. 2,30	Икра рисовая в/с 0,45	Пастама ротовая в/с 0,70	Помидоры 0,60
Колбаса вареницкая 3,60	Савиен 251 Ж. 2,40	Окунь озерный свежий 2,52	Полнокож 0,28	Салат 0,70	Отрубы 0,70
Колбаса вареницкая 2,60	Светлане 0,35	Осетр сирийский в. 4,50	Икра пшенчатая в/с 0,70	Биск. 1,20	Аты-баты 0,35
Колбаса вареницкая 2,20	Янко-Весел 0,30	Стерлядь каспийская 6,20	Икра полшпичная в/ст 0,42	Маришане 1,20	Аты-баты 0,50
Колбаса вареницкая 2,20	Насоса ромболовской 1,80	Горбуша свеж-морожен. 4,10	Икра свежая в/ст 0,32	Пап-фуртловский 0,80	Салам 0,60
Колбаса вареницкая 1,60	Тегеран «Ир» 1,80	Синга серебристая вог. 4,32	Икра первая в/ст 0,46	Конфеты «Юбилей» 2,40	Баллажаны 0,60
Колбаса вареницкая 2,30	Вестер 0,45	Килемма свежеморожен. 4,56	Икра низшая I сорта 0,46	Конфеты «Ангел» 2,40	Редис 0,60
Колбаса вареницкая 4,60	Юбка черная 2,40	Налива гол. моршуги 1,40	Хопль озерный 0,32	Конфеты «Юбилей» 2,40	Зеленый 0,30
Колбаса вареницкая 3,60	Сир-тобанский 2,60	Нарц черная лососе. 3,25	Насоса водосамочная 0,22	Помидоры «Славия» 1,40	Груши 0,50
Сардельки 1,80	Сыр советск. 2,60	Нарц южная мелкая 5,10	Насоса оловянная в/с 0,32	Печенье «Юбилей» 1,23	Слива 0,43
Сосиски 2,40	Вестер 1,40	Сельдь в/ст 1,40	Рожки из п.в.с. осос. 0,32	Печенье «Юбилей» 0,43	Абрикосы 0,65
Ветчина в фольге 3,60	Сельдь атлант. 1,33	Сельдь атлант. 1,33	Вермишель в/с 0,46	Кофе 1,32	Виноград 0,80
Пальте 1,20	Треска в/ст 0,40	Треска в/ст 0,40	Апельсин французский 0,45		Апельсины 1,50
Оборка 3,60	Салам 0,25	Салам 0,25	Навароны англійський 0,42		Навароны 1,50
	Вальма 0,48	Вальма 0,48	Фасоль 0,60		Линзы 0,50
	Уорр-корчак 1,32	Уорр-корчак 1,32	Горох в/с 0,35		Линзы 2,60
			Соль повар. 0,05		

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 Всероссийской Экспериментальной Выставки

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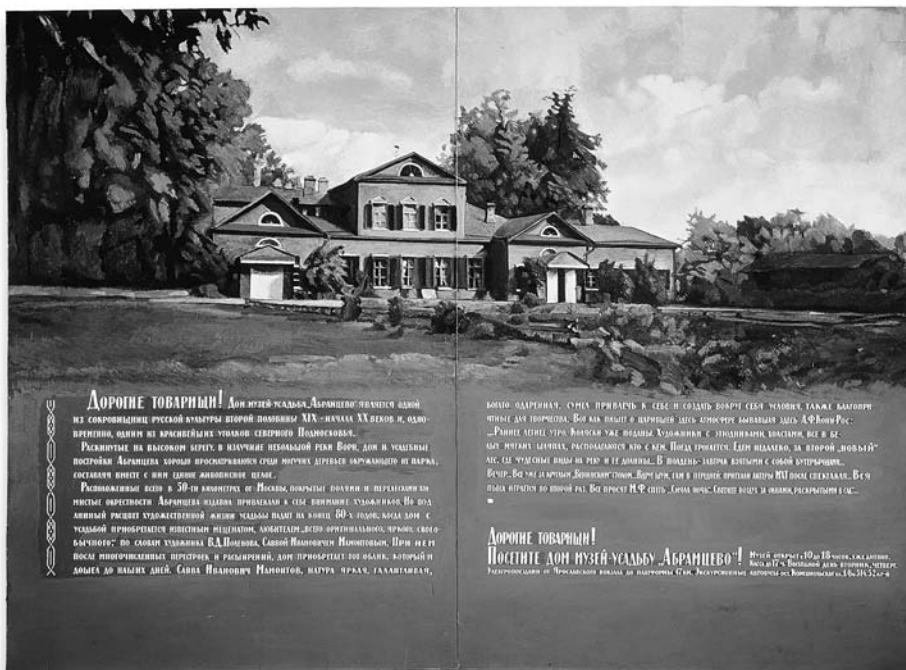
Восстание Мострава 1986





Я в траве нашел жука.  
Черный жук, блестящий.  
Для коллекции моей  
Самый подходящий.

Вырывается мой жук,  
Прыгает, стрекочет,  
Он в коллекцию мою  
Попадать не хочет.



The second group of paintings—of the “production” executed by this “character”—have small but essential peculiarities. They include *Sunday Evening* (fig. 28), *Sobakin*, *The Mokushansky Family Schedule* (fig. 42), *The Plan of My Life* (fig. 43), *First Snow* (fig. 44), *In the Relaxation Zone of the Sokolniki Region*, and *Three Russian Paintings*. These paintings cannot be hung in “places of common use.” They are devoid of any practical meaning; they “distort.” They are internally contradictory. Their form and preparation is like that of “standard ZhEK production,” but the content, the meaning, is from an entirely different place, often a place far from the ZhEK’s orbit. In this second case, the veracity of the earlier story about these paintings being made by the character is suspect. Perhaps we can make the crazy assumption that this “personality” does these for himself, with the goal of mocking, “making us a bit sick,” producing parodies using our real life, “caricatures” in the very same shapes and sizes he uses for his regular orders? That is not out of the question, but still, this assumption is crazy, highly improbable. More likely, if he were sick of drawing *Hello, Morning of Our Motherland!* or *Deluxe Room*, he would draw landscapes in the spirit of Kramskoi or Kuindzhi in his free time. If, of course, he were not just drinking with friends, which is most

Адрес: Красноярский пер. 2, к. 11		Расписание поведения членов семьи Локучанских. 1882 и 1883.												Составлено Локучанский Ю. С.		
		а р е ж и м														
Фамилия, И. О.		6-6 <sup>ч</sup> утра	6 <sup>ч</sup> -6 <sup>ч</sup> утра	6 <sup>ч</sup> -6 <sup>ч</sup> утра	7ч. - 9ч. утра	10 <sup>ч</sup> -12 <sup>ч</sup> дня	1 <sup>ч</sup> -3 <sup>ч</sup> вечера	3 <sup>ч</sup> -6 <sup>ч</sup> вечера	6 <sup>ч</sup> -7 <sup>ч</sup> вечера	7 <sup>ч</sup> -7 <sup>ч</sup> вечера	7 <sup>ч</sup> -9 <sup>ч</sup> вечера	9 <sup>ч</sup> Ю. вечера	10 <sup>ч</sup> Ю. вечера			
Локучанский Муря Степанович		Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Прогулка в саду, в парке или разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Обед.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	
Локучанская Парватида Ильинична		Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Обед.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	
Локучанский Александр Яковлевич		Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Обед.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	
Локучанская Светлана Яковлевна		Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Обед.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	
Локучанская Татьяна Корнеевна		Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Обед.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	
Локучанская Наталья Александровна		Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Обед.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с мужем, дочерью.	
Локучанский Игорь Александрович		Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Обед.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	Чтение, разговоры с женой, дочерью.	

likely.<sup>6</sup> Otherwise we would have to recognize some sort of sophisticated and refined reflection in him.

Well, and what if this is insanity?

Once again, we can compare the situation we are analyzing here in the visual arts with the literary situation. In literature, the insanity of the hero—a character—is not at all a rarity, and we listen to his verbal meanderings quite calmly, normally. In the context of our analysis it might be interesting to compare two “madmen” of world literature: Don Quixote and Poprishchin.<sup>7</sup> Don Quixote is preoccupied with saving the world from evil, Poprishchin with the pursuit of his own happiness. Don Quixote doesn’t immediately wind up in a bed, imprisoned in a mental ward. Poprishchin lands there right away. It seems the essential concern in both novels is the dividing line between the world of insanity and our world—the “wall” beyond which, we should clearly know, insanity lives—and the compassion with which we should regard someone close to us (Poprishchin) who crosses this line.

Throughout the entire length of Cervantes’s novel, Don Quixote, being insane, functions in our reality, on “this” side of the insane asylum wall.

6. Ivan Kramskoi (1837–1887) and Arkhip Kuindzhi (1842–1910) were prominent Russian nineteenth-century painters.

7. Poprishchin is the protagonist of Nikolai Gogol’s *Diary of a Madman* (1835).

Being not very sharp, he is constantly animating for the reader this basic dilemma: which of us in this world is really crazy? We who see “reality,” but take no measures against evil? Or the knight who is fighting evil, who is not complacent but doesn’t see the reality of this world?

Returning to our artist-character, we can presume that he, like Don Quixote, belongs among the not very bright madmen incarcerated behind

## П л а н моей жизни:

### Д е т с т в о:

*Катание на санках, коньках и лыжах, купание, ныряние в пруду на даче, собирание грибов в лесу. Прозники с отцом в зоопарк, увлечение животными, (собачка-Тарзан; голуби, голытки), увлечение машинками.*

### Ю н о с т ь (12-18<sub>+</sub>)

*Поездки с отцом на байдарке по реке Чусовой. Охота и рыбалка в Забайкалье, (стипендия с приободой). Сборя камней, гербариев на р. Чусовой. Первые туристские поездки с друзьями по Приобитке, (Юткы-Арбе), по северу Горьковской и Вологодской областей. Занятия зимней спортом: горными лыжами, и летими: бейсбол, шабаше. Окончание специальной школы, (с биологическим уклоном).*

### М о л о д о с т ь (18-32<sub>+</sub>)

*Поступление в институт им. Л.Мехлиова, (биологический фр-т). Научные экспедиции в Каспийское и Аральское моря, (изучение подводной флоры). Занятия в научн. студенч. обществе. Мелитяной, поездки с женой в тур. пут-дня. Зан. альп-изм и бодн. лыж. Оконч. ин-та. Работа в районе сов. морей (Камч-ка). Поступи в аспирантуру Зап. дис-ции. Родил двух детей.*

### З р е л о с т ь (32-65<sub>+</sub>)

*Приобретение моторной лодки. Путешествия в низовьях Ваги и Дона. Путешествия с детьми на байдарках по р. Чусовой и Белой, (охота, составление карты речного дна бассейнов этих рек). Изучение морской флоры в районах Чукотки, Лезки и Гренландии. Составление карты морской дна Северного пояса Земли. Работа в ин-те гидродезии Северн. и Восточн. морей. Защита докторской дис-ции. Участие в международных симпозиумах. Поездки в Англию, Италию, Францию, Индию, Грецию, Австралию и Аргентину. Написание капитального труда. Преподавание в ин-те гидродезии Сев. и Восточн. морей Акад. Науч СССР (фраг-т изобогороди. флоры). Создание «Лобаринга» для изучения и разведен. образцов изобогород. флоры.*

### С т а р о с т ь (65<sub>-</sub> )

*Приобретение дачи с лесной участком и реки под Москвой (по Курской дороге). Устройство газонного и вишневидного сада. Посадка водного кустарника (малыны и спородины). Разведение певчих птиц (канарейки и дрозды). Изучение и расчистка пруда и укладка по его берегу лесного луга. Расчистка дорожек. Устройство парника и оранжереи редких растений. Разбор архивов. Приведение в порядок рукописей. Работа в саду, огороде, прозяки, собирание грибов в лесу. Катание в пруду зимой и летом, в любнго походы.*



„Первый снег“

Из писем Т.Ф.И.-вой

28.IV.64.

**Ну, что, милый!** Почему ты молчишь? Я очень волнуюсь. Твои письма стали для меня эликсир жизни, и мне очень плохо, когда их нет. Иногда я усталю к тебе и брожу по твоей громадной лаборатории. Брожу очень тихо, чтобы не мешать тебе работать.

Сейчас ужасно медленно тянется время. Приехал всего один месяц, как ты уехала, а мне кажется, что уже год тебя нет рядом со мной. Вчера ходила к маме. Она изумительна! Посидела на той местинке, вспоминала, как мы были, проваливались в снег. Как было все чудесно! Москва тоже изменилась. Поднялся земная трамба, Бесна!

А как у тебя дела, милый? Как твой рыбок?

Я каждый день смотрю на синий зырок, но улы... Иногда без уведомления меня, чтобы я не волновалась, что завтра я получу письмо. А из центра повторится тоже. Сережа, твой милый Людо излучает тебе. Урачаю для меня у себя тут-туточку претензи Хороблю?

Целую тебя, Твоя Людо.

14.XI.65.

**Сережа родной мой!** От души поздравляю тебя с многими летями. Боже, ты в этот день постареешь на целый год и станешь милам старичком. Представь, что я сегодня у тебя и мы отмечаем твоё многолетие.

Меню обычное. Российское вино, фрукты и, конечно, твой любимый малялык. Ну сиди около окна и пьем за тебя.

Ты чувствуешь, как нам хорошо, родной? Боже, Сережа, как бы мне хотелось сейчас быть с тобой! Много раз целую тебя и желаю тебе всего самого наилучшего.

Сережа, родной, что бы ты хотела иметь в память об этом дне от меня?

Конечно не фотокарточку, я тебе и так её вышлю. Мне очень хочется оставить память о себе какуюнибудь, но я не знаю что. Помогй мне милый. Очень худо быть от тебя так далеко, и так редко видиться. Я, кажется, ничего о тебе не знаю. Сережа, милый, мне очень нехватает тебя!

У меня все хорошо. От мамы получила письмо, они попали в ужасные условия, и девочки очень скучают без меня. Танюша плакала, хотела, чтобы я ехала с ними на Сахалин, а Любушка успокоила тем, что пообещала приехать.

Соседи еще не приехали, и пока я одна в большой и пустой квартире. Не очень приятно. Правда, знакомые не дают скучать.

Фотокарточек из Еревана еще нет.

Милый, 25го я буду звонить тебе в 3, пожалуйста, не уходи никуда.

Нежно тебя обнимаю.

Целую тебя много, много раз. Людо.

the walls of an insane asylum and who functions in this world, the one surrounding us, pursuing a program that has come to be called in our country, the Soviet Union, the “Counter Plan.” In our production facilities, a Counter Plan is a plan put forth as a reaction to a plan imposed from above, from a more highly placed organization. Having reviewed the imposed plan, an

enterprise as a whole or an individual brigade or even an individual person responds to it with a new plan, which, as a rule, sets even higher demands. It is a kind of superplan, a plan that is not anticipated “there, up above,” but is always received with approval.

Such is the case with the paintings of the second sort: *The Mokushansky Family Schedule*, *The Plan of My Life*, and others made by the character, not as a result of a direct order from above, from the bosses, but as though they had been ordered by the general logic of our life. He—the artist—executes and affixes these items ahead of time, as a kind of advance work—that if not today, then tomorrow, will be ordered, and will already have been done. The artist-character thus appears to be a bright, forward-looking employee who has anticipated management’s future orders with love and attentiveness, who extends the “orderliness” imposed by the boss to things to which the boss has not yet attended, not yet “gotten around to.” In a certain sense, our character is an enthusiastic bureaucrat who has found happiness in systematization and who desires to cover all of his life, all the way to the horizon, with this happiness.

Two questions remain to be examined: the relation between the self-reflexive artist and the artist-character, and whether this character has a name.

First, we will attempt to answer the second question: the artist-character doesn’t have a name.

In the first place, this is because the character didn’t exist when I started to make these paintings. He emerged rather gradually. When I was beginning to do my “albums” [i.e., *Ten Characters*, which first appeared in 1975], I did not believe they would become characters in the first person, but soon “they”—the characters—appeared, even with names. But in this case, the name of my character, who painted, it seems, forty or fifty paintings, did not appear for some reason. (For Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid, the artist who painted, it seems, sixty works or so was named Buchumov.)<sup>8</sup> Why was this the case? Probably because he, this character, is very close to me. He almost *is* me. In our social life, if it were to have happened that I had not hidden, I would probably have produced exactly the same works. But why “if”? After all, my work on book illustrations for thirty years now has consisted entirely of *The Beetle* and *Hello, Morning of Our Motherland!* It is not for nothing that *Glue* and *The Little Water Sprite* are taken directly from my book illustrations—in appearance they are doubles of the sweet hackwork for which I was paid. But

8. Nikolai Buchumov was an artist-character invented by Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid in the early 1970s.

then again, I sign book illustrations with my own name, which means in a way I drew them myself. But which *I*? The other, “social” one? Then again, we are socially determined not “from within” but “from without”; others impute to us how we are supposed to be: happy, outgoing, understandable, NORMAL, “LIKE EVERYONE ELSE.” And here is the answer: my book illustrations are done by my “whole self” and my artist-character *is* my “whole self.” He is absolutely “normal.” He is the very embodiment of *The Norm* (the name of the great novel by Vladimir Sorokin).<sup>9</sup> My character is absolutely normal. He demonstrates his normalcy. He sticks it right under our noses, and that’s why he doesn’t have a name. His name is “who,” and a “whole self” cannot have a name.

Here is my response concerning the relation between the artist and the character: When the writer calls his heroes by name, he intends to affirm that his heroes are “who.” In the case that we are analyzing here, the subject “I” is the “whole self.” The “I” subject has a name, but “no one,” the “whole self,” does not (“everything,” like “nothing,” cannot have a name).

Perhaps it becomes possible to answer the first question—about the relation between the artist and the character—like this.

Or, perhaps not.

9. *The Norm* is a novel by Vladimir Sorokin (b. 1955), a friend of Kabakov’s during his Moscow days.

*From An Apologia for Personalism in  
the Art of the 1960s: An Impassioned  
Monologue on 23 June 1986*

1986

These sometimes rambling recollections elaborate on observations that appear in Kabakov's earlier *The 1960s and the 1970s: Notes on Unofficial Life in Moscow* (1982–1984). Yet the point of view they present also bears the stamp of a somewhat later era, a time when the initial transformations of perestroika and glasnost had begun to take root. The artist's voice is perhaps at its most candid and revealing in these pages.

At the outset of an activity, a person has a sense of the start, the place where he begins, like a runner at the stadium. This feeling was especially strong among the young artists of my generation. It would have been natural for some rocket launcher to thrust the young artist part of the way toward going into orbit: it could have been school, teachers, traditions, even intelligent fathers and mothers. Our generation, however, started from absolute zero. That was the sense we all had. Everyone started from his small hill in a field, a hill so small that it was almost invisible.

That would have been bad enough had the starting place been level and flat, but many had to begin by overcoming obstacles. Important facts had been intentionally distorted, significant phenomena were branded as unneeded, harmful, nasty, while unneeded and harmful ones were praised. To move forward, you first had to discard these distorted perceptions. That is, we were at a “minus-start.”

The resulting negativism toward the artistic life around us remains today in the consciousness of artists of my generation, that is, the artists of the 1960s.

Of course, I could name several artists who started a bit earlier than we did but in the same direction. In sport this is called a “staggered start,” I think. Those small intervals turned out to be extremely important in terms of the skills each succeeding “runner” acquired. [ . . . ] These artists were fed by a small stream, almost negligible, that seeped out of the mighty rivers that flooded artistic life in the 1920s and 1930s. It may have been murky and weak,



but that stream broke through the 1930s and was still running weakly in the 1950s.

The Jack of Diamonds, broken up definitively in 1932, was not destroyed, and its artists continued to work in the same traditions. Mashkov, Osmerkin, Shevchenko, Konchalovsky, and Falk did not exhibit—the exhibitions belonged to another “contingent”—but they continued to work at home “for themselves,” had students, and so on.<sup>1</sup> [ . . . ]

Today no one worships that fetish, the word “painting,” and it is gradually falling out of use, but in the late 1940s and early 1950s the word was practically synonymous with art.

In art school, the most important consideration was whether you had a feel for color. You were better off with no legs than no feel for color. If you don’t have a gift for painting (yet it was known that there was a gift for art as well), you shouldn’t take up art. This innate ability to paint was so important, and I suffered so much—my doubt as to whether I had this quality was like an open wound—that I decided to ask a “specialist” (there are always students in class whose painterly gifts are recognized and admired) whether I was a painter. But how can you ask a god, an oracle, directly? I used an intermediary, who asked about me in passing, randomly. That evening, he shook his head and told me the answer: “Not a colorist.”

So, painting and art were synonyms. What was the concept of “painting” then? It was the Russian branch of Cézannism, which had acquired certain characteristics, as did everything coming from the West, and existed in two forms: the first, classic form, that is, the Jack of Diamonds, at its best in Falk and Konchalovsky, displayed a total disregard of nature (taking nature as only an excuse for the evolution of painterly flows, color balance and interaction . . . a most complex elaboration, musical structure, and so on). The interactions of colors, their masses and rhythms, are the true heroes and protagonists of the play appearing on the canvas’s surface; the depicted trees, sky, vase of flowers are merely raw material, inevitable and necessary. Cézannism presumes the existence of nature and draws from it, but the basis is a preference that everything be unmoving—portrait, landscape, still life, not running, not agitated—and the painting is built on that.

The second form of the Russian concept of “painting” in those years reversed this structure: primacy was given to the subject, and the painting became merely the “required condition,” the “form” that allowed the reality

1. Ilya Mashkov (1881–1944), Aleksandr Osmerkin (1892–1953), Aleksandr Shevchenko (1883–1948), and Petr Konchalovsky (1876–1956) were members of the Jack of Diamonds, an avant-garde artistic collective.

to exist in a picture. This approach requires that you be interested in and love what exists beyond the canvas, that is, reality, psychology, genre, dynamics, plot. This tendency existed in the Jack of Diamonds too, but in the 1930s–1940s it merged with the concept of “Soviet painting.” You take the already developed Cézannist form—it’s readymade, like clothing everyone knows—and the new task looks like this: “What are we going to paint with this method?” The classic Cézannists depicted only still lifes, landscapes, and portraits, but we, “having mastered this form,” will apply it to other subjects.

That was Soviet painting before and after the war.

Now, it seems to me, those artists are no longer remembered or known, but we met them live, “active”: Sokolov-Skalia, Ioganson, Uon, and others.<sup>2</sup>

It cannot be said that the rivalry between the former and latter tendencies was fought “as equals.” The artists of the first group were already squashed and branded as “formalists” by the time we were in school. “Formalists are those whose names start with F—Falk, Favorsky, Fonvizin.”<sup>3</sup> The latter group held all the posts by the late 1940s. It was their work that we were supposed to study in school and college. We constantly heard, “Of course you have to paint in a painterly manner. Why is that painted poorly?” But what was meant was no more than a pretty color film. Beneath it, there had to be a well-sculpted body, chiaroscuro, and so on. There had to be good academic drawing, like Chistiakov’s, with a small painterly overlay of the Jack of Diamonds artists. [. . . ]<sup>4</sup>

A true Soviet painting style emerged, something like the “absolute house” in architecture, the ideal house for all times. Its attributes were: “painterliness,” a weak mortar of Cézannism, and drawing that had to be exactly as it was in the Renaissance, with the addition of Russian painting from the end of the previous century: everything elaborated in detail, but not “dry,” and a few notes higher. The means were combined to form the necessary conglomerate, which was used to make, for example, all the panels, paintings, and stands at the VDNKh.<sup>5</sup> By the middle of the 1950s the process seemed to be completed and everything was in place forever.

We stood at the peak. We were masters of the “method,” and before us was

2. Boris Ioganson (1893–1973) and Konstantin Uon (1875–1956) were official artists of the Soviet period.

3. Author’s note: Attributed to Erik Bulatov. The “formalists” were the painters Robert Falk (1886–1958), Vladimir Favorsky (1886–1964), and Artur Fonvizin (1883–1973).

4. Pavel Chistiakov (1832–1919), an important teacher of Russian painters throughout the nineteenth century.

5. VDNKh (*Vystavka Dostizhenii Narodnogo Khoziaistva*) refers to the Exhibition of Economic Achievements, a kind of national theme park founded in 1935.

a vast vista of subjects, an endless line of heroes sitting in the fields at midday, traveling home on leave, going to the club to vote, and so on. Not everything had been captured on canvas yet, and in that sense we had huge freedom.

Rethinking the system itself, the approach—that never occurred to anyone.

But it did occur to some people, I would say out of fear that everything had already been done, completed, and all that was left was repeating and repeating.

That 1960s generation—around fifty people<sup>6</sup>—falls into three groups, if you talk about their education: the ones who graduated before then from the Surikov or the Polygraphic Institute or art school, that is, the “professionals,” who got the full and strict academic education; the studio artists, those who had studied in someone’s studio and had the experience of that teacher (Beliutin’s students, for example) or who had studied in the studios and clubs of the Pioneer palaces; and a third group, who had no special education—dilettantes, self-taught artists, or those originally from a different profession. [ . . . ]

Of course, I’m talking about an entire generation of artists who seemed to reject the academic model. When I speak of the world of “unofficial” art, the number of such outcasts, “mutants,” and dropped “electrons,” was of course almost negligible. I called it fifty, but there were only twenty-five to thirty actively working artists—a drop in the ocean. The vast majority were “normal” artists. The Surikov Institute alone graduated 150 people a year, the Polygraphic another 50. And what about the Stroganovka, the 1905 School, the Architectural Institute?<sup>7</sup> Year after year. The main current was in the “normal” direction.

Curiously, this “mutating” act in the 1960s had been impossible to predict. The origins of this strange growth, this protuberance “on the side” of the people moving forward, from the womb of the academic school itself, from its almost Lyceum-like elitism, would be very interesting to explain from social, psychological, and all other points of view. A strong side growth on a tree. . . .

This side growth, in turn, spread into eight or nine runners, moving in all directions from a single point, each with its own genealogy. (And there were other branches as well—poetic, literary, musical.)

The phenomenon is interesting not only because several artistic tenden-

6. Author’s note: I am talking about Moscow, as usual.

7. “Stroganovka” refers to Stroganov Moscow State University of Arts and Industry, founded in 1825.

cies flared up at once, but because each was characterized not by a general resemblance of ideas or programs but by a general and important trait: each tendency consisted of artistic “individualities.” All of the artists were personalities. If anyone told one of them that he was tossing around a well-known idea, he would be insulted; each was certain that he was doing something uniquely his own, with no concepts or ideas borrowed from elsewhere. That is, thanks to some strange, almost magical effect, Tselkov became Tselkov and Rabin became Rabin.<sup>8</sup>

This was the main principle of the times: no one resembled anyone else. Everyone was unique. No one imitated anyone else.

Of course, the past is always idealized, but nevertheless, in terms of the quality of intensity, enthusiasm, and productivity, I want to say: it was a unique time.

In the next generation, there was a sharp decline in the number of “personalities,” people worked in clans, and a hierarchy of leaders and followers developed. The times became less individualistic and more culturally normative, I guess. And the energy gradually ran out, or so it seemed.

I don’t mean to sing the praises of this cohort of the 1960s: first, it’s not clear what the results are, and second, it was all done with a big dose of self-admiration and inner euphoria. The objective significance of the phenomenon remains unknown. Perhaps, as always, a temporal distance is necessary in order to understand what really happened. For now it seems that the production was extremely personalistic, individual, and that it does not fit into any artistic evolution.

I could try to describe the psychology of each of these “personalities,” give them ironic or, on the contrary, apologetic characteristics, describe the incomparable originality of their actions, speeches, behavior, and works. But it is no less interesting to describe that atmosphere in which they developed, since it seems that it was not only their personal will, not planned improvisation, but some kind of source, a cultural and historical field, you could say, that caused all of this to arise inevitably.

I don’t like the word “condition” (“what conditions conditioned” or “what reasons reasoned . . .”), and yet it is probably more to the point that there was an environment, an atmosphere, that was very thick, intense, and unique. If I could define some of the characteristics of that energy-charged field, it would be easier to define these strange figures who were often contradictory in image, direction, and development.

8. Oleg Tselkov (b. 1934), known primarily for painting disturbing, semihuman oval faces, and Oskar Rabin (b. 1928) were both prominent unofficial artists.

I am convinced that artistic actions and works can be appreciated only with an understanding of that “field,” its context, and not a scientific and historical understanding but a sense of the flavor of the living fruit with its juices and live, charged magnetism.

We had had a ripened fruit in the 1920s; it fell from the branch, and it split to reveal seeds: literary, musical, and theatrical personalities. . . . As if a pomegranate had fallen and broken into seeds.

I believe it was exactly the same in the 1960s, when a juicy, living, strange fruit ripened. I need to describe its taste. Curiously, no one has any doubts about the value of the lovely fruit of the 1920s. Everyone knows precisely what it was about. They know the approximate “edges” of the phenomenon and can outline it precisely. “The old world ended, the new one began.” Everything now takes place practically not on earth but somewhere in space; there is an incredible belief that man has come into contact with cosmic currents and is acquiring a new image, new language, new consciousness, and new goals. He is no longer the “old” man, the “ancient Adam,” but a new creature. His relationship to the “old” man will be like that between a butterfly and a caterpillar: “Yes, I used to be that, but now I can fly!” It’s not just a different worm. It’s something “different.” It can fly. This requires the invention of a new linguistic and visual structure, for a new man cannot speak in the new world in an “old” language. Could Caruso permit himself to moo like a cow? There is a new attitude toward daily life. It is clear that the demands of daily life sucked you in and that people were dying in it. Hence the absence of mundane reality, the ignoring of the quotidian, the struggle against it, becomes the norm. The archaic structures—an individual child, an individual room—belong to the past and now appear silly and unnecessary; the human being of the new creative formation is a social person, part of a single collective. But a leader can come out of a collective, for example, Mayakovsky, who is receptive to everything the collective says; he can “hear” it, and then speaks in its name.

A multitude of such things and concepts, tragic, funny, paradoxical, and astonishing, comes into my mind almost unexpectedly. The most important is the completely new attitude toward the future. The past is suddenly completely known. It is over. No need to go over old rubbish. We need to live “like the future,” and time will flow backward from the future toward us. The future is approaching “today” at great speed, entering it. Matiushin’s structures speak, for example, of the mutual penetration of the human, animal, and vegetable worlds.<sup>9</sup> An expanded consciousness, Matiushin says, is

9. Mikhail Matiushin (1861–1934), a Russian and Soviet futurist composer and artist associated with Kazimir Malevich and the futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov.

the consciousness that does not differentiate between man and tree, for example. This is not pantheism, becoming “like” a tree or “like” a young animal. Rather, the language of plants, animals, nature in general, will become accessible to man, and he will be able to speak like a man or, if he wants, like a bat—the world opens up to him in every dimension. The problems of the fourth, fifth, and sixth dimensions hold no complexities anymore, because the dynamic consciousness is particularly receptive to the world in the cosmic dynamic. We see a cup the way it really is only if we are next to it. That is, we are tied to the immobile cup by our own immobility. We must look at the world from a dynamic angle. If we were to rush quickly past the world, the objects would be different. We must open the dynamic point of view and study the world in motion (as was proposed by Malevich and others). Many of those revelations are now inaccessible and dark to us, but these are the seeds of that ripe and lost “fruit” of 1912, the year of great discoveries: Kandinsky’s first abstraction, Malevich’s Square, and many other prophecies.<sup>10</sup> The 1920s seemed to be the beginning of the realization of those prophecies. But even in the 1910s, there were people who foresaw cataclysms, including a social revolution, considering it merely a local expression of something cosmic.

With their dynamic gaze they foresaw not only the Russian but the world revolution, and nothing surprised them. They were not angry; on the contrary, they received it all enthusiastically. Malevich and Tatlin seemed to “know” that it would be so, and their problem was in giving, “bringing,” a new language into the world. Without knowing what they were breathing, what they saw with their “inner gaze,” it is impossible to understand Tatlin’s Tower or Chekrygin’s visionary works.<sup>11</sup>

Why am I dwelling on the 1920s? Of course, I am seeking an analogy with the 1960s. Was there a comparable “mushroom harvest”? Was there fruit in the 1960s? If so, many bees or flies all flew out at once and buzzed in a chorus; perhaps there was something like that, but can we give it a definition, even an approximate one, as I tried to do with the 1920s?

A full description and listing of all the characteristics is impossible. Sixty years must pass; that is, things will be clear in the 2020s, when the edges of the phenomenon and its issues will be visible, the way the edges of the 1920s are visible now. The metastases and problems of the 1960s extend to our day.

10. Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944) produced his first apparently abstract works around 1912; Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square* was introduced to the public only in 1915.

11. A reference to Vladimir Tatlin’s sculpture project *Monument to the Third International* (1920) and the career of Vasily Chekrygin (1897–1922), a Soviet avant-garde artist.

But what was it? Only a few aspects are visible—social, political, cultural. The deeper layers and the general whole are still invisible.

The social characteristics of the 1960s are the following: inflation of the paradise and promised happiness that had been proclaimed by that time.

The difference between the proclaimed achievement of the absolute perfection of human life and the actual record—along with the inner sense of need for that absolute, and the sense of being deceived, of missing something—is the inner social tension of the 1960s.

It was a commonplace by then that we had the best art, the best economy, the best legal system, and the best way of living. And not just the best among other bests, but the best all around, because “over there” everything was terrible and rotting while here everything was getting better. It was the same in history: the construction of the beautiful palace never worked anywhere. But we built it. (“It” was more or less like what they have now in North Korea.)

And suddenly, finding ourselves on that sunny peak, we saw that things were out of order. Today, the radio broadcasts opinions that things “are not quite right.” Back in the 1960s we wouldn’t have believed it even if we had heard it. We knew that everything was working. That’s what caused the tension, because daily life did not confirm the declaration that we had achieved the dream.

Art at that time was absolutely normative. It was known that everything had been done. Art, you could say, had detached itself from the people who made it and as a whole was not subject to new interpretations or revisions. It exists, and you who enter it must study it and try to add the same water from the same source to the existing pool.

So the second side of the artistic situation is the divorce between general artistic normativity and individual artistic agreement.

Maybe all of this is correct, but still the horrible thought could appear—for some reason *I don’t want to do it*. Naturally, a student like that would be labeled untalented. It was clear that he was too lazy to go through the work to become a master, that he was shirking serious labor. But the point is that these accusations were the same ones usually addressed to Symbolist or “Western” art, and the student had heard them many times. For instance, in our school the names of Vrubel and Borisov-Musatov were banned for being despicable formalists. In the first year at the institute, we could not say the word “impressionist” without adding “daubers and messmakers.”<sup>12</sup> We knew

12. Mikhail Vrubel (1856–1910), a multifaceted fin-de-siècle artist; Viktor Borisov-Musatov (1870–1905), a prominent Russian Symbolist painter known for his dreamy, otherworldly scenes.

that an “artist” like Claude Monet made blue shadows even though shadows were obviously black or dark brown. We learned about another mediocrity, Modigliani, only at the end of our studies: he drew pancake-shaped faces and angular noses. There was also this horrible creature, Picasso, who was capable of mutilating human forms and drawing four eyes. We knew that the art of the twentieth century and even the end of the nineteenth century was filled with such scoundrels and failures, that we were the only ones left on the island, surrounded by the ruins of the sinking ship that was the art world. Like Noah, we alone were saved thanks to our sturdy boat, and the rest were drowning all around us. That was the worldview. Those were the lectures we heard. We were the only inheritors of the great legacy: Rembrandt, Raphael, and Leonardo looked to us, beseechingly, practically with tears in their eyes, and thought, what luck that these people will continue our work.

Thus we were “rescued” from the formalists. But our childlike minds protested vociferously against the rescuers’ mission. Maybe because we saw in them the horrendous figure of Gerasimov and the other “Stalin Eagles,” as they were called by our teachers, and we could not accept that these people had been called upon to carry the Holy Grail, that they embodied the truth.<sup>13</sup>

That led to a kind of “porcupine,” a multidirectional bristling of attempts among art students to find “something else.” Some resisted the normative instruction (“draw like me and you will be drawing in the only correct way”); some looked for ways to express their individuality and their own path. The certain declarations that “we” were the only ones in the world to be drawing correctly provoked others to dig around in books to see if maybe someone else could draw properly too. That’s how our little world came to be populated with “experts” and the “erudite.”

Of course, all of them were far from being erudite experts. But the style I use for this narrative will be rapturous and apologetic, and intentionally so: I want to fall into this state, first, in order not to feel that emptiness, that gaping hole that each of us felt beneath us then, and second, in order to re-create and recall that style of electrified, rapturous ecstasy that was characteristic of our circle and to a great degree created its atmosphere. In general, my account will take the form of an “impassioned monologue,” speech, not written down but spoken, uninterrupted, the speaker not taking time to think about what he’s babbling on about, not stopping suddenly.

Everything that I am saying here, and will say in the following pages, is an apologia for this phenomenon, a recognition of its importance, value, neces-

13. Aleksandr Gerasimov (1881–1963), one of the foremost exemplars of Soviet Socialist Realism painting.



sity, essentialness, its ontological nature. Most importantly, it is an expression of the optimistic faith that all of the people who represented this phenomenon are exceptionally interesting, important, and necessary. Although still unclear and mysterious, this phenomenon nonetheless has significance and purpose for our cultural and artistic life today.

May I outline the object of the apologia? It is an apologia for Personalism, for an amazement before the art of the 1960s, for the fact that a bunch of expressive individuals appeared who had the courage to hang, as if in the air, representing no one, not as a movement, only themselves. This is all the more worthy of respect because the powerful, active, frustrating background against which the group appeared was a background not of individualism and Personalism but of normative rules. The art around them was posited as definitive, eternal. In that sense, Personalism was a rebellion, a controversy, juxtaposing itself to the faceless normative milieu. This was a protest not of weak and meek individuality but of full-fledged and self-sufficient artistic personalities that asserted themselves through their paintings.

Each of these personalities built its own cosmos, with its own history of the arts, its own philosophy, its own technology. And, I repeat, each built its own genealogy, from each individual building backward. That makes it all the more interesting to find the “tail” that dragged behind each of them, to study the tree stump on which sat such an interesting and paradoxical personality as, say, Rabin, Tselkov, or Neizvestny.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps the tree had no other branches. A huge trunk with only a single branch. . . .

The idiosyncrasy of these personalities does not preclude their joining into associations. To start with, they were close and associated among themselves. Moreover, some had “trains” of students, followers, and imitators. There weren’t that many of the last. Some had paying students, that is—it was a normal way to make money—while others simply allowed their students to work next to them or nearby. [ . . . ]

On the whole, I repeat, they were individuals, not tied to a single tendency, they could not have been called a movement, like, say, fauvism, futurism, or suprematism, since their ties were those of friendship. Some had relationships that went back to school or college.

There could not be any hidden contradictions, much less hostility. Each retained his own artistic program, shared it, but also tolerated and respected his neighbors. So we cannot speak here of associations in terms of tendencies; that would have made description much easier, and I really wish it were so.

The “official” artists and critics never said anything about this group,

14. Ernst Neizvestny (1925–2016), a prominent unofficial sculptor.

preferring the policy of silence until the late 1970s. Artists in general don't think about the existence of anything noteworthy beyond their own studios, but starting in the late 1970s the so-called unofficial art became an abnormal splinter in exhibitions and artistic life. From the external, official point of view it was not clear whether they were "faggots, hooligans, confidence tricksters, or spies," or maybe all of those rolled into one, but one thing was perfectly clear: they were mediocrities and had nothing to do with real art, as represented by the Union of Artists.

The interest of Western "dealers" in that art was understandable (I'm again quoting the "official" point of view): this was a mockery of "our" life and "our" art. It could all be discounted, however: the West was a dying breed that had not created anything good since Raphael and was almost completely corrupted. When people countered that a capitalist wouldn't waste his money, the answer was something like this: they pay money for temporary values, not eternal ones. You have to make a profit now, and it doesn't matter on what, gold or shit. We are not looking for that kind of fast success: our values must be eternal. That was the approximate argument against the phenomenon I am talking about, and I don't think the attitude toward it will change in the near future.

The official structure, unlike the personalistic one, has principles to which it adheres. The first is normativism—that which cannot be changed under any circumstances. Of course, if an academician painted today as he had twenty years ago, he'd be kicked out of the academy. But still, the principle remains inviolable. Noticing the changes is somehow rude.

Everyone knows that all the leading artists fought the "academy." But Kramskoi and his group fought the "bad" academy, while Rabin was fighting the "good" academy, and even though the behavior, texts, and ideas are almost the same, it's still what they call in Odessa "two big differences."<sup>15</sup> A sense of humor is inappropriate here. No laughing, chuckling, or sarcasm. Down with jokes! Never have times been so serious. Never has correct art been made with such grim expressions.

Archeological and ethnographic expeditions use the terms "hard culture" and "marginality," which essentially mean that every society has a closed nucleus—a territory wherein the rules are clear, forms are stable, and norms are executed without demur. Outside that "nucleus" lies a marginal zone, occupied by people who do not fulfill the norms or don't know them and find themselves kicked out, beyond the border of the "hard culture." On a social

15. Ivan Kramskoi (1837–1887), a painter and rebel against the Imperial Academy of the Arts.

plane, for instance, the distinction may be between the people who live well and the poor. In politics, there are those who accept the system and those who do not, those who share the convictions of the hard culture and those who do not. A marginal person is one who is on the periphery of the system, on its edges. Naturally, all the personalities participating in the underground artistic life of the 1960s were marginalized. This explains why no one ever spoke about them within the “hard culture.” The marginal ones are those who reject the correct, agreed-upon nucleus of any culture.

But there are other categories of people who are located on the edge of the hard nucleus, in its softened zone. These are the ones at the gates of a closed hospital who are asked to pass messages to those “inside.” They are the messengers, the links. They eat and drink “there,” but wander around “here.” They wear robes. They’re “allowed.” Moreover, they are the favorites of the Union of Artists. Living far from the center, they do not want rank and position, do not show up at board meetings, do show up drunk for jury meetings, but they “belong,” since they give the representatives of the center an opportunity to show their magnanimity and liberalism. The quiet Oleg Vassiliev, who always paid his dues, is a marginal who doesn’t know the real, inside rules of the hard culture. X and Y, by contrast, unruly and beloved by the Union of Artists, don’t pay their dues but do know the rules and are first in line when the numerous benefits are handed out, allocated by the Center. How they learn the time of the handouts and who tells them remains a mystery.

Thus, the figures of the hard culture (be they Salakhov or Ponomarev, in the center, or Nazarenko and Nesterova, on the edges) know the same rules.<sup>16</sup> Some obey them with solemn, oppressive faces like steam engines, others seem not to obey them but are playing the same game. The marginal ones don’t play the game at all. There are some among them who would like to cross the border. With time they are accepted on the other side of the gate, but only when they’ve mastered the unwritten rules of the hard culture (that’s why it’s a culture, because its rules are unwritten and some people somehow know them while others don’t).

Belonging to the unofficial world is not a caprice: if I want to, I’ll draw this way; if I want to do it another way, I will. It is the result of an inner decision, a manifestation of hidden desires that exist objectively while remaining unmanifested for a long time. These are like nervures, sympathetic lines that

16. Tair Salakhov (b. 1928), Nikolai Ponomarev (1918–1997), Tatiana Nazarenko (b. 1944) and Natalia Nesterova (b. 1944) were considered by Kabakov to be, to varying degrees, official artists during the late Soviet period.

require exposure. They are branches of an invisible shrub, which exists and needs to be given its own face, clothing, and name by each personality. [ . . . ]

Can we speak of unofficial culture as a *culture*, or at least as a significant *cultural phenomenon*? To this day, even the posing of this question is not accepted by everyone (if you take away the criminal-political sense and examine the phenomenon objectively-historically). Many believe, since we all live in one country, speak one language, that any division is artificial, useful only to our enemies: Show me those people of the unofficial culture—who are they? You mean those pathetic traitors who pass themselves off as the avant-garde? They’re nothing, empty creatures unworthy of attention. Everything real and elevated reaches the top here. You can’t bury talent. And so on. On the other hand, there is the opinion that you can talk about unofficial culture, and not only in the field of visual art.

Official and unofficial worldviews are based on totally different psychological mindsets. Most of all, it is a different relationship to the viewer. Official artistic life is oriented toward an abstract viewer who does not exist in real life. It appeals to a viewer who does not exist, who has no flesh, no psychology, an abstract, synthetic paper character addressed by the artist, poet, or musician. This viewer and listener was not invented in the 1960s, but earlier, I think, somewhere near the start of the century, in the 1910s. There was a supposition that it isn’t an individual person who reads a book or looks at a painting, but that everyone all at once is doing it. Some sort of mass, perhaps a million people, are standing in front of a painting and looking at it. You know, the way you have fifty people watching TV together in a rest home.

Addressing a general crowd instead of an individual person is very vividly expressed in Mayakovsky. He alone speaks to a faceless mass of people, filling up all the space, expressing delight, as they await his every word. He believed in that reality and “saw” that homogeneous sea of heads extending to the horizon before him.

In the 1960s a comparable abstract mass, a crowd, became a taken-for-granted reality; it became the “viewer,” and all official culture was now addressed to it.

Unofficial culture always addresses an individual, concrete person. The viewer and listener lost by official culture is the addressee, the object of interest, and subject of perception in unofficial culture. It was that way from the start and remains so today. Who is this subject? It is first of all a creature who has a capacity for self-reflection and an ability to appreciate a work of art personally, through his own experience. This is not a person who stands like a baby chick with an open beak, delightedly swallowing whatever he is told, but rather a person who calmly, attentively, and probably coolly, listens to what

you tell him. He is not astonished by the seed, like the bird; he knows a lot on his own, before encountering your heart-rending poem or painting, and he is very good at comparing what you are putting in his mouth with what he has already eaten in the past.

Unofficial art, then, is addressed to a person who can enter into a dialogue of equals with you rather than participate in the game of leader-crowd, teacher-pupil, prophet-adept, doctor-patient, and so on.

The official artist is protected from the start. He's always in a fort—you can't spit at him or express your complaints; he just shoots from his cover, and if you rush the fort, you'll be dragged away and beaten for a long time—that is, there is no feedback. The unofficial artist does not appear protected. His listener, his viewer, is not far away or behind a barrier, like a roaring crowd in a stadium. He is sitting next to him on the couch and can send him to hell at any moment. (Under his breath, of course, given the good-spirited atmosphere that reigns in the unofficial world—curse him out loud and you won't be allowed in the house next time.) The artist is constantly irradiated by his viewers or listeners. One of the characteristics of unofficial art is the precise and often personal identity of the addressee. Even if the artist works in quiet and solitude, tomorrow he will get a response, in facial expressions, in words, or in voting with the feet. But naturally, there are people in unofficial culture, too, who address the millions, who are certain that they are handing out gold and that everyone is enriched by communicating with them.

That is to say, the question of whether or not unofficial culture exists touches not only on the results (which the future will judge) but, first of all, on a new setup that requires contact with the perceiver. If you accept the point of view that art is not a one-way street but always a dialogue, then unofficial art is equipped with feedback to spare.

But here it must be said that this contact has a limited, artificial, and sometimes pathological quality. The life of an unofficial artist passes only in his own milieu. The absence of exhibitions and the impossibility of showing to a "neutral" (as they used to say, a "broad") viewer leaves a morbid stain on the activity of the artist and on his product.

Of course, a work must be addressed to someone personally. Probably the twentieth century is the century of the individual and not just the mass. The search for an individual, a person, worth addressing must be open and free. The artist must paint an open book, and then he will meet the viewer that he seeks. But our milieu, the milieu of unofficial culture, is the milieu of closed doors; that is, the paintings are locked away, isolated, like the artists themselves, and there is not the wide exchange and resonance that is normal for

artistic production. If there is a resonance, it is doomed to quiet down, since it takes place in the small space of a closed environment.

The pathology of unofficial art life mirrors the pathology of official art life. The latter has a seemingly gigantic audience, but the resonance dims because the artist is shooting at a duck flying over a lake while sitting at home in the city.

The misfortune of unofficial culture is its own inability to be heard. It can't even hear itself. It plays with itself; it doesn't know the strength of its voice, nor its timbre, nor its place in history. Either it is a mighty blow, or it is the slap of an enfeebled patient against a plate. Nothing has auditory adequacy, or any other adequacy, and often when these phenomena are dragged out into the light, they turn out to be nothing more than the pale, weak shoots on a potato in the cellar, instead of being thick and green, as they would be under the open sky. [ . . . ]

One of the reasons for the appearance of unofficial artists is the cutting of the Gordian knot that had tightened to its limit in the 1960s. "If you are a Soviet person, you must speak in public places and at work the way you are supposed to, the way everyone around you does, under fear of death. Or are you better than the others? You can express to your wife, mother-in-law, and friend your private opinion, that is, your 'human' traits and peculiarities, but in the outside world, say what everyone else says."

This sense of duality, of schizophrenia, was so pernicious in the work of all artists, so "normal" and natural, that reflecting on it and somehow discussing the issue did not seem possible since it was dangerous.

The appearance of unofficial art was a reaction to that duality, to the assumption that in his artistic practice a person can and must do something for which he will be personally responsible. Personalism is the attempt to maintain this: I do externally what I am responsible for internally. This is the external explication of what is perfectly clear to me inside. The usual Moscow Artists' Union duality becomes impossible for the unofficial artist: union artists think, "the people need my art," but the artist personally does not. They do what they need themselves, and they think others need it too.

The unofficial artist seems to be sending a signal into space in search of his viewer. Official art, by contrast, resembles a radio on a pole in a field and other places where people congregate. People cover their ears as they walk past, but it is felt that they need it. Empty exhibition halls, failed visual propaganda—who was all that for, then? [ . . . ]

Let me now list the main tendencies within the "shrub" of 1960s unofficial artists. And let me ask the following: To what ideas were their works appeal-

ing? With whom were they corresponding? They really did resemble signals addressed to some remote, unearthly place. The addressee, the viewer, the listener, was completely hypothetical yet completely definite. This leads me to think about strange confirmations of the existence of Vernadsky's Noosphere. According to Vernadsky, all cultural emanations, according to his hypothesis, are released into the upper strata and don't just sit there but live, vibrate, radiate, and so on. Every civilized person tunes in to these waves and not only receives information but comes in contact with something like a transponder that communicates the main criterion of any phenomenon. When he is shown work by Glazunov, say, he knows "from somewhere" that it's shit.<sup>17</sup> Even if he's never seen anything before. It's not that the person has been to Italy or often goes to the Pushkin Museum. It's just that his inner "receiver" is always tuned to the Noosphere, and he compares the impulse from there with what comes to him from paintings by Shilov, Obrosof, or others and he tells himself, I don't need this.<sup>18</sup>

The artists of the underground are attuned to the Noosphere. Without any confirmation—visual or otherwise—of the need for their works, often living in windowless half-basements and enclosed spaces, they still know "from somewhere" what is wanted. This is a very interesting phenomenon, related to these people's particular sensitivity.

They try to relate their work to the world beyond the edge, beyond the boundary of the space (whether cellar, hole, or excavation pit) that makes up their immediate surroundings. In response, it seems, they send out their signals, their greetings, their offers of contact with the greater world.

How is this possible at all for people whose ties with the larger world have been cut off? There is a hypothesis that these scoundrels, wandering the boulevards, found some Western magazines in a rubbish bin, and that started the whole catastrophe. *Too bad that there were still some cracks left, through which the dying world of capitalism managed to get to us.* But it wasn't only that, although, of course, we all wanted to learn what is considered valuable today in the artistic life of the world. Such problems are rooted in another problem, which is more visible today than it used to be. The country was cut off from world history. It was inculcated in us that all of humanity, the entire world tree, lived only to produce its natural fruit (like a pine cone)—us, our way of

17. Ilya Glazunov (1930–2017), a quasi-official painter with nationalist views who gained prominence in the later years of the Soviet Union.

18. Aleksandr Shilov (b. 1943), an official painter who specialized in portraits of government leaders; Igor Obrosof (1930–2010), an official painter of the Soviet period.

life, our art. And we were alone only because we were the first on the path that soon everyone would be taking.

The basic idea of the unofficial artists of the 1960s was an assumption that there was another history, that the world tree has goals for growth other than giving forth the branch on which we sit. This other history was not better or worse than ours, simply different, and it was bigger than ours and therefore enveloped our history and our place. The assumption that our life should be comparable with, and related to, that big history was the main conviction of the unofficial artists of the 1960s. It exists today, but not in the acute and dangerous form it took then. Now one can even discuss it: isn't it time to bring our technology, economy, production of agricultural products to the level that exists elsewhere in the world? We've started making economic bridges. In the 1960s science was such a bridge, though even that was divided into real science and bourgeois science. Today the single field of science is a normal concept; tomorrow the single field of technology will become the norm. But in the area in which we are interested here—the field of culture—nothing has changed, not a jot. Comparing our contemporary painting with that of the West is the same as comparing our science with their pseudoscience in the 1950s. The West has pseudoart, a compilation of nonsense produced by scoundrels, “faggots,” and so on.

It's not only about the artist's personal “statement.” His work is a kind of “language,” which can be, and probably should be, understood by many. Everyone understands Caruso or Maria Callas—we have accepted their language (that is, the language of bourgeois art, since we never had that manner of singing). But in the visual arts, everything that we have “achieved” is taken to be normative. We may not take or borrow from the West, but our stuff should be grabbed up by them. Our painting, like Italian opera, is universal art. Why shouldn't Soviet painting travel to other continents, like Italian opera?

Linguistic structures, in my view, are not isolated. Does the language we use to address the masses (major key, simple, accessible) distort the information it should deliver? Is that language understood by those to whom it is addressed? Judging by the reviews in the press (our press) about our exhibitions abroad, the ordinary viewer there “adequately perceives our painting.” What the artist wanted to put into the painting was seen by the viewer—in our lexicon, the “progressive” viewer. I have my doubts about this (in this, I'm not alone; a number of people whom I consider experts in the field agree), and I want to say: those things are not perceived at all. That is, leaving aside the powerful content of those paintings, they are not perceived because of



their language; no one wants to put them on his plate, so to speak. Even the official accounts sometimes reveal vague information about the failure of our exhibitions. The idea is ripening that it may be time to start using the international language; after all, the correct ideas that we need to express can be expressed in it too! This tendency toward universal language is now “being heard in certain circles.” “To speak their language” is being heard in the official milieu. This receptiveness comes from the desire to be heard. In general, the process is reminiscent of the mandate to wear crinolines and camisoles, under threat of punishment, promulgated by Peter the Great, “so that they will at least recognize us.”

Our culture is turned toward man’s inner world. While we must develop science so as not to fall behind, while technology and a good harvester will yield more grain, in the arts—in painting, music, or theater—we don’t need to be competitive. All those forms of art are just means to bring up the person who will run the harvester. That is the most important function of art for us. So that art is produced for domestic consumption. The important thing about bast shoes is that they’re comfortable.

Still, we have to create versions of export art: just as we have girls who dance on international cruise ships, we have theater troupes and ballet companies, even literature and films “for them.” I don’t rule out the possibility that we will see an export version in painting, although there’s no sign of that yet. There is a special reason for that. While in other spheres of activity, there is independent expertise, there isn’t any in ours. Painting experts are the same artists who hold posts in official organizations. As in the Krylov fable, the fox gives advice on how to run a chicken coop. For the time being, the cultural leadership hasn’t considered acquiring impartial, independent experts.<sup>19</sup>

One further observation: the attempt to insert oneself into a broader history is characteristic of unofficial artists, who continually compare their works with those produced outside the boundaries of our closed world. The results of these “insertions” have often been spectral, since no one has seen “those” paintings, breathed “that” air; the fabric of that external world history could not be understood or sensed in full and even to this day remains closed to us. None of us, of course, will ever leave, see anything, hear anything, learn about the world we want to relate to our work. That world exists only in the imagination. There, like mirages, float collections of paintings, museums, and exhibitions. Everyone who lives here knows how to fantasize about the outside world. When we say, abstract art is good, or bad, or surre-

19. Ivan Krylov (1769–1845), the foremost Russian author of fables.

alism is out of fashion—it's all images, all imagination. No one here has any real idea of what's going on with these movements.



The construction of reminiscences and accounts of various events, phenomena, people, and results of artistic life is usually done either in chronological order, where one thing strictly follows the other, or in the manner of a fragmentary mosaic: in this spot lived so-and-so, who said this-and-that, but “just two blocks further on” is a completely different story. . . . The second type of narration, what we could call a spatial distribution of artistic phenomena, is seen more frequently. Of course, the people in the story know one another, but they are not very connected internally and in general are shoots of different artistic species, different directions. I should emphasize that that is actually how this story occurred.

But for me, in my reminiscences of the 1960s, an image that is more concentrated and whole is more important. I can't do anything about it. Perhaps, this is a distortion of the real situation, but for me the unofficial art world of that period is a very tight, very compressed shrub with many branches, complete in itself, having a single foundation and a single original impulse. A metaphor comes to mind: the creation of this unofficial world can be compared to the history of the creation of the world in general; that is to say, there was a “big bang.” The image suggests an impulse occurring in absolute emptiness and at a single point—in this case, Moscow in the early 1960s. Guessing what that original impulse was, and naming it, offers an easy and natural approach to describing all the branches of the shrub, the many lines extending from that initial bang. This starting point, for me, produces as well the image of a character whose traits could be seen as various reflections of various people, yet at the same time as a single person. That image, the sole, collective being, not embodied in one person yet still existing, is the artistic creative character of the 1960s.

There is one more circumstance: the incredibly thick, compressed atmosphere, which, I think, remained the same throughout this entire time. It seems to me that everything came out of this electrified air and atmosphere. This overfilled ball later expanded, created something until it began to weaken, lose energy, and vanish. [ . . . ]

Turning to a general evaluation and a broader definition of the 1960s, I would like to use yet another metaphor: I have the impression that before the 1960s we were sealed in a huge tin can that hummed along imitating an engine, shaking, a voice announcing that we were gaining altitude, that earth

was now far below, that we were flying to the stars. In the 1960s some of the passengers drilled holes in the walls of this can and discovered that we were in a swamp, surrounded by miles of garbage. Not only were we not approaching the stars, we were just lying in shit. This discovery elicited many emotions. Everyone looked out his porthole and saw his own vision. The world unfolded in disparate points of view, not in full volume but in a vastly amusing way. Everyone remained in their seats, observing what leaked in through their holes in the can, and inside each a personal picture of the outside world was formed. It's as if cosmonauts on Venus filmed the surface without leaving the spaceship, just through the portholes, and then tried to compose a map by combining random shots.

If the can fell apart and we could walk on the planet, like other cosmonauts (say, travel everywhere, see what others are doing in art), we might then see the real world. But that was and remains impossible, and we learned about the world only through the stories we told one another. One said that he sees the outside world as "brown," since his porthole was right up against the ass of a fallen horse, another insisted that the world was golden green, since he was looking at swamp duckweed, and so on. No one could create a general picture. This explains the incredible kaleidoscopic nature of unofficial art in the 1960s. The point was, I repeat, that everyone was looking at his own inner world, not the external one, taking a fragment for the whole and inner fantasies about the outside world as actual reality.

In fact, we are dealing with a particular kind of insane people who discovered the cosmos within themselves. This was not "psychology," psychology in the realistic manner, as in Chekhov, because for that you need both an outside and an inner world, and we had nothing outside: you can't use the term "outside world" for the blackness, fear, and that humming, shaking tin can that is filled with triumphant cries about our approach to Sirius and the incredible sausages we will soon be eating for dinner.

Discovering another world is discovering yourself as well, but that was not said of us.

So there was no common communication and trust in the other man's picture; no one could say, or wanted to say, that the outside world was *like this*: for example, that this is a field sown with oats, our can is lying in the middle, and beyond is the forest. No one had any guarantee of the accuracy of that picture. Each one defined the world with his color and his texture. The number of allies depended only on the stubbornness and fanaticism, the confidence broaching no argument, of the proponent. This tragic circumstance elicited the richness and paradoxical nature, and at the same time, the pretensions to universality, that characterize the consciousness of the 1960s

artists. Everyone had his own “picture of the world,” and each picture described “everything.”

Digressing and running ahead, I will say that in the 1970s, having had their fill of these pictures from inside, from through the cracks, artists made an attempt to describe the rusty can from the point of view of an outside observer. This is a very important stage. This was an attempt to understand oneself from the point of view of someone from the world outside the can. A description was compiled of the rusty capsule, the soldered pot in which we live, in various aspects: “with anger,” “with hurt,” or “in detail,” but primarily from the psychological point of view—look where we live, brothers, look who we are. . . . This was the emotion of the 1970s, I mean, in art. What forms did it take? Various. The most powerful of them was Sots-Art, then the daily life, *byt* [the everyday], or *Byt-Art* [everyday art], and also all kinds of “actions.”<sup>20</sup> But those were other artists, other people. . . .

The 1960s would not have been the years of complete and dominating Personalism if they had not brought out a few people, besides those associated with the group tendencies I have discussed, who were such loners that they leaned on no one, developed their art without ties to any phenomena, tendency, group, or ideas, correct or incorrect. They were extreme individuals, in the precise meaning of the word, a manifestation of the hyperpersonalist approach that characterized the 1960s. [ . . . ]

I’d like to touch on the three important problems that come up when remembering the 1960s. The first is the economic issue (earning a living). The second is how official culture differed from unofficial culture. The third is fear.

The topic of an economic foundation for the lives of unofficial artists of the 1960s has two aspects: how they earned money and where they could work, what jobs and “positions” they could hold. In terms of income, unofficial artists were divided into those who earned money from their paintings, that is, who tried to sell them somehow, and those who rejected that path completely and sought other sources of income. I’ll talk first about the latter. It’s easier for me because I am one of them myself. I always preferred to draw whatever I wanted, and I knew that I would not make money that way, in part because I wasn’t sure of the quality of my work and also because

20. Sots-Art is an unofficial art style grounded in a loosely satirical doubling of official Socialist Realist representation. Its main practitioners, Erik Bulatov, Vitaly Komar, and Aleksandr Melamid, began working in this manner in the early 1970s. *Byt-Art* refers to the interest in banal themes in the art of the 1970s, while the Collective Actions group pioneered the invention of “actions” in the unofficial milieu.

I was afraid of being bound by commercial considerations, dependent on the whims of the buyer: if he wants to buy, he will want something specific, and so on. That is, all kinds of purely panicky fears hung over me, while I wanted my work to be a purely platonic endeavor, what we called “for myself.” But how to earn money then? Especially since there was another issue hanging over us: starting in our school days we were taught that you can no more be a “free” artist than you can live without a residence permit [*propiska*]. Everyone had to be attached to some organization or other; even “home workers” had to get permission to work at home instead of at an enterprise. You had to be part of some official art structure, be it the Union of Artists or the City Committee of Graphic Artists or something else.

In short, this was the situation: first, you had to find a sideline income and legalize your situation, and then, in the remaining time, work on something “serious and real.” The idea was also to be able to have “real time,” not just leftover time, to have most of your time belong to you and give only a small part of your time to earning money. The idea boiled down to earning the maximum in the minimum of time. Fortunately, being a graduate of the Surikov Institute and having a profession as a book illustrator provided that opportunity. In that capacity, I intended to draw exactly what they expected from me in order to “move up the line” to the cash register as quickly as possible. I had no artistic ambitions in that area and still don’t. The goal is to get my drawings “accepted” and “passed.” The books (in terms of text) can be anything, preferably the very worst, since we are paid by size of illustration and not on the principle of more for good books and less for bad ones. I exaggerate a bit here, since there are top rates and minimal rates, but I was happy with the minimal ones; my strategy was that it was much easier to do “more” than to do “better” to make up the difference in the rates. That is, three illustrations for bad books are easier to do than one for a good book. I stuck to this strategy all these years, and as a result, I need about six weeks out of the year to earn what I need. Of course, that is better than optimal.

My colleagues—I mean Erik Bulatov, Eduard Gorokhovskiy, Oleg Vasiliev, Viktor Pivovarov, and Ülo Sooster—did it a bit differently, but in general the calculation was the same. While some of them put more of themselves and more passion into book illustration and others less, the principle of it being a sideline remained for all of us.

This also pertains to having a job. Since the status of illustrator allows you to join the graphic art section of the Union of Artists (not right away, however) or the City Committee, you thereby legalize your noble face as a normal artist. Fortunately, no one checks to see if you are sincere in your illustrations. If there were meters that could measure the strength of your passion in draw-

ing a bunny, a lot of people would “get burned.” But we don’t have that kind of analysis, thank God. A bunny drawn without feeling for the sake of income and a bunny drawn with love give approximately the same result in material compensation.

Status as a member of the union also gives you the opportunity to rent a space (the so-called sub-rent) for a studio. I’m not even mentioning the fact that illustrating children’s books is highly paid (there were reasons for that, but it would be a long digression here), and thus, the calculation of “money earned per unit of time” yielded a very satisfying result.

I don’t know many other part-time jobs. The often-cited jobs—night watchman, boiler stoker—were not employed, if I can put it that way, by the artists I know. Yes, there is another form of income—working in an art combine. This is analogous to working as a book illustrator, except you have to make paintings to order on given topics. It’s hard to say how much these artists make and how much time they spend on that.

The other group of unofficial artists tries to earn money with their paintings. The first question is who commissions them and how regular are the purchases. We’re talking about forming your buyer. I repeat, we do not have a free market for paintings. There are no selling exhibitions that are accessible to every artist; there are no merchants who take a commission (in the West, it’s 40 percent), who buy, as they tell us, an artist “at the root,” that is, pay all his living expenses. In the 1960s, the unofficial artist was cast upon the winds of fate, and his “survival” was often a matter of chance, a successful coincidence of circumstances. [ . . . ]

Oskar [Rabin] managed to create a firm and lasting circle of consumers for his art. For that, he had to fulfill a number of conditions: first, a very steady production of a single type, without variation, so that the potential buyer knew what he was acquiring, that is, to some degree, a professionalism in his paintings. Second, a total regularity in their preparation, without big intervals, that is, painting after painting. [ . . . ] These paintings were very, very cheap. Only Oleg Tselkov sold at more or less expensive prices. Oskar valued his works at 150–200 or up to 300 rubles. These are risible prices compared to their value today. [ . . . ] There were artists who let their paintings go for 15. In short, it was all shameful, nightmarish. [ . . . ] Oskar simply figured out how many he could do in a month and sold accordingly. Each painting had a number on the back; those wanting one could sign up, and when their turn came, the painting was made. [ . . . ] But sales for these artists were random and far from regular, and only the ones who had a stable circle of buyers managed to live more or less tolerably. It’s hard to say who those buyers were, and I’m not even going to try.

But this brings up another problem, no less tragic than the lack of regular income: when a painting is sold, it disappears without a trace. The reason is simple: most buyers were foreigners, and once a work ends up “abroad,” it’s almost impossible to find it. And in fact, we saw that Nemukhin’s and Rabin’s studios were half empty.<sup>21</sup> I heard that Rabin left with a small fund of fourteen paintings that he did not want to sell and which formed the gold reserve of his art.

This question relates to the next question—where do you get paintings in the event that there is an exhibition? I repeat, one of the dangerous and tragic problems for an artist who earns a living by his work is the disappearance of his paintings in unknown directions. This does not happen to the artist who earns money on the side: his works settle in his studio. Ülo was completely open to selling a painting, but I don’t remember it ever happening. He saw nothing daring about selling; he considered it the norm.

But selling, both in the 1960s and now, is a dangerous thing. Artists have been cruelly pressured by the authorities. For instance, they came after Rabin for many reasons, saying, “Who are you if you’re not a member of the Union of Artists, what right do you have to draw!” He was considered a parasite–home worker, without rights, one who could be oppressed. [ . . . ]

The problem of a place to work was also painful for unofficial artists. They were forced to work at home, in the apartment, which was usually just a single room. You couldn’t even talk about a studio in the 1960s. It was only later, through the City Committee, that some managed to get studios. But in those years, people worked only in their apartments: Mikhail Grobman, Vitaly Stesin, Aleksandr Zhdanov, Vladimir Zhdan, Mikhail Kulakov, Dmitri Plavinsky, Oleg Tselkov, and others. Coming to see them was coming to a room/studio, where the family lived, children scampered, and so on. The life was not prosperous or even self-sufficient. As I remember it, life was poor, the traditional clochard style, like the French at the Café de la Rotonde, or Americans in Soho, and so on. The worries were how to manage, borrow, eat a meatball at a neighbor’s, and so forth.

I have to say that we got a lot of help from the so-called well-wishers, admirers who weren’t artists but who loved artists; you could always go to them. You could always get a meal and a drink, or just visit. I remember the home of a certain Stern, a marvelously gentle and hospitable man, where we hung around and came over with the aim of getting fed. This was a real problem—where to eat: maybe Yuri Kuper’s, if he wasn’t visiting someone

21. Vladimir Nemukhin (1925–2016), an unofficial artist who was an early member of the Lianozovo group.

else with the same goal, or someone's birthday party? (Although Kuper really is in the 1970s.) So, there was a black and merry poverty, a romance if you will about those years, although it was all rather sad as well.



A description of the atmosphere of the 1960s would not only be incomplete but would lack its main pulse if I did not discuss the fear, the unconquerable, all-pervasive Fear with a capital F. The fear was not only an attribute of my psyche or those of the people around me; it was a ferment in the blood of everyone I knew. I don't know a single person who had not felt that fear; although it existed in various forms, from well disguised to a panic bordering on paroxysm. The entire scale of fear that exists, all its gradations and forms, were represented. Without understanding this phenomenon and bearing it in mind, you can't understand a single movement, action, or statement of those years. A state of fear was present in every second of our life, in every action, as a necessary element, and like coffee and milk, that is, in every form of combining. There wasn't a word or action that was not mixed with a certain dose of fear. The fear was not related to anything concrete: "I'm afraid of this, but not of that. I'm afraid of this more and of that less"—it was like air, present, invisible, always and everywhere. You couldn't say precisely what it was a person actually feared. He was afraid of absolutely everything. It was a climatic state. Fear was simply the air of the 1960s. That doesn't mean, of course, that it went off somewhere in the 1970s, no, it exists even now, but I'm talking about the 1960s.

The condensation of fear, its coloration and its intensity in various eras, differed, of course, like a force field that either kills you or pinches you. I must say that I never knew that light, pinching fear, even though now, in the 1980s, the general tension is weaker than in the 1970s, and in the 1970s it was a bit weaker than in the 1960s. I could do a diagram of the amplitude of fear, its voltage; I think that it would vacillate before 1962—before the Manezh show—with gaps, even definite periods when it seemed that "soon it won't be scary at all." Everyone knew that fear was tied to the Stalin era, when fear was the norm, and the tension was say, 500 volts (if that is the limit). Fear then was almost material—you could touch it; stone and metal were less material than the fear. After Stalin it began to seem that fear was vanishing. During the Thaw, fear lost its metallic sheen, but after the Manezh, the atmosphere of fear returned and remained until 1974 and the Bulldozer show.

With unrelenting tension, fear hangs over unofficial art like the sword of Damocles—you feel it and await every day the inevitable retribution for everything you've done. The life of an unofficial artist passes under the inves-



tigative eye that sees all: and now, at the last second, the sword will fall, since the distance from life to death is at its shortest. All the conversations—people who lived in that period will remember—70 or 80 percent of conversation was about who had been taken away, what was taken from them, who was called in, who was searched, what was confiscated, who could be next. That is, we talked about some inexorable punishment that could occur at any moment, and the punishment was destruction literally, not something else.

Everyone understood that our lives could be erased, literally from the face of the earth—not just one’s work but the person himself. And for what? For everything. Everything you do contributes to your incredible guilt before the one who will bring down the blow. You will be getting punished for your entire life, and this is very interesting. All you do is paint. You don’t stick your neck out. You barely talk to anyone, or to no one at all. You don’t meet up with hostile elements—God forbid!—or anyone else for that matter, but nevertheless your whole life is one totality of guilt, from the thoughts inside your skull to your drawings and your individual remarks. It’s all criminal from start to finish. This sense of “criminality” in your simple, normal life is very interesting and could be compared to child psychopathology (in general, our life is child psychopathology, not adult—we don’t seem to have any grownups; we’re all children enduring punishment or awaiting it): someone watching you very closely sees that, no matter how you live, it’s a monstrous error against the norm—a standard known only to the teacher or monitor—which you can’t execute, not because you are a scoundrel, but simply because your life is a fundamental mistake from the start. In that fear, in its totality, there is no sense that you are guilty of one thing but not another. It is your entire life that is one big crime, and not just *your* life but the lives of everyone around you. All of them are deserving of punishment.

Everything they say, do, paint, create—it is all an obvious crime. There are no extenuating circumstances that the prosecutor will accept: a priori, guilt is proven. You recognize it yourself (an almost Kafkaesque situation), and therefore the question of whether you are guilty or not does not even arise. If you were to ask “What for?” the answer might well be, “You know what for,” and that atmosphere filled our entire world, an incredibly intense, anxious anticipation that at any second they could grab you. The fact that you haven’t yet been ground to dust is experienced as an incomprehensible delay, a trick of some sort. The sense is that if they didn’t arrest you today, they’ll definitely do it tomorrow: a constant expectation of total annihilation permeates the 1960s and continues into the mid-1970s. It is pointless to try to save yourself, to hope to avoid your fate or beg for mercy, because there is no one to ask. The punisher is not personified, and the fear exhibits a completely

irrational, metaphysical nature. It was in our nerve endings. We woke up and fell asleep with it, and perhaps we were born with it.

Why do I say that somewhere in the middle of the 1970s this phenomenon underwent a small change? The Bulldozer Exhibition was in 1974, when Oskar Rabin took an incredible, previously unthinkable step, a step that is perceived as a milestone—it's hard for me to figure out Oskar's mysterious and in many ways heroic psychology, but I think that his appearance on "Senate Square" (I so much want to call it that), on the dusty and barren empty lot in Beliaevovskaya was a challenge to that irrational "something" without eyes, without ears, without a face.<sup>22</sup> Oskar poked his finger into a gigantic construction hovering over us, filled with mice and ghosts, and everything inside started moving. There were sighs and screams. Someone grabbed him and dragged him away, but the one who grabbed and dragged him had no eyes, no ears, no nose, no face. I saved a newspaper with an article about Oskar and the "wave of people's accusations." That article is also an image of fear. Who writes that stuff? Someone without a face. Everyone who signed the article was also afraid of that "someone."

After the Bulldozer, somehow the tension dropped. Though artists understood they were still under suspicion, under a bell jar, now they were playing cat-and-mouse with the authorities; that is, the obligatory retribution had vanished. There was a new sensation: maybe they'll get you, but maybe they won't, and maybe it will turn out all right.

Back in the 1960s, that hope did not exist. Naturally, no one openly displayed their fear. Everyone hid it in his own way. Some drowned it with drunkenness and ribaldry. Others maintained an air of "Who me? I haven't done anything. I have a residency permit to live in Moscow, membership in the Artists' Union, contracts with publishers, which you can check here, and so on" (I belonged to that category). But there were also those who literally remained behind locked doors that they didn't open when the bell rang. It's known that when the American conductor Leonard Bernstein came to see his brother, the latter peeked out and then slammed the door on him, since it wasn't just his brother, it was an "American" trying to get in. Nonetheless, the majority of people lived with at least an appearance of normalcy. What helped them survive? Of course, youth, creativity, and inventiveness always resist the routine, stagnant, sleepy existence that results from fear. Silence, dust, emptiness, banality, abandonment—we resisted all of that, trying to come up with something, to communicate, to joke, as if we were in a bomb

22. "Senate Square" refers to the location of the Decemberists' 1825 revolt against Nicholas I in St. Petersburg.

shelter during a raid, huddling together. Besides, a certain solidarity came from being sentenced by that common fear, and we understood one another perfectly because we all feared the same thing.

Incidentally, now that there is less fear, our differences and our individual peculiarities have come to the fore. This shows that our communality was, to a great degree, due less to inner similarities, to shared spiritual or artistic interests, than to that enveloping, irrational fear and panic. It was literally the atmosphere of a bomb shelter. The tone and topics of our conversations were very similar: who managed to run across an open space safely, who was blown up, whose house collapsed. Everyone was listened to with profound interest, and then the next one would speak about what he had seen outside. I think that the recent war had promoted that state. Everyone remembered that feeling of needing to hide, the sensation of being an evacuated stranger, the absence of your own nest. We were all huddled in a place that was not our home. That ferment of Fear with a capital F, which enervated, tormented, and tortured us all, is what I want to convey to you in this passage.

How was that fear reflected in our aesthetic activity, in the characteristics of our results? What was fear in artistic practice? Did it have, besides the purely psychological stresses, some sort of substantive aspect? It is hard for me to be certain. It led to two things, in my opinion: to a squeezing out of phobias into the outside world, which gave the artistic life of some artists a certain social aspect—here I mean primarily Rabin and Tselkov. For the bravest ones, whose fear had been made over into images of the outside world, this led to depictions of terrible phantoms, the face of fear itself: the newspaper *Pravda*, posters on the streets, and so on. For the ones who did not dare look fear in the face, and that was the majority, it led to flight into other spheres, unreal and nonexistent, to the formulation of what could be called a metaphysical consciousness, to movement into areas located far *above* our earth, above this terrifying place where fear reigns, to distant places, heights, flights, and so on. That is to say, in a certain sense, spirituality was the flip side of flight from fear. It was flight to a place where perhaps the threat was not as strong, a flight, that is, to imaginary, unreal spaces.

I think that the movement toward painterliness, “daubing,” all kinds of techniques, modulations, appeals to color, and various plastic and aesthetic flipflopping, was also a form of flight from fear, falling into allegedly special, craft-oriented and creative goals.

In the 1970s a group of artists turned and looked straight at the weapon that was aimed at everyone, into the face of fear, if I can put it that way, but this became possible only when the threat itself had weakened and the incinerating force of fear could no longer burn the face that turned to it. In the

1960s no one, except Rabin, dared to look at the face of the eyeless, mouthless monster, and therefore each fled in his own way, hiding and telling people that he saw color harmonies in the spirit of Cézanne, or painting religious visions, or falling into “quiet” artistic drawing [ . . . ], while the majority simply stayed home “repairing the Primus stove” and “drawing for themselves.” A quiet, sweet, calm madhouse. In general the movement toward madness, which I believe permeates the atmosphere of our life—but that is a separate and large theme—is based on that phobia, the incandescence of unremitting, permanent fear, everywhere.

Enough on that. I can talk about it endlessly, but that would be boring and unbearable to read.

The third topic that I named here is the distinction between official and unofficial art. My description here will have a pseudo-academic character, taking into account possible opponents, other opinions, fully academic perceptions, and so on. Over the years, these adjectives—official and unofficial—were used frequently to talk about art and culture, and not to say what I think those words mean would deprive my characterization of the 1960s of a very important theme.

The words “official” and “unofficial,” in regard to culture, appeared relatively late, at the end of the 1970s. In the 1960s there was only one concept, *underground* [*podpol'e*]*—underground art, underground poetry, underground jazz, and so on—and underground was indeed an accurate definition for the 1960s atmosphere. The later term, “unofficial culture,” underwent powerful changes with every year, and now, toward the end of the 1980s, it is strongly diluted; there are even those who say that there is no such culture, that it is an artificial attribution, and there is merely “good” and “bad” art. If you examine the spectrum of these opinions, you can find several possible directions.*

One of the most popular opinions is that official culture is one in which the cultural figure acts officially, that is, he is published and gets money for it. If he counts in the official world and makes his way there, then he is an official artist and a participant in the official culture. Conversely, the unofficial artist does not count, is not published in official publications, does not exhibit, and is not paid for his production. That is one definition. I would call it the formal-bureaucratic approach, based on your housing permit [*propiska*], so to speak.

The second definition is extremely simple—if your works “could be accepted,” then your art is official. This definition has a slightly irrational character, but it is quite accurate in describing an existing delineation, the border between official and unofficial art: “pass” or “not pass.” It is instinctual, as

in the animal world—“our species” versus “not ours.” It’s hard to formulate, but everyone senses the difference.

The third definition is “value-based,” axiological, most vividly represented by Kholin—everything that can be published is official art, and it’s all crap.<sup>23</sup> Naturally, this does not mean that everything that remains unpublished is not crap, but that which is published is definitely crap. Unrepulsive, valuable, real art can be found only among what cannot be published. Clearly, this definition comes from a postulate about the intentional falsehood, perversion, and artificiality of all official culture. This is an “honest” definition.

Since we’ve started talking about honesty so soon, there is also an opinion that a strict division of culture into official and unofficial is not quite authorized, since there is a third category, intermediate, which includes some manifestations by actors of both cultures [ . . . ]

There is still another definition. Official art is art that was born out of the October Revolution. That is, a new era began and brought with it new values, criteria, and perspectives, and a new planet appeared. Everything that is related to that new planet can be called official. That is, this is the new Soviet art. Unofficial art is that which casts doubt on the newness of the new Soviet world. It positioned itself that way in the past (the thinking of the “not-yet-destroyed” and so on), as well as in the present (I meant the 1960s). In the past, that was all Zoshchenkos, Akhmatovas, Pasternaks, that is, people who had not changed internally and who did not totally believe in the new world.<sup>24</sup> They retained the idea that the past world did not have such huge flaws that it should be rejected totally. It, that world, continues to exist. And this new world has yet to prove its “newness,” its appropriateness, and its reality. The 1960s were filled with the same kind of “revisionist” content: even though the new culture has existed for half a century, the outside world, beyond the borders of the new culture, has not lost its content, is also real, also has its history, and in relation to the culture of this outside world, the new culture—socialist realism—is still rather problematic, localized, and certainly has not “vanquished” the rest of culture. In short, unofficial culture is the “outside” and the “past” culture and everything that is attracted to it, while the official culture is “our” domestic new one. It’s as if we were in a railroad car: we don’t know where we are now, but in our car we have an absolutely new life, and

23. Igor Kholin (1920–1999), an unofficial author and poet.

24. Mikhail Zoshchenko (1894–1958), a famed satirist; Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966), an acclaimed modernist poet; Boris Pasternak (1890–1960), a multifarious literary figure who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1958.

we pay no attention, to put it mildly, to what we see out the window; indeed, we'll tear off the heads of people who stick them out the window.

One more definition. Official culture represents an absolutely false construction. False in relation to what? In relation to the subject who makes that culture. The assumption here is that everyone making the culture is doing so not in a conscious state but in a dream, under a spell—if you don't count the out-and-out liars who are just looking for the easiest way to get paid. Unofficial culture, on the other hand, is sincere from the start. In it a person gives himself to himself, his world, his depths; he finds reality inside himself, not as defined or dictated from the outside. He lives from the inside out. Unofficial culture is painting, poetry, and literature “from inside oneself.” Official culture is somehow insane. No one knows where it came from, who invented it; it's like fear: it's everywhere, but no one has ever seen it. It's a kind of phantom. Thus, the difference is this: the unofficial artist fears and trembles but the art is in himself, while the official artist fears nothing but the art is not in himself; like a Gogolian hero, he wanders without flesh and blood. The nature of official art is anonymous, impersonal; it belongs to no one personally and is needed by no one personally, but it's everywhere—like winter potatoes, delivered frozen to the store, that neither the seller nor the buyer will eat, but that are nonetheless potatoes. Unofficial art is like potatoes from the village, planted and dug up for people to eat.

There is a view that there were always two cultures in Russia: official and unofficial. It only *seems* to be a new phenomenon. If you look into Russia's past, there were always writers who were not published, for example, Chaadaev, who was not published under the tsars or the Soviet regime, or Leontiev, and so on.<sup>25</sup> That is to say, banned literature has always existed, even in smaller quantities, going back to the Old Believers; unorthodox political and religious views have always been anathema—the state considers these texts, these thoughts, criminal, amoral, and antistate.<sup>26</sup> The tradition of banned, burned texts and images always hovers over our amazing country; in our times it took on a particular harshness, but if we look closely and extend our focus beyond our own times, we find it as well in all of the past centuries. The old censors had, and ours still have, extensive indexes of what cannot be said,

25. Petr Chaadaev (1794–1856), author of *Philosophical Letters* (1831), which offered a skeptical view of Russia's role in world history; Konstantin Leontiev (1831–1891), a conservative philosopher who identified Russia as an Eastern nation, alien to the ways of Western European society.

26. The Old Believers are a sect of Orthodox Christians who did not accept church reforms in Russia during the seventeenth century.

written, printed, depicted, thought. Such structures, if less detailed and less harsh and less ridiculous than now, existed in the nineteenth century too.

As for the makers of unofficial art, everyone I know—that is, a wide circle of poets and artists—has a fully unofficial sense of self. To this day, all of my friends still feel as if they are unofficial figures, and not a single one of them has ever made an attempt to escape that condition, to become official, to “fit in.” By this I mean that the sense of being “unofficial” so permeates every step, every idea, every deed of these people, that you can safely call them 100 percent unofficial. Of course, some of them have dreamed that one day unofficial culture will become the official one. I know artists who dream that their art will be recognized and exhibited, that their poems will be published, but their dream pertains to some mysterious future; not one of them believes that this will happen now or any time soon. This disbelief has a foundation (just like their hope for future recognition) that has been tested thousands of times in our age. Just in my lifetime, a large number of people who spent their lives unrecognized and unofficial have been rehabilitated and included in the official culture. This has not yet touched any of our contemporaries. No one currently alive has received official status and been canonized, but unofficial artists of the past—damned, shamed, trampled in the mud, and spat upon—are gradually being washed off, given official status, made pillars of our official culture. These are names known to all, artists reborn before our very eyes: Sergei Esenin was transformed from a hooligan, formalist, anti-Soviet writer and drunkard into a noble singer of Russia; the OBERIUts, especially Kharms, are gradually entering official life; Pasternak and Zabolotsky have been given an official face; Akhmatova, Mandelstam, and now Tsvetaeva have been canonized—all have been rehabilitated and included in the local pantheon; that is, we have been given the right to use their names.<sup>27</sup>

We even know the rhythm of rehabilitation: approximately sixty years after the death, destruction, and murder of an “unofficial” artist, his name starts appearing on the stage of Soviet official culture, that is, his work can be studied. Thus, it is quite possible that some sixty years from now the classics of Soviet painting might include Rabin, Masterkova, Chemiakin, and others, and the scoundrel formalists of that new modern time will be told: now

27. OBERIU (the Union of Real Art) was perhaps the last major collective of futurist poets, musicians, and artists, founded in 1928 in Leningrad by the writers Daniil Kharms and Aleksandr Vvedensky. See *OBERIU: An Anthology of the Russian Absurd*, ed. Eugene Ostashevsky (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006). Nikolai Zabolotsky (1903–1958), Osip Mandelstam (1891–1938), and Maria Tsvetaeva (1892–1941) were all major literary figures in the post-revolutionary years.

Rabin, even though he lived in France, was a true Soviet, Russian artist.<sup>28</sup> Everything here exists, I think, on the principle of topsy-turvy: today's scoundrel, enemy, rogue, and mediocrity will be tomorrow's something else, and vice versa.

You can also discern a special love for the dead, I suppose. A dead person takes on the flourishing features of a live infant. His face fills out and becomes extremely fine, while the living person's face turns mortally pale and bony. No one is healthier and more eternally alive than Pushkin, and there is no one more dead, angry, and bony than Solzhenitsyn living today.

This is what will happen with the 1960s, I believe, just as it happened with the 1920s, when that decade was given the status of a recognized textbook period that could be studied in school as a page of art history. Just now, before even forty years have passed, we see the anniversary celebrations for Khlebnikov, who went from madman, absurdist, futurist, and formalist to mysterious wise man, transformer of the Russian language, and philologist.<sup>29</sup> Blok recently became part of the school curriculum. Probably, with time, they'll stick Khlebnikov in there too, turning him into a "good" Symbolist, like Briusov.<sup>30</sup> It's exactly sixty years since his death—everything is on track in keeping with the rule I described.

Naturally, there's a whole history of the interrelations of unofficial cultural figures with those of the official culture. I could describe it, but it's not part of my aim. The way things move from total scorn, hatred, and the idea of the "nonexistence" of these people to their becoming a strange kind of splinter or scab, and then the time comes when it is said of them, "Maybe there is something there, after all." Of course, the criteria that exist beyond the borders of our country have an enormous influence here. Our official world, even though it is full of arrogance and self-importance, understands full well that the real criteria, the real definitions of values, are located only abroad, only outside. So as writers and artists acquire fame there, the attitude of official culture here gradually and imperceptibly changes. For instance, the concept of the 1960s is already being half-loved, and it is considered bon ton to talk about it. I recently heard a totally official poet say, "I am a *Shestidesyatnitsa* [a woman of the sixties]," that is, a member of the generation that flowered in the 1960s. The law of nostalgia is bringing in people who would

28. Lidiya Masterkova (1927–2008), unofficial painter who emigrated to France in 1975; Mikhail Chemiakin (b. 1943), unofficial artist from Leningrad who also emigrated to France.

29. Velimir Khlebnikov (1885–1922), a futurist poet and playwright who enjoyed growing cultural influence during the later Soviet era.

30. Aleksandr Blok (1880–1921) and Valery Briusov (1872–1924), prominent Symbolist poets who did not emigrate following the Bolshevik Revolution.



have never shaken hands with one another then, but in the historical past they hug, smile at each other, and form a unified cultural whole.

Of course, if I leave the academic point of view, the dispassionate description of “those” and “others,” and insert an emotional note, this is the point where I should be screaming: it is my profound conviction that the greatest value, interest, import, and beauty exists only in unofficial art. Here I am fully in accord with Kholin and can say with pleasure that I never knew, nor do I want to know, a single official artist. I always felt a kind of panic in their presence. I have never liked a single work by an official artist. I always felt that this was a different species of human beings with instincts I did not understand, a scary and horrible species; I always perceived their handiwork as the handiwork of mysterious animals that live by laws I don’t know, extremely dangerous animals that could attack you, and so on. That is, I perceived the official world, the world of official artists in particular, as a world of predators capable of the most incredible things.

The history of official art is something I know almost nothing about and don’t understand. I don’t understand the hierarchy, the processes at work there. I don’t know the groups, and so on. I know the history of unofficial art more or less in detail, its evolution, and so on, although that applies only to Moscow—I don’t know much about what happened in Leningrad, Odessa, and other cities. But the cosmos and depths of official art are practically closed to me. Therefore, my view of official art is rather neurotic and negative. I am not capable of being a historian of the official art life of my time (nor, to be honest, of unofficial art), since it looks deformed, prejudiced, and fragmentary in my notes. I suspect that unofficial art is similarly invisible from the point of view of an official historian. At best, he may have heard a few names, but his attitude toward the handiwork of unofficial artists is like my view of official art. That is, he regards it with scorn, revulsion, anger, and disdain, dismissing it as mediocre, false, and unnecessary. It’s all mirrored and crisscrossed. He considers official culture the only real culture, attributes value only to what has already been exhibited, and so on.

And yet I can say that during that period (I mean the 1970s) a very large substratum of “honest” artists appeared. I know many young artists who do not at all want to participate in exhibitions, compete for prizes, accept commissions, or be part of the official art life, the way it was in the 1960s. They want to remain on the periphery, off to the side, and do their own art, but they have the same extreme blindness and lack of interest in unofficial culture. They don’t know it, and they avoid it. Nevertheless, I am willing to call them honest artists, but because I don’t like their work (of course, I have seen

only a little) and because I belong, like an ossified animal, to the species of unofficial artists, I really can't be objective about them. [ . . . ]

I think my monologue is coming to an end. When a helicopter lifts off from the ground, you lose the contours of objects, groves, houses, roads, and cars, but you get a general picture from the greater distance. Taking that as a metaphor, I'd like to produce, in conclusion, two overviews of my opinions on the 1960s.

The first takes in how I see all of the products, all of the results of all of the artists of that period, the entire enormous conglomerate of creative personalities and what can be said about them—although, perhaps, I am not fully entitled to do so. I picture the entire volume of results as a huge field, a huge dump—inexhaustible, varied, but literally a garbage dump. The image of a garbage pile as the visual result of everything made keeps sticking in my imagination. I don't mean any single work, or anyone's individual and varying works, but a general unitary product—with various hues, of course, but also, for me, an undeniable connectedness.

Where does that image come from, that strange perception, in a way demeaning, of course, deprecating the results? I have several hypotheses.

Yesterday, I was at a group exhibition of young artists of the 1980s. This group, in my opinion, represents an important and extremely lively electrical current, the artistic impulse that exists today. They are on the same frequency as us. I recognized them as family in spirit and behavior and in the atmosphere reigning in their dilapidated space, which used to be a nursery school. I recognized them as the inheritors (as it is usually, and pompously, put on these occasions) of the art of the 1960s and 1970s. And my first powerful impression of the show: I saw a huge pile of garbage, comprising the exhibition hall and the hanging of the show, and the paintings themselves have a semi-garbage character. Everything, that is, appeared as a huge pile of garbage. But what kind of pile? This was not a pile of something dead, desiccated, wrinkled. It was a fire-breathing pile, full of vitality and energy. It was like life itself. It continued the living, writhing garbage pile, filled with extraordinary explosions, that was the 1960s, and my impression was that it would continue beyond the 1980s, into the unknown future, and new people would appear also on the same frequency.

So, the world I have seen with my backward glance looks like a gigantic dump. I have been to a few real dumps—near Moscow and near Kiev—and they are steaming hills reaching to the horizon, made up of the most varied things. On the whole, it's crap, rags, the discarded stuff of an enormous city, but you can see, as you walk through crevasses between the hills,

that it is breathing majestically. It is breathing with its entire past life. The dump is full of explosions and flickers like stars, stars of a cultural rank: here you see books, over there a sea of magazines filled with hidden photographs and texts and thoughts; you see things people once used. An enormous past arises behind those crates, vials, sacks, and all the forms of packaging that man once needed; many have not lost their shape, not turned into something dead when they were thrown away. They seem to be crying out about that life, that past; they preserve it within themselves. The sense of unity of that life that the objects have not yet lost, and at the same time the separateness of the components of that life, and the former “livingness” of those components, gives rise to an image . . .

It is hard to explain what the image is . . . perhaps of camps where everything is doomed but keeps trying to live; perhaps of civilizations sinking under the blows of cataclysms but in which events still take place. A sensation of the huge, cosmic character of real life overwhelms you at these garbage dumps—not a sense of the abandonment and destruction of life but, on the contrary, of return, the cycle of life, because as long as memory exists, everything that is part of life will live. Memory preserves everything that has lived, that has been cast off, not in its cast-off state but its original one: whether these objects were brought home from the store or were someone’s presents or were made by hand, everything that is here has been known by someone, has passed through human hands. This is not a dump of metal technology but of things that have passed through human hands, through human hearts, through human actions and imagination and so on, that have participated in the history of the individual, and this individual history permeates and cries out about itself through these myriad things.

I am not imputing incredible value or significance to these objects and what was once done with them, not suggesting they be treated like precious diamonds or kept in a museum like a rare carpet; these works are like semi-finished products or subproducts—on the one hand, the result of the efforts of life, its hopes, and on the other, something pathetic, weak, something only “semi.” . . . There is a famous fairy tale about a man who tried to make a horseshoe, and when he failed at that, he tried to make at least a nail, and when that didn’t work, well, then a needle, but it all failed. It’s that state of flickering, that interval between an idea, not clear what, and the action that does not correspond to the idea that I am talking about.

There are tons of reasons for being in that state. Recently we discussed whether our works are, in practical terms, religious objects: Maybe they can be regarded in an elevated way? Maybe they radiate higher impulses, and the artist had reason to fall into an appropriate state to be able to see higher

worlds, that is, he became, practically speaking, someone's "servant." One of the interlocutors noted that in other parts of the world there is an intermediary region between an artwork and higher instances, and this is what we call "culture." This is the intermediary layer between higher matters and mundane matters produced by humans. The artist knows very well that by tuning in to that cultural layer he engages higher worlds, higher problems—not only mystical and religious, but all the issues of society, morality in particular. But in our part of the world, where the very word "culture," to which one could appeal, does not exist at all, all sorts of crazy ideas develop; for instance, if you paint squiggles with a flourish you are serving higher powers. That is, we lack the mediating link, the intermediary level; therefore, everyone can imagine that he is in touch with any issue directly. In actual fact, he is in touch with nothing. It is merely his hope, will, delirium. Perhaps, as a result of these efforts, something original and strange may emerge, but the place for that product, in my view, is still the . . . I hesitate to say where. Why? Because it is a semiproduct, with lots of desires, many hopes, but little of what could be called a cultural result. That is why the image of a huge dump seems appropriate.

These results, these works, these things that no one knows how to use, or to what they correspond, or who needs them once they're made—they're like doodles by the telephone. There's a lot of interest in them; you find abstractions and female heads and other marvelous combinations, dreams and hopes, mathematical and occult designs, but whenever the house is cleaned, they'll be tossed out.

When I look at the works of those years, the image of dust, dirt, nonsense, and craziness floats to the surface. The most powerful impression of our life is the impression of incredible messiness and uncleanliness. I don't mean moral filth. I mean physical dirt, the sense of a lack of sweeping up. It reminds me of a person who washes up a bit and puts on a tie, thinking that everyone will be looking only at his washed face and tie, when usually, the rest is visible too. Just as in a room you usually notice the unswept corner and not the swept middle of the floor, you see the undusted object and not the parts that had been wiped by a rag.

When I was in Czechoslovakia I was painfully astonished. I remember that all the corners showed the same state of cleanliness and ideality as the center, where you're supposed to look. Here there is a big difference between where you're supposed to look and where you're not. We are trained not to look where we're not supposed to look, even though it's natural for the eye to gaze where the owner of the house is not expecting. The guest sees perfectly well where he is, no matter how hard the host tries to distract him.

So, all the paintings of the 1960s resemble the ladies in Gogol who exist in the certainty that the guests at the ball will see their eyebrows or chin and not notice their neck, nose, or other flawed features. Looking at a painting, I can see clearly what my comrade “wanted to say,” but he did not take the enormous “rest” of the painting into account, as if he did not know what to do with it and hoped I wouldn’t look there, but that “rest” is present nonetheless, and it presses and affects the viewer mightily. The artist may not see the “rest,” but it envelops the painting and leaves the impression of that dust, rubbish, nonsense, and craziness, that grayness, that are the insurmountable element of all of these paintings. This is the fatal element that smoothly and methodically drags all of these paintings to the garbage pile. Of course, I’m speaking metaphorically and not saying that these paintings should be left by the disposal chute.

I would extend the image of the garbage dump to our whole life. I think that the basic conceptions of the artists of the 1960s were to create paintings that would stand up to our reality. Such conceptions are a tradition in our world. Every living person, artists in particular, perceives our world as an oppressive, unfair, horrible, dangerous place and tries to make something to juxtapose to it. If you look closely, you will see that their paintings coincide with their surroundings and are not so much an escape from them as a part and expression of the enormous living mass that envelops the artist. That is to say, in my pessimistic view, there’s no way to escape it. These paintings return through the back door, so to speak, into the gray, murine, dusty reality.

Why is it gray, dusty, and so unified? Why is it an insurmountable material for every artistic effort or hope? The point is that the 1960s were years in which that enormous country returned to its original state of unarticulated, boring, meager, miserable existence.

I have already said that I consider 1917 the impulse, the start, of a massive effort to pull ourselves up by our own hair, an enormous leap out of the eternally immobile, barely pulsating morass of a burdensome, literally immobile existence into some other perspective, to head down another road into another distance. This reckless hope for a change that would tear us out of our hopeless reality, giving us incredible dimensions and maybe even a new reality—this emotion, this frenzied hope—was the mood in which people lived in the 1920s and maybe the 1930s, and then came the war. The 1960s were characterized by one feature—deep, dark pessimism about having returned to the old ways, to the same house or, better put, the same barn from which we had set out with terrific hope, music, and the anticipation of success. This is the way the heroes of Gaidar’s *Blue Cup* set out to go “far away”

but unexpectedly return to their starting point.<sup>31</sup> The 1960s were not merely a return. It was as if you had walked and walked through woods and fields with all of these new vistas opening up to you and then—bam!—you're right back at their front door. This sensation of running into the barn door that you left behind a long time ago—filled then with other intentions—defined the psychological air of the 1960s. The pendulum swung back to its earlier position. All of these images of returning produced the profound resignation, pessimism, and disillusionment that imbued the 1960s.

Perhaps I am projecting into the past and describing today's situation, since it is exactly the same as what I have just described. In the 1960s we would have found exactly the same state when we stepped out of the woods and stopped in front of the same old door. It was the sense of the end of a long voyage into an unknown country that we had invented for ourselves, a sense of weariness, dismay, and anger at all of those enterprises, at our boots, at the deprivation, at the punishment, and so on, the regret that it was all in vain. All assertions that we had reached the palaces failed to convince us, since we could all see the same old door and the old shoes in front of it. This sense of pessimism is what gives power to the image of return. Return to the old, brazen pile of garbage that had not gone away.

There is another image: that of a stuffy room, immobility, with nothing going anywhere, everything staying in place. People are suffocated in the rubbish, since there's nowhere to take it, to sweep it out. The boundary between spaces of rubbish and of nonrubbish is lost. Everything is littered, cluttered—our houses, streets, cities—and it is impossible to clear anything out; it all remains with us. If you're a science fiction writer, you can see a planet made up of garbage. Moving it from place to place does not make it disappear. It's like the man in my building who goes down the stairs with a garbage pail and drops half the rubbish along the way; it's not clear where he's going and why, or if he just threw away the pail when he got sick of it. This is the mixing up of two spaces: the place from which garbage should be removed and the place to which it should be taken; this "unity of opposites" is the dialectics that we once learned in school, here demonstrated in a visual way. How, for instance, do our construction sites differ from our garbage dumps? Take the building across the street from my studio: it's been under construction for eighteen years, and just as before, it's a huge, rusty carcass

31. Arkady Gaidar (1904–1941), a children's writer whose story *The Blue Cup* focuses on a children's adventure in which the protagonists return home, rather than ending up in far away lands.

surrounded by rubbish, a dump; the blueprints are obsolete, changed many times, and in fact, as it turns out, lost. Everything is flooded, some of the panels are broken, and it's impossible to build there at all—in other words, tons of problems, but the building will be built, even though it's already a ruin. You have to eat food right when it's cooked; you can't reheat a cutlet that's been lying around for two months. Here, everything is mixed up in wild, arrhythmic cycles, everything is forgotten, torn up, and retied. Pushkin said, "And innovation is old, and olden days seem new." This mutual penetration of everything into everything, this dusty smog composed of everything, is the main sensation we have.

Of course, we could look at all of this "unity" from an optimistic point of view. I have already said that the exhibition of young artists was full of power, fire, smoke, and incredible energy. Everything was stylish, substantive, and intense. Yes, intense, but only because the garbage dump, constantly revolving around itself, keeps producing something. Things rot and new sprouts come up; things flourish. The dump is extremely potent and "fertile." Or else it is some kind of mysterious, unknown half plant—half animal, which died but is still sending out runners. Where? Why? What kind? None of that is clear, for their fate is to be buried under new layers of rubbish. That is, it's a nightmare, but not a mystical or biological one, where everything consumes one another. It is a cultural nightmare.

Anyone who's been to a real dump knows that it is a very entertaining trip. You don't need to travel to Tanzania or India, you can experience strong emotions right here: we see bags of local newspapers, and then a foreign magazine flies in with a view of the Eiffel Tower or photos of Australian aborigines.

Our cultural consciousness is stuffed with these fragments and shards of various sciences and concepts borne by the wind from different places, from our past and present (from the Western past and present, that is), brought in from various sides without forming a chain, or connections, but just a huge, motley pile on our mental horizon. Picking up whatever catches your eye, one person becomes interested in Western art of the 1920s, another in the ancient East, and they all, having found their niche, shout out, "Hurry over here, look what I found, this is a fragment of an Asian pitcher, look at the line, what ornamentation!" while another howls from his corner, "I picked up a piece of a Ford automobile, look how thin this wire is!" Each cries out with the enthusiasm of a discoverer about his own find, and each really is a discoverer, because there's no better place for making finds like this than at a dump! The feeling you get is that this isn't destruction at all, but almost a Renaissance. Here we approach concepts that are almost like Fedorov's: the

rebirth of life in the most precise meaning of the word.<sup>32</sup> A friend looked at my work where I attached a label to each piece of trash on which I wrote some recollections about the stuff, and he said that I was giving new life to trash. In fact, when a person picks up an object from the trash, an explosion occurs of associations that are plastered to the object, and his memory, his sudden knowledge about the object, restores the lost life of that remnant. Like an archeologist, not a scientist who knows every bit of the zone, of the burial mound he is excavating, but an ordinary person who picks up an object which for some reason he has heard about and knows.

That is the image that came to me, of a dry garbage pile. I want to distinguish the compost pile, where everything rots and decomposes, turning into a new product, from the dry dump that consists of cultural shards.

Why do I keep repeating the word “culture” with the word “shards”? Why does the enthusiasm of the explorers wandering around this dump get fired up when they find shards of culture? Here, I think, we are deprived of culture; here, culture does not form that solid layer to which all cultural figures—artists, poets, writers, scholars—turn and in which they work. We do not have that solid layer; it was destroyed long ago. So, wandering around the dump, cries of enthusiasm at finding cultural shards, it seems to me, are howls over what has been lost, this amputated member. Howls lamenting what we would like to have, within ourselves, in the form of connections to time, in the form of history, in the form of unchanging laws and rules, in the form of something that formally is always tied to all of human society. The hopes, the joy, the touching surprise that we discover in coming upon shards of culture, our old one or a foreign one, are in fact our utopia, as a child feels about a toy that he never had but saw at a friend’s house.

If we assume that this image of an enormous dump is applicable to the work of the artists of the 1960s, then the question arises whether that work resembles in any way the work of the 1920s and 1910s. Some would say yes, it does. But from my point of view, no, not at all. The art of the 1960s, I think, is more an art of fading hopes, dwindling energy, because it is the energy of great hopes born in other times. Now the 1920s, that’s the energy of rising currents, but the 1960s is decreasing currents that are losing their power. The former go back to more subtle and powerful, I guess, cleansed layers of the cosmos, while the 1960s go down to lower, entropic layers, the layers of chaos. The 1960s is a movement toward chaos. It is a remembrance,

32. Nikolai Fedorov (1829–1903), a Russian philosopher who proposed numerous projects relating to space, mortality, and technology.



very weak, of rising currents, of rising vectors of existence, but the movement itself is fading and falling. The 1920s is movement toward new worlds, a cleansing movement, hence the new directions—suprematism, constructivism—an ascetic, dry movement discarding all unnecessary things, discovering the essential, eternal, architectonic constructs. The paintings of the 1960s are, by contrast, abundant, garrulous, busy, filled with structures, details, trifles. More than anything, they are shaggy surfaces overgrown with detail, with weakly expressed construction. They are amorphous, formless, pile-like things. It is movement downward, falling. I believe this movement toward chaos, dissolution—movement downward—is characteristic of the art of the 1960s, but not that of the 1920s. However, this is a private remark without a generalizable character.

I often use the word “results,” but what does it mean? Over time the concept has undergone great changes. Everything done in the 1960s participates in recurrences of various kinds and is sent into new times like, well, a record made in one period and then sealed and saved somewhere to be listened to by people in another time. There it is layered by alien worlds, sharpened or destroyed, or assumes a different sheen, form, and so on.

My thoughts today, of course, come from new speculation. Examining the 1960s while still in them, immersed in the concepts and psychology of artists who were close to me, I based my understanding on the principle of empathy, that is, compassion and co-thinking. But today’s commentary is tied to an attempt to see that phenomenon as part of a series of other phenomena in local history. As you “fly off” from that period, “the land of the 1960s,” you can see new relief, other mountains, islands, vegetation, deserts, rocks, and so on.

And if the image of a huge dump represents a frivolous, destructive, and nihilistic take on the 1960s, there is another viewpoint, another approach to examining, not the results of the 1960s, but the problems of the relation between the artist and his place in life, his role in society, his mission, I guess, in life—how he understood that role and what it was. Is it possible to find something universal, integrating, and characteristic of the artists of that period, of all of us. I said that the 1920s saw attempts at raising utopias, extraordinarily opened horizons, everyone living for a future seen as imminent, and therefore the artists of that time dragged back stones from the future and erected buildings. They were the architects, builders, and stonemasons of that future. Can a unified, generalized statement be made about the artists of the 1960s? There can certainly be no talk of building the future for these artists. The unified image of these artists, merging all the personalities, for me is a creation that rejects the existing reality, does not see the past, future, or present; it depicts a person who is not tuned into reality at all, who hates it,

yet is burdened and tormented by it, by the special pain of being beyond life's borders all the time. The artists of the 1960s had a special sense of themselves as researchers, voyagers, I suppose, to other spaces. They were like children, locked up, punished in kindergarten and dreaming of other rooms, games, trips—in their dreams, of course, not in reality. They were totally isolated from everything around them, and their total nonparticipation, ignorance of the world, and fear, of course, led to a certain electrification of their fantasies. Each of them represented an incredibly charged sphere of mirages that were revealed to them, that glowed brightly and clearly in their imaginations. The sad but clear thought of various forms of mental illness, which each of the *dramatis personae* had, also comes to mind. Why do I speak of illness? First of all, you can see the destruction of the personality, its disintegration into three, five, or more parts, the separation of the personality that is active and really living in this world—and I repeat that really acting and living was impossible in the 1960s—from the endlessly agitated, electrified, and nervously intense imagination. The separation of the consciousness from existence was characteristic of all of these artists, and on the level of personality they all represent spiritual breakdown and illness to some degree.

I see their work as a filmstrip of fantasies, discoveries, visions, I suppose, born of this disintegration, this separation of consciousness from the body, from reality. In general, the presence of phantoms, ghosts, and spectral existence in life is very characteristic of our “underground,” our “basement.”

At the same time, never was so much said about things like “truth,” “authenticity,” “energy,” “artistry,” words that speak of true, real existence; the attempt to ontologize, that is, was extremely great. What does that mean? It was natural because in a destroyed creature, in a mind separated from reality, artistic activity itself was endowed with very important functions—the functions of acquiring reality, foundation, truth, earth, existence. Art in those years was fetishized absolutely. It was the crystal ball, the magic wand that produced the manifestation of reality in a ruined creature and a ruined life.

Thus, the relation between the artist and his product was as follows: the artist lived for no known reason—who he was, his path, his place in life, and his own feeling about living were unknown—but the moment he picked up a brush and faced a clean canvas or white paper, new powers from important, unreal worlds descended on him and he created reality. He was then present in reality and performed real actions. This mission of art as healing—and from a mystical point of view, as giving meaning and reality to a person's existence—is, it seems to me, the most important and fundamental definition of the relation between the artist and his work in the 1960s. Everyone profoundly believed that the finished product was really truthful, beautiful,

and significant. That is why the most terrible thing to say to an artist in the 1960s was that his product was not beautiful, not important, not artistic, not truthful, because this was their last hope. The painting was the last reality, the extreme edge of existence for these people. If it turned out that the painting did not exist, then life itself would lose all meaning. If we had been part of an order with artistic rituals, cultural traditions and actions, then there would have been some faith that in doing this work you were involved in real, essential responsibilities that were related directly to all of society and known to all, but the artists and their art were cut off from any sense of belonging to real forms. So the work itself became the only reality.

Hence, the incredible fetishism of artworks. Some artists adored their own works, drooled over them, and the most important events in their lives were showing the works. So our discussions, even though they resembled big cultural meetings, conferences, because sometimes they acquired serious form—lectures, readings, and so on—were actually more like special forms of ecstatic rituals, organized around artworks, the only form of reality in our unreal life. So the cry “I’ve finished a painting!” could be heard in the most far-flung parts of Moscow, and everyone would fly there, like moths to a flame, first to see the painting and second—and this is the important part—to participate in what was the one and only reality for us all. To be present at a poetry discussion, to listen to a reading, was to be in the center of real events, at the very point of the start of life. That is how I would define the true relations among the artist, his works, and the reality of the 1960s. [ . . . ]

Therefore, schizoid (in the horrible coloration of the word) is a very accurate description of the general aura, the general atmosphere, surrounding the artists of the 1960s. And without any changes, this atmosphere extends into the 1970s and 1980s. [ . . . ]

In recalling that life—if you take away the exaltation, enthusiasm, huge doses of self-delusion, and, I guess, ambition and vanity—it is a completely schizoid formation, a kaleidoscope of judgments, opinions, incredible agitation, repetition, aggressive insistence on one’s rightness, and complete absence of calm, relativism, parity, or any other relativistic forms. “Only that which I think at this moment actually exists, and I am prepared to force my opinion on others.” Our conversations, I recall, were successions of brief, or not brief, monologues. Since we were all equally mad, we listened patiently but with difficulty, not paying attention, to each monologue, so as to then be able to speak, without interruption, one hoped. These were internal howls, charged with energy, filled with extraordinary conviction and aggression. I must say that not all artists had the same level of “soundtrack,” and the majority, of course, expressed their intentions, their concepts, in visual, profes-

sional form. But at the same time, no one lacked verbal conceptions, which were expressed at every opportunity, in the form of an uninterrupted gush of speech.

The atmosphere of the 1960s was charged with this enormous schizophrenic communication. Everyone was positive that he was revealing some deep truth. They were all expressing their ideas about the world and on various issues with the absolute certainty that theirs was the final truth, and everyone burned with the fire of his truth. Of course, this can be considered creative, positive, and constructive, but I think it was morbid, neurotic, schizoid. As in my description of the garbage pile, I must say that the conceptual value of the statements and works and the artists' judgments had a rather problematic nature.

Speaking of schizoid behavior, I realize that it is present in every creative personality as a kind of unconscious, unmotivated movement from the hidden depths. But let me remind you again of the famous statement that not every syphilitic is capable of writing *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. That is, the condition could have been very fruitful, but in our condition—the condition of destroyed cultural ties—most of the results of such schizoid behavior were not realized or were whimsical, uninteresting, random, or unimportant. They were the product of pure madness.

Inadequacy of results to intentions—that is what characterizes the 1960s. The actual messages' seriousness, intensity, and importance were very high, but the results were not commensurate with the intentions. This lack of connection between idea and product, I would say, was not merely schizoid; it was real schizophrenia. The artist "imagined" that he had created something incredible: one built something that was practically the Tower of Babel, another had an idea that would turn the earth on its axis, a third invited an angel over and had lunch with it. There was a lot of "imagination," but the results were negligible. Still, everyone called on us to believe him, to "see his point." It reminds me of the famous scene in Swift, where the hero is taken to meet various mad scientists, each of whom is doing something strange but can prove in five minutes that his discovery is incredibly valuable. The artists were like that—they believed in the worlds they discovered and could cast a spell on anyone who entered their studios. I have already mentioned Shvartsman's powers of persuasion.<sup>33</sup> In fact, you can recognize a schizoid by his terrifying power of persuasion and ability to draw you into his field. Every artist of the 1960s literally radiated his idea, and I still cannot separate the radiation

33. Mikhail Shvartsman (1926–1997), an unofficial Moscow painter who gained notoriety for his intensely spiritual paintings.

from the results, which I think is also characteristic of schizophrenic symptoms. Things are bad if subsequent eras do not “see the point” of the patient who chased a kangaroo around his hospital room.

This horror whirls over my head too: I am afraid that the big “scribble scabble” done so enthusiastically for many years by thirty or forty artists may turn out to be just daubing. The history of art abounds in examples like Van Gogh and Gauguin “daubing” what they wanted and being appreciated only later. But—I want to utter yet another pessimistic “but” here—if you daub in a culturally elaborated, saturated field, then the “daubs” will absorb a lot of cultural elements, signs, and concepts, while the things done by savages, madmen, or dilettantes in emptiness, in a garbage heap, will remain nothing but daubs. I think that is the difference between Van Gogh and, say, Kulakov.<sup>34</sup> Tachism invented in a cultural milieu is not the same as Tachism executed in a milieu devoid of culture.<sup>35</sup> That is the basis of my pessimism. The classic example is Zverev.<sup>36</sup> The famous collector Costakis was taken by him, bought up and collected his drawings, and propagandized him in every way, but outside Russia [ . . . ] his art made no impression.<sup>37</sup> The “Russian genius” did not make it, although the works of other Tachists entered the pantheon of cultural values and artistic movements.

Let me digress a bit. I was asked once if it was not critics who make “geniuses.” “Such a phenomenon happens.” History sometimes acts like a crazy, mass chorus touting an artist; that is, someone “falls” for an artist and shouts cusswords, full of delight. The nature of that choice is irrational, but I am afraid there is also induction, a form of contagion. Art is a form of contagion, of falling into the wave that attracts you. Malevich blazed such a powerful beam of resonance that it was bound to excite a large number of madmen. We are a single human tribe, and the resonator and the resonated seek and find each other.

In classicism, the search for forms was made a fetish: you had to make a form that would affect everyone, including the goat in the garden. There is no

34. Mikhail Kulakov (1933–2015), an unofficial artist who worked at times in an abstract expressionist style.

35. Kabakov’s use of the term “Tachism” refers not only to artists such as Wols and Jean Dubuffet in France, but also to the abstract expressionists of the New York School, such as Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock. Interview with editor, Mattituck, NY, 28 February 2016.

36. Anatoly Zverev (1931–1986), an unofficial painter prominent in the 1950s.

37. George Costakis (1912–1990), a Russian-born, Greek art collector who owned the largest private collection of Soviet avant-garde art in Moscow, including works by Marc Chagall, Kazimir Malevich, Vasily Kandinsky, Vladimir Tatlin, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Liubov Popova, Olga Rozanova, and El Lissitzky.

such fetish now. Jackson Pollock finds a large group of people who resonate to his signals, while another artist pours paint on a canvas in exactly the same way but gets no response. Resonating groups arise around personalities who can condense all of the sounds and ideas that everyone has but that are scattered or weak or fragmentary; only a leader can turn them into something whole. Pollock became the leader of the Tachist movement not because he invented it but because he combined its ideas into a single whole. When a movement is just beginning, it is not yet clear what it is, and the leader may appear later, at the optimal moment.

Why is our art so unfortunate? Because it does not permit natural groups and directions to develop, and rise spontaneously, like bubbles after the rain. At the right time, an artistic representative appears in each group, or so it seems to me. Pollock is not claiming to be the leader, though he is the real, objective representative of his time, his region, his clan. It all coincided, and he began to “buzz.” Otherwise, he could not pick up speed and power to emit the resonant signal. He gathers into the resonance everything he has: the times, the place of action, the culture.

This is why I have doubts about our results. Sure, we have bold personalities—these schizoid people are capable of powerful accumulation and powerful attack. But when only one person attacks with no one behind or next to him, it is a schizophrenic attack, just some person running around waving a stick.

The figures of 1960s art were not free, not having chosen the situation in which they lived. Some of them later left in order to try themselves out on a broader testing ground, to test their worth. The rest lived, and continue to live, under the conditions offered. Their freedom of artistic choice was negligible. In the 1960s they considered it differently, said that was good, that it “freed the soul.” That is, the worse, the better. The more nightmarish, unnatural, difficult, and hopeless a person’s existence, the stronger his spiritual and creative flights, the truer and more elevated, and so on. And they always brought up the Western world, where the artist slavishly depends on merchants and is forced to make not art but commercial works, things that sell. While here, they said, in a paradoxical way freedom flourishes, and the artist, not bound by money, creates unheard-of, never before seen works. But this is a double-edged sword. Both our freedom within slavery and our results are very dubious, and I regard it all quite skeptically.

Of course, our situation is unique: no one does anything for the sake of money, no one dictates to us, and everyone is working from “within,” but I doubt whether this lack of conditions, even commercial ones, is really a good thing.

Sometimes an image pops into my mind. Maybe it's a tad exotic: perhaps all of us are patients and staff in a 1960s mental institution who came to an agreement on regimen and treatment. Say, from 4 to 5, we have "drawing," then a nap, then discussion of our drawings, applause, prize-giving, and so on. Well, the future will tell, but what, basically, distinguishes a madman who draws black squares on a white background from Shvartsman who draws faces? The answer remains unclear. From our position, from our time, from this attic where I am sitting now, it is hard to tell.

The products of this small madhouse will end up, in time, in a small outbuilding of the Big Madhouse, on the experimental operating table of both local Russian history and European history, and must find their way to other shelves, and only then will the final sentence be pronounced and a place found for them. That is natural and inevitable. So the results will not be known soon.

If this entire text (naturally, to its final, concluding part) is an apologia, it bears the schizoid determination to which I tend, like all the others, and I am prepared to repeat three times "I like it all, I like it, I like it," as a British magazine recommends doing to start your day, repeating eight maxims like "Life is good," "I like myself, therefore, other people like me," and such.

Today is colored in different hues (perhaps, under the influence of yesterday's exhibit?), as if they had turned off the hot water and turned on the cold. Everything I said before under the flag of rapture, satisfaction, and significance suddenly looks problematic. Today, I turn toward the 1960s with a feeling of pessimism and nihilism. But perhaps this is just another schizoid reaction that has as little reality underpinning it as the apologia does. Rapture and disappointment are like a pendulum or a scale swinging. Therefore, the attempt to create an image of everything done in the 1960s in the form of a garbage dump, and the attempt to turn all of the characters into the image of a single talented and inspired artist, are actions of the same kind. . . .

## Conceptualism in Russia

1986

In this essay written the year before he was first allowed to travel to the West (for an artist's residency in Graz, Austria), Kabakov outlines the distinctiveness of conceptual art in the USSR by returning to themes and strategies grounded in nineteenth-century Russian literature. Aiming to explain "Russian conceptual art" to a potentially wider audience, he goes out of his way to refer to prominent non-Soviet artists.

An exhibition of "conceptualist art" has opened in Moscow. And what kind of exhibition doesn't have an introduction or an explanation? Nothing should be shown without an explanation or introduction, since it is obvious that "the people don't understand." Therefore, one has to work out carefully why one is showing them anything: What is it for? What should one understand from the display? Why is *this* being shown and not something else? And why *now*? To start with, then, necessary and sufficient explanations of the exhibition must be clearly and logically set out. Even so—and recognizing this is no less important—the "people" may not only fail to understand but, even worse, may understand things the wrong way. Thus, the second half of any introduction should consist of a careful and detailed explanation of what we should understand about what is in front of us. Since it can be assumed that the people will misinterpret "everything" (yes, everything), the explanation must deal with everything, not just one area or detail. The person who does the explaining (how many times he has already done it!) must be able to cover the whole spectrum; that is, he must be a moralist, a philosopher, a historian, and an art critic. He must have all of the knowledge himself. A guide in our country performs this task with great pleasure, although with a tired and unhappy expression.

What is written here is not an explanation of "Russian conceptualism" but rather a description of what we consider the core of this Russian conceptualism. As is always the case, the concept has been current here, though long hidden. The word "conceptualism" is invested with associations of having come "from over there" (the West), though suddenly it became clear to us that the range of things "they" call conceptualism is analogous to what has already been perhaps the most important part of our "artistic" outlook.



Now that the word has come to us, we realize that we already knew what conceptualism is, and we have discovered among ourselves that we have already made excellent use of it. (As it turns out, we have been speaking prose for a long time.) Its strength was everywhere, like air that is invisible but exists all around.

The title of the article is "Conceptualism in Russia," although it would have been more accurate to write "Russian Conceptualism," since, in this case, as in many others, everything that has fallen on our soil from whatever areas—philosophy, economics, culture—has immediately acquired qualities and meanings that have little in common with the prototype. Therefore, we shall try to sketch out in a general form what conceptualism is in the West and here.

The activating principle of Western conceptualism can be seen as the idea of "one thing instead of another." Essential to our further account is the meaning of this "another." This is the most important thing. In this is the primordial, concrete materiality of the Western concept. That which is replaced is already "there" beforehand, and everyone knows it exists. That which already exists only becomes differently coded, differently named. At exhibitions the pictures, sculptures, and objects of art are always prefixed with the words "everybody knows that . . ." In this way, the urinal at the exhibition becomes a work of art, although, in reality, in its role as a urinal, it is not. Marcel Duchamp here discovers a great solidity in the value of structure, its many-leveled depth, where although one component may have been exchanged for another, the edifice remains stable. So it is that, instead of a picture, a urinal may take center stage, but the system of values, the creation of art, exhibitions, fine art, and culture, has in no way faltered or been destroyed. Moreover, as it turned out, the readymade, very quickly after Duchamp, took its place alongside pictures in the museums on an equal basis. "One thing instead of another," that is, creates a bit of confusion at first, but equilibrium is soon restored.

What can be said about our contemporary conceptualism? On the basis again of "one thing instead of another," it appears that an even more radical substitution than that of Duchamp has been undertaken. In the idea of contemporary conceptualism there is the proposition of transforming two already famous artistic "objects": (1) artistic things and (2) the artistic milieu understood as "the sacred artistic complex"—the exhibition, the museum, the artistic gathering.

In the first case, a thing is not replaced by another thing, as in Duchamp's case, but by an idea. In this case, the idea is not embodied, but is recorded and may be, or more accurately should be, fixed in the material of the record-

ing, in the “thing.” It should remain in existence on the level of an idea, not as a sign or a symbol, but rather, precisely, “instead of,” a thing (as a number exists instead of the coat that has been given to the cloakroom). Scorning translation into the material, purposely refusing “embodiment,” conceptualism is content with the fixing of an idea, the record, the description, the project, and the sketch.

Second, conceptualism destroys and abolishes “the place of habitation” of artistic values—specialized premises, museums, art exhibitions, etc. Activity and action take place instead any place on earth, even preferably away from art centers and centers of civilization—in deserts, on mountains, and so on.

In such cases, given the nature of the artistic production in question, it becomes clear that the work cannot possibly be put in a museum (it is impossible to bring a whole cliff or the sea into the museum, for example). It is impossible to transport, to repeat, to preserve a happening or a performance.

All conceptual actions are fixed only in documents and photographs—and apart from this, nothing exists. In this, by the way, another mission is realized—the hidden struggle with commercialism, with the ability to buy and sell everything, to turn anything into a mercantile object.

In both contexts, as one can readily see, the same substitution of objects is realized, the principle of “one thing instead of another.” After the initial shock, collectors, gallery owners, and dealers quickly understand that they can treat the new conceptualist art in the same way as the formerly new, now-overthrown art, which has become fully traditional. An idea that exists in the form of writing or as a project may be exhibited and collected in the same way as past “art objects”: actions, fixed on photographic paper, may successfully be included in monographs, hung in museums, and—*oh, what a horrible thought*—even sold, even if the location of the action is ten thousand kilometers from the gallery and the buyer, for example, somewhere in the snows of Kilimanjaro.

One way or another, everything reverts to its traditional status as an art object.

It is not the same in our country. Here, in contrast to the West, the principle of “one thing instead of another” does not exist and is not in force, most of all because the definitive second element of this binomial, “another,” does not exist. It is as if in our country it has been taken out of the equation. It is simply not here. To go into more depth on this fundamental question is beyond the scope of the present article, so let us limit ourselves to the postulate that it is this second element of the binomial—the representation, the idea, the fact, the thing, which has always existed, primordially, “over there”—that

is here unclear, undefined, its very existence in doubt. In such a situation the construction “instead of” carries special interest, as the “in-” simply does not exist; in contrast to the principle of Western conceptualism, there is a total enigma—emptiness. What we get is a striking paradox, nonsense: things, ideas, facts inevitably, with great exertion, enter into direct contact with the unclear, the undefined, in essence, with emptiness. This contiguity, closeness, mixedness, this contact with nothing, with emptiness, makes up, it seems to us, the basic peculiarity of “Russian conceptualism.”

But what results can come from the meeting of “something” with nothing? We feel that we can point to two such results: “phantasmagoria” and “a tendency toward discussion.” Given that Russian culture has been portrayed best in literature, we shall turn to literature for examples that illuminate these results.

### Gogol, Dostoevsky, Chekhov

Much has already been said about phantasmagoria and the phantom quality of Gogol’s characters. It has become a commonplace. It has also become a commonplace to mention the particular “gap” that appears with each of his characters. It is as though Gogol deliberately and carefully drew in little details that these “characters” (the word, it may be said, does not entirely suit them) coincide *almost* exactly with the characters they personify, those whom they most satirically and artistically represent, those *in place of whom* they are presented. These meticulously drawn details do not in any way heighten the realism of the prototypes; on the contrary—precisely because of these prominent and painstakingly described details, the impression is created that behind the details there is nobody and nothing. Literally, in the most terrible sense of the words, *nobody* and *nothing*. There is no Chichikov, no Nozdrev, no teapot, no nail on Petrovich’s right foot, indeed no Petrovich—in general, there is nothing there and never was.<sup>1</sup> The chilling horror that emerges from Gogol’s pages can be interpreted and described in the light of our aforementioned principle: any objects, ideas, intentions, or actions coincide not with the things themselves, but with nothing, the void, a gap. On the very brink of being, they assume that dry withered look, the look of empty phantoms or ghosts to whom it is impossible to impart life. They cannot be warmed up, even if we feed them tasty pie, piping hot broth, tables full of delicacies like sturgeon . . . we cannot give them life.

It is generally known that the great mass of text in Dostoevsky’s books is

1. These are references to characters in Nikolai Gogol’s 1842 novel *Dead Souls*.

made up of interminable, unremitting debates. And—this is most important—the debates are completely specific. We can say that these debates are not about something fundamental but, more than anything else, are debates debating debates. The novels contain short debates, long debates, flourishes, and chains of debates of monstrous length. Every reader of these novels is familiar with the feeling that the thread has been lost, and with it the chance of following the twisting and turning of the basic idea; the idea turns out to have been drawn into *the process itself*, into the multidimensional references, digressions, relationships, supplementary and subsidiary explanations of previous references, and so on.

This stream, or more accurately, waterfall, has been compared with the literary tradition of the “test of ideas,” but it seems that this is not right.<sup>2</sup> A better comparison would be the interminable stupor of an inquest, or the torture of clerical work, or a nightmare where the loops of one “relation” become entangled in the loops of another “declaration” forming a nauseating “relation to relations”—from which none of the characters can extricate himself (this is a feature shared by Dostoevsky and Kafka).

What we have here is not a test of ideas, but the interminable reflection of one “opinion” in another, one point of view in another, and all together it can be seen as an enormous genre of “in the opinion of.” But, it must be repeated, as with Gogol, this vicious circle of judgments and opinions has its limits, and that limit is the void. That is where each chain finally comes to an end. At that point all of the “opinions” close in on themselves—and the repetition of this depressing and hysterical spinning, in ever newer circles, starts again. In Chekhov, we meet the same thing, the same theme. Here the characters do not love; they talk. In contrast to Dostoevsky’s characters, they do not explain or discuss anything—their texts do not become entangled and conflict with each other, always with the same rhythm, somewhere up in the air. Each utterance is sounded in turn; the requisite pause is observed, like measured drops of water dripping. The feeling of emptiness is not located at the end of the “ordeal” or search, as it is in Dostoevsky—it is there from the beginning, as a precondition, like a “given” in algebra. A primary feeling of emptiness embraces the words, deeds, and actions of Chekhov’s characters. The emptiness is behind everyone, behind everything that happens to them, but they talk nonetheless, talk to fill the emptiness, to prevent the emptiness from appearing with them on stage, to stop themselves from disappearing into the noiselessly resounding awfulness of the void. They must talk. They

2. Kabakov has in mind Menippean satire, specifically Mikhail Bakhtin’s writing on the genre in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. Interview with editor, Mattituck, NY, 28 February 2016.

must weave an unbroken net from words, phrases, and opinions that, from the very beginning, have been devoid of sense.

As leaves fall softly from a tree in autumn  
So I let fall these mournful words of mine.<sup>3</sup>

However, what does this have to do with conceptualism, and above all else, with art? In our opinion, any construct, any concept presented as such, unattached to any exterior purpose, can be understood and sensed as an already complete form, as a self-contained structure, as conceptualism. And as an “aesthetic creation” it can be described and represented visually, as is true for any kind of art.

Precisely because of its self-contained character, its lack of windows or an exit out of itself into something else, it is like something that hangs in the air, a self-sufficient thing, like a fantasy construction, not connected to anything, not rooted in anything, with no propensity to gigantic, global speculations. It can be inspected and described from all sides. In this sense this aesthetic phenomenon perhaps deserves to be related to an artistic style, to conceptualism.

So, in this way we can say that our own local thinking, from the very beginning, could in fact have been called “conceptualism.” We simply did not know that we have already been speaking in prose for a long time.

3. A quotation from Sergei Esenin’s poem “The Grove of Golden Trees Has Fallen Silent . . .” (1924).

# Edge, Border, Crack

1986

In this probing, anthropologically minded essay, Kabakov seeks to elucidate the inner core of the Russian and Soviet psyche. According to the artist, to understand the USSR, it is crucial to view the Soviet Union as only the most recent instantiation of a much more complex sociocultural phenomenon, an “edge” civilization surrounded “on three sides” by China, the Mars-like landscapes of the Russian Far East and the interminable expanse of the Arctic North. For Kabakov, a feeling of extreme peripherality in relationship to Europe, combined with a sense of encircled “centeredness” in relation to these other zones, leads to the development of a peculiar cultural sensibility: “border consciousness.”

## I

According to our, as they say, mentality, the “edge” [*krai*] is a very significant—I was about to say extremely [*kraine*] substantive—concept. As in any cluster of ideas, it is tied to a whole complex of notions that, on the one hand, is very easy to decode but, on the other, is not so simple to define. A cloud of meanings and “overtones” hovers around it. In short, the “edge” is among those images that exist in our country, that, thanks to our “table-of-ranks” mentality, are considered to be “major” and “most important.”

The same can be said of the image-concepts “border” and “crack.” There is an entire family of words related to the word “edge” [via its root, *krai*]: Ukraine, outskirts [*okraina*], outermost [*krainyi*]. This last word, “outermost,” is used to describe something that is last, located on the edge. *But on the edge of what?* Our constant sensation of the edge prompts a natural answer: on the edge of nothing, on the edge of emptiness. For us, *beyond the edge* can only mean emptiness.<sup>1</sup>

And at the same time, *outermost in relation to what?* The answer is just as natural: in relation to the edge of some “inner” thing, some sort of body, some central object. “The outermost home in the village” is the last home on the edge of a small town, on the outskirts in relation to the center. Herein

1. See, in the present volume, “On Emptiness.”

rests the most interesting thing: that the outermost as the last instance of something entails a sort of understanding of measurement, of numbers. (If this is “last,” then it’s been preceded by 1, 2, 3, 4, etc. The same is true when people stand in line—where, by the way, they might hear “You will be last” as slightly offensive, as compared to “You’re last,” but more on that later.)

Let us return to the edge. I would like to postulate at the outset that in our country the “edge” can be called that “line” or “border” that separates “something” from “nothing”—a body from emptiness, being from nonbeing. The edge is conceptualized as the edge of some already existing, defined body that delineates the body on all sides, defending it from the emptiness that surrounds it.

The image of a monastery, kept separate by its walls from the indistinct space surrounding it, is apropos here. Or we might picture a city, its tall walls defending it from attack.

In any case, the edge is thought of as an outline encompassing something *on all sides*. This important circular concept evokes as well the sensation of emptiness—an emptiness that seems likewise to embrace us from all sides, quietly and terribly enveloping our body; an emptiness coming from who knows when and where that surrounds us like an invisible, formless, frightening ocean.

One circumstance related to our local “geography” is interesting.

In our language, the word “edge” [*krai*] can be used to describe both a “nearby region” [*blizhnii krai*] and a “distant region” [*dal’nii krai*] (recall songs with titles such as “I Left for a Distant Place,” “My Sweet One in a Distant Place,” etc.). In applying these concepts to the body and to emptiness, we can presume as well a “nearby edge” (the edge of my main body) and a “distant edge”—also “my edge,” but an edge spreading into emptiness, penetrating it, as though it were a body projecting an indistinct “corporeality,” as though the nearby “emptiness” were some sort of medium, filled with a multitude of trivial bodies that are corporeal, like the main body, but many times smaller than it, forming a kind of cloud that hangs in the emptiness around the main body. And then there, beyond this “cloud,” begins the “main emptiness,” total nothingness. Hence, the border region that for a particular city, village, or town is its “near” edge is, for a distant city, village, or town a distant one. The formation of the expression “alien region” [*chuzhoi krai*] (as in, “I wound up in some strange region”) is interesting here. “Alien” is an unambiguous concept: another world, not ours, hostile, the world of evil, in brief, of emptiness. But “edge” can be perceived as taking “the edge of me” into “their” emptiness.

## II

For us the concept of the “edge” is inseparable from the concept of the “center”—the pair represent mutually interconnected zones. The edge is always a circle around a center, the envelope around some particular body, within which everything together forms a unified corporeal “triad.” Take some sort of fruit, an apple, for example: there is a center (core), the body of the apple itself, and its skin or casing—and we see everything as a cross-section, with each of these parts distinctly visible.

This entire structure can be seen—the core, the flesh, the skin—in a mature, ripe fruit (if we accept the image of the apple as an appropriate one). If we take the entire apple tree as the whole, then it becomes more difficult to discern the “edge,” since air penetrates all of the spaces between leaves, branches, fruit; but then it is easier for us to demonstrate the notion of “nearby” emptiness—emptiness within the confines of the main trunk, intersected in all directions by a complex and tangled interweaving of small and midsize branches, leaves, and fruit.

Given slow, almost standing-still time, it is easy to take in visually the entire surrounding space. As we do so, the various “edge” shapes become easily distinguishable, as do their aesthetic characteristics; all we have to do is to imagine ourselves in the center. The characteristics, traits, and aesthetic appearance of that which we characterize as the “center” become just as clearly “visible,” again in our imagination; all we have to do is to imagine placing ourselves on the edge of the “outskirts.” This pair—“center” and “edge”—is a favorite subject of our thinking, prevalent in discussions occurring everywhere and all around us on all levels. Charged with energy, saturated with emotion, it melds into the pair “provincial” and “metropolitan,” or “capital city–like,” and a complex of related oppositions: not-full/full, significant/insignificant, adequate/inadequate, imperfect/perfect. In our everyday life, these tensions lead us to an untenable, insurmountable desire to move “toward the center,” not to be “on the edge,” peripheral. The most interesting thing in this circumstance is the existence of axiological (evaluative) characteristics associated with the center and the edge, leading to an understanding that everything significant, perfect, and true exists in the center; everything on or along the edge is insignificant, unimportant, untrue, substandard, and second-rate. In an ontological sense, that is, everything that is important, almost sacred, belongs to the center. The “edge” is devoid of this quality. The edge is functional, but not ontological—it is called upon merely to preserve, to protect its “center” from danger, to hold it inside itself, to contain it. Being, in other words,



is in the center, nonbeing on the edges. Given such an orientation, what we get is a kind of pyramidal structure, where the edge belongs to the bottom, the terrestrial horizon, its flat surface spreading out all around without end or edge. The middle, the body between the edge and the center, is like the body of the pyramid, gradually rising toward the center/peak, high above the earth. However, I would like to propose—not without a dose of irony—that in our case, in our mentality, this pyramid could be posited just as successfully in the form of an enormous funnel: its edge, like that of our pyramid, is located on the surface of the earth, but the body of the funnel extends downward, deeper and deeper into the infinite depths, with its center, its “peak,” far below in a head-spinning pit into which it is terrifying even to look.

### III

Having analyzed this structure, we could presume that we have a rather stable formation designed, so to speak, for a very long (if not eternal) existence, wherein the “corporeal” origin finds its form of being in the “emptiness” surrounding it, and adapts to it, creating what might be called, were we to express it in scientific terms, “homeostasis”—a stable state with a specific, calibrated rhythm to its functioning.

But if we now apply all of this to our “geography,” to “our mentality” (and it has been only this analysis we have had in mind from the very beginning), then in historical reality we discover two types of contiguity between *our* geography and that on the other side of the boundary, the same kind of geography but one that is not ours. Even though the boundary itself, like a solid line distinguishing our geography from “not ours,” completely separates one from the other, the nature and type of interaction with this “beyond the boundary–ness” is sharply divided into two types that are bound up with the situations analyzed earlier.

Without any preliminary analysis, I want to name two types of interactions: our neighboring status with China and the East, and our neighboring with Europe and the West, calling the former interaction normal-natural, and the latter schizo-neurotic. What do we mean by “normal-natural”? What is meant here is that in entering into such “border relations,” in having and continually maintaining them, “our” internal structure, our “geography,” does not experience any kind of tensions in its own state. Its constant contacts are not in any way touched, no external dynamics arise, nothing prompts a relocation, a rethinking of one’s internal rhythm; there is no need to change one’s “breathing,” one’s mentality. Speaking in technical language, the system does not experience any critical loads given such interaction.

In reality, physical existence of the border with the “East” in no way disturbs our internal understanding of the geographical cosmos. The main components of the system remain unwavering and immobile: its “center,” its “edges,” defined in relation to their receding from the center, sinking farther and farther into the “emptiness.” And finally, there is total, all-encompassing “emptiness,” homogenous in its silence and immobility: the quiet, eternity, mystery, and immobility of China; the eternity and immobility, almost like an alien planet, of Kamchatka and Chukotka; and the boundless cold, ice, and darkness of the Arctic Ocean, departing into oblivion and the infinite North. Quiet, oblivion, gloom seize “our place” from three sides, and in our consciousness we do not distinguish our understanding of such a “nearby place” from contact with other stellar worlds, with the darkness of a homeless cosmos.

But on the fourth side, interaction with the “border” more recently has been of a completely different type (I have in mind here Europe and the West in general); it is precisely here that we enter into an interaction, we encounter not “nonbeing,” as in the East, but *being* of a sort that in the enormous majority of cases is directly the opposite to our understanding of being; it shows itself to be something entirely different, a way of being that exists with its own, quite different ontology, under its own sign. “Our place” encounters another mental reality living in another “state” of time. This other reality, though nearby, is happening at a “different pace.” The two worlds are moving at different speeds and at the limit of the proximity of “time” and eternity (motion and immobility), and the vicinity in which they interact is nearby: right there, “on the other side of the border,” their surfaces “rub up against” each other. . . .

Such interactions cannot help but turn out to be neurotic, due to the constant presence against “our” boundary, “our” border, of a gigantic independent reality that does not recognize our ontology or our eternal laws of “center–edge–emptiness,” and—the main thing—does not care at all about our time (or more precisely, the total absence of it). All of this cannot help but provoke well-known schizoid effects, symptoms, and signs, though in the historical period under review, it seems that all of this hardly touches the stable foundation (“sharply continental”) of our sense of the world.

#### IV

All that has been said about the special situation defining the interaction between our world and the “West” cannot but lead to an understanding of the role of the border between “us” and “them” as a facet where the edges of two

juxtaposed worlds meet and—what is especially important—as something that leads to the emergence of a new type of person as a result of the existence of this perpetual brutal interaction. This is the emergence of a person—in our country, not in theirs—who is “on the edge,” with a consciously different attitude toward the world, a person “here” who is nonetheless an entirely natural, so to speak, “continental” type. A bit more detail is in order here.

If we imagine a large aluminum bowl filled to the brim with some sort of substance, earth, for example, then in the center of it could be located a type of consciousness that might conditionally be called “central.” This is a type of worldview that leads a consciousness to feel as though it is at the center of the world, and that around this center meaning and knowledge grow weaker and weaker until everything ends in nothingness. If we look from the center into the distance in all directions—all the way to the horizon—everything ends in oblivion, fog, ignorance. There is no one *there* and never has been; KNOWLEDGE, HOME, and TRUTH exist *here* and are preserved only here, where these people are standing who are virtually alone in the entire world, possessing the truth and the life of the world—perhaps, in the depth of their ontology, they are the only people standing on the summit of an enormous and completely empty world. They resemble people standing above a light in the middle of a gigantic sea that surrounds the rest of the world in darkness.

Another type of consciousness might be called the “consciousness of the border,” and in our country we might call the carrier of this consciousness a “border” type. He occupies a place in our bowl, not in the center, but at the very edge. Situated on this edge, he knows and sees, like the “central” person, with his inner vision; he can see, however, that beyond the bowl is not emptiness and oblivion, but just the opposite: on the other side, beyond the bowl, exists an enormous, rich life, “fully valued” in every way, extending all the way to the horizon. Meanwhile, from the other side, from the point of view just beyond this edge, the internal territory of the “bowl,” the one you must consider to be your own “reality,” appears to be empty, untouched, useless, belonging to no one—having precisely those attributes of oblivion that the “central” consciousness ascribes to all that is beyond the bounds of the bowl. The “border” person, the border consciousness, still belongs to the edge of *our* bowl, *this* bowl, but he has the constant awareness of the presence of another reality on the other side of this bowl, something that as part of normal “bowl consciousness” should not be! It is like a house in the ocean—it just should not be there, but there it is! Such a constant state of affairs, and not just a momentary situation, cannot help but lead to a fateful outcome; in reality it leads to the emergence of a “second border consciousness” at the edge of the bowl. This consciousness, by definition, should be split: the

lower, deeper part of it still belongs to the bowl, the central consciousness, but its proximity to, and view across, the edge gives rise to a border consciousness. These two consciousnesses do not merge. They function separately. They belong to different orientations, to different times, to different ideas; the disjunction leads, in such characters, to the formation of special, always schizophrenic, sometimes original, fantasies and desires to combine these two origins, these two concepts inside oneself. For a “border” already passes through this consciousness, leading to the formation of frightening centaurlike ideas and shapes.

We may now note a few characteristic signs of this border consciousness:

1. His definitely schizoid quality, a proclivity to fantasize, sometimes to the point of insanity, about what is located “on the other side” of the border, as well as what is located within his own geographical space, inside the “bowl.” Everything has blurred and changed. It’s become wobbly, slippery.
2. The completely incredible, insanely complete inversion of everything. It is all upside down: the density, the reality, the materiality of the “world of the bowl” has turned out to be emptiness, nothingness, while the former emptiness of the “world beyond the border” has acquired density, reality, and actuality.
3. From this comes a strange, almost euphoric sense of “freedom,” like that of a child’s balloon floating away, a freedom that seems to be free from both worlds, on both sides of the border, a head-spinning sensation of “boundedness,” a sensation that it is perhaps forbidden for a human being to see both sides of the dividing line—a condition of balancing on the edge of mental health.
4. From the perspective of the “border,” the once-integrated world instantaneously turns kaleidoscopic. Peering beyond the edge, “abroad,” you can neither see nor understand the myriad connections of the other world and are doomed to create completely fantastic causes and relationships. At the same time, you are completely aware that this connection has arisen only in your head.
5. A person in this situation is torn between two states of mind: the protective instincts of the past—established in the depths of one’s upbringing, laws that have become unconscious, automatic, unwritten rules, various genetic codes—and a new reality for which no antidote has yet been devised because of the protracted, constant rupturing of cultures. And this leads to stress, panic, and fear.
6. The other world is perceived as a hallucination, a phantom, a temptation. To the frightened, agitated soul living “in the bowl,” these visions, filled with utter monstrosities and all kinds of enticements, appear infantile, disturbing—sleeping worlds given strange, whimsical play in the depths of an indignant consciousness. . . .

7. All of this, all of these twists and turns, takes place against the backdrop of a profound sense of doom and lack of freedom, a sense of being bound to the “bowl.” The pull of the “center,” the gravity of the great and terrible “pyramid,” doesn’t allow the person “on the edge” to break away, but holds him in its iron bridle, reined in like a horse on a track, doomed to describe the periphery in his movement around the center.
8. Hence the constant pessimism, the sense of doom, the feeling of hopelessness associated with this everlasting attachment to the center, the pervasive nihilism and constant self-loathing, the painful combination of excitement, neurosis, and total passivity, the doomed inactivity, a unique kind of masochistic joy derived from total inner hopelessness—such, it seems, is the status quo of this consciousness we have labeled with the terms “edge” or “border.”

## V

Such a strange, agonistic state cannot be all that stable. Contemplation of both worlds, on this and that side of the border, leads inevitably to a distinctive understanding of the place of the border itself, the very line on which the border character stands. It might be said that the straight line running before his eyes turns into a deep “crack” directly beneath his feet that divides the two worlds into separate planets flying off in opposite directions. The image of the cosmos emerges again in his consciousness, but not that image, characteristic of the central consciousness, of the eternal flat earth under an enormous starry cupola. For the “person of the edge,” the cosmic image now acquires the kind of immediacy and dynamism experienced by a person standing on ice who discovers a crack under him and sees his two feet on either side of it.

The endless black cosmos does not calmly and magnificently wrap the large earth but rather ruptures it into two halves, precisely at the point where the person is standing, and pushes the halves apart; below, under his feet, the person sees with horror the crack opening onto an enormous, black drop-off filled with cold, darkness, and stars.

From here, from this strange contemplation of the abyss, comes that cosmic experience, alive and intense, filled with ancient horror, that the person standing on the edge feels like a sweet and panicked sting, the burn of icy cold.

Now the “crack,” not a line or a border as it was before, emerges as a new, entirely irrational motif. The currents running through it are perceived as forces of chaos, thrusting themselves upward, coursing through the person straddling the crack, rushing toward some new other cosmos—currents terrifying in their unbelievable energy, flowing from this crack as if along the

walls of a deep, icy canyon. The one who is lying (standing) on the crack feels himself to be a bridge, accidentally, arbitrarily, and weakly connecting the two separating halves, strangely conscious of the fact that even though these are two different halves, they maintain, perhaps thanks to him, some secret commonality, though maybe just a “decorative,” aesthetic commonality. The person himself is not in a position to judge. In his wilted and frightened state, he senses some kind of command, full of insistence, but what exactly it consists of, he cannot say, though he sees that the command’s fulfillment, which depends on him, is being carried out poorly.

## Art Has No Unloved Children

1987

Kabakov's first article intended for publication in the Soviet Union, "Art Has No Unloved Children" argues that the Russian state (in the contemporaneous guise of the USSR) must learn from past mistakes. Kabakov contends that throughout Russia's history its most creative voices have been persecuted during their lifetimes, only to be later proclaimed national treasures. He makes the case that the Soviet state should recognize the achievements of the unofficial artists and writers while they are still alive and at work, rather than continuing to ignore or punish them. Appearing in *Literaturnaia Gazeta* on 19 August 1987, the article was retitled "Little White Chickens, Little Black Chickens" by the editors.

One of the obvious signs that change is entering into our public life is the striving to re-create a full picture of our historical development and the elimination of taboos on a broad range of historical phenomena that have been deliberately hushed up. For example, many people have known that artists producing so-called unofficial visual art have been working for approximately thirty years in Moscow, Leningrad, and other cities, and yet the vast majority of viewers have known virtually nothing about this art: artists of this movement have been deprived of all opportunities to establish direct contact and dialogue with the viewer via open exhibitions. This was the result of the artistic and exhibition practices undertaken by the Artists' Union, for which a monolithic conception of art dominated. There was a monopoly over artistic truth and an intolerance of any kind of alternative.

The traditions established in the 1930s, in essence, represented a continuation of nineteenth-century academicism. The carrier of the eternal and the beautiful was seen to reside in this academicism and only in it. It alone was recognized as having the right to call itself high art that depicts reality in the light of the ideals of true beauty. It was assigned the lofty mission of nurturing goodness and morality. Conversely, any work that did not fit into the Procrustean bed of "academicism" was denied access to viewers, who over the course of the last few decades have received only negative information, as in a police blotter or "witch hunt," about the existence of this loathsome phenomenon—called modernism or avant-gardism (these are the mildest designations), or labeled indecent, unsuitable for viewing under any circum-

stances, deserving of harsh judgment. What was seen in this art was “a studio for curing political provocations,” “the wretched offspring of ambitions,” “dilettantish dishes,” “dubious semi-amateurism.” Even now, such phrases resound in angry speeches that, to a great extent, represent the only public admission of the existence of this mysterious art. Hence, people unenlightened about artistic issues know only one thing, but it is the most important thing: everything that is even close to avant-gardism should be dropped, done away with once and for all.

We, however, shall put aside excessive emotion. We shall calmly try to make sense of a strange question: Why—despite all of the attacks, the absence of opportunities to exhibit their works, the difficulty of the artist’s fate, the everyday inconveniences attendant on their unrecognized, repudiated position—do “unofficial” artists continue to exist, stubbornly producing only that which their inner voice prompts them to make, and not the external shouts? Are they bullheaded beasts, madmen? Do they just not know how to draw “as they should”? (But as a rule, they have received an artistic education.) Or is this art just for the public? But which public? They are not exhibited, after all. Isn’t this too high a price to pay to make shocking stuff that doesn’t shock anyone?

It is possible to formulate many such questions that either intentionally or unintentionally minimize the problem. But the fact remains a fact: for some reason, this repudiated, unrecognized art continues to exist and develop, in spite of everything. It is impossible to come out here in this newspaper article and provide a problematic letter of recommendation, an analysis or detailed description of this art, and it is premature: first, it has to be widely exhibited, to be presented in the court of public opinion; only then can an evaluation be proclaimed. Otherwise we will be assuming that very same position that the aforementioned critics took in rejecting what no one had seen (as a rule, this included even them). There is only one path here, and it is called by that same word that is now heard often in our public discussions and speeches—*glasnost*: first, exhibitions, art critics’ publications with reproductions, the opportunity for whoever wishes to compose his or her own impression of the object, and only after all of that, discussions, descriptions, polemics, and even perhaps our beloved criticism. Just so long as it is not the search for a black cat in a dark room.

But for now, when evaluation precedes knowledge, how can we talk about nurturing the active position of the viewer, his taste, his personal interest and responsibility for the fate of art and culture? Such a mechanism is capable of engendering only indifference, passivity, the constraint of thoughts and feelings, dogmatism. As a result we encounter a strange phenomenon: that



very same viewer, in the name of whose education our artistic organizations spare no efforts, is in no condition to name a single painter living in our time in our country. Opinion polls actually indicate this. To the question *What is the purpose of the visual arts?* the answer is basically this: it is a type of propaganda and a way to educate the masses. Taste for the visual arts has been lost! It cannot be returned on the basis of old prescriptions—but without such, it is difficult to imagine a fully valued existence for culture or a genuinely developed human being. The main lesson that art can teach a person is the lesson of freedom. The creative spirit, imagination, intuition, flights of intellect, bravery of thought, risk, and the search for the new—these are values inherent in a human being that are not always used and cultivated in due measure but are expressed via the identity of an artist and his works. And it is precisely the perception of the artistic image that is capable of enriching human identity, of opening inside it and before it, perhaps, new and unexpected perspectives that previously might not have been realized, of dwelling in the form of nebulous potencies. A lot is said these days about “new thinking,” about overcoming dogmatism, about the significance of the human factor. Our social consciousness is taking note of the necessity of these things.

Therefore, it is important to follow the internal dynamic of art, to analyze calmly the presumptions about the emergence and existence of such a phenomenon as “nontraditional art.” If we turn to the historical development of art, what is revealed is that such a phenomenon is both natural and inevitable here. The path of development of art is dramatic, and one of the most basic sources of this dramatism is the relation between tradition and nontraditional forms.

Having turned his attention to the Middle Ages, Mikhail Bakhtin brilliantly pointed out the value for the organic development of culture of those tense dialogic relationships that take shape between high, serious, official culture, with its rigid canon, regulation, and ritualism, and lowly, folksy, unofficial carnivalesque-humorous culture, with its happy freedom, upending of hierarchies, and moments of play.<sup>1</sup>

We might recall, for example, the French “accursed” poets—Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine—for these too, in their time, fell out of the flow of the traditional culture of their time, the last third of the nineteenth century. But then in the first quarter of the twentieth century, French art critics made use of the same epithet when describing a whole movement in painting—

1. Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), literary theorist and philosopher, articulated such ideas most powerfully in *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984)

“accursed artists.” These first facts that come to mind attest, somehow, to the fact that there exist similarities in how culture plays out during various times. There emerge, inside of art, unknown, incomprehensible (and therefore, most likely, seemingly unacceptable) phenomena that are cursed, refuted, and destroyed by their contemporaries. Sometimes even successfully, it would seem!

However, they do not disappear; rather they are reborn, proving their vitality. Perhaps it is worth contemplating why they emerge at all—where is the logic here? We can draw an analogy that might be unexpected for a conversation about the visual arts. Biological experiments indicate that if one hundred chicks appear in the chicken coop, there will definitely be two black chicks for every ninety-eight completely white ones. No matter how you try to destroy the hen that engenders them, the same proportion will be evident in the next population.

If we recall the history of academicism in Russia, it doesn’t look so smooth, either. In the beginning stage, academics were renegades—in other words, innovators. But time passed and they began to put the brakes on the development of art. And who replaced them, who turned out to be the new renegades? The Wanderers!<sup>2</sup> It was precisely they who protested against the academy and academicism. Kramskoi, for example, and along with him an entire group of artists, refused to make paintings on religious themes, as was required to receive the gold medal.<sup>3</sup> These artists refused and were expelled from the academy, which cursed them. They then formed their own community, which now would be called an “informal association.” Hence, this itinerant movement, now famous as an important link in the history of Russian culture, was also an instance of unofficial art at some stage of its existence. And such is the consistent pattern—approximately twenty years passed, and these very same Wanderers turned into academics, and their students, sensing the dawn of new times in art, demanded they be replaced in their teaching posts. . . .

And so, the history of art evinces a constant battle between what could conditionally be called academicism, and what is called unofficial art. In this battle, as would be expected, someone loses and someone wins. History then puts all in their proper places.

These examples speak to the fact that the emergence of alternative, non-

2. “The Wanderers” (*Peredvizhniki*) refers to the artists who formed the Society for Traveling Exhibitions (*Obshchestvo peredvizhnykh vystavok*), which aimed to present contemporary life in Russia while also exhibiting visual art in the provinces. The first *Peredvizhnik* exhibition opened in St. Petersburg in 1871; Ivan Kramskoi (1837–1887), a prominent painter and critic, was one of the founders of the Wanderers.

3. The theme of the Academy’s notorious 1863 competition was “A Feast in Valhalla.”

traditional forms inside the normally developing organism of culture is inevitable. Alas, this simple truth is clearly visible only when we look at the art of past epochs. The mistakes made at some point in terms of evaluation, the narrow-mindedness of understanding and taste, seem obvious to us now, or sometimes incomprehensible or even funny. But despite this historical experience, in a strange way we repeat analogous mistakes in our own culture, in our very own time.

In order to understand the specifics of our nontraditional art of the 1960s to the beginning of the 1980s, we should consider that it began to take shape amid the monstrous dogmatism of Stalin's cult of personality, when it was as though everything in culture went numb, and all forms of cultural activity were regulated in the strictest way. It is curious that unofficial art reacts very acutely and precisely to petrified forms but not to those that are half-living. It doesn't touch semi-living forms. That is to say no living forms—there is nothing to topple there. But everything that has turned into stone, into pompous monuments, empty slogans, impersonal books that no one reads, in short, all that was stillborn and empty, becomes the object of attention of “unofficial art.”

In the 1960s and 1970s, seriousness and pathos dominated official art, whereas unofficial art introduced licentious laughter. Parodying petrified forms, it created a distance in terms of the recognized norms; it repudiated any monopoly over artistic truth. During those times, now referred to as “the period of stagnation,” this was perceived as sedition and heresy.

How often the fasting priest from culture would pose such a question: “And just where, then, does this painting summon us? . . . What kind of object is it, a nail or a rope?” The answer was simple: “It isn't summoning us anywhere—it is just a game, a game that not a single person in the world can live without!” The dialogue continued, as a rule, like this: “Now, what if everyone starts to pound nails into the canvas?” Not everyone will do this! But just maybe one person will think of it—for the sake of the game of imagination and the mind. And he would find viewers who would be able to evaluate such a work. And the question about “everyone” would be to a lesser degree ridiculous. What if everyone stops taking a ticket on the trolleybus? Should we destroy city transportation? During any time period, some will buy a ticket and some will ride for free. This should be embedded in all of the preliminary calculations, just like the percentage of viewers who will understand why this notorious nail is pounded into the canvas. Here is yet another classic question of “high culture”: “And just what is this comrade artist laughing at?” Ah, he is just laughing because he is a person—he isn't aiming it at anyone in particular. Violating what was normative in recognized

art, unofficial culture demonstrated that there exist forms of comprehension and reflection of reality beyond the bounds of high culture.

There is yet one more reason for the emergence of “unofficial art”—a protest against the impersonal principle that prevailed in official art. In unofficial creative work, the personal inception played a dominant role; the uniqueness and right to artistic attention of a specific, “little” person was defended.

In a normally developing culture, both principles—traditional and non-traditional—are equally necessary, similar to how any living organism needs mechanisms of both preservation and renewal, stability and dynamism, lest it become unfit for life. The mutual annihilation of official and unofficial cultures turns out to be a tragedy for both.

It is easy to observe that victory—total and resounding—of one movement in art leads to its general stagnation. Art needs a diversity of forms, devices, methods; otherwise it is unsustainable. The clash of traditional and innovative forms in art at the beginning of the twentieth century took on a particularly acute quality. The “leftists” were victorious in the 1920s, and old art was “tossed overboard from the ship of modernity.” This did not lead to anything good—art cannot develop one-sidedly. Within decades, a new academicism won out—and the paintings of avant-gardists started to fly out of the museums. We can feel the consequences of this battle to this day. A suspicious attitude toward the historical avant-garde extends to the nontraditional art of today. As a result, we have lost many works of art from the 1920s. They have either perished or been scattered throughout the world, or have simply fallen out of normal cultural circulation for many decades, and this has done, and continues to do, damage to our art and culture as a whole. Furthermore, the situation that was created compelled many famous artists to emigrate.

An analogous process was repeated in the 1960s and 1970s. The length of a newspaper article, obviously, does not permit me to turn in great detail to this dramatic peripeteia. I will limit myself merely to reminding us of two sadly famous events in our artistic life that led to entirely negative consequences: the Manezh exhibition of 1963 and the Bulldozer Exhibition of 1974.<sup>4</sup> The unhealthy situation in our art provoked a new wave of emigration among our artists, and as a result we lost such marvelous masters as Oskar Rabin, Ernst Neizvestny, Yuri Kuperman, Mikhail Chemiakin, and many others.<sup>5</sup>

4. The Manezh exhibition (1962) and the Bulldozer Exhibition (1974) are generally considered to be the bookends of a particularly stormy period of confrontation between the unofficial artists and Soviet officialdom.

5. Oskar Rabin (b. 1928), Ernst Neizvestny (1925–2016), Yuri Kuperman (b. 1940), and Mikhail Chemiakin (b. 1943) are unofficial artists who left the Soviet Union for the West.

Of course, the historical assessment of these events belongs to the future. Even now we can observe a gradual restoration of honest evaluation and historical justice—alas, often this happens only after an artist's death. For example, the supremely talented artist Ülo Sooster, who worked the last decade and a half of his life in Moscow, who did not sell a single work during his lifetime, was not permitted access to a single official exhibit, and was not accepted in the Artists' Union, now, after his death, is recognized as one of three classics of Estonian art. His works have been acquired by the leading museums of Estonia and are displayed at serious exhibits.<sup>6</sup> One of the greatest sculptors of our epoch, Vadim Sidur, also did not have any exhibitions during his lifetime (the *Literary Gazette* has already written about his dramatic fate), finally "saw" his first solo exhibit—after his death! True, still not in the exhibition halls of the Artists' Union.<sup>7</sup> The first official publication about the art of Anatoly Zverev appeared not long ago (in the newspaper *Moscow News*), also only after his death.<sup>8</sup> It is painful to write about this, but this is our living history and our contemporary reality, and everyone who is not indifferent to our common culture is obligated to comprehend this situation, to understand it, so as to draw a lesson from it.

It is possible that the works of the avant-garde of the 1920s cannot be canonized at this point. This will probably happen in about twenty years. The myth will be rewritten yet again, and then we will get the full picture of the artistic life of that period. Insofar as the representatives of unofficial art who were working in the 1960s and 1970s are concerned, they will be recognized in about fifty years. And then they will arrive in the museums. But already now, recognizing our past, we should strive to create a full-blooded artistic life, full of dynamism, tensions, and battles. To that end, these artists' works should already be appearing in exhibitions as art oriented toward creating discussion. Let not everyone recognize them, not right away; yet it is impossible to conceal and hush up an entire art movement. It is not right to give consideration only to those who consider any nontraditionalist a blotcher, a smearer, an enemy of art and the people. The demand for *glasnost* should be extended to this sphere of visual art as well, no matter how unusual such art might seem to us.<sup>9</sup>

6. Ülo Sooster (1924–1970), an Estonian unofficial artist and Kabakov's studiomate in the 1960s.

7. Vadim Sidur (1924–1986), an unofficial sculptor who often worked with grotesque, profane, and erotic themes.

8. Anatoly Zverev (1931–1986), an unofficial artist who first gained fame in the 1950s with his expressive paintings and drawings.

9. *Glasnost* refers to the Gorbachev-era policy of permitting open discussion of political and social issues and their dissemination in the media.

Artistic diversity, an intracultural dialogue, is in the interest of art as a whole. We have one more discovery to make: the world will not turn upside down and the sky will not fall to earth if current “academics” and “avant-gardists” are accorded equal rights in our exhibition halls. Experience indicates that in history a peaceful coexistence has already been prepared for them—after all, they are children of the same epoch. As a rule, children are not divided into those who are loved and those who are unloved. If it is now already obvious that this shared historical fate will inevitably unite them, then what remains for us is merely to provide them with a peaceful coexistence in our common contemporary reality. After all, this contemporary reality is only a small part of our larger history. And we will succeed only if we try to look at our living, stormy, contemporary reality from the perspective of a history that has, in the end, put everything in its proper place.

## How I Became a Character Myself

1989

Elaborating on the themes of 1985's "The Artist-Character," this absurd short story relates a fictional anecdote about unofficial life in the 1970s. The narrative imagines a visit from a "citizens' commission" to Kabakov's attic studio. Recounting the implications of the tale's tragicomic denouement in 2016, Kabakov broke into laughter, emphasizing that the story exhibits the classic structure of "Jewish humor": even if, against all of the odds, you manage to do everything right, everything can still end up turning out entirely wrong. In fact, the odds are that it will.<sup>1</sup>

I was working on my "white" paintings at home in the attic, in my studio on Sretensky Boulevard. It was the end of the 1960s, beginning of the 1970s, and work on such paintings during those years was extremely dangerous. The creation of paintings in "nonaccepted traditions" could end very badly. How? In all kinds of ways. The repertoire of punishment was broad, covering the entire scale of retribution. For what? *For everything*. They could imprison you for having contact with foreigners. They could take everything away and destroy it as "hostile, ideologically problematic objects." They could expel you from the Artists' Union. They could stop submitting your work to publishing houses (this had already happened to me twice), or they could simply deprive you of your studio. . . .

It is not surprising that in such an inflamed, panicky atmosphere, any telephone call in which an unfamiliar voice was heard through the receiver—"Is Ilya Iosifovich there?" (of course, without any "hello" or identification)—was immediately perceived as the end of everything: the future, life, and work. I took my own measures against such hysteria, against such horror: the door at the far end of the attic, the only one through which you could reach me via the back entrance, was always locked from the inside. It didn't have a bell, and that door was so far away from the studio that I wouldn't have heard even thunderous blows with a crowbar, and if I had heard them, I still wouldn't have answered the door. (This was often inopportune, since my

1. Interview with editor, Mattituck, NY, 28 February 2016.

faulty heaters would pour water on the downstairs neighbors who would call the plumber from the ZhEK. Knowing that I wouldn't unlock the door and not having a key—only my neighbor Volodya and I had keys—they would crawl out on the roof and, cursing, signal to me through the window that something had to be repaired in the studio.) Furthermore, I almost never answered the phone, or would answer immediately in a squeaky, childlike voice—"Hello!"—which would always surprise the caller, who might decide either that I had gone crazy or that children had gotten into my studio. Most often, though, I would disconnect the phone altogether and sit and draw in what seemed to me complete safety.

But it only seemed that way. When I'd go out into the courtyard to go home, I might run into my attic neighbor, who was also an artist and who had a studio at the other end of the roof. (The entire perimeter of our enormous building was lined with studios that each artist inhabited like a submarine, each in a separate compartment. But unlike a submarine, the separate compartments never had anything to do with one another. You could get into them only through separate entrances to the building from the courtyard.) And my artist neighbor would usually say, with a depressed look, "A commission is coming on Friday. Clean up your place, and pass it on to your neighbor." Everything would fall apart inside me at such news. A commission comes with but one goal: to seal the studios and expel us to who the hell knows where. (These studios were not our property. The Artists' Fund rented them from the ZhEK, the public housing authority, and we in turn rented them from the Artists' Fund.) There were numerous, very different kinds of commissions: sanitary commissions, technical commissions, repair commissions, commissions from the executive committee of the region, and the most horrible—almost bestial—the fire commission. These commissions differed in composition. Most often there were three or four people, each armed with some sort of documents, but sometimes there were five or even seven people. In any case, the goal was always the same—to close, to seal off, to finish with this cursed evil that had nested in the attics—the "artists." It should be said that the word "artist" was firmly associated throughout our society with the profligate, the cheat, the scoundrel, the drunk, the do-nothing, the enemy of society, and the first wish and obligation of everyone concerned, from the neighbors living downstairs to the chairman of the executive committee, was to get rid of him, to crush him like some kind of vermin. An artist is a person who doesn't go to work "like everyone else." It's not clear what he does. He earns insane amounts of money in an easy fashion, debauches from morning until night with his models, and on top of all that occupies a large



living space according to some unknown right, even as others are perishing in poverty and overcrowded apartments.<sup>2</sup>

I'm recounting all of this so that the reader might understand the state I was in when the next commission—having arrived filled with hate, revulsion, and suspicion—viewed my studio and the white and not-white paintings standing along the walls. (Why didn't I hide them before the commission's arrival, like I usually hid vodka bottles in the corners? I was more afraid to show them an empty studio. That would have raised even more suspicion: "Heh-heh-heh, then what is it that he's *really* doing up here?" No, it was better for them to see the fruits of my work standing along the walls, better they be convinced that this is the studio of an artist, and not . . . it's horrible to even think what might enter their heads. . . . And having seen the paintings, what could they understand? They might become infuriated, concluding that I am mocking them, and not only them but Soviet power, the Motherland! Each person in our country knows by experience that the incomprehensible evokes in our people not a desire to understand or at least to admire, but a rabid anger, a sense of offense, a desire to trample and destroy . . .)

The commission members, as though they had conspired, didn't pronounce a single sound for a long time. They just looked at my boards and, threateningly, remained silent.

For a long time I have known that scorching silence of "people who have power," people who see in you an enemy that for some reason they still haven't dealt with.

Had they questioned me, what could I have answered, standing there like a knowing, guilty, apprehended thief? What is this before us? If you really are an artist and this attic is the studio of an artist, then where are the easels and palettes? Where are the portraits, the landscapes on the walls? Where are the canvases on stretchers? What is the meaning of these strange white shields with carefully written texts on them? Paragraphs, tables of last names? Whose are they? The bosses, impenetrable, are intensely scrutinizing, threateningly silent.

I can't endure it, but I must. I must quickly justify myself, save myself and my studio. I jump in first, not waiting for a question, with a response-explanation. I speak calmly, in no way acknowledging my internal hysterics.

2. Author's note: In connection with this, it is impossible not to recall the epic discussions between the local authorities and the Artists' Union on a most pressing problem: Would artists be permitted to have a couch in the studio? The authorities forbade a couch—first, because it was forbidden to sleep in the studio and, second, to prevent debauchery—but the Artists' Union insisted on a couch, since an artist, having stood for an hour or two at the canvas, had a right to rest and recline on a couch, which is entirely logical.

“These are all orders from the ZhEK. This is the schedule for garbage removal for the entrances of our building. This stand is for the playground in the courtyard, and this is for the ‘red corner.’<sup>3</sup> On this board there is a photograph of an exemplary worker; it will be hung in the square for the holiday . . .”

The tension diffuses. Everything has become clear. The commissioners think, he, this guy, is not an artist, but he does necessary work. He works on the beautification of the courtyard, the street. True, all of this looks a bit strange: schedules, last names. But on the other hand, it corresponds to what the guy is saying. It is precisely these “stands”—Masonite panels in heavy frames painted white—that each of us sees near building entrances, at construction sites, at warehouses, train stations, at police stations.

Now I have an entirely comprehensible, socially familiar image. I fit into our common Soviet world. I have my own place in it: I am not an artist—I am a scripter. Apparently I get my salary from the ZhEK, and the studio, paint, boards—all of this belongs to the state, it is not my own. Along the walls are empty boards for still unwritten announcements. . . .

I am a “character,” with a readymade, familiar role, a person from the ZhEK, something like a pipe fitter or a plumber, a creature from the lower ranks of the social hierarchy, small, forgotten, not deserving of attention. It is necessary only to ensure that this creature does not “bring women” here (there, in the corner, he has a couch), does not drink, sweeps up his trash, pays his bill regularly, and doesn’t bother his neighbors. But it would be best of all if he—and others like him—were not in the attic, where, having locked themselves in, they can do the devil knows what, far from the eyes of the police, fire inspectorate, and sanitary commission of the executive committee . . .

The commission silently turns around and leaves my studio, first having signed a protocol, as “all of the members,” ordering the “closing and sealing of the dwelling.”

3. The “red corner” originally referred to the area in Russian homes in which icons were kept; *krasnyi* (red) is also the root for the word *krasivyi* (beautiful). In the Soviet period, the corner became the place in any institution in which busts of Lenin, propaganda posters, pamphlets, etc. were kept.

## A Story about a “Culturally Relocated” Person

1994

This text, an edited transcript from one of Kabakov’s first public speeches in the West (at an art critics’ conference in Stockholm), sheds light on the artist’s understanding of the West and East during his first decade living outside Russia and the USSR. It is particularly instructive to compare the narrative here with Kabakov’s observations in his dialogue with Mikhail Epstein fifteen years later. Throughout this collection, one can track the transformation of Kabakov’s conception of Western art: from the purely imaginary hypotheses of the early 1980s to his embrace by the West in the 1990s to the more nuanced and skeptical viewpoint articulated in the late 2000s.

The circumstances of my appearance at this podium are fairly remarkable. Never having contemplated such a thing, I was flabbergasted to receive the news that I am supposed to speak at this congress and that I was *chosen* to do so. The situation instantly reminded me of an episode from my childhood, from my school days.

My classmates and I were racing around during a break between classes, textbooks and notebooks flying all over the place, when suddenly the teacher appeared and announced that I was being summoned immediately to the director’s office. When I opened the tall, leather-covered door, I saw in front of me what was called the “senior pedagogical council”: the entire core teaching staff was sitting at a long table; a bit farther down was the director himself and the counselor of the academic program. My appearance was met with complete silence. Finally, the director asked, “Kabakov, you must know why we summoned you?” I was silent, shifting from one foot to the other. “We want to speak to you about your hooliganism.” Thoughts rushed through my head with frightening speed: first of all, in our class, Sidorov and Pokrass were much worse than me and, second, as far as I could recall, I hadn’t done anything in the past week. The director went on, “Don’t worry, you haven’t done anything ‘particularly exceptional.’ We called you in here as a ‘typical representative’ of the problem of hooliganism in our school, and we wanted to hear what you have to say about why you behave like a hooligan and why hooliganism has become so widespread recently?”

The present situation resembles precisely what I have recounted: the audi-

torium is silent and I am supposed to guess why I am here. I am supposed to guess just what it is about me that is typical.

And I think I've guessed: I am a "relocated person." I, raised and formed completely in one cultural region, have been living in another one for a long time now, six years already. My "cultural" past collides with my "cultural" present. Having learned to swim in one lake, I, gasping for air, now flounder in another body of water, one whose composition is utterly different. Today there are dozens, if not hundreds, of such flounders who at times come to the surface, then once again disappear underwater. It is in this sense that I understand the topic about which I am to speak today, how I understand my being "chosen": I am to talk to you about how a "culturally relocated person" feels, about how both cultural layers are refracted and intersect in such a person's consciousness, and how this becomes evident in his work.

In telling this story I will experience a particular satisfaction rooted, apparently, in a circumstance of an entirely personal nature. Although it is pleasant to feel like a so-called individual, it is no less pleasant to reveal and display your individuality not as something exceptional, but as just the opposite, as something entirely characteristic and typical. A psychoanalyst would no doubt detect here a case of self-repression due to being raised in a totalitarian society, and we would no doubt have to agree with the analyst's perspicacity.

But let us begin by employing an old, bureaucratic, much-lamented Soviet organizing tradition, by providing a synopsis of the forthcoming account:

First, we shall touch on the situation in which the "relocated person" has not yet begun his "relocation," although he already has an image of the West and a set of expectations and claims that he will present to that same West.

Further, we shall touch upon two tendencies—strategies, so to speak—which are connected, but which can be singled out and examined separately: the first we will call the "idealistic" tendency, inclined toward broad artistic generalizations and speculations; the second is a "practical" tendency, more connected with the material aspects of artistic activity in the relocated person's "West."

Next, we shall touch on the a priori, and as a rule fatal, mistakes in these hypotheses about the "Western art world," which seem to be founded firmly and well in advance.

And finally—this will be the main part of the speech—we shall try to speak about the actual results of this "convergence," of this unification of two cultures, about the real and absolutely unreal possibilities in such a situation.

During my speech I will assume the position of a patient obsessed with only one thing: how to describe the symptoms of this process most accurately.

As a rule, a "relocated person" winds up in the "West" voluntarily, and no matter how sudden or gradual this relocation is, the person has been preparing internally for a long time, and naturally he can't help but form an image beforehand of that world in which he will find himself. This image existed and exists until this day (no doubt, it will exist in the future too) on the territory of the Russian-Soviet world. And although I'm speaking of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, it seems to me that a similar picture is visible from any country, and its "realisticness" remains the same despite all the diversity of the contours.

The notion that the Western art world is hierarchical, that it has a pyramidal quality, is at the base of this image. In this hierarchy, there exists one most important country, the main city in this country, and the most important gallery or group of galleries in that main city. I'll speak a bit later about why the gallery and not something else is precisely at the top and in the center of the art world. The director or directors of such galleries are crazed with their love of art. They are continually searching for "genuine" art and "genuine" artists. But to find these, given that the Western world is enormous, is not so easy. For the most part, judging from the reproductions in journals or catalogs, what is done there is boring, third-rate, and uninteresting. This, of course, is very good for the one who is now heading there: it will make it easier to get noticed and be "taken" against such a background.

In accordance with such an image, a system of "expectations" is devised, along with a strategy for behavior after arriving in the desired territory. The base of these expectations is getting into—if not the very best, "main" gallery—then, at least, a "very good" gallery. By this time, information has already been gathered about the main country and its main city and, of course, all the main galleries in it. Along with this dream of getting into a "good" or "very good" gallery are all sorts of other dreams connected to a thoroughgoing program designed to extend to the very end of the artist's life: relative material prosperity, successful exhibitions, and, thirdly, the cherished, gradual, step-by-step dissemination of the artist's fame throughout the world.

All of this, I repeat, is connected entirely with the "level" of the gallery: a "good" gallery will enable the artist to achieve this more quickly and better than a not so good one, where the program would advance more slowly, or worse, and if you end up in the "main" gallery, it starts literally immediately. And all of this, naturally, is connected with the name of the director of the gallery. A few of these names sound downright legendary. Earlier I spoke briefly about the image of these directors breathing only the air of art, searching for someone to promote instantaneously to the roster of "world geniuses"; indeed, the directors' own memoirs and self-descriptions paint

just such an image. In his program of "expectations," the relocating person prepares for these directors the role of caring and anxious father, one who will toil "day and night" in support of the genius child, a father who will take it upon himself not only to realize all of the child's dreams but to take care of all of his material concerns as well: the legalization of his status in the country of residence, the conduct of his everyday and legal affairs in these new, unfamiliar surroundings, and—the main thing—a continual supply of money from the sale of his paintings. In this wonderful plan the artist sees for himself only one "sacred" thing: to create works of art. All the rest is the affair of the "good gallery," where everything functions in an automatic regimen, according to a rhythm that was set in motion long ago: exhibition, success, sale of paintings to collectors; exhibition, success, sale of paintings to a museum; etc. ad infinitum. In this composition a particularly important place is given to that same director, to his ardent and passionate interest in the burgeoning career of "his" artist. And this is entirely logical: the greater and more frequent the success of the son, the greater the revenue the "father" receives, and the greater his joy from the so thoughtfully nurtured and guided talent. If the person getting ready to relocate is not merely a wonderful artist and a talent, but a "modernist" in principle, if he "knows and accepts" Western art and wants to participate in it, he is filled with the same expectations: to realize his ideas and concepts, which are not only, he is certain, on a par with the very "latest" in this area, but even a step or two ahead; and moreover, for all of this to occur and be realized in the lap of a proper gallery.

Takeoff, a smooth flight, and the subject of our story appears on new ground. He has neither money nor, as a rule, relatives who can support him at first, nor artistic "compatriot groups" or patrons such as, they say, existed at the beginning of the century. In the "main" artistic center where he has "landed," he is one-on-one with the actual local situation, carrying only the small bundle of paintings and drawings he has managed to bring with him. The realization and verification of his original plan begin. He has disembarked not on an uninhabited "Treasure Island" but into a densely populated, even overpopulated, world where his secret Captain Flint map doesn't correspond to reality at all.<sup>1</sup> The major galleries really do exist; you can go to the advertised address, touch the glass placard near the entrance with your hand, and even glimpse, at the end of the corridor through an always open door, the fleeting face of the "head" director, a face familiar to you from photographs. But that's all. No one looks at paintings here. No one will come to the room you rented to look them over. The secretary looks at slides twice

1. Captain Flint is a character in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883).

a week. But in this new, interesting world, it turns out that everything has its own predetermined shelf. "One who is landing" finds out—from another "newcomer," who landed long before he did—everything he needs to know about the actual local life, and primarily about the galleries, of commercial art and so-called noncommercial art, which can also be sold under certain circumstances. The main thing is to find that gallery which best corresponds to your "profile" and style—and, it turns out, is very, very difficult to get into. But best of all is to head for, even though it is not so "prestigious," a gallery that deals specifically with the art of the nationality to which the "relocated person" belongs: Russian, Italian, Mexican, etc.

I will not describe here in detail the fate of those artists who do not make it into a gallery, any gallery at all, which is the majority of artists, and who are put in the position of "keep trying and waiting" for years, until such time as they lose their strength and desire. I will not talk about disillusionment, horrors, and tragedies, that is not my genre: I promised that my story would be depressing but not tragic. Let's assume that the artist has already made it into a gallery.

Today, it's as though the noncontractual, nonverbal relations between the artist and the gallery recognize the expectations about which we spoke earlier. Exhibitions are organized about twice a year; the gallery handles all of the "paperwork," helps the artist obtain the right to work, that is, legal status in the country; the precise commission from the sale of paintings is agreed upon. Let us even assume that one of the most important points in this program goes as planned—there is an exhibition, and many paintings are sold, which naturally pleases both the gallery and the artist and favorably affects their relationship. Nevertheless, the creative ambitions of the artist remain continually unsatisfied. The reason is not at all that the director doesn't love art, that he doesn't behave like one's own "father," that he doesn't try from morning until night to get the artist publicity. The reason rests in the objectively existing position of the gallery today, independent of its rank in the contemporary art world, whereby the history of the discovery of pop art is not likely to repeat itself. And this is primarily because the dominant role in the discovery and exhibition of modern art, a role that at some time in the past was indeed played by the gallery, is disappearing, if it had not already disappeared at the beginning of the 1980s. Over this same time, the significance of nonprofit organizations has grown infinitely: kunsthallen, institutes of contemporary art, museums of modern art. Under these conditions galleries do not turn out to be the only ones who show the world all that is best, most interesting, with the brightest future. Even the most "major" galleries are losing their standing as the highest arbiters of artistic status and fashion,

and as the first discoverers of new talents. Now they attract artists to themselves only after these "talents" have exhibited in other places.

But in terms of their expectations, those arriving from "outside" have failed to notice this diminution of the galleries' role, and to a large extent this isn't their fault. It seems to me that those who are listening to me now must already have detected a spuriousness—not so much in the words, but more likely in the intonation—in my ruminations about galleries. Any person who is not interrupted for a long time—and that is precisely the situation now—will betray his own attitude toward the subject of discussion. In some people what emerges is the vociferous intonation of a prophet, in others the tiresome intonation of one who is saying what everyone has already known for a long time; many have detected in me shades of poorly concealed terror or fear. That's correct. I really do fear galleries, not this or that specific gallery with which I have worked or am working, but rather the gallery as an institution in general, as a principle. And I can say immediately why I fear them: I fear them primordially, instinctively, and profoundly.

When a traffic policeman stopped me in the Soviet Union for violating some rule, I walked, having half-opened the door of my car, toward him, and having seen my shaking hands, he asked what was the matter with me. I answered, "I am afraid of you." It's the same in this case.

But it's better if I say outright what I am not afraid of: I am not afraid of kunsthalles, kunstvereins, ICAs, museums, and foundations. I don't like private institutions; I do like nonprivate, public ones. The psychoanalyst would again find in this the reaction formation of a person born and raised in a totalitarian society, and again he would be correct.

I understand perfectly well the curators and their role in the contemporary artistic process. In essence, fate itself has called them to fulfill this mission: to show in their institutions the newest, most important, most interesting of what is happening in today's art world, both national and international. And I might add, in the majority of cases this profession and these people unite all that is necessary for accomplishing this. They are full of profound enthusiasm and interest in what they are doing. They combine in themselves art historians, critics, and organizers. They possess complete and thorough information about today's worldwide art process, and furthermore—without this there really is no curator—they have an intuition, a sixth sense that permits them to see when something is approaching us from the future. In the best sense it is a profession for the idealist, and that's why today it is difficult and popular.

Another incident from my days in art school—I am moving chronologically in my examples—will illustrate the reason for my trust in curators and



my panicky fear of galleries. During the summer practicum at our art institute, every day we would have breakfast, lunch, and dinner at a big, common dining table, and all of this was included in the tuition for the general institute program. Our teachers and professors would eat alongside us. Everyone always had a good time. We would energetically discuss artistic problems in an unconstrained and relaxed fashion. But one time our professor invited me and some other students to lunch at his house. It should be said that the times—these were the postwar years in a village outside Moscow—were rather modest, if not to say simply barren. It was not so easy to obtain groceries. And our behavior, mine and my friends', was entirely different at that table than it was in the common dining hall. As easily and with as much gusto as we stuffed down our meals in our mess hall, we literally choked over every bite here; after all, each item, each dish was not just one's own, not "communal," but belonged personally to the host who had invited us here. He and his wife had *obtained* all of this. They stood in line. They spent their meager personal reserves, and they themselves were embarrassed, and this was conveyed to us. Under such conditions each dish, each bite, turned into torture. Constraint and silence reigned at the table. The parable is clear. That's why it is so easy with curators, why you can so freely give yourself over to the realization of the project, your idea, because they are curators, relatively free in their budgets, capable of realizing the most dramatic and often expensive projects. They don't have the terrible shadow behind them: how, in what way, will they manage to sell this or that item? Today no gallery can permit itself to act this way, because "it's business" (and a very difficult one, according to everyone). It could be said that kunsthalls, ICAs, museums of modern art also spend somebody's very real money, public monies, on their activities, but these monies, I am firmly convinced, for the most part go to genuinely cultural activity and thereby justify their public cost.

My enthusiasm for the idea of nonprofit organizations has yet another cause, which finds its basis in the existence of "unofficial" culture in the USSR over the course of thirty years. This unofficial world, as is well known, comprised a small group of artists, poets, and writers in Moscow, and former Leningrad, which opposed the art of Socialist Realism that existed in Soviet culture with a search for other, nonregulated forms and directions. They did not have the opportunity either to exhibit their works or to get information, and there was the daily danger of their small circle being destroyed. But their opposition to official art was not only of an aesthetic nature but, to a great extent, an ethical one as well. This was a movement full of idealism and aspiration toward "pure," noncommercial means of artistic production. This involved the creation of the primary mass of works "for oneself," for

one's own circle, and—whoever knows the eternal conditions of life established in the Soviet Union—with virtually no hope of ever “showing” them and receiving some sort of response. Under such circumstances, many artists earned supplementary income on the side—they did illustrations, book designs and layouts. This demanded a great deal of energy; it required time. But it preserved the inviolability of the time devoted to “one's own” things. This precise delineation was transferred by me and some of my friends into our evaluation of the situation of artistic institutions in the West—which we saw manifested in their division into purely idealistic ones, which included all nonprofit organizations, and commercial ones, galleries. From my point of view, this picture was entirely confirmed by the actual state of affairs. May the artists living here since childhood please forgive me, but I find that after the place where I used to live, this state provides simply astounding opportunities thanks to the existence of these institutions. My opinion, after everything that has been said, is that all of one's artistic efforts can and must be oriented only toward them, but I understand that it is not my place as a newcomer, a “relocated person,” to give advice to those already living here.

In order to amuse the public, I will tell the story of a group of Kazakhs, residents of the steppes of Central Asia, who visited the famous collection of painting in the State Tretiakov Gallery in Moscow. The tour guide leads the group to a painting by Isaak Levitan that depicts a lone, small church on an island, surrounded on all sides by the infinite flood of a river.<sup>2</sup> “Look at this image of loneliness, neglect. The artist brilliantly depicts the anguish and boundless sadness of a Russian person in such a simple and powerful way,” pontificates the lecturer. “Why sad? Why mournful? It's a happy painting, joyful!” interrupts one of the Kazakhs. “Why is it happy?” “*What?* Can't you see for yourself? There's a whole lot of water there!”

The relocated person has virtually no knowledge about the existence of this branching Western network of nonprofit organizations (of course, this was the case before my speech—now everything is different). And yet, one of the main obstacles for this person on his way to the *kunsthal*, his main problem, is the criterion for participation in contemporary artistic life. We can formulate this as the problem of the contemporary language in art, which stands like the riddle of the Sphinx not only before the newcomer but before any, even fairly well-known, Western artists, who, so it is thought, absorbed it (this language) with their mother's milk and didn't learn it from books and reproductions.

I am convinced that for each person sitting in this auditorium, the tem-

2. Isaak Levitan (1860–1900), a celebrated painter of Russian landscapes.

perature of attention should rise automatically at the phrase “contemporary artistic language”: this is precisely that vague area where each person has something to say; each person has his own notion in this regard. I also have one, and it concerns the contemporary artist: his speech should be comprised of a contemporary “vocabulary,” a “new” utterance taking into account precisely this vocabulary, and an individual “accent,” personal leitmotifs that accompany this utterance. In all three of these components, the arriving person has, as a rule, what are called “problems.”

As far as the size of this “vocabulary” of contemporary words is concerned, many believe, and I think so too, that the happy time of forming new words in this graphic language is already past, that the majority of Western artists are very familiar with this two- or three-volume visual “library” or encyclopedia, that it goes without saying that it is their natural baggage. This is not at all the case with the newcomer, who, if he has used this “collected works,” encountered many torn-out pages, and may be familiar only with the cover or a few individual pages. But without the knowledge of all the pages—and I repeat here that frightening word, *all*—and preferably also the notes published at the end in fine print, any work in this terrible Western art world, and not only a new and original one, is futile. In place of such a heavy load (the entire encyclopedia)—the existence of which he often doesn’t even suspect—the “relocated person” elaborates a theory of “his own niche,” inserting himself at his own discretion into this or that volume of the encyclopedia, into this or that page, applying to his own works the criterion of “good/bad” and not asking, “When was this done?” Understandably, this question is of no particular significance for “internal,” familial, and friendly use, whereas for “external” use it can turn out to be fatal.

A yet more difficult riddle for any artist, a true stumbling block, is the demand—hanging like the sword of Damocles over his head—to do something “new.” Oh, the marvelous, irretrievable times when one could make something “good and of high quality,” when the basis for ambition was the slogan “Just like everybody else’s, but better!” True, after the publication of Boris Groys’s book, *On the New*, this question began to be clarified somewhat—the fog began to dissipate—but there were still no direct instructions as to how to make this accursed “new” thing without which you simply won’t be admitted anywhere.<sup>3</sup> Not pursuing the problem in depth, since I’m in a tenuous bubble at the expense of other people’s time, I will merely touch on this problem, or as the scholars say, I will “broach” it, with the certainty that it is not within my power either to resolve it or to under-

3. See Boris Groys, *On the New*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2014).

stand it. One must regard the capturing of the new in one's work like an unprecedented, accidental success, like Hemingway having caught a big fish—and we know that fishermen too often return from the river empty-handed. But to extend this metaphor, one must speak the profound truth that, most likely, this fish will be caught in the river and not, let's say, on the main street of Stockholm. Here the "river" is understood to be that same library of contemporary art—that same accursed encyclopedia of absolutely mandatory information about what has already been done and what is being done today. The only thing that the "relocated person" has by right entirely "ready" is his own personal accent. Not only does he not have to worry about it or work on it, but he arrived with it; it is inherent in him from the beginning, the inalienable color and shading of a national culture. The misfortune is that he arrived a bit late, "arrived" in the literal sense of the word, not him, personally, so much as the entire train on which he came.

Two words about this fatal situation whereby the artist arriving today turns out to be an involuntary victim. Just seventy years ago—not a very long period of time—this situation would have "worked" for him rather than against him. I am talking about the waves of national artistic—I cannot come up with the appropriate term here—"inundations" (I am quoting Boris Groys here from memory), continually rolling, one after the other, flowing into the Western art world, renewing ideas and artistic language. Africa replaced India, Russia replaced China. But a considerable time has passed since this enrichment—and the enthusiasm that both this wave and the artist himself provoked in the West has waned, and new arrivals today produce the opposite effect. Belonging to some "school" now—be it Russian or Mexican, French or Czech—is perceived as a negative, ethnographic factor hindering the artist to a certain degree in his attempts to enter the Western artistic community on an equal footing. However, the artist, newly arrived, often doesn't know about this circumstance, this "hump" on his back that appears upon crossing the border, which, as Boris Groys writes, is visible to everyone except the owner of that back. This is precisely the same as when a critic in an offhanded manner writes "the young artist from India" or "the famous Mexican painter"—everyone silently understands what this epithet means.

But there is still another reason why the "relocated person" not so much cannot, but more likely doesn't want to, enter into Western contemporary art. The reason will be funny to the point of incredulity when I say it: he just doesn't like it. But as everyone knows, no one likes it: neither the critics nor the collectors nor the artists themselves. It is formal, cold, heartless, boring, hermetic, and for many people (as attested to by polls), if it didn't exist, they

wouldn't even notice. It is not surprising that the opinion exists that we are talking about a unique kind of conspiracy, a “conspiracy of the untalented.” But it is very simple to respond to this. We have no other language besides this one today and there can be no other one. It is what we speak, and language, it seems, like parents, we cannot choose. But many “relocated persons” think just the opposite, and what begins is an excruciating dichotomy. Either I must speak in this language, be it a thousand times damned, in order to be contemporary and to be “accepted,” or I will do what I know how to do and what I love—painting and art, as I understand them, “genuine art.” Very many “relocated persons” think this way. It's no wonder that in Russia today the story is so popular about Larionov, who, living in Paris, invented Rayonism for the sake of his reputation as a modern avant-gardist, but continued to paint landscapes in oil “for his soul,” keeping them under his bed and showing them only to a few people—and in secret.<sup>4</sup> In this situation, some artists try to modernize a bit, to “renew” their love in the West, but you can't deceive the West—that's why it's the West—and these results turn out to be “unredeemed.”

Now from a general panorama let us move to my personal experience. I have already fully satisfied my passions for broad generalizations and descriptions of others' fates—not specific ones, but in the form of some sort of blurry shadows.

What did this cultural move mean for me personally? What were the problems that arose? And what steps were taken to resolve them?

I must say right off that I, like many of my friends, arrived in the West not from another culture, but from under the ruins and fragments of a culture that had existed at one time and had been totally destroyed. I will not enter into a discussion as to what was Soviet culture. I will not fatigue your attention with an analysis of just which culture in particular was destroyed—European, Western, or Russian. For those of us born in the second generation, the time before the revolution was a time of culture in general, Culture with a capital letter, just as today for adults with machine guns in Lebanon, there was, at some point in the past, simply a time of Peace.

In my consciousness, this “prerevolutionary” culture existed not only in the prehistorical past, but it was alive even today, and it looked like an infinite sea, engulfing on all sides an enormous dry island called the Soviet Union. To reach that sea, to take a dip and swim in its living waves, was my dream.

4. The Russian avant-garde artist Mikhail Larionov (1881–1964) developed his art of Rayonism in the 1910s.

Moreover, it was entirely "Platonic": the borders were, as everyone knows, "under lock and key," and emigration was not what suited me, and would not have been easy for many reasons.

After my relocation to the West (which I refer to as a "business trip" to myself, since this feels more comfortable psychologically and preserves an internal distance from that place where you may perhaps remain until your very death; and besides, it's already a tradition: a great many artists and musicians have left for the West on similar "business trips"), I bumped into the surprising duality with which I began my speech. For I hadn't been mistaken at all: all around me was the very culture about which I had read, dreamed, and seen in my imagination, and it was in everything—in the great museums, in the architecture, in the classical avant-garde, and in today's contemporary art—everything was this culture. But strange as it may seem, it was not in the people themselves, not in the, so to speak, subjects who "function" today in that culture. My strongest impression here is of the gap between the results of the action and the subjects of the action. In conversations and in the people themselves—in artists and critics—I have encountered profound pessimism, alienation, and as a rule, some sort of strange indifference toward the divine, strange lady Culture who appeared to me behind every corner, whose glimmering presence and breath I felt to be right next to me.

This can best be described by comparing the psychology of a bastard or orphan and that of legitimate children. In childhood I always lived in a dormitory, that is, simply speaking, in a children's home, but often on Sundays I would frequent the home of my school friend who had a very prosperous family, a "normal family home": a father, mother, two sisters. One had to see how this legitimate son behaved upon arriving home from school, how he would insult his mother, how he would upset the plates during meals, spilling everything on the tablecloth, how with genuine malice he would talk about his parents and about the home that he was so sick of—while I saw an entirely different picture: rows of books in an enormous library, a wonderful meal, a kind, intelligent woman, and I would think, if only I were to have such a home and such parents!

That's how it is here in almost every artist, without exception. I have seen the desire to kick as painfully as possible everything that is around him, to knock over one more sculpture, to smash one more plate against the wall—understand that I am saying all of this figuratively. But in the life of the family that I was talking about, I saw something else that affected me profoundly. After yet another outburst by my friend, after another of his "tantrums," his mother, not saying a word, picked everything up off the floor, wiped the

table, and in a minute there was the same order in the house that there had been earlier—his behavior had not led to the downfall of the household. I have the very same feeling here, where I now find myself. I repeat, of course, that this is the view of a "relocated person" and accordingly from the side: Western culture is so vital, so stable, its roots are so deep and alive, and it is so productive that, speaking in the language of the parable above, it absorbs, recasts, and dissolves in itself all of the destructive actions of its own "children." Indeed, as many believe, it sees in these actions its very own development—what is elegantly referred to here as "permanent criticism." But I would like to add a footnote here: this criticism, like the destruction itself, is permitted, if it can be so expressed, only from its children. That same mommy described above would have behaved quite differently had I started to act at the table in the same way as her son. Most likely she would have called the police.

If, while living at home, I was full of venom, and all of my works contained aspects of criticism and repudiation, now, having wound up here, I experience tremendous piety toward—I should say after many years of existence under Soviet power—your culture. Internally I am shouting "yes, yes, yes" to all that I see here, and especially to that living history of art, that wonderful river that flows deep, absorbing newer and newer currents.

But this feeling of mine impedes my work here to a certain extent. Here everything is full of criticism, repudiation, and the very greatest—Beuys, Warhol—produce this most successfully and consequently on a grand scale. Without a radical critique of each and every thing, without staunch negativity, no one will listen to you here. But how should a "relocated person" undertake criticism when here criticism is endured, I repeat, only when it comes from your own children, in their own language? Moreover, how can you criticize what internally appeals to you? The newcomer here is forever—and I repeat this fatal word, *forever*—left with only those possibilities reserved for guests, and there are only two of them: to tell about how you, the "guest," feels in the guest's position, or to tell about the place you came from. Both tactics have a long tradition in European culture. But in our time stories about Sinbad the Sailor do not garner as much interest and curiosity as they once did; first of all, because of the energetic development of information and tourism, and second, because there are already quite a few Sinbads here.

I was ready to assume the role of such a storyteller about the country of horrors and sadness from which I arrived, to position myself as a new Homer. Honestly speaking, this was precisely my secret desire: from childhood, I have had an extraordinary passion for telling others what is going on in my own house, rather than undertaking the chores of fixing it—true, this is characteristic of many of my compatriots and in this regard I am not differ-

ent from them. But the entire problem is how to talk so that people will listen to you? The horror and virtual hopelessness of such an attempt results from the fact that any one of your words—words in the literal and figurative sense when the topic of discussion is fine art—has its own context, the context of the place you came from, but in the new place this accursed context is unfamiliar, and because of this unfamiliarity the “word” is inaudible. It doesn’t resound! What’s worse, any one of your paintings, sketches, objects, or texts is slowly—partly because of laziness, partly because of arrogance—explained by the native of the local culture and interpreted in the local context. Against this background your things become banal, long familiar, they wither and they die.

For someone who has never seen the sea or a river, a fish can appear to be a small piglet without legs and hooves. How can you find the right language for your story so that others will listen to your tale? In other words, how can you insert into their ears, eyes, brain not only a text but a context as well, and do all of this in a short period of time when the Western viewer or critic appears and lingers for a moment in front of your work? Here we might envy the circumstances of theater, ballet, cinema, or an evening dinner, the “time factor” they provide. There is no common answer to this riddle of the Sphinx. There is no universal device you can use to slip out of this clinch. Each case is individual. I can only describe the method decided upon by me, or which for some unknown reason came into my head.

I came up with the genre of “total installation.” The viewer winds up in a space in which he sees a multitude of things: paintings, sketches, objects, texts—in essence, the same things he sees by other artists, in other installations. But here the entire collection, and the viewer himself, turn out to be submerged in a purposefully constructed space with an encompassing atmosphere created as well by specific paint on the walls, ceiling, and floor and special lighting. It is that medium, that air, that I brought with me here, to the West. My—our—Russian-Soviet atmosphere: heavy, repressive, boringly gray, hopeless and infinitely sad. If the Western viewer can remain indifferent as he stands before such “strange objects” installed in the clean, bright halls of a museum or kunsthalle, he cannot remain so when he’s surrounded on all sides by “such air.” It is the atmosphere—the magnetic field unexpectedly emerging under new conditions—that is the very context that participates in the proper display of the subject, story, or event that the artist wants to convey to his new viewer-listener. And experience has demonstrated that this speech, this communiqué, is perceived appropriately in such cases.

This example touches upon an extraordinarily interesting question: is it inevitable that the “relocated person” recode the language with which he has



arrived in the West, or can he continue to perfect that language? From the point of view of traditional artistic ethics, the artist should not—if he is a genuine talent, an artist from God, etc.—adapt himself to the new conditions, like a chameleon, but rather should continue to create what was begun and coddled in the silence of his studio, experiencing all the vicissitudes of fate and lack of understanding, hoping, as in the example of Van Gogh, for the justice of historical time and cursing the injustice of today. According to the model described above—which without a twinge of creative conscience is intended and directed toward the new viewer, I repeat, the Western viewer who is experienced and raised on the history of Western art—the main thing is the comprehension and perception precisely by this viewer of what you want to “say.”

By the way, here we have what seems to be a paradoxical situation, since these works produced “here,” these same total installations, cannot be shown in my homeland. I am asked about this fairly frequently and reply, No, because they are made specifically and intentionally only for the language of perception here. In one’s homeland there are none of the torments that inform work in the new place, and there cannot be, because an entirely different language of assessment exists there. It is paradoxical, but whoever is following my story understands why this is so.

But the problem of language appears even more decisive and radical today. This Western language is now actually a language of “common understanding,” and in this sense this “international language” enters—has entered—into contradiction with local, national, and regional languages; they intersect and struggle with one another. Today it is very significant which “language” an artist is speaking—local, regional, or international—in literature this is far from the case. It exists, this international language, but like air, it is impossible to see or touch it, although all of us gathered together here in this auditorium breathe it and “speak” it. It is that language, the level and attributes of which are applied as the criterion today to any work in any corner of the globe. It is that measure of assessment—and it is unimportant whether we curse or praise it—by which works are exhibited today in kunsthallen, and in many galleries; it is the scale according to which museums acquire works. It is the Esperanto that never made it in the area of spoken language, but which has been successful, born at the end of the century, in fine arts, music, and theater. Because in addition to language there is content; there is what the artist wanted to say. And in terms of content, enormous, profound differences surface—social, political, and thousands of other impenetrable differences related to national cultures. But all of them intersect and, most important, they can be understood by others, thanks not to their own lan-

guages, Chinese, Russian, Spanish—for this to be the case one would have to be a superb brilliant art historian—polyglot—but thanks to all those who have learned to hear an alien voice in this unified language—of course, with its corresponding accent.

Are we to understand then, after all that has been said, that the method for preparing a contemporary art dish is already known: that it consists of quality raw material—local, national, or regional content—prepared according to the proper recipe, that is, with a mastery of international speech? Recalling the Russian proverb “God loves a Trinity,” we glance around, and isn’t some “third one” forgotten in this “kitchen”? Of course, this third one is forgotten, the same one from time immemorial—the chef.

## From *On “Total” Installation*

1995

In 1992 Ilya Kabakov was invited to give a series of lectures at the Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Frankfurt. These lectures would later appear in the original Russian, as well as in German and English translation, in the volume *Über die “totale” Installation/O “total’noi installiatsii/On the “Total” Installation* (1995). The lectures offer both a rapid overview of the history of installation art and a kind of “how-to” guide for producing works of installation.

### Lecture One: The General Situation When “Total” Installation Emerges

As everyone knows, it is impossible today to understand anything without the surrounding “context,” up to and including the purchase of a movie ticket. In order to understand what an installation is, and what a “total” installation, in particular, is, and where it came from, one has to imagine that surrounding “context,” that is, to examine at least approximately the general situation of contemporary art as it is today. It appears to be, according to common opinion, very complex, vague, and contradictory. Everyone also concurs with the opinion that we are dealing with a decline in energy in the artistic environment, even some sort of inertia and weariness. (In this case I am arrogantly taking it upon myself to judge not just the specifically Russian artistic situation but the “global” situation, everywhere, despite how summarily this notion appears here.)

But hasn’t something like this been said constantly, in every era? (“There has never been a worse decline,” “Has there ever been a worse time than this?”)

I wouldn’t have the right to speak about this at all, given my ignorance of the entire depth of the processes occurring in this world, but by *complexity* and *contradiction* I have in mind the presence today of a great many pairs of opposing tendencies, and by *decline of energy* and *weariness*—a clash of these opposing forces, in which neither side can conquer the other. To ensure that what I am talking about is clear, I will identify each of these opposing pairs in succession:

1. A change in the roles of the well-known pair of concepts "center" and "periphery."

Until relatively recently, the interrelations between this pair looked entirely traditional for a Russian artist, but not only for a Russian artist. They turned on this long-established question: "Where is it that the most important events in art are taking place today?" (Yesterday it was Berlin; the day after tomorrow, Paris; today, New York; even earlier, Rome—and so on. . . .) For a young artist it was natural to move "to the center," to leave the edge for the middle, the provinces for the capital. Today, however, the seeming stability of these relations has wavered. A multitude of "centers" has appeared, and the periphery has stopped (of course, relatively) being a pitch-black "dark corner," in part because of the quick accessibility of information, but more so because of the universalization and uniformity of the artistic institutions that are rapidly being established all over the world: museums of contemporary art, kunsthallen, contemporary galleries. This rapid multiplication of centers, the dispersal of their significance relative to the "periphery," creates a completely new, often dramatic situation of a psychological, cultural, and communicative character not previously encountered.

2. The crisis in the status of "painting" as a genre.

Whether or not the advocates of painting as the main "plenipotentiary and representative" master in the plastic arts want to admit it, there is a crisis and waning precisely of this genre—and alas, one must agree with this. And we're not talking about this fragrant branch of the noble bush being eclipsed by tall-growing wild plants—performances, installations, photographs, video, and others. Rather, in all probability, the internal potentials for development of the genre have been exhausted, and right before our eyes it has been transformed from a "model of the world," which it was at one time, into an "object" that is slashed or turned toward the wall, on which paint is poured, to which whatever happens to be around is attached. In this capacity, as an object, "painting" functions today in the art world as a "thing among things," having lost the central and privileged position it possessed until not so long ago. But the exit from the stage, the downfall of the "great silent one" who autocratically ruled the art world for nearly six centuries, creates an enormous, still insufficiently recognized whirlpool, like after the *Titanic* goes down.

3. Commercialization and the relation between the commercial and the non-commercial in art.

We are talking about the clash, the combination in one work of two qualities, two tendencies: an interest in commerce and a commercial dis-

interestedness. Of course, here as everywhere else, we are talking about works of modernist art (today, postmodernist). A similar combination appears entirely natural and not contradictory in the art of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and of earlier epochs, where the work, executed in the framework of a familiar tradition, guaranteed beforehand its commercial suitability as long as it was executed properly. But from the beginning of the twentieth century, beginning with the period of permanent innovations, the commercial "profitability" of a work at the moment of its preparation becomes entirely problematic and can be determined only after some interval of time. Such was the situation in the art market before the Second World War. "Traditional" art was of high quality and valuable, and the modernists had not completely "conquered" the "market" or begun to dictate prices. The situation changed after the war, and has been stabilizing especially for the past twenty years. The market and prices are determined predominantly by modern art, which has now become an entirely "traditional" style. (We might recall the joke about the old lady at an exhibition who is distressed, having been told that "other kinds of art won't be happening in the twentieth century.") Hence, prices, increasingly reflecting quality in this newly traditional art, have come to be seen as equivalent to quality, and thus the criterion of quality not only for sellers and buyers (galleries and collectors) but for artists themselves.

But this situation contradicts the fundamental internal requirement of any kind of modernism: to create something "radically" opposed to whatever constitutes the "background," to tradition as a whole and the notion of "creativity" itself, ignoring all material conditionality. An escape from this contradiction, from this "clinch," is sought not only by artists, not only by museum curators, but most of all by the galleries: where will one be able to find absolutely noncommercial art that can be sold for a lot of money in the future?

#### 4. A loss of the dominating significance of trends and styles.

Also completely unexpectedly, the seemingly natural process of the advancing development in art history, movement forward by way of the consecutive "negations" of one artistic direction by another, has been interrupted. Each successive trend "conquers" the previous one, dismissing it as having become "historically obsolete" or "untrue" (or "incomplete"), proposing itself as more all-encompassing and, undoubtedly, more "contemporary."

This victory of the "new" was often achieved as a result of competition between two parallel trends in art: cubism/fauvism, constructivism/surrealism, geometric minimalism/abstract expressionism. But such a "machine of

evolution" has started to skid during the past twenty years. If we compare the previous history of art with a river flowing in one or in many riverbeds, and the diverse trends with the waves of this river, then today's situation most resembles an enormous lake with all of the trends moving around this still surface, "drifting" and peacefully coexisting . . . both new, recently emerging trends and already long forgotten ones. So it seems, "the river of history" is no longer flowing forward, but neither did it turn back, having been transformed into an immobile lagoon that risks being covered with duckweed. You can see the same thing in both the overall panorama and in an individual work: a simultaneous combination of components from different times. Differences in quality and differences in style do not struggle with one another but are arranged together according to the principle of "peaceful coexistence." This situation is perceived by some with an almost apocalyptic slant, as the end of history and a confusion of languages and thoughts.

But history goes on, it continues to occur, and there is yet another tension today recognized by many: a feeling that there are intense processes occurring deep inside artistic life that remain indiscernible on the surface.

##### 5. The contradiction between "national" art and "international" art.

There is still another conflict, still another contradiction: the parallel existence of national and international art. Here too the situation looks completely new, not as it did at the end of the last century or almost to the middle of our century. Along with the existence of major centers of art, national schools developed: French (School of Paris), German, Soviet, etc. It was not until the middle of the century, or even really until the beginning of the 1970s, that international groups of artists appeared, welded together by a commonality of artistic views, forming a unified normative system, including themselves in a unified common understanding of the history of new art, a new system of artistic criteria, a unified pantheon of modernist classics. Beginning in the 1970s, all of this finally formed into a unified complex. The history of art of the twentieth century has become virtually canonic today, and what has turned out to be possible is the creation and productive functioning of an entire system of artistic institutions, obligatory throughout the entire world, based on a common understanding and a unitary context: a system of museums, kunsthallen, private and public collections, educational systems, etc. Today we can speak of an international art community that is not formalized anywhere but that actually exists, and to a great extent presents the norms for artistic life everywhere on the planet (with a Eurocentric orientation). New regions—Japan, India, China, etc.—have been drawn into this "international school." And what about the former national schools?

What is the nature of their relationship to this "international umbrella" that encompasses the entire civilized and uncivilized world? They are dramatic, and not only because national schools have a long historical path of development and are connected by deep roots with the cultures of their countries, but also because the artists themselves, all of these so-called representatives of "International Art"—all graduates of their own national schools—today represent their own national artistic and cultural realities much more than the modernists did at the beginning of the century. The best among them—Jannis Kounellis, Anselm Kiefer, Bruce Nauman—are able to combine in themselves an "international language," an elaboration of a national cultural problematic, and an active, personal point of origin [*nachalo*]. But there are not so many of them, there are very few. The main situation is characterized by dramatic ruptures, conflicts, in each region, between national and international cultural tendencies, the contradiction between the specific mentality of each country and the "international" institutions functioning within its territories.

#### 6. Individualism and the cessation of activities by artistic groups.

It is well known (at least this was a rule of artistic life up to a certain point in time), that all kinds of new tendencies, new ideas, and new proposals arise in small groups, associations of artists bound together by a certain number of years of friendship, who work and live side by side. New art history knows of numerous examples of such groups, but for such a group to be productive, for a specific circle of ideas and proposals to form and endure, time is necessary. Such a group situation, such an "incubation period" within the bounds of one group, practically does not exist today for the contemporary artist. As a result of specific circumstances—primarily early and desirable encounters with a gallery—an artist abandons the group early. He ends up left to his own devices, one on one with all of the institutions, which are oriented toward the artist, again only personally—be it a gallery, *kunsthalle*, "foundation," or some other public organization. Under such conditions, when highly developed and formally well organized institutions have the opportunity to grant various stipends and funds, it becomes virtually impossible for a small independent group of artists to remain intact.

But, placed one on one with a developed but, in principle, anonymous artistic system, the artist can realize himself in it. In fact he realizes only his individualism—one of his traits, taking it to its utmost extreme. Systems of artistic institutions that are developed and interconnected, called upon to engender and aid the process of artistic evolution, in a paradoxical way actually

engender an extraordinarily isolated artistic individuality, which in principle does not need others, which elaborates an individual, isolated artistic system that does not correspond with others in any way.

7. And finally, we have occurring everywhere the complete nondifferentiation between the spheres of art and of life.

This involves a gradually intensifying tendency, now achieving a certain kind of maximum, toward the complete nondifferentiation between the spheres of art and of life itself. And this is occurring along with the constant growth and financing of art's "places of habitat": museums, exhibition halls, galleries. On the one hand, this process is the opposite of what occurred at the beginning of the [twentieth] century: the work of art is again returning to museums, only now it is to museums that specialize in modern art. In a strange way, there is also a parallel process of desacralization occurring at the same time: there is a strong tendency to turn these places into "places of real life"—into passageways similar to airports and train stations.

There is a growing tendency among artists themselves to ignore outright their works as "cultural things" and to treat them like any object in life, in the most direct sense. The cultural sphere of activity is being desacralized, the line demarcating these two layers of existence easily transgressed, even going unnoticed. And the mechanism of dragging in objects "from life into art," which has functioned since the time of Duchamp's urinal, stops functioning, simply due to the nondifferentiation of these two spheres, these two spaces. Everything turns out to be equal to everything else, and picture galleries intended to preserve, and to retain in themselves, this sacral state, are having great difficulty. They are using up their last strength to preserve this atmosphere. At the same time the sacralization of life itself, as was predicted and anticipated by the artists of the avant-garde at the beginning of the century in their manifestos, has not occurred and, apparently, will not occur in the foreseeable future. The effect of artistic forms is losing its power, and we are dealing with a process of annihilation of these forms by the invasion of the formless realia of life itself, among which technical devices occupy an enormous place—various kinds of video equipment, virtual-reality devices, computers, and other property, called upon to demonstrate the "new" in art via the application of new technology.

In this situation a few "strategies" are possible:

Continue to develop forms within the already worked out artistic traditions, elaborating the basic opposition in postwar art history, between minimalism and expressionism, thereby following its internal evolution.



Continue the long-standing tradition of going beyond cultural activity, escaping into a state of premeditated barbarity, mysticism, or elevated aggressiveness, hoping, even having confidence, that the results of all of this might *inevitably be included* in canonical art history.

Establish connections across the borders of each type of art, following the path of "interdisciplinarity," bringing closer together and casting bridges between music, poetry, literature, theater, and plastic art, which until now have been divorced from one another, within the confines of the new "territory" of artistic space.

We are talking about a specific attempt to create a new *Gesamtkunstwerk*. This is precisely what we will propose.

# Text as the Foundation of Visual Expression

1995

Originally presented as the preface to Ilya Kabakov's first collection of translated writings, "Text as the Foundation of Visual Expression" sets out the broad parameters of Kabakov's art in a few short paragraphs.

In the exploration and discussion of this topic, it must be noted that we are not talking about today's widespread practice of a text replacing a picture (although in individual cases this may very well happen), nor are we talking about the picture whose subject is based on this or that literary work, although this situation also plays a role in the subject of our discussion.

We are talking about the more profound, determinative significance of text for any visual image, where behind the various types and forms of textual participation in plastic works (as inscriptions, separate words, letters, etc.), as well as behind any work formally deprived of these elements and belonging to "pure" plastic work, all the way up to abstract forms, stands a narrative which exists and "works" on all levels in the creation of these works, as well as in "understanding" them.

This narrative does not replace the visual. Just the opposite. It "moves" with it and exists parallel to it. Narrative imparts a depth and clarity to the visual that, as a rule, it most often lacks. But first of all, we must introduce "clarity" in the very use of the words "text" and "narrative" in this case, when they are employed beside the words "visuality" and "visual expression."

In this case we are talking not so much about a precisely pronounced word or even about a written text, but rather about a unique kind of active verbal utterance that can be articulated in the course of the creation and perception of the work. Such internal "speech" accompanies any artistic "action," often remaining hidden even to the one "pronouncing" it, though it can also appear to him in its complete textual definitiveness as an accompanying commentary the whole time that he makes the work. And this very same text that was clearly formulated in the "beginning," can be clearly "seen-read" in the finished work.

This is particularly noticeable in works of art that were made a long time ago, which have become the subject of history. Not only are the surviving Egyptian reliefs “pictographic,” but so are works from later epochs. The signs and forms of these artists go together distinctly into phrases; we can easily read this graphic text.

It is not excluded, that this assertion [text as the foundation of visual expression] has as its basis a cause that is not so much theoretical as psychological, connected with my personal experience. I have always had this quality—to connect any visual perception with an internally spoken text—a distinctly spoken monologue would always arise inside me accompanying the examination of anything in life or in art. Without this text or commentary formulated in my consciousness, contemplation was for me incomplete, not experienced strongly enough. This did not mean that words “covered over” what was standing before me, or that seeing was replaced by words. No, my vision remained sharp and tense, and the more concentrated it grew, the more naturally and inevitably it engendered a text to accompany it.

## On Risk

1997

In the 1990s Kabakov began producing short, aphoristic texts that typically appeared in catalogs or as exhibition wall texts. “On Risk” is among the artist’s most punchy offerings. Here he reflects on the mechanisms of contemporary art.

The theme of “risk” is marvelous, topical, and very good for a discussion of the activity of the contemporary artist who, when considering his work, is presented only with his own choice. Of course, he does not fit into any tradition, but rather observes only one: not to fit into any. To do so, even if unknowingly, to join the ranks of the already familiar as in times past, to resemble someone else, is the greatest risk and can lead to ruin for a contemporary artist. Hence, rallying his memory, intuition, and informational reserves, he carefully tries to prevent this and to ensure that insofar as possible his work is new and does not even hint at anything seen to date. In conceiving, preparing, and producing this work of his “own,” this something “new” that belongs to him alone, the artist nevertheless encounters three types of risk. We shall arrange them one after the other in the form of steps according to their “level of risk”: high, higher, very high.

The first risk for the contemporary artist is that he may go entirely unnoticed: no attention will be paid to him in the art world. (It is assumed that inclusion in the art world, participating in it, is the main imperative for an artist today.) In this sense, the stage of the art world resembles the stage of a theater where hundreds of dancers demonstrate their abilities and talents for a director, and the director carefully assesses this moving crowd to select someone to work in the theater. To attract the director’s attention—or in our case, the attention of the curator, the museum director, or the gallery owner—is the singular goal of each individual in this choral dance. It is the reason for the most nonsensical tricks, the use of “shock art.” To leave the dance floor not in the list of those who were noticed, hired, “included”—this is the content of risk number 1, which we shall call the risk of being excluded.

The second risk, the second level, is—having been included in the troupe

and striving to remain for as long as possible on stage—to get stuck within one’s “act.” With each new appearance on stage, the artist must elaborate on his act, make it more sophisticated, hold the attention of the viewer, and to do so he must constantly innovate and expand his “repertoire.” . . . This resembles not so much a theater, with its flat, “level” stage, as a circus: the actor slowly walks back and forth under the big top on a taut wire, bearing the risk of losing his balance and plummeting downward at any second.

The third risk arises when the artist, for some reason, begins to ponder the future of his works and to aspire to have them hold the attention, not only of living colleagues and curators, but of future viewers, to hope that his works might continue to “work” even after his time, when today’s colleagues and curators have become part of the distant past. He very much would love to remain noticed in the future, among “actors” of a much higher class than he. And here, no matter how much he would like for it not to be the case, the risk of “exclusion” from such lofty company is extreme, perhaps maximally high. If in the first and second instances, reduction of risk depends to a certain degree on the artist’s energy, mind, intuition, and ultimately talent, the ability to eliminate or even ameliorate this last risk, risk number 3, is not within his, or anyone else’s, power.

## On Cézannism

1997

An updating and extension of ideas found in Kabakov's recollections on the life and work of the artist Robert Falk, "On Cézannism" seeks to acquaint the reader with the aesthetic urgency that informed the "formalist" painting that surrounded Falk in the 1950s.

The name Cézanne takes us to those distant, fog-shrouded times when the word "artist" was understood to mean a person who painted from "nature" and who depicted that nature in his canvases. Even more ancient artistic schools, which have now departed entirely into the abyss of time, taught how to transfer nature to canvas in the most faithful way, according to worked-out methods, similar to the rules of harmony and counterpoint in music.

The basic rule for transferring nature to the canvas is the rule of "the correctly positioned eye," which consists in the following: before something from nature can be depicted on canvas by the hand (the brush), it must already have been seen there by the eye. The trick, however, is that what has been seen is not on the surface of the canvas but in its "depths." This means that instead of the canvas, in its place, you have to see an aperture, a "window," and beyond it, on the other side of the physical canvas, you have seen "nature," and having this vision indelibly before you, you can then draw it with paints, pencils, and other materials.

Achieving this trick, taking it to the point of automatic consistency, was the fundamental challenge of school, its original goal (similar to the "placed hand" for a pianist), on which one could then superimpose various goals and meanings. Whoever mastered this method turned out to be a professional; whoever did not, remained a dilettante.

But Cézanne abandons this seemingly unwavering foundation. Cézanne does not take it as his task to see reality beyond his canvas, but continues to see it, the canvas, as a dull two-dimensional surface and goes on depicting "nature" on it. How then was it possible to transfer three-dimensional, stereoscopic nature onto a flat two-dimensional square? Cézanne uses a trick here that could not have occurred to anyone before him: he starts to see

nature itself as two-dimensional! After this, nature, having lost its spatiality and, along with it, its “reality,” becomes an extraordinarily rich collection of colored and shaded blotches. These blotches are now more easily coordinated with the blotches of paint that arise on the surface of the canvas. The harmony, the correlation of the colors of these blotches, lines, and tones on the canvas, should replicate insofar as possible those same correlations of colors, lines, and blotches seen in “nature.” The canvas becomes a place of exhausting labor, of an endless, monotonous, tortuous process resembling the transfer of heavy sacks from one warehouse to another, where, moreover, you constantly have to coordinate the placement of one sack amid the others in the new place.

In light of such an analysis, painting sounds like a kind of Sisyphean labor, a strange and curious method.

But a miracle occurred—the seemingly unwavering world reared up, and along with it the seemingly unwavering school of the “positioned eye” disappeared. Still, the need for a method, a system for transferring “nature” onto canvas, remained. In this situation, dilettantism seeks and unexpectedly finds such a system: the many years of practice of the single builder of a unique home instantaneously understood as a “universal system for depicting everything.” Two concepts arise, two symbols of a new artistic religion: “Cézannism” and “painting” [*zhivopis*] (as the manipulation on canvas of colored blotches)—and these turn out, in essence, to be synonyms.

Our generation in the Soviet Union experienced the influence of this religion, but already in its weakened, dying form. In part this is because a war against “Cézannism and formalism” was declared in cultural politics—history was thrown into reverse, backing up to Courbet and the Barbizons, and the Russian “Cézannists” Falk, Shevchenko, Osmerkin, and others lived out their days in loneliness and oblivion.<sup>1</sup> This was in part because “entirely new times were upon us” that no one could then have foreseen—the universal refutation of drawing “from nature”—and with this new epoch the great wars between “those who draw” and “those who paint” disappeared into the fog of history.<sup>2</sup> The very word “painting,” which had been equivalent to and corresponded to the concept of “art,” disappeared. “Cézannism” itself disappeared not only in Russia but also in Eastern Europe, where before the

1. “The Barbizons” is a reference to Jean-Francois Millet, Theodore Rousseau, and other painters of rural themes active in mid-nineteenth-century France. Robert Falk (1886–1958), Aleksandr Shevchenko (1883–1948) and Aleksandr Osmerkin (1892–1953) were considered “formalists” in official Soviet criticism.

2. A reference to the great and lasting controversy that developed in Italy in the sixteenth century over the relative merits of design or drawing (*disegno*) and color (*colore*).

war almost everyone was a Cézannist, which had meant an artist devoted to professional problems, to multiday searches for the true color. . . . Everything had passed, everything had disappeared, had dissipated like smoke.

But the art of the “founder” remained, thanks to his having introduced into his own canvases, in addition to a credible “nature,” yet one other thing, one other demand: that the canvas remain not only similar to “nature,” but also organized according to the principle of “Great Painting” [*Bol'shaia Kartina*]<sup>1</sup>—of the “Painting” [*Kartina*] of Nicolas Poussin. But that is already a separate topic.



# The Spirit of Music

1997

Once Ilya Kabakov's art projects began to be credited to the duo of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov in 1997, his partner's background as a student of music began to enter the vocabulary of his work ever more insistently. The present text speaks to this development, as well as to Kabakov's lifelong interest in structures of presentation derived from the folkways of classical music. Kabakov has been especially fascinated by the canon of classical music and the genre's unique culture of performance.

I remember sitting at a concert when I was, I think, fifteen or sixteen years old. I had been going to the conservatory in Moscow for a few years already. I used to go by myself, without paying. I had no money for tickets, and to be honest, it was impossible to get concert tickets: you had to find out the schedule, figure out where to get them, wait in lines, etc. My school friends and I used a more primitive, barbaric method that carried a certain risk: we would stand near the usher and wait until the crowd of ticketholders got denser, then we would try to sneak in, hiding behind them. If this worked—and as I recall, it almost always did—we would rush to the first amphitheater and again try to remain unnoticed by the ushers. We would sit on the long, semi-circular benches, crowding those who had legitimate tickets.

The musicians have already appeared, the instruments are being tuned discordantly. The hall sparkles with whiteness and the golden dark wood of the organ. Glinka, Dargomyzhsky, Balakarev, Liszt . . . look down from the walls above.<sup>1</sup> Suddenly everything falls silent, only timorous coughing can be heard. . . .

During the period I am recalling here I did not go to hear one or another composer, let alone a specific performer. I was simply pulled like a magnet to the place where there was music. As soon as the orchestra, irrespective of the number of musicians, began to resound, something occurred in the hall, or, it would be more accurate to say, *someone* appeared in it. This someone

1. Mikhail Glinka (1804–1857), Aleksandr Dargomyzhsky (1813–1869), Mily Balakarev (1837–1910), and Franz Liszt (1811–1886).

was entirely real, albeit invisible; nevertheless, for me he had a kind of image. I could feel his presence with my entire being. He was not in the orchestra, whence the diverse sounds were rushing toward me, but rather he appeared and existed, it seemed, in the entire space of the enormous illuminated hall, filling and electrifying it with his presence. He, like the mysterious phoenix, slowly emerged at the sound of the first notes, and just as slowly dissolved into the air and disappeared as the final sounds faded.

It was as though this someone—he could more precisely be called a “spirit”—stood behind every musical piece, behind each sound, behind each individual instrument, behind every movement of the piece, behind the gestures of the performers and conductor. And there, in the background, not coinciding with any one of these components, he imparted energy, inspiration, and enchantment to everything.

I had one response to the appearance of this spirit—I would begin to cry. A kind of special, happy tears would come from somewhere in the very depths of me. Flooded with tears, I could clearly and perceptibly hear the musical language—for what else but a language was the resounding music, sincere and comprehensible, the clear and melodious voice telling me about itself in simple words.

Of course, in addition to going to the conservatory, my friends and I—at that time we were all studying together in art school—listened to a lot of music on the radio, and we would often get together for this purpose at the apartment of one of our friends. He had a magnificent collection of records, and we would listen to them one after another, playing them on a hi-fi turntable. But although the time would pass in silent concentrated attention, and both the performers and the quality of the recording were first-rate, that state, that sensation, that I experienced in the conservatory would not occur. The music did not resound in the same way. The spirit would not appear.

Only much later did I understand that what got me so agitated, what captivated me, could only happen in the conservatory hall. Of course, the live sound of the instruments, of the human voice, as well as the physical presence of the performers, was important. But that was not all. Music emerged and lived not only near the orchestra. Of course, it was born there, under violin bows and piano keys, beneath the waving of the conductor’s baton, but it could be said that after its birth it lived between us: between the high white walls, between the sixteen oval portraits, between the people frozen in silence, between the long semicircular barriers of the amphitheater. . . . It was as though we surrounded it on all sides, those who were playing and those who were listening, and it wound up in the middle, in the center. And it was

here, in this sphere, hanging in the air and glittering, that the one I spoke of earlier, again appeared in the concentrated, resounding space—the musical spirit.

This discovery, this knowledge, that the spirit emerges not from some specific place, but precisely in between, in a situation where either accidentally or intentionally the most diverse elements must coincide in such a way that they are reflected in one another and in this sense are equal participants, was confirmed for me in other situations of life as well and in other experiences unconnected to music.

## Public Projects, or the Spirit of a Place

2001

During the summer of 2000 Ilya Kabakov cotaught an art course with Emilia Kabakov at the Ratti Foundation in Como, Italy. Together they offered the students a survey of ideas on public art and the technique of “total installation.” The present text serves as an introduction to a longer volume devoted to the Kabakovs’ installations in public spaces.

First of all, I would like to say a few words about my own circumstances, about how I began to produce a rather large number of public projects.

Around three years ago I began to receive proposals from various art institutions to participate in public projects, that is, to produce works that would be placed in open spaces in various cities and countries. They were meant to be oriented toward the memory of Soviet Russia, insofar as it was necessary to insert them into the normal conditions of the place in which public projects are constructed.

I do not intend to define the meaning of “public project” broadly and objectively, and honestly speaking, I do not really know myself what that definition might be, since in all that I have read about it there are widely differing definitions. Therefore, I can only speak about my own extremely subjective views, or perhaps fantasies, regarding this subject. Mine are based on the experience I have accumulated while creating a number of diverse public projects.

When I look into the past, public projects by and large appear to be practical things that have concrete, utilitarian meanings. Past monuments appear to have been erected in order to reinforce the memory of important historical events connected with the places where the monuments were built. In particular, these are usually in memory of some victory or plague, again, a historical event or curious circumstances connected with a location. Furthermore, public monuments have served as ornaments, as unique aesthetic junctures within an urban ensemble, especially in classical squares or baroque squares or streets.

Without a doubt these are complex sculptures with their own mythological proto-images: all kinds of nymphs, satyrs, and other “pagan beings” peer

out from behind the bushes and trees—what emerge in my memory are the marble ensembles of Versailles, the Summer Garden in St. Petersburg, and many other places. These are the traditions that are now complemented by the works of contemporary artists.

According to my observations, artists now use the proposed places exclusively as exhibition spaces for their own creations. What does this mean? I begin from the notion that the place, no matter what it is, even though it is extremely important, authoritative, and historically significant, is still just the background for the erection or construction of a new artistic creation. The artistic work in these cases generally ignores or, more often, represses and surmounts all that surrounds it. In fact, the sought-after goal of such work is to achieve victory over its environment. The relation between artwork and environment, that is, resembles that between victor and vanquished. This is especially true for many American artists, for whom ignorance and suppression of the surrounding space seem axiomatic and are posited as goals from the outset. This tradition of the artist seeking victory over the environment is, of course, a consequence of modernism, which prevails even today in the perception of the artist as a genius or prophet—a unique kind of ruler. Everything else only heeds and submissively perceives the brilliant, extraordinary communications emitted by the artist. This is how the relationship between the teacher and the pupil, the genius and the talentless, the prophet and the inert masses, the connoisseur and the ignorant, is established—and for many artists it remains entirely natural. Moreover, every place is, for the modernist, absolutely empty, a blank page on which can be written his or her immortal lines.

My own concept of the public project, to which we shall now turn our attention, appears to be in disagreement with what has just been described. I see this public project as if it has existed for a long time already as a natural and absolutely normal part of the space in which it is located. My perception of the viewer is also different; it does not marginalize the viewer and aims not to be condescending; on the contrary, the viewer is an active and perhaps even main character of the work. The viewer should be the master of the situation, because he or she sees the work in the context of the space, which existed before any encounter with this work. This place might be one with which the viewer has been familiar for a long time and may contain a great many things in addition to the work that has been installed in it by the artist. Of course, this viewer is capable of comparing all that he or she sees as the artwork with what has been seen previously.

The concept of the public project in our discussion presupposes a com-

plex and, one might say, “multitiered” viewer. In most cases, I will describe viewers as being of three types.

The first, an especially important type, is the one who is the “master of the place.” He or she is an inhabitant of the city, the streets, and the country where the artist has been invited to build the work. The viewer is already familiar with everything and has grown accustomed to the place. He or she lives in it. Anything new that is placed in it will be perceived as if by the owner of an apartment into which something was added; the viewer has either to accept it, to accommodate it into his or her normal life, or to discard the extraneous, if not repulsive and useless, thing—a not unreasonable reaction that could well be anticipated. Hence, the relation between the public project and the viewer, by virtue of the viewer’s living in this place where the artist is a guest, turns out to be fundamental.

The second type of viewer turns out to be the tourist. Tourists are a large tribe now, racing all over the globe, and differ from the first type in how they view a public project. A tourist is interested in the unique characteristics of the place he or she is visiting and prefers that the public project be somehow characteristic, even perhaps peculiar, reflecting some unique trait of this place. Tourists are looking for something they can remember among all of their other touristic impressions. Therefore, an artwork must contrast with the place, but not in a modernist sense: it must have its own unique features yet connect with a specific cultural field and the cultural circumstances of the land or place, to which a tourist may be brought by bus or may find through his or her own wanderings.

Finally, the third type of viewer the public project must consider is the passerby, the solitary *flâneur* taking a meditative stroll, not involved at that moment in day-to-day affairs; rather, contemplating various distracting subjects: life problems, culture, memories, be they sentimental or romantic. At such times we find ourselves in a scattered state, on a solitary journey through life. And the public project must fulfill the needs of this viewer, who seeks escape through immersion in some kind of imagined space—the past, for example, which evokes certain associations and memories. This is not a tourist visiting another country, but a person wandering around his or her own city, sometimes estranged and in a state of half-sleep, half-wakefulness, pausing before something that suddenly seems interesting.

The question is, then, who is this artist who, unlike a modernist, creates an artwork to fulfill this different task? If we posit the modernist artist as a sort of master, demiurge, and prophet, then the artist we are thinking about here should be understood as a “medium,” attuned to the voices that con-

stantly resound—and if you listen for them, with rapt attention, they are very loud—in each place where a public project is proposed. In particular, in those places where the cultural layers are very dense, where deep levels of a cultural past exist. Each public project understood in this way is the result of the reactivation and realization of the voices of culture; it is the voices of the place itself that concentrate and literally produce what they anticipate. The artist only compresses and embodies these voices. The project is therefore not something that is delivered, inserted into an alien environment, but something the environment engenders—and forms an image of—which is already presupposed and anticipated. What emerges primarily is the decisive significance of the context. This requires more than studying the historical background, events that occurred in the place, streams that passed through it. We are talking here about reverence for culture, not so much for particular facts, no matter how important they might be historically, as for the dense layering of culture in the place itself.

We are talking about the “illumination” of the historical depths, where one image is layered on another, reactivation of the memory that creates a multilayered, multivocal resonance. Not only should the memory be put to work but also the imagination, which restores all those layers that are mixed up, intersecting one another. This means that besides the material, besides that which is etched in stone or steel, that which is hard and sturdy, there exists a unique “airy medium,” atmospheric, that includes the sky above our heads and the ground beneath our feet and the grass nearby. It encompasses not only what we see but also what we do not see, primarily the intervals, the voids, the spaces between objects. After all, the meaning of the intervals or voids is no less important than that of the objects. These voids say and mean no less than the objects themselves.

A public project should be completely connected with all these things, should participate with all of its parts in the already existing ensemble. But it is also important that it insert itself in the place and become a natural part of it, by way of the active, constructive “tricks” and devices well known in art. If there is a horizontal space, the work might end up being vertical; if the environment is chaotic, then it might be better to make it geometrically precise. It should function so as to be noticeable, but not only as an irritant to our eyes, not only as a “visual attack.” It should also possess the qualities of a silent dialogue, a profound and intricate contact with the place in which it is located. Yes, of course, it must be visible, but not at the expense of all other things. In the case of the public project as we see it, the other things do not function as a background that is dead or incapacitated by the object’s activity. Rather, the public project must be a partner in a conversation, a normal

interlocutor and a respected colleague that relates to the rest of the surrounding space. It is this ensemble as a whole, and not merely some leading voice within it, that turns the public project into a total installation.<sup>1</sup>

From what has been said so far, it is clear that my perception of the public project is primarily that of an installation.

A public project for me is not a sculpture at all, but rather a kind of installation object that functions as an element within an *already existing installation*. It transforms even the most banal environment into a space of culture. It reworks this environment and imparts to it another level of existence. And in each separate case, I can show how this is realized technically. When you build an installation in an art institution, its “culturedness” and “artisticness” are guaranteed by the “artisticness” and “culturedness” of the cultural place itself—a museum, an exhibition hall, etc. To rework the banal space of an ordinary city or even the space of nature in order to bring out its cultural significance—to make it into an artistic image—is a rather interesting task. It can be important for a public project. But will it succeed? Will the surrounding banal space devour the artwork because of its weakness, its misguided consideration of the space it seeks to transform? Over the course of our work [Kabakov’s collaboration with Emilia Kabakov], we have developed the concept of a public project that functions as a unique “installation.” Installation methods allow for the differentiation within a public project of its transparency and its lack of transparency. Although public projects are often made of very hard materials—bronze, marble, and the like—the overall orientation requires that these projects be created in such a way that their transparency is maximized, so that communication and contact with the environment are maintained. A public project should always, and in the most active way, communicate with what is included in it and what stands behind it.

A no less important requirement is the spatial consideration of the installation, and not just its sculptural qualities. Although many components of our installation have been sculptural, what is important is that these sculptures do not draw attention to themselves. Rather, they appeal to the environment, proposing that we see ourselves together with that environment. They invite us to consider ourselves as part of the environment and not merely as the main characters against the background of the surrounding space. This is a difficult task—to ensure that we see the object together with the environment. To make things clearer, one can propose the example of Alberto Giacometti’s sculptures. They are supposedly made from bronze and possess a finished form, but they present the experience of air, of the wind. The wind

1. See the excerpt from *On “Total” Installation* in the present volume.



blows, the air squeezes itself into these sculptures. They appear to be material impressions of forces that we do not see. We see quite clearly that these sculptures are the result of the effect of these invisible forces, which compress the sculptures from all sides, pressing different shapes into them. Likewise, the installation allows the direct impact of the entire surrounding world in which it is located.

The installations are constructed in such a way that they create the image of standing on the edge, on the side along the contour of figures that do not occupy or are not from the center. The problem of the center and the periphery, the center and what surrounds the center, is itself an interesting one. There are many public installations built precisely with the idea of the noncentrality of the object on which our sight concentrates. It is as though the center is fleeing. You look the whole time at something that is slipping away, moving away from the center. It is a centrifugal and not centripetal movement. This trick that disturbs the concentration of one's attention at the center appears rather unusual. The question then arises: where is the center of the project? We generally suppose it to be in the middle and meant to attract our attention, but this center is actually nominal. The viewer forms a center by concentrating on his or her own personal fantasies. The viewer's own attention and personal reaction forms the intellectual center, because there is no physical center. The installation, for example, may represent a surrounding system of mirrors or antennae that project their energy and their associations on the subjective perception of the viewer, and—strange as it may seem—the viewer and not the object one is looking at turns out to be the center. Here is a paradox that is resolved successfully, as none of the elements of the installation are central, all are equally part of the ensemble. As in symphonic work, the soloist is distinguished only briefly from the common sound, then again merges with the whole, drowning in the overall flow of the music.

It is also interesting to compare the principle of constructing such installations with the tradition of ancient Greek theatre. The role of the chorus leader is to stand out from the group as a whole only for a moment, supported by the entire chorus into which he or she then disappears. The leader, that is, stands merely two steps ahead, only to dissolve into the mass again. The main characters also step out of the cycle of dancers only for a moment, then enter back into the whole dance again. The same is true for the ancient gods (Pan, for example), who step out from behind the trees or bushes for a moment only to hide again or run into the thicket. This presence of the whole chorus—the common mass or nature—is necessary for the soloist to perform, then again to dissolve into it. Such are the principles that explain our

concept of the project. Herein rests the harmony between the environment and the objects, when they enter and step out of the environment.

Other associations with the word “harmony” also surface—tranquillity, equilibrium, etc.—which have therapeutically calming effects. All of the public projects we have undertaken are aimed not toward confrontation or destruction. They do not provoke paradoxes or cause aggression. On the contrary they are meant to contain calming qualities.

All of them are aimed at a principally positive meaning, owing to the fact that it is culture that does and will “support” any work of art. Art can exist only within culture and “feeds” on it. This is the ethical platform that was clear to us during the entire time we have been realizing these projects.

In analyzing all of this, one might say that we are talking in part about the tradition of nineteenth-century Russia, which viewed European culture with enormous reverence and respect, and considered itself to be an important part of that culture. This culture was always considered to be the cradle, the foundation, of all that was present in the younger Russian culture. Such an attitude toward European culture, at least for me, was deepened by the dominance of Soviet culture in my life. Children born in the Soviet Union, deprived of any connection with European culture, perceived this culture through a romantic, nostalgic prism that shines at us from the depths of the past and represents a wonderful landscape. Whether or not this is true is another matter. But such a lofty, ecstatic attitude toward European culture has significance even today, one that has served as the basis for all kinds of improvisations, ideas, and images when we have been given the opportunity to devise public projects.

## Why Was It Necessary to Use the “Character” Device for the Exhibition Rather Than Signing My Own Name?

2004

Kabakov returns here to the theme of characterhood and his underlying conviction that his art is made, not by him alone, but by a hybrid creature made up of Kabakov and a mutating cast of artist-characters. These alter-egos have assumed various forms over the years, but the basic idea of Kabakov’s art never strays far from the zone of the artist-character. This particular text relates to the artist’s creation of an art historical narrative centered on three generations of fictive artists: Charles Rosenthal, “Ilya Kabakov,” and Igor Spivak. In 2008 the work of these three artists would be featured in the massive exhibition *An Alternative Art History: Rosenthal, Kabakov, Spivak* at Moscow’s Garage Center for Contemporary Culture.

Actually, this is not entirely clear, especially in the situation that has developed in the contemporary art world, where an artist is supposed to insist on his own image, on his own identity, on his own not-so-easily-developed handwriting becoming a clear visual sign that will distinguish him from everyone else. Why is it necessary to put forth and hide behind another face, hence not guaranteeing the authenticity and identity of the proposed work, a work made by the hands of an artist who, for some incomprehensible reason, refuses to put his name on it?

The answer will be clear if we try to analyze the problem of “the person” and “the artist,” to analyze how these two are combined in the one person who produces the so-called artistic product, the artistic work. This problem is not at all new. It is understood that the “person” making the artistic work is himself, of course, a person, but for others, from the moment he begins to produce something, he becomes an “artist,” a professional, a “master,” an “actor,” etc. In each of these cases, we are talking about a profession, a professional occupation, and the behavior as well as the self-consciousness of such a person is distinctly split in two: there is a life devoted to the profession and a life “for oneself” as a person, or in other words, time and effort devoted to others, and time and effort saved for oneself.

But in many cases, especially given today’s demands for professional-

ization, this balance is violated, and the profession "devours" the time and mental energy of the "person." The person becomes only the executor of professional "will." He merges and coincides with his profession, with his work, completely and without any remainder. He and his profession turn out to be one and the same. This is particularly noticeable, and has been prevalent for a long time, in the "creative" professions . . . for musicians, actors, writers, and artists, where the coincidence of the person and the professional is considered obligatory; otherwise, their "product" will not be of sufficient quality. Such an understanding was established long ago and is considered quite logical in and of itself. But there's more. It is considered desirable and even necessary that this self-perception develop as early as possible, best of all in childhood; should "one's calling" arise at that early age, the human being would never thereafter feel himself to be anything other than an artist for the rest of his life, right up until his death.

This inner sense and knowledge of oneself as an artist (and this is independent of results and evaluations from outside) fills the person with pride and a feeling of attachment to a higher category of beings. What emerges, as a result of such "sublimation," is someone who feels different, "other" in relation to "ordinary" people who are not engaged in sophisticated and lofty endeavors, for only geniuses and real talents, that is, those very same artists, poets, and musicians, are capable of such things.

But one might imagine a situation in which such a metamorphosis from "worm to butterfly" does not occur in a person, where, if we extend this example, the worm continues to exist alongside the butterfly, following and observing its behavior. What if we imagine that the person does not disappear into the artist, either because the artist emerges in him too late, or because the state of being an artist is seen, not as necessarily "super valuable," but as one of many states, albeit an extraordinary one, but still just one possible state of the same person, that is, himself?

The interrelation between the person and the artist in such a case becomes rather interesting. The artist uses materials, ideas, problems, and complexes possessed by the person, trying to find forms for their clear expression; the person, observing this procedure, tries to make sure that the results are comprehensible and transparent for "human" understanding, both his own and other people's. Moreover, both participants in this partnership find themselves in the following correlation: the human material is always greater, more complex, and less exhaustible than the artistic proposals that can be made by the artist, who is capable of thematizing only a small portion of them. On the other hand, the "human" half has no other opportunity to be liberated from even a portion of these problems except through making them "obvious"

and clear . . . primarily for himself, and hence for others as well . . . having formulated them in the shape of some sorts of images. Understandably, only an artist can do this. In other words, in this partnership, in this inseparable knot, one "possesses," while the other "demonstrates" by performing roles. But what is most important is that each time, in each individual case, only one play is performed. The next time, on another occasion, the play will be different, with a different plot and different "characters." So this word "character" has finally come up, the word proposed at the beginning of this long explanation of the exhibition where the "artist-character" displays his works.

## *Nikolai Petrovich* (Commentary)

2008

This is a *mise-en-abyme* of sorts, a commentary on a painting derived from a short story. First, Kabakov produced a short story called “Nikolai Petrovich,” which he then cited in the painting *Nikolai Petrovich* (1980). Here, many years later, Kabakov reflects on the interpenetration of word and image in both Nikolai Petrovich projects.

Many times I have made works that contain both image and text, usually the one under the other, an image and a text. In their meaning, they often contradict each other, and through this game each participant receives a new meaning and significance.

In the painting *Nikolai Petrovich* (fig. 45), the relation between image and text is tautological. The text can be understood as an explanation of what is depicted. Wherein lies the intrigue? What purpose is there in creating a literal situation in which the painting and the inscription directly correlate with each other? In order to understand what follows, it makes sense to include here the text written on the board, at least the beginning of it:

-us a quiet, gray, cold autumn day. The horse had already been harnessed, but Nikolai Petrovich kept dragging his feet and could not bring himself to leave. The trip didn't frighten him; he was completely indifferent to the upcoming journey, and he wasn't thinking about the cold night, the mud, the bumpiness, or the other usual discomforts.

“Well, are we going?” asked the voice of his traveling companion, a local agronomist, also called Nikolai, in a slightly hoarse voice after the cold night. Nikolai Petrovich himself wasn't feeling all that well either.

“It's getting cold already, and I left home in just a shirt and jacket . . .”

And so on. The whole text moves along like this, to the very end. It is impossible to find either an unexpected turn or some other meaning, either in the phrases or in the plot itself, which quickly brings to mind hundreds of similar ones. Nothing—neither the text, droning on monotonously like chewing gum stuck in your mouth, nor the painting's subject matter, a view of some Siberian river, familiar since time immemorial (and therefore we are sick of



нан и тихий, серый, холодный осенний день. Лошадь была уже запряжена. А Николай Петрович все медлил и никак не мог выйти. Поезда его не пулаа, к новому пути он был совершенно равнодушен и не думал ни о холодной почве, ни о грязи, ни о тряске и других обычных неудобствах.

— Ну что, поехали? — голос его понученного, местного агронома, тоже Николая, звучал слегка хрипловато носом холодной почвы. Да и сам Николай Петрович тоже чувствовал себя не совсем хорошо.

— Уже холода наступают, а я из дома выехал в одной рубашке и вообще хорошо, что пальто взял на всякий случай, — подумал он. — Чорт бы побрал эту погоду, никогда не знаешь, какой будет, да и вообще, видно, с летом придется распрощаться!

— Да, поехали, — сказал он и со вздохом поднялся со скамьи. Дверь со скрипом отворилась и он, пропуская вперед агронома, увидел за его спиной уже порозовевшее небо, двор, ограду деревни, спускающуюся вниз по косогору дорогу и такой знакомый и уже прискучивший ему за все эти годы вид. В телеге, смеясь вылезая среди остальных, лежал старенький холодальник, который хозяин их ночлега, пользуясь случаем, просил Николая Петровича подбросить в соседнюю деревню к свояку.

Николай Петрович работал здесь уже давно, смена мною прореченный, и сейчас, уже в должности старшего инспектора лесхознадзора, ехал по вывозу в Усолье-Верхнее где по звонку района, "необходимо было его срочное присутствие" и где ждали его уже третий день, но куда из-за плохой дороги и поломки телеги он никак не мог попасть.

В эти края бы да дорогу приличную! Хотя бы такую, как между Вышгородом и Хаузинным, с привычной доской подумал он. — Цены бы этим краям не было. Эх, да что говорить! — он даже поежился, вспоминая про Железную Паль, между Березовым и Азовинным, которую ни престоят еще сегодня проехать и в которой увезали все без исключения телеги, лошади и даже машины, а в прошлом месяце так засадили трехосный самосвал, что по с трахом вытаскивали два трактора, после того, как он простоял там целую неделю.

А после промелькнул в эти дни дождь, что там теперь? — с тоской подумал Николай Петрович, но тут же решил ни о чем таком не думать, а по обычной своей манере, вспомнить что-нибудь приятное. А оно было и совсем недавно.

Приятное и даже радостное было вот что: дочь Николая Петровича, Маруся, поехавшая в Красноярск, выдержала экзамен и поступила в сельскохозяйственный институт. А сколько хлопот было с этой Марусей! "Ной характер", с удовольствием подумал Николай Петрович, вспоминая, сколько неприятностей всен им всегда доставляла "упрямый" марусин характер. Стоит только вспомнить, каких споров, слез и уговоров стоило всей семье ее решение переехать в Красноярск и держать экзамен в "сельскохозяйственный". "Что тебе работы мало здесь, в районе?" — кричали на нее мать и сестра. Там же ты там жить-то будешь, ведь ни одной родной души не будет рядом! — вторила им бабушка. Николай Петрович лишь об-

it)—none of this has any internal development. Everything is tautological and equals only itself. Everything taken together does not draw attention to a focus, is perceived not as an isolated, coherent whole but rather as a fragment of something else. And the entire matter rests precisely in this fragmentariness. The painting as a whole presents itself as a fragment, as a part of

something located somewhere beyond the boundaries of this part. The entire written text is the same exact kind of fragment. It begins with a truncated half-word, “. . . us,” and also breaks off in midsentence. We do not know what happens. We do not know the end of the story.

Logically, one should produce several paintings before and after this one so as to complete—to perfect, so to speak—the narrative chain, to connect beginning and end. Just glancing at the painting hanging in front of us, we see that what is on the wall is a boring, totally unattractive, banality—the banality discussed above. It is easy to surmise that no matter how many works might be placed “before” or “after” this one, they would all be exactly the same, and most likely it would be impossible to distinguish the “first” painting and the “very last” painting. Banality has no beginning or end. It covers over any reality with a fine layer, reducing everything to a common denominator, to a single surface. Banality is always equal to itself in all of its manifestations. In it any part is equal to its whole, and therefore any fragment of banality appears to be a fully sufficient representation of the rest.

Both the materials and the technique used in making *Nikolai Petrovich* speak about the banal. Painted on Masonite, the material used to make virtually all stands, posters, and public propaganda in the Soviet Union during the 1960s and 1970s, the work embodies the standard style of such painting and the standard textual script used by the anonymous “executor” of these works. In a word, there is nothing more to discuss here. The painting does not hold your attention, and you would rather walk away.

Still it seems you could take one more look. The nature of a fragment is paradoxical precisely because it is a fragment. And the nature of our consciousness is such that seeing a fragment cannot help but activate our imagination, our memory. The banality of the fragment evokes an entirely non-banal reaction, a desire to re-create the missing components, the context, and, ultimately, the reasons why this particular fragment was chosen by the artist. Unexpectedly, it becomes an unsolvable mystery, a case for a detective; it turns out to be quite difficult to explain why the fragment appears banal—and as this problem to which there is no answer turns yet stranger, more mysterious, it turns out to affect the deep layers of our consciousness even more.

It is curious that a fragment of an ancient vase or sculpture—something truly valuable—does not evoke such a strange, vague tension as the scrap or shard of something lying about underfoot, familiar to everyone.

It is probably necessary to hang this work neatly on a wall, preferably the wall of a museum with appropriate accompanying commentary.



## From *Catalog*

2009

The texts that follow—excerpts from the lightly edited transcript of a precisely orchestrated series of thematic conversations between Ilya Kabakov and his longtime friend the cultural theorist Mikhail Epstein—present a dialogic effort to come to terms with the depth and breadth of Kabakov's art.

### Inferiority Complex

ILYA KABAKOV: Since we are talking here about inner feelings, you can't say precisely when this inferiority complex appeared and in what connection. It can be judged, like any illness, only after the appearance of painful, horrible symptoms, answering the questions of the doctor, seeking the reasons that made you sick and to what these anomalies are related. I gradually developed an ambivalent attitude toward this complex. Of course, its basis is suffering, the most unpleasant and difficult experiences. But later, I thought differently. Like any prolonged illness, if it does not lead to a catastrophe or cataclysms, the inferiority complex has its flip side. Participating in this illness, merging with it, you discover that besides its unpleasant and difficult aspects, less negative aspects gradually emerge, and that it has certain stimulating, if you will, even benign and healthful qualities. Thus, while earlier, especially as a child and in middle age, I used to regard my inferiority complex warily, as the cause of many misfortunes, I gradually came to think that it was one of the most positive and stimulating properties of existence.

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: Tell me, Ilya, what could have been the cause of that inferiority complex? Your life was and remains full; you might even say a Life with a capital L. What childhood emotions gave rise to it?

IK: I think it's related to the fact that everything I experienced had the coloration of failure and something that I perceived as negative, incomplete, unpleasant, failed.

ME: That was your own assessment?

IK: Perhaps it came from the negative assessments of others. It's all mutually related. First of all, the roots of my inferiority complex lay, of course, in

our family situation. Not from my mother but from my father, who was always unhappy with me, which he expressed by beating me ruthlessly. He beat me furiously, what you'd call in a frenzy, when people lose self-control. Mother told me that it was only when I got pneumonia that he stopped beating me. That was before I was six or seven.

ME: How old were you when your father died?

IK: My father was born in 1905 and died at seventy-six. But the decisive moment came in 1942, when he was drafted. He left for the war and never came back to us. I was nine. I believe that this had a fateful significance for my future survival and my mother's life.

ME: Being fatherless?

IK: Yes, fatherless. For my mother and me, the fact that he left us was an enormous good.

The sense of inferiority is also related to the situation of living in the dorm at art school, where I ended up. We never had a home. Before I was seven, we rented a room where I had my little corner. Then came the war evacuation, during which we also rented a room, in Uzbekistan.<sup>1</sup> So you could say that I was not only fatherless, but homeless from the start: I lived in a space that could not be described as a home in any way. Finally, living in evacuation, in 1943, when I was ten, I went to art school, where I lived in the dorm for seven years, and then at the dormitory of the Surikov Institute in Moscow.

ME: Why didn't you live with your mother and study the usual way?

IK: The story is that after various stages of being evacuated from Dnepropetrovsk, we ended up in Samarkand, where naturally, there was no house for us. Then, when I started in the art school, my mother took a decisive step. She took a job at the Leningrad Academy of the Arts as a nurse and housekeeper only for the sake of being with her beloved son, to feed him and help him, and then she set off on a voyage with that school. Problems arose: I lived in the dormitory, and mother lived basically nowhere.

ME: In Samarkand?

IK: In Samarkand I lived with her, but later, when the Leningrad Academy and its school were evacuated to Zagorsk, I lived in the dormitory in Zagorsk. Then I moved to the Moscow Art School, and all that time, mother kept renting "corners." Thus the homelessness was double—it was not

1. In the fall of 1941, Kabakov's family fled the Ukrainian city of Dnepropetrovsk only weeks before the arrival of the German army. As evacuees, they lived in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, and nine-year-old Kabakov became a student at the similarly evacuated Leningrad Academy of the Arts, an elite secondary art school, which later again relocated to Zagorsk, outside Moscow.



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only me, but my mother: I knew that my mother had nothing, ever, that she was suffering for the sake of being with me, that she had no *propiska* [permission to live] in Moscow, and that she was there illegally, sleeping in her coat so that if the police came to check, she could say she was merely visiting friends. This is a very sad story, described in *Album of My Mother* (fig. 46).<sup>2</sup> This leads to an incredible psychic load on a person. Living in

2. The installation *Labyrinth (Album of My Mother)* first appeared in 1990.

the dorms, I fully blended in to the horrible collective of boarding-school kids. It's a different animal from a kid who comes to school from home. For boarders the school and the boarding are one mental mush, where the "seniors" rule, which means almost daily beatings.

ME: Army hazing?

IK: You're right to mention it, because army hazing is a form of revenge, punishment. The youngest is not treated as a full-fledged human. The full-fledged human is the adult. The little one is like a little animal.

ME: Were you beaten as much as the other little kids?

IK: Yes. But I don't remember being beaten because I was Jewish. That wasn't stressed. And I didn't look Jewish. I can't recall any anti-Semitic moments. It's just that everyone hated everyone else. A vicious barbarism reigned. The initiative was in the hands of three or four pathological sadists, who bashed the younger kids with enormous pleasure.

ME: What about the teachers and housemasters?

IK: They did not exist for the "internal" life of the dormitory. In that world, as in any seminary, there was no one to complain to. It was "the way of life." It's interesting that a child doesn't perceive it as villainy or bad organization, or politically incorrect. He perceives it as a world that is set up that way, in which you get beaten. Your smile vanishing during a beating. We were supposed to feed the "seniors." Go get potatoes for them, peel them, cook them . . .

ME: Like in the army.

IK: Absolutely. It was a horrible world on the level of savage barbarity. We'll touch on this theme—the artistic meaning of boarding school. The inferiority complex is constant beating, an inadequate life.

ME: How did your subsequent success, about which we will talk separately, affect this complex? Did it mitigate it?

IK: It's an age thing to some degree, and for the time being I can't really say anything about it. I can talk about a certain reduction of the inferiority complex only in the last two or three years.

ME: But your departure to the West took place a good twenty years ago.

IK: Yes, but it's not tied to a sense of success. It's the start of an exodus, flight, I guess. That's not yet success. The fact that I was invited to have shows doesn't mean success at all in the art world. You are simply being given a chance to continue working. The correct definition is continuation of work. If, for example, you are fired, that means you are an unsuccessful worker. Continuation of work is not the same as success. It's just that you continue executing your ritual functions, required by that discipline, at a given institution. It was the same in the children's publishing house where

I worked. From the outside, it was successful artistic work, but in fact, it was executing all the rules of the given institution, from which you are not fired only because you fulfilled them precisely. It's just like a successful editor: he comes in every day and does his work.

ME: Even in Soviet society, where I met you in the early 1980s, your symbolic capital was enough to guarantee overcoming an inferiority complex. Your circle of artists was the circle everyone wanted to join.

IK: I think this is the purest retrospection and, naturally, an outsider's view and, perhaps, an observation that those people were set up very nicely: they didn't go to a job, they made enough so that some could even afford a car and live in a certain security from the punishing order. Thus, by external parameters, they were extremely lucky people: they had escaped Soviet life, lived in fabulous conditions, could dance and whore around with their models, and on top of that, do whatever they wanted while everyone else had to do what others demanded. But subjectively, from inside, this in no way affected the mental state, the inferiority complex, which burned with all of its fibers.

ME: Burned because there was no exit out into the big world?

IK: I can list all of the components of the inferiority complex. What was done as art was a personal improvisation on a dilettante level. It didn't belong to any tradition, nor did it belong to any innovation. It was truly whatever came into my head. I observed those completed works from an outside angle and I could see that their nature, their result, was tied to personal improvisations, albeit on the theme of the surrounding Soviet material.

ME: You don't think that someone greater than yourself is speaking through you?

IK: And that it is manifested in some way? Well, first of all, you have to look at the result. What were these results? I've always had a very strong, you could even say "inflamed," criterion of cultural quality. That was, of course, the art life abroad, the history of art abroad, which did not work or exist within the confines of our enclosed prison situation, which, I am profoundly convinced, created products of prison sensibility. Potatoes can have green sprouts, but in a cellar you can only have white, crooked sprouts. That's how I perceived everything that was done in the environment around us. It's also a fact that we had solidarity, we were cellmates, and we all applauded every white sprout. This is how I evaluate it, because we did not have scope or criteria. We did not have a free historical view on what we produced. The sense of being in a prison colony and its inferiority overlaid my personal inferiority complex and gave rise to the inevi-

table thought that we would always be in this state and would die in it, in the corner of a horrible cell. We were lucky that we could feed ourselves and talk about whatever we wanted. Those were the joys we were given, including the ability to paint “for yourself.”

ME: Do you ascribe that inferiority complex to yourself as an artist or as a person?

IK: I think both as a person and as an artist.

ME: In dealing with colleagues and curators do you also feel that complex?

IK: Yes. I feel the bastard complex in the most direct way: many are legitimately born, and I, for a variety of reasons, am illegitimate. The whole problem of my bastard state lies in not belonging to the world that for some reason I could visualize in my imagination very clearly.

I should say a few words about the voice that points out my inferiority.

You keep hearing this voice that says, “No, that’s not it. That’s not enough.” Whose is it? Today, I relate it to a paradox of the Soviet educational system, which permitted big chunks of Western cultural history into its curricula. We were taught on the basis that the Soviet person is the crown of human history (unlike the Nazi system, which declared the exclusivity of Germans on the principle of nationality). The Soviet concept was that all of past history was an approach to the peaks on which we stood—Soviet artists, musicians, politicians, and just the Soviet people, in general—heights that were unattainable for everyone else, because only we were the result of historical progress. Thus, in order to understand what heights we had achieved, we had to know all of the previous steps on which the foundations of our society were built. So education was primarily built on the study of history and literature. You know, it was brilliantly planned (at least, it seems that way to me now), because it was modeled on the German classical gymnasium, where “universal” education was fundamental. Thanks to the efforts of Maxim Gorky and others, the entire spectrum of masterpieces of world literature were opened to the reading child (and besides uninterrupted reading, nothing else existed). You could go to museums that showed the history of art, of humanity. World classics played in theaters. The range of “open doors” onto world history was rather large.

ME: But that could have elicited a reaction of comparison!

IK: That was the reverse side that the Soviet regime had not foreseen. Reading Balzac and Zola, studying Rembrandt’s painting, we received the models of the heights of human genius that a person could hope for in his development. And we could compare all of that to the hole in which we sat.

They should have shut that off, closed the doors from the start, and created an absolutely autonomous history of Soviet life. This gave rise to the whole explosive wave of dissidence, negativism, and disgust, among not the old intelligentsia but the new one, the one born of the conservatories, libraries, published books, and museums.

ME: As I see it, this inferiority complex is a positive engine in your work. Things are fine with the complex. On the contrary, it's the superiority complex that usually corrodes the will to artistic activity. So we could say that it is a full-fledged inferiority complex?

IK: That's hard to say. I want to add a bit here regarding Soviet education. The peculiarity of it is that the published books, the exhibitions in museums, and the concerts in conservatories and music schools were oriented toward masterpieces, an absolutely absorbed and accepted group of the highest achievements. We were taught the "select" history of the arts. Therefore, the pupils in art and music schools had the peaks of world art history sticking into them like thorns. Later, observing art life in the West, I saw that it wasn't oriented toward Michelangelo and other great artists at all. There was no normative standard there at all. You draw one way, your neighbors a different way, and all together you get actual artistic life. Nothing needs to be compared to anything else. But from the point of view of the maximalist perceptions of the Soviet mentality, when I got to the West, I couldn't understand why, say, you, Mr. Johns, don't compare your painting with Raphael. For me that would have been natural, because my Soviet upbringing was all about masterpieces.<sup>3</sup>

ME: Profoundly normative and idealistic.

IK: I don't know how the others resisted that terrible complex: "You're twenty-five years old and you're still not Raphael!" But for me that's still one of the most terrible stimuli. There are no actual artists for you. For you, there's only that damned Raphael, Rembrandt. . . . And when you're knocking yourself out, you think that they had much better conditions for their creativity. Even though, perhaps, that's not true. Maybe they also had to function in a terrible swamp. [ . . . ] But I still think those were better eras. First, there were guilds, where artists socialized, competed with other artists, and had guild criteria. There was also the milieu around artists—connoisseurs, specialists, critics—to whom the artists appealed and from whom they could get a certain qualified reflection of their activity.

3. A reference to Jasper Johns (b. 1930), an American artist who has produced many enigmatic painterly ensembles.

### Creative Socializing

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: If the rules of life consist in getting free of all material cares and social obligations in order to go away, say, into the space of your installation, then what role was played by the, roughly speaking, intermediate milieu of socializing? All your evenings were devoted to it, weren't they?

ILYA KABAKOV: Yes, practically every evening, starting at 6 or 7. The day had to be given over to "solitary sitting."

ME: Was it pleasant, the way eating food that tastes good is more pleasant than eating food that doesn't, or was it, in fact, part of the creativity?

IK: Both. You had to go somewhere, whether to my studio or someone else's.

ME: Because you can't work sixteen hours in a row?

IK: Of course. And then, it's youth, good health, the desire to have fun and be seen. And most importantly, seeing close friends, what today would be called "our crowd."

ME: Now that hasn't come up before in your answers.

IK: Yes, they were close. It was like an aristocratic club, for members only, who wouldn't even dream of bringing an outsider with them, a cult of "our people" for many years. It was always the same people. And this never got boring, because the foundation was the need, totally absent in the West, of fully revealing yourself in conversation, and it didn't matter what kind—political, artistic, or psychological (to curse this world, change it, or improve it). To pour out your heart and primarily to share what you thought. Everyone spoke frankly about what was happening in the art world. There was a huge need to do that. Sometimes I would even run over in the middle of the day to Erik Bulatov and Oleg Vassiliev to discuss something. I can't even imagine that now. But in those days, with the lack of a cultural field, each tiny bit of news and your own fantasies grew into a huge palm that demanded immediate reporting or discussion. Expressing opinions on everything going on, and examining things from every possible angle and context, was mandatory. The wealth of all kinds of analyses constituted the content of our evenings. They were not social events but "fiery examination." Of course, we all had a lot of free time, in general, in the USSR. For some reason there was a lot of time. . . .

ME: This is a very interesting third life, beyond social life, the publishing house and illustration, and beyond your own creative life. A third life, which held an enormous place in Soviet society. [ . . . ] For you, does this have its own absolute value or is it only a function of the Soviet period?



IK: I didn't waste time on it during the day. I would have been ashamed to spend part of my day on it. But in the evening, when you can no longer work, your friends come by, and it seemed like a sweet pastime. Or I would rush over to visit Eduard and Galina Steinberg or someone else, where the same thing was taking place. I can't even remember what we talked about. If we could see notes now, they would probably be a series of emotional outbursts. But we understood that jabber so well. First of all, it was built on basement or prison ethics and subject matter. As you know, prison conversations sound as if they're the last ones.

ME: Before the execution!

IK: Exactly. We were all overexcited, because this might be the last conversation. "No, we won't leave until we determine whether God exists." I think this complex of the Russian prison mentality, this drive toward the clarification of truth is always present. To dig down to the essence. It's the opposite of the Western manner. Ben Sarnov has a wonderful episode in his autobiography when he tells a foreigner that he had spoken on the phone with a friend for an hour and half.<sup>4</sup> He is asked, "How is that possible? On the phone? Were you planning a meeting?" "No, we were just talking." That's like our gatherings in Soviet times. What was the reason? No reason.

ME: I think that, first of all, it's not just a Soviet trait, but a Russian one. And second, there is a self-sufficient life in it, just as there is a creative one. Those conversations created what is called the spirit of the times (perhaps even more than what these people wrote). It is life creation, roughly speaking, in words, in socializing. And your studio played a colossal role there.

IK: Of course. It was an expression of the spirit of the times. All of us had a burning need to talk, the way it's described in nineteenth-century literature. But I must point out, not all night. Just until 10 or 11.

ME: The conceptualist milieu or, we might say, the late-Soviet milieu differed greatly from the Symbolist turn of the century and even seemed mocking and ironic. Nevertheless, it lived by the same laws of "the Tower."<sup>5</sup>

IK: Yes, and the distance was very great: the soul flew off. I have to say that there was a total absence of pragmatic subject matter. Any approach toward that sphere was regarded as a painful dissonance. And any flight into the distance was perceived as perfectly normal.

4. Benedikt Sarnov (1927–2014), a teacher, writer, and critic in Moscow.

5. "The Tower" refers to Viacheslav Ivanov's literary salon in pre-revolutionary St. Petersburg.

ME: After long years living in the West, how do you perceive it now—as a deformity? Or is there deformity in Western life, in an excess of pragmatism?

IK: Yes, the West naturally cannot understand what we're talking about, what the roots are of this way of spending time. Or what you can talk about so passionately: somebody's book or something like that. I'll say a few words and that will suffice. We had a passionate, continual verbal torrent. I don't know what to say about it, Misha. I'll quote Volodya Sorokin (from his interview about conceptualism).<sup>6</sup> He says that it was like a diving bell for people underwater. It was about breathing: we breathed despite the general suffocation. Don't forget that all of the texts sounded against a background of no texts. Uncensored gatherings. We all understood the context of those texts. Because as soon as the context changed, the conversations came to an end. The old form of speech reappears when you meet friends, but it's fragmented and, most importantly, it's not clear why it's needed, except to resurrect memory, or to confront today's commercial social reality.

ME: Did you meet here or there?

IK: We met in Moscow and we manage to meet here too, but the prison cell illumination of "our place" is gone. There is no illuminated space in the surrounding gloom. Now the light everywhere is even, no shadows, like an operating room.

### Artwork

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: Let's talk about what is good and what is bad in an artwork. Can it be good precisely because it is bad? What is a good-bad work?

ILYA KABAKOV: The presence of the intentionally, deliberately bad in an artwork—at the base lies the concept of overturning or rejecting two very important principles. The first: a good idea must be well organized. And second, the so-called principle of limitation: anything that is well planned must be well executed, that is, the principle of beauty, correspondence, that which is unchanging in any craft execution. A good stool must be well made. The assumption is that the form should be as good as the goal.

A different concept is the following. Something deliberately chosen as bad on its own is inserted into an artwork. That might be sloppiness, mediocrity, imperfection, incompleteness, coarseness. Where something

6. Vladimir Sorokin (b. 1955), a widely published Russian novelist and playwright, author of 2006's *Day of the Oprichnik*, trans. Jamey Gambrell (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008).

needs to be said in a refined way, do it crudely, in a talentless and ugly way. The reason for this has both historical and conceptual meaning. Historically it is tied to the fact that an artwork in which “good ideas are well expressed,” like everything else in the world, gets old and obsolete. In comes a form that mobilizes and renews a good idea by executing it badly. You see it working in linguistics. For instance, there was a time when you were supposed to say tenderly, “I love you, darling.” But a time came when such confessions elicited doubt. And the lover now says, “I’m going to take you, you little pig, and squash you.” And the beloved object understands and is even touched. But to an outsider the statement is a collection of ugly words. Something similar happens with the renewal of tired speech. All of modernism is a protest against well-articulated speech, an attempt to worsen it. This mobilizes the contradiction between form and content, and at that moment, content is renewed and appears more vividly against the background of bad execution. And this must be recognized as the use of bad for the sake of the good. If you look at things from the point of view of the old good, Picasso’s depiction of women looks like hooliganism and an insult to the female body.

In my case, it’s the use of a fragment, made obviously badly, intolerably badly. Any possibility of further deformation, opening of color, inaccuracy of form seems exhausted. In my case, a bad thing must appear to have been made by an autodidact or generally seem banal and tacky. Banality was already in use, for a long time, but the style of the self-taught amateur was rather fresh material for me: the work of an autodidact who doesn’t know how to draw trying to draw something well, but not knowing how to do it. The pretension to making a painting in an unsuccessful way. Or executing an idea in the stupidest and most boring and banal way.

In general, introducing boredom into an artwork is also a form of the bad. Inadequacy, in other words. Although, after some time, it becomes adequate. Expressing a lofty, elevated idea in a trite and ugly way is the basis of the good-bad artwork.

ME: But it’s important for the bad to be done well.

IK: Correct. Here we see the so-called form of effort. What is a dilettante? A person who does things diligently, assiduously. The result is poor, boring, not interesting, but diligence and obstinacy must be present in a dilettante’s work.

ME: But in this case you made the bad well. So can you always distinguish bad as a method from bad as a result, as truly bad?

IK: Of course. In that sense, it helps to work with characters—he did it, I know it’s bad, but he’s doing it and he doesn’t know. That vibration must

be present. And of course, it's an in-joke for certain viewers. If viewers don't get it, they're turned off by the painting that strangely combines, say, Socialist Realist and abstract geometric elements. Part of the picture is Socialist Realist and part constructivist. That's really mixing swine with caviar, because the principle of minimalism demands clear and elementary particles for serving elevated goals (*The Black Square*).<sup>7</sup> Replacing *The Black Square* with a portrait of Stakhanovite workers inside the remaining form of a square appears like an outrage, an incongruity, a terrible parody.<sup>8</sup> In a certain sense, if the good-bad work is done properly, the parodic element appears in an active form, but simultaneously in a more uncertain sense. I mean a well-calculated balance where the viewer can't interpret it either as something lofty or as something base. Where trash and the elevated balance as equals. The viewer understands that before him is pure "intention": I wanted to do it well, but it didn't work out.

ME: It happens sometimes that an artist uses bad as a method but does not reflect on it. For instance, Vsevolod Nekrasov. When I wrote that his poems were the grumbling of Akaky Akakievich, he took great umbrage and made me an enemy for the rest of his life.<sup>9</sup> But I had meant exactly that: badness as a method, not as a result.

IK: Of course, it is the right method for executing lofty goals.

ME: Speech defects, mumbling, lisp, and so on.

IK: Mooing. Mayakovsky used to walk down the street mooing like a cow. It was the elevated scream of a poet in the right circumstances. And he barked at the opening of an exhibition of Finnish artists. When the sickly sweet speeches were being made, he started howling like a dog, and then barked, which is totally commensurate with the circumstances on offer.

### The Creative Process

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: Stamina and self-control—what qualities are they?

ILYA KABAKOV: Stamina and self-control is a very good topic. Stamina and self-control is the absence of tiredness. Not persistence in work, but not getting tired of work. This is related to the general energy given to you

7. On Kazimir Malevich's suprematist painting *The Black Square* (1915), see Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, trans. Marian Schwartz (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

8. In 1930s Soviet society, the Stakhanovite movement encouraged citizens to replicate the miner Aleksei Stakhanov's feats of production.

9. Vsevolod Nekrasov (1934–2009), a prominent unofficial poet during the Soviet era; Akaky Akakievich, the main protagonist in Nikolai Gogol's 1842 short story "The Overcoat."

by nature. It's not over yet, but I've never complained about an absence of energy, that powerful continual adrenaline rush. I can withstand an adrenaline attack practically from morning till night without getting tired. So far. That phenomenon is a curious gift of nature. Excitement and readiness to talk, discuss, draw, when your concentration is uninterrupted. I sometimes lose my concentration for various reasons (laziness, failure), but not from exhaustion. I've had this feeling from childhood that it was an element of cosmic origin. It can be described just like this: currents coming from above surround me, and I am inside some kind of energy pipe. There's something like a showerhead and I'm in the flow that comes out of it. My energy is not physiological in character but a fine energy that charges me up from the moment I awaken, and I am instantly ready to perform. It's hard for me to say what it is. This kind of exhilaration has dogged me from childhood. Even at the boarding school I was always overexcited and ready for mobile socializing. I can't say that it was the school that was so stimulating. It stimulated doing nothing and incapacitation. I don't remember ever feeling incapacitation, just sitting there as if I weren't there. I was always in an exhilarated state.

ME: Do you feel the need to switch that energy from one channel to another?

IK: No. It's an incredible monotony and obstinacy in one place.

ME: When you've been painting all day, do you develop the need to do something with, say, an installation?

IK: Not at all. I am incapable of switching over. If I'm doing a series and I have to do some other show at the same time, it's simply intolerable.

ME: That is to say, you can work in parallel, but you don't like it?

IK: I used to be able to force myself, but now, with age, I'm less able to do it. I'm like a sheep stuck at the gate, and if you pull him by the tail, he kicks. I become enthralled and swept up by what I'm doing at the given moment. I can't switch.

ME: How long do you sleep?

IK: It used to be normal, but now it's very brief—four or five hours. But I don't suffer. I'm very nervous over my work. During work I am in a state of extreme uncertainty and panic. Because I know that the smallest wrong step is a mistake. The range of "success" for a work is very narrow. If you stay in the corridor, on the path, you can fall off both sides at once. Even worse, the path itself could be wrong. You have both to control your steps, so you don't step off to the right or the left, and at the same time to control where the road is going. Here it is quite appropriate to talk about panic, which is a package of two fears: I won't be done in time, and it won't work out.

From what I've said about imagination, it should be clear that when you're working on a painting or installation, you have to see it whole in your imagination right away.

There are two kinds of artists (working on installations): improvising and reproducing. Improvising is when the person comes into a room, asks that it be filled with stuff, which excites him, and then asks that the stool be moved away, the table brought closer—on the fires of his improvisation, he creates something that suits him. The reproducing method assumes that the artist sees the installation in full in its physical embodiment, all at once, with light and details. From the very start it appears to him complete. As Hitchcock used to say, the film is completed, only the filming is left. You see its length. You've viewed it from every angle. The rest is reproduction. And reproducing is a boring process. The master has done his work, and now you need an obedient animal that will do what it's told. Thus, the artist's work is composed of three characters. First, the one who saw it, then the cattle who execute it, and third, the critic who looks at it from the point of view of the outside world, art history, and says it's turning out to be shit and the whole concept was shit.

ME: That's the creative process. But how does the vision of the installation happen? Where does it come from? Does the vision/concept precede the work process, or does it appear within it? Do you meditate on this?

IK: There's nothing special. Since childhood I've had a horrible feeling that emptiness yawns beyond the edge of a drawing when I finish it. Emptiness is this horrible state of despair, and I don't want that collapse. I want another drawing to start immediately after the end of this one. That way I can sail over the emptiness, jumping over the abyss on a galloping horse. The need for the next work is a physiological salvation from falling to the bottom. I value highly the constant attention and ideas for the next thing. Even as I'm working, I watch for the plan to appear in my mind for the next work. The strategic push is not very great. I move in short jumps. I don't have long-range plans like the Ring of the Nibelung or something. I would love a gigantic project. But as a rule, the length of time for a project is two to three months. You have a happy chunk, this next work appears instantly, and you complete it in a few months. But while the boring execution drags on, it's very good if during that time the "inner" artist starts talking and tosses up the next program to the surface of your brain. I have two such ideas right now. But the question of criteria is important too. The reason you take *these* ideas on and not others that pop up. The criterion is that they can end up in a museum. The museum, as is clear from what I've said earlier, is the Gog and Magog for me. I've already talked

about my technique for looking at my own works—I place them mentally on museum walls and regard them among the work of other artists. The work has to hold up not just in its room, but among other artists.

ME: Which artists exactly?

IK: Sometimes contemporary ones, sometimes classics. In principle it doesn't matter. But there have to be some standards for your works, so that they don't fall through the museum net like uncalibrated eggs in an incubator. The selection of the right subject is related to the fact that, for some reason, in my imagination, I believe that when I go past these works in the museum, I won't be horrified, I won't feel embarrassment or shame. It doesn't matter whether it's good or bad. Being shamed is an interesting theme. It's below what you consider the norm. It's very important that you reach the limit of your norm, bang your head at the end of the corridor. It's also very subjective. I know that I won't do it any better. My norm will not be improved. Because the creation of the normative is not about quality. It's about creating the sounds that the work is supposed to emit. Either I hear the consonance or I don't, and I hear the consonance in my favorite artists (I'm comparing chord with chord here). It's purely auditory; it doesn't matter what's drawn.

ME: And the moment of seeing the next project—is it an instant?

IK: An instant. It is born like the phoenix.

ME: You mean that you don't even think about it?

IK: Yes, then it suddenly flies in. And in full feather. If it has some invisible, dark part, I figure there's no need to think it out and just discard it. The right phoenix is born right away with everything down to the last claw.

ME: Does it have any connection to the previous work?

IK: Some. But that can be established only later, it's not within the zone of control. Suddenly you realize that this painting corresponds to another or fills a lacuna, gap—that means someone is taking care of it. The one who is located in the abyss and hands you these things. Not lowering it from above, but tossing it up from below. This is actually an interesting coordination: vertical and horizontal. It is not described from right to left or the reverse, but on the principle of up and down. The cosmos is understood as “above,” and the “below” of personhood is a lower space. And the mind is the membrane, the screen, I guess.

ME: So, you're doing something boring . . . and suddenly—a miraculous vision!

IK: Exactly. The boss mails you an envelope, you open it—

ME: Do you worry that it might not come?

IK: The concern, the fear that the letter won't be sent, is continually there.

Milochka [Emilia Kabakov] knows that I often howl like a dog for fear that there won't be a telegram.

ME: "Gone and forgotten," yet suddenly it arrives?

IK: Neither time nor circumstances play any role here.

ME: Do you have states of meditative searching, when you lie half-awake and try to catch those messages with your antennae?

IK: No, because I know I'll never catch anything that way. You can't use the slightest effort or technology, say, lying in the bathtub; but the shower is a wonderful place, because fragments of the newborn object are clarified in there. But you should not artificially create a field of imagination. Of course you can make it up. Imagine something. But someone tells me right away: "Hey guy, don't do that, it's not guaranteed by the boss-mailman." The mailman gives you a degree of total confidence. And not only confidence, but also the energy to execute it. While the things you make up are noncompulsory—you wonder whether it's worth doing them. The packet of energy apparently is given along with the envelope sent by someone, with a terrifying degree of compulsoriness.

ME: Does the creative package have any other stages or conditions: material, temporal?

IK: When the package is sent, everything has to be ready to execute it: free time, quiet, space, and so on. The thought that you are busy and have to postpone it is simply completely impossible.

ME: But what if it happens in the middle of the previous project? Do you complete the previous one?

IK: Of course, patiently, drearily, with gloom and self-control. This dreary and ugly completion verges on the bad. The point is, a donkey is a lazy, messy executor, who does not like his work. So when he gets up to the edge, they're already yelling at him, "Get going!" The important thing is not to force him to the front edge, just to keep him from stopping altogether. That holds for the problem of poor execution and quality.

ME: These imperfections and careless lapses in execution are related to the fact that you don't want to spend a lot of time on a project you're sick of?

IK: It's a general attitude toward any physical execution. I don't like it, and I have a profound certainty that good execution is not obligatory. I see that confirmed in the works of artists I like. The best works by Titian and Rembrandt are done carelessly, especially in the late years, when thoroughness was not an issue for them. Because they knew what they were doing and how it would turn out. And their "badness" with time appears as exquisite mastery. And on the contrary, there are works by some artists (like Ingres) who oppress you with their thoroughness, bureaucratic smoothness, and detail.



ME: Let's continue the Creative Process theme. You say that you try to stay at the minimal boundary of the norm.

IK: The minimal boundary of quality.

ME: Is this an artistic method?

IK: No. There are many reasons here: indolence, lack of respect for craftsmanship, dislike of physical action and craftsmanlike execution. Writing fonts, for example, I enjoy a lot, but that's calligraphy. It's from a different sphere. As for realizing my fantasies, they don't require that kind of craftsman-calligraphic precision. The culture of the sketch is very close to me. There's an entire genre built on the sketch technique, on the principle "Here, I've jotted it down, do you get it?" "Yes, we do." Although it might be seen as bad work, aesthetically displeasing.

ME: Do you relate that in any way to the Russian origins of these works?

IK: Not Russian origins, but Soviet ones, without a doubt. Soviet hackwork is the basis of my works.

ME: So it is your method?

IK: Of course. I adore those hacks and esteem their zealous efforts, twists, and lies when they try to foist intentional hackwork instead of a full-fledged product on you. All my children's illustrations are built on that. I have the manner, like all hack artists, of creating the impression of something that was done in a quality way.

ME: Yes, your children's drawings are done very thoroughly, and looking at your installations, you wonder at how it's all done.

IK: That's not thoroughness, it's merely the impression of thoroughness. I know the reference points of attention. When a person says, "That's good," he actually sees only three points that are so well constructed that he falls into a visually organized net. That's how the seller holds a kaftan, covering up the holes with his hands and showing the spangles. It's the same ability to make "works of art," covering up the holes.

### The Intelligentsia

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: Today the intelligentsia is considered the cause of all misfortunes and the collapse of Russia. Generally, the word in mass usage has a very negative connotation.

ILYA KABAKOV: It scares me to think about it. It's like someone saying on his deathbed, "Doctor Petrov caused my death." What was the beauty of Soviet education? That it prepared a "harmonious, universal" person, who in the ideal would know the history of Greece as well as a Greek. That was wonderful for the ambitious type who wants to know everything and

have a well-rounded education. Naturally, I never considered myself an *intelligent*. I didn't come from a family of the intelligentsia. When I met members of the intelligentsia, I felt my bastard and Mowgli status, saw myself as an outsider making contact without any basis for it.<sup>10</sup> My inferiority complex blazed when meeting an *intelligent*. And at the same time I knew that if the country had anything at all, it was only the intelligentsia. So adoring them was even more important for me than adoring creative people. I understand why. The *intelligent* in Russia was the tail end, the remainder of the Enlightenment tendency that came from France and Germany. This was the transfer of Western Enlightenment to Russian soil under Peter the Great, which flowered only in the late nineteenth century. It was not simply aristocratic behavior but also knowledge and duty and morality. The *raznochinets* [intellectual who was not a member of the gentry in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russia] is the image of the *intelligent* with an all-encompassing education. This protuberance extended into the twentieth century, until Pasternak's generation. There were only a few random people in mine. But there were enough to worship the intelligentsia and love all of the intelligentsia literature (Chekhov, Pasternak, and so on). For me the intelligentsia is the image of a human being. A person for me is not a hero, not a renaissance man, not a titan, but an *intelligent*. (It was the only thing that mattered in the "dark days.")

ME: "Intelligentsia" is becoming a negative term even for the intelligentsia itself, because the intelligentsia are people who can't do anything except read and discuss, who are hostile to the regime and order, incapable of any action or real help, and therefore to be blamed for the collapse of Russia. There is a proposal to excise the word "intelligentsia" from dictionaries and replace it with the more respectable word "intellectual." How do you feel about that?

IK: Unambivalently. It is horrible and a nightmare. There's a criminal paradox in the *intelligent* blaming the intelligentsia for everything. There is, of course, the traditional description of the self-flagellating *intelligent*. That's Vasisualii Lokhankin and so on.<sup>11</sup> So self-criticism is part of the image of intelligentsia behavior. But if the *intelligent* denies himself as existing, that is an illness and a non-intelligentsia act. He is speaking on behalf of someone else.

ME: It's curious that chauffeurs, mechanics, and janitors don't damn the

10. Mowgli, a fictional feral child in Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894).

11. Vasisualii Lokhankin, the absent-minded intellectual in Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov's 1931 comic novel *The Golden Calf*.

intelligentsia. They respect writers, actors, and artists to the best of their abilities. But people in intelligentsia circles have the need to be self-deprecating.

IK: That can be ascribed to the peculiarities of the latest stage of the intelligentsia in Russia, when it is biting its own tail. When there is no exit and no future, the suicide of a stratum takes place.

ME: Of the words Russia has contributed to the world's lexical reserve, "intelligentsia" is essentially the only worthwhile and positive one (as compared to words like vodka, pogrom, Bolshevik, kolkhoz, Soviets, KGB, gulag). And it is this word, the ornament of Russia's contribution to world civilization, that they want to abolish.

IK: By the way, when Westerners learn what the Russian *intelligent* is and how that differs from an "intellectual," they are confused, amazed, and respectful.<sup>12</sup>

### Psychoanalysis and Attitude toward the Psyche

ILYA KABAKOV: The first impression you have when you look inside yourself is of an incredible psychic mush. It's something practically physiological, like opening up the belly, the intestines. It's scary to dip into your own psyche, which is full of pipes, canals, jars, with something constantly dripping, flowing, rotting, crawling without permission or correlation with your brain. You feel this horrifying sensation of a gigantic world, over which you have no control.

When I started making albums, one of my goals was to pull out, like a rope, diligently and neatly, all those wriggling ribbons, so that each one lay flat individually.<sup>13</sup> I had the idea that this psychological world existed before I had awakened and started observing it. Besides which, I was amazed that this world had no connection to the outside world. Freud astonished me with the profound conceptualism of his constructions, his supposition that there are external causes that push on inner strings that began to sound: a dog barks and anger awakens in my soul; a beautiful woman walks past, and something trembles inside me. That is, there is the idea of a connection between the outside world and the inner one. The misfor-

12. On the cultural and intellectual history of the Russian and Soviet intelligentsia, see Masha Gessen, *Dead Again: The Russian Intelligentsia after Communism* (London: Verso, 1997).

13. Kabakov describes beginning the albums around 1970; see, in the current volume, the excerpts from *The 1960s and the 1970s*.

tune of being beaten as a child makes the ribbons stretch out in a different pattern.

I was not so sure that in my psyche there was a connection between external and internal. The external lived one life and the internal another. Responding to the challenges of the external was enormously difficult, and I did not know how to respond because the inner noise and buzzing drowned out any possibilities of trying. Then, at a rather early age (around twelve or thirteen), the next stage began—the period of self-examination and self-analysis.

Self-examination, rummaging around in myself, was a headlong dive into a swarming space, to the point of complete insensibility toward the outside world. The tendency was to decide which of the movements were good and which were bad. I was not a neutral observer who simply watched the situation. My impressions were strictly divided into good resonances and bad ones. There were very few good ones. Practically every bend in my psyche looked uninspiring. There were fears, indolence, stupidity, boredom, lack of confidence, not knowing what was what. A mass of movements, and yet I could not determine what had gone into motion and where it was headed. Therefore, learning about Jung's theory was more productive for me than Freud's. I tried to discover erotic motivations and sublimations according to Freud, but it was not convincing enough for me. When things moved on to archetypes, I realized this was closer to me. The basic concepts—"ego" and "superego," the impersonal "it," Personality—all that seemed to be hitting the target. I recognized the territories related to those concepts. But I did not know what to do beyond that, how to understand their interrelations and learn how to manage all that.

When I learned Adler's theory, related to the concepts of thirst for power, the system of ruling the world, I once again found no correspondences with myself, since these concepts were not appealing to me and I did not recognize myself in them.<sup>14</sup> This digging around in myself dragged on endlessly and paralyzed any action and thought, because in response to every thought there appeared an antithought, it was all so ambivalent, one crossing out the other. My psychic space was in a horrible state until I gradually set up my artistic production. It didn't work very well at first, because at first it was accompanied by horrible internal commentaries:

14. Alfred Adler (1870–1937), an Austrian psychologist who wrote extensively about the concept of the inferiority complex.

you're not going to accomplish anything anyway, and so on. My inner voice said, "Drop it! Stop trying! What you're doing is shameful!" But since I didn't have anything available except what I was doing, because I wasn't trained to do anything else (unlike, say, Pasternak, who dropped music and took up poetry), I continued drawing until I got into it. I cured myself of continual self-destruction only through a second activity—preparing my works. In a sense it was healing. When I began looking at what I was making through outsiders' eyes, my inner "blindness" ended.

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: You speak of the psyche, but if I'm not mistaken, you have mentioned several times that you lack heart. Is it related somehow—a strong presence of the psyche and a lack of heart?

IK: With self-analysis? I think my psychological state always looked quite pathetic, that continual observation of my psyche. Heart and soul I think are manifested unconsciously and spontaneously. Self-analysis does not allow anything spontaneous to break through, because it peeks at it and spontaneity withers under the gaze. The horrible consequence of self-observation is the paralysis of action and automatic actions. It's a good thing it doesn't paralyze digestion or breathing. I could have paralyzed my walk in that state. Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* is an example of how you can keep watching yourself.<sup>15</sup> I suffered from that throughout my teenage years.

### The Art World

ILYA KABAKOV: An enormous theme. My dream was to get into the Western art world, where they have the highest criteria, where they love artists, which is the beginning and end of existence for an artist. His paradise is there. Everything will be good there. His soul will find peace and he will find friends. As Baratynsky put it, "And as I found a friend in my generation / my reader I will find in posterity."<sup>16</sup> Which was what happened. When I crossed the border in 1987, I found myself in the Western art world. The art world is divided into two parts for me—the yin and the yang. The yin is composed of the nonprofit art world, not involved in money, a conglomerate of museums and kunsthallen and everything that is supported by higher forces, so that they don't have to worry about it and can give artists the opportunity to have a show for free. The yang, on

15. See Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).

16. Evgeny Baratynsky (1800–1844), a poet celebrated for his philosophical verses.

the contrary, is focused on money, crawling with dealers, galleries, sales, where all the criteria come down to what can be sold, not a pure interest in art. I, naturally, dreamed of being in the yin.

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: You didn't want to sell?

IK: Selling would have been good, of course. But I knew that if I were invited from museum to museum, they would pay not so much for my works as, more importantly, for my existence during the time I worked on the show. I got stipends from the ministry of culture or the DAAD, but when it came to an exhibition, they gave me a place to live and money to live on.<sup>17</sup> I was back in the residence hall of art school, which suited me very well. A miracle occurred: I started right away in the museum space, first DAAD in West Berlin, then the Centre Pompidou, and a chain of museum expositions followed. Completely surrounded by the attention of the highest caste of the art world (museum and kunsthalle directors and curators), I felt I was at the peak of bliss and wanted to express myself totally in my artworks. Everything I want to execute was paid for, and no one ever said it was too expensive. Each person said, express yourself—the space and everything you need for that will be taken care of. Crawling from place to place, I spent a happy period from 1987 to 2000. I was invited to build installations and do public projects in open territory in cities. The people who commissioned it paid for it. Of course, I had galleries (Feldman and others), but in my naiveté I thought they were also museum spaces.<sup>18</sup> I made big installations, like *Ten Characters*, and the gallery was like a museum for me. I didn't think about selling it. I was moved by the passionate need to exhibit.

Basically, my hunger for exhibitions was hysterical. After thirty years of restraint, I found myself in the zone of debauchery, and tirelessly, ecstatically, I did one installation after another in various art institutions. In galleries, I made the same kind of monumental objects that I did in museums. I wasn't concerned whether a gallerist could sell them or not. This, naturally, coincided with my psychology as a Soviet—everything handed to him, never worrying about making money. The money came out of some budget or other. Thus, I knew one half of the art world, and I closed my eyes to the other. I skipped the normal evolution of an artist, which starts with a gallery that then sells your works to a collector, who

17. DAAD refers to the German Academic Exchange Service, a fellowship program for scholars and artists.

18. Ronald Feldman Fine Arts was Kabakov's initial gallery in New York.

then “pushes” the works to a museum. That is how an artist rises step by step to the top.

ME: It begins with commerce?

IK: Yes. The museum is the pinnacle. Yet I moved from the top down. An inverted pyramid: they took me in galleries after I had been in museums. So I have an inverted consciousness. This dragged on until 2000, when things changed sharply in the art world for many reasons, both internal and external. Before that, I moved inside noncommercial structures, and I would have been embarrassed to be in a gallery. I didn’t have a permanent home. I kept moving from Berlin to Paris to New York. I had money, but I barely spent any. Wherever there was work, I set down my suitcase, like a *Gastarbeiter*. This blissful situation continued until the irreversible changes in the art world. The authority of museums melted away, and gradually things turned into what we have today.

That happened for several reasons. The system of museums and kunsthallen formed after the war, actually, in the late 1950s. Its ideology is the academicizing and canonizing of the classic avant-garde. Before the war, the avant-garde was the problematic life of confrontational individuals; the world had not been mastered by modernism. After the war, it became clear that modernism was the main direction of artistic life in the twentieth century and canonization could take place only in the directions that the modernists had established. The figures of the “saints,” the unflickering stars, were established and canonized as well. The museum established criteria for accepting into its castle only those who obeyed and accepted the paradigm of classic modernism. The next stage of modernism is postmodernism, but what’s important here is that this next step was still in the field of modernism. Museum directors and curators exhibited and engaged artists. They displayed incredible love for the artists and their works and their high standards for evaluating the works. In a certain sense they were the ideal audience and critics and protectors, because putting things in museums meant the preservation of the values that they themselves had established. The exhibitions were primarily of classic modernism or of artists who were aligned with the modernist movement.

Getting into the zone of museums and kunsthallen was infinitely hard. They were essentially a monastic order, a monastery with high walls and shut gates. The bishop loves the monk; the monk loves serving the monastery. Outside, waves of life crashed against the walls of monasteries, which had scattered all over the world, as orders usually do. But getting through the gates was difficult, because there was an incredibly high demand for the spirit of and fidelity to the modernist tradition. Foreigners

could get in, although the main synod consisted of Western Europeans and Americans, who held the keys in their hands. Friends of art paid for the museum projects, because they believed in the power of art and the spiritual significance of that “tree.” Paying was a pleasure for them. A kind of ritual. I’m describing it all in an ironic key, but to some degree this corresponds to reality.

Then everything changed. The system was ruined from outside and inside. Why did the outer walls fall? The crowds that stood around museums and were left to their own devices figured out that a process of “democratization” was called for. They asked the question, why do those within the gates get preferential treatment, while we, who also work, do not? The curators lost their sense of class and esoteric demandingness. The next generation of curators stopped “serving before the altar.” They developed a skeptical attitude toward the product they exhibited. They began to regard ironically the sacred “sacks of rubbish,” whose mysteries were gradually unfolding. They were tired of bowing to those magical symbols, they lost the spiritual tension, and rebellion fermented inside the monastery. The most terrible part was that large groups of collectors joined the rebellion. They lost their piety for sacred objects. And art turned into an object of social status. It ceased being the center of attention and became one of the service spheres, part of interior decoration, serving the goals of design.

The scariest part was the end of financing. Once the museum was no longer a holy place, people stopped paying for the “masses” that were performed there. Museum workers started looking for ways to earn money. New, cynical groups appeared; one pioneer was the Guggenheim Museum with its director Thomas Krens, who decided to refocus the museum’s work from preserving the holy aura to corporate management and industrial decisions. He saw his museum work as an empire destined to establish outposts in various countries. That corporate, industrial expansion of the museum was the first step toward destroying the closed monastery. From that moment on, museums rapidly lost their previous status, turning into industrial companies. One company advertises and exhibits automobiles, another Kandinsky: the museum business.

The concept of modernism unexpectedly was left without its contours or borders. The criteria used by previous curators were lost. The holiness was lost, and anything at all could be declared art. The criteria that determined why a given pile of rubbish was holy and another hooliganism and outrage became, not indistinguishable, but irrelevant. A huge number of artists appeared who simply didn’t know that they were the



heirs of the traditions of modernism. The artists of the next generation had not been brought up with the history of art; the academic art school had stopped teaching modernism as a sacred tradition, and it became known that modernism was a type of mass media, and in that sense no longer distinct from design. The boundaries that had been clearly marked in the past no longer existed. There was high and low, and the high turned more frequently to the low for resources. But as long as the concept of high art remained, even pieces of garbage and lumps of rock took on new characteristics. As soon as the high stopped existing, everything became horizontal and flat, losing the criteria of good and bad, quality and not quality, and so on.

Everything was up to the whims and the will of the curators. The curator stopped serving artists, becoming an amateur constructor and creator, with the artists delivering material almost like anonymous “proletarians.” The school of curators also lost contact with the previous priesthood. The transition from sacred to profane happened somewhere around 2000, and since then the fate of many representatives of the old generation has undergone great changes. There are completely new artists, like Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, who are now stars of the art world and art media. It’s a form of playing with the public, with idiot collectors, inflating commercially supported things. The art world was quick to change its guidelines.

ME: How did your life change?

IK: Not radically, because most museums had already bought my works, many curators knew them, and galleries began selling them, primarily paintings, on the basis of my “status.” I met a new sphere of existence in the form of collectors. I did not like the fact that someone owned my paintings. From my point of view, grounded in the tradition of museum-going, a museum did not belong to anyone—it was like the starry sky. The history of art was distorted for me. In actuality, everything moved as it always did. After all, collectors were the starting point for getting into anonymous public places, but for me it had been the reverse. I didn’t want to know any collectors and I didn’t want to do anything for them. Nevertheless, things are moving well, more or less.

ME: What about your movement between museums and galleries?

IK: It’s continuing somehow. But to this day, I’m not oriented toward galleries. I do what comes into my head, as always. I’m not interested in whether or not it sells. Fortunately, Milochka deals with that. I have a person covering my back who organizes all the museum things and everything else.

Over that period, there has been a change in the status of the artist.

Since the international monasteries have fallen apart and the art world has fallen apart, artists have been relegated to the places where they lived. I suddenly became a Russian artist reflecting life in Russia. Or one might be, say, an African who, despite living in New York for a long time, must still reflect life in Africa. Every artist became a representative of his country of origin.

ME: That's unpleasant.

IK: Of course. The respected countries are given preferential treatment, while an artist from an unrespected country gets lowered status. Russia, in particular, everyone hates, fears, and despises, so an artist from Russia is a priori defeated by belonging to that universally despised place. So I, as never before, have been closely tied to my wonderful homeland.

### The World of Things

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: How are you with the world of things, with the nearest object environment? Do you like it or are you indifferent to it? I'd like to hear about the city as part of the world of objects.

ILYA KABAKOV: We're talking about a certain maximalism here. I have the profoundest lack of interest in things and an unwillingness to deal with them. I think the roots go back to my life in residence halls, where none of the things belonged to me. You would put something on in the morning and take it off in the evening, but there was no subjective or intimate attitude toward it. Besides which, there was a very important aspect—clean or dirty. In the dormitories, there was a day when you turned things over to the laundry and you were issued a new shirt, pants, and bed linens. You didn't even have to wash your own socks. Everything you wore was someone else's department. It was a state enterprise, and in that sense you were just a cog in the system. On the other hand, dishes, teapots, bath supplies, and so on were common property. They were not controlled by the state, like the clothing, but left to whomever, in particular, to your neighbor, who had to make sure the glasses were washed. But that was the hypothetical. I don't remember ever washing glasses, cleaning cups, or even clearing the table. The tables in a residence hall were a garbage dump. No one cleared anything, no one wiped the tabletops. That was the model for our entire life. You cleared some space for your piece of bread and sausage, but no one ever thought it necessary to throw the remains into the garbage pail.

ME: You couldn't afford to rent a corner in someone's place?

IK: That never even entered my mind. The dorm was good. Student dorms

were not entirely pure hell and evil; they had their appealing sides too. Your fellow students, with whom you talk and share books.

ME: Was it possible to have a place to meet with a girl?

IK: No, nowhere. But the 1950s were rather chaste times in general. An asexual atmosphere. We had male groups, a men's room, and women almost never entered it. I don't remember any time when we invited them to join us. It was more like an army barracks. I'd like to point out an aspect of my attitude to dirt and other people's property. The world was all someone else's and all dirty. It was so totally dirty that you didn't even think about cleaning. Why clean it when it belonged to others? There was no concept of public cleanliness. Life in the Soviet Union was a huge pile of garbage, with everyone treating it as not his own, because rubbish was tossed into no man's land. Everyone swept his own floor but tossed garbage into the courtyard. [ . . . ] All things in the Soviet Union were secondhand many times over. No one even thought about buying something new; that was seen as extreme snobbery and fastidiousness. Things only half-worked, being old, from printing presses to kitchen stoves. Everything was half-broken, nonfunctional, and filthy. My experience of life in the Soviet Union followed that paradigm completely. I only rarely swept up my studio. I used the rubbish, as you know, turning it into objects. But the idea that the studio should be clean never occurred to me. I had the same problem with laundry, which I did with great difficulty. So a disgust for things was instilled from the very beginning. It doesn't matter whether it's mine or not. The alien world started at the boundary of my body.

ME: And it's remained like that for the rest of your life?

IK: All my life.

ME: Yet you are surrounded by refined things.

IK: No thanks to me.

ME: But do you appreciate them?

IK: I appreciate cleanliness, but I don't appreciate things, including my own artworks. They are objects of interest to others. If you don't love yourself, others won't love you. It's the same thing: I don't love my works. I don't like them.

ME: At all?

IK: At all. There is something in them, but as things, they don't please me. Therefore, that means, I don't like anything. I have never collected anything. All the furniture in the studio in Moscow came from the garbage.

ME: But are there things that delight you, for instance, works done by other artists?

IK: No. I might like the ideas in them. I don't regard them as objects but as

creative handiwork, the embodiment of ideas. In stone, I don't see stone but the attempt to transform something. One distinction: nature is unavoidable, but all things are made by people and are displeasing, even though I understand that there is a culture of objects, both the simple thing and the masterpiece. But that I attribute to other eras, and it is not interesting to me either. I am interested only in abstract works—paintings and works that manifest pure fantasy, concepts, and so on, transformed into matter.

### Space

ILYA KABAKOV: While everything I said about objects was negative and expressed revulsion, I am happy to announce that everything to do with space elicits a sweet taste in my mouth, like jam—something familiar and attractive, positive, extremely pleasant and nice. Honestly, I have no fear of space, even bottomless and infinite space. I perceive it as a pleasant voice. The farther away the space, the broader and vaster, the more pleasant the voice. Of course, there are horrible holes, darkness, alien space, but I would attribute that to physical fear, the automatic fear of the unknown, of what will happen. The actual experience of space is always highly imbued with goodness and potential.

The first quality of space that I find attractive is that it is full of enormous possibilities. I never see space as emptiness. It always seethes with possibilities or with accomplishments that I am unable to make out. When I don't see something, I think that there are huge amounts of everything, which is in fact the case. That quality is highly developed in me. It's the same with space: every empty space looks as if it's already filled with something that I do not yet know. This elicits delight and positive rapture. The presence of the unknown is always something positive for me.

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: Does your trust and interest in space arise from the fact that it has emptiness, like light?

IK: Of course. There's different matter there. What repulses me about things is the issue of touching and physical characteristics. I don't like touching. The tactile is always unpleasant, but the mental aspect of space always elicits incredibly positive emotions, because it lacks physiology.

ME: That's very understandable. A-tactility, untouchableness, all fits in with what we talked about regarding asexuality.

IK: Physics doesn't seem mysterious to me; I assume I know it, but the non-physical is unclear to me.

The second quality of space is potentiality. Incredible reservoirs of

possibilities, fantasies, flights of fancy. You can build something. Fill it up. Space and creativity are very close concepts.

And last, space appears in its most important function as a sphere of escape. My mother told me that even as a child I had a burning desire to run away from wherever I was. I've even written about this. And I ran headlong, without a backward glance.

ME: You ran from where?

IK: From the house. From the apartment. There was a threshold where I sensed that the aura of home ended and I was in a space that did not have domestic filling. It glowed and sparkled. The zone of freedom for me was related to the concept of space and not of freedom of will. In other words, there are places where you can hide from something that is unpleasant, difficult, or is the object of another's will. Escape is an alternative to being connected. The desire to flee from wherever you are kicks in automatically. When I am in a plane, I have the horrible sensation of not being able to jump out. I want to get away from being in a car or on any trip at all. When I go to someone's house, one of the sweetest feelings is knowing that I can leave pretty soon. If I can't, that creates an oppressive sensation. It doesn't matter whether the host is a pleasant person or not. Jumping and leaving for a different space is one of my strongest unconscious emotions.

Then there is work as an artist with space. Painting pictures always oppressed me (because you have to keep messing up the surface), since I could never find space there. In school they teach us—and in the end, you can do it—see space beyond the empty pieces of paper, that is, draw figures not on the paper but somewhere far away. I remember when I learned to do it, that I felt such inexpressible joy. I was drawing figures “out there” “in the distance,” and not on the paper. School gives you that; it doesn't come naturally. Children's drawings are always on the surface of the paper. If you tell a child to draw depth, he doesn't even know what you're talking about. Nevertheless, there is the artistic practice of perspective, “making holes” in paper and canvas, which goes back to the Renaissance. Still, for the most part, that didn't suit me, because after all, canvas as a thing and the painting as a thing interfere with a complete passing through, unless you're working with that contradiction in the first place.

The transition to installations was a very important decision for me. The intermediate space between viewer and painting was extremely important for me. Much has been written about it. It is the field of interaction between the painting and the viewer who thinks about why the artist painted the painting; that is, filling that space with text and thinking is already an installational, spatial attitude. And my last point: when you

finally enter that three-dimensional space, you start to work with installation, which is the apotheosis of spatial-artistic creativity. At first I felt as if I were swimming in the ocean. It's "mine," innate, precisely because space for me is filled up, I can feel what it is.

ME: Is *time* connected to space for you?

IK: I've wondered about that and I continue to ask myself. The answer is no. I don't deal with time well. Even though I sense actual, tactical time very precisely, I've never thought about working with time in contemporary genres. First of all, I mean literary and musical genres. I feel that you could construct a certain dramaturgical form here: plot, dénouement, finish. I feel it in the text when I write. I know ahead of time the spring-like compression, restraint, and then the explosion, the unexpected move, the final part, the ecstatic finale. These temporal forms in art exist. I had theatrical productions, but they weren't interesting. I had a poor sense of dramaturgy, the dynamics of action. So for me they remain a stranger's performances, video art . . .

ME: There are artists of time and artist of space. For example, Blok is considered a poet of time in the sense that he himself changed over time.<sup>19</sup> Three volumes of his poems are the stages of his human development in time. There are poets like Tiutchev, who spent their lives developing the archetypes and cosmic intuitions with which they were born and who did not change over time.<sup>20</sup> It is very difficult to distinguish Tiutchev of the 1830s from Tiutchev of the 1850s. Do you consider yourself an artist of time and path, like Blok, or an artist of space and being, like Tiutchev?

IK: An artist of space. But on the other hand, I see how everything has changed in time. What I drew and thought at thirty, I certainly didn't think at forty. Because for me that was a change from one person to another. The goals and tasks I set myself at thirty ended at some point. After that came the tasks of middle age, which were executed and then ended, and I never returned to them again. Every age has its temporal characteristics. In general, everything goes to the count of three: start, middle, end. Nothing continues forever. But I cannot say that I manage my life like time. Even though I make plans and try to stick to them. I have a strongly developed bureaucratic, bookkeeping side, programming my existence. That, without a doubt, comes from my mother.

19. Aleksandr Blok (1880–1921), a widely celebrated Symbolist poet, author of the poems *The Twelve* (1918) and *The Stranger* (1906).

20. Feodor Tiutchev (1808–1873), a Romantic poet and an icon of nineteenth-century Russian poetry.

### Change in Genres

ILYA KABAKOV: In my work, genres did not flow from one into the other but replaced one another. At first, in my years at the institute, starting around 1953, I spontaneously began doing abstract drawings. It was a kind of discharge of energy along with the movements of my pencil.

They were scribbly but with a certain energetic force. Visually, it was chaos, mishmash. Later, when I was renting cellar spaces, I started doing “metaphysical,” surrealistic compositions.

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: Do any of those remain?

IK: Yes, a few. Almost all of the abstracts. But I gave away almost all of the invented geometrical tricks to foreigners, because a foreigner was a guarantee of preservation. They were always amazed that an artist not only wasn't asking for money but was thrusting his works on them. A Western artist is always a selling artist, but I couldn't have taken money, because that was seen as a criminal act in Soviet times. A dollar was like a poisonous snake, too scary to hold in your hand.

In the cellars I started painting volumetric pictures one after another and continued doing them even in my new studio. At the same time I started creating series of drawings, which could be considered preparatory to the albums. When the idea for the albums came to me (in 1970), I completely abandoned paintings and totally worked on making albums. That is, each new genre pushed aside the previous one. My first installations appeared in 1985 (*The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*, installed in my studio) (fig. 47), and afterward, when I moved abroad, there were only installations. When the installations required drawings, texts, or paintings, I did them especially for that particular installation. In principle, they could have been shown as independent paintings, but in fact they were participants in the installations. Public projects appeared in parallel. That's how it stood until 2000, when I returned to painting with great enthusiasm, and that continues to this day. At the same time I sometimes make sculptures, which often are simply fragments of models.

There's also the genre of models and prints, which I don't like making. Even though I have everything I need to do them, they just don't interest me. I had to make a lot of prints, and it was always with a sense of the peripheral and enforced. There are also objects—things made out of paper, cardboard, or combinations of materials, that I was asked to make or for some reason came into my head.





ME: There were also stands.<sup>21</sup>

IK: That's right. I must say that the genres in Moscow were quite varied. You have to include work with "cultured" rubbish: I made "books of life" and "rubbish novels." Then, there was the imitation of the activity of a Soviet artist, a hack painter, a slave of the ZhEK and ideology.<sup>22</sup> I made screens and stands. And also, as if on the part of an average Soviet bourgeois, I made books and albums with glued-in photographs (*In Our ZhEK*).<sup>23</sup> These "characters" made them in their spare time. The stand genre belongs here. The stands were painted on heavy construction cardboard and were allegedly to be placed in the ZhEK office. When commissions, say from the fire department, came to me, everyone knew that I was working for the public demand.<sup>24</sup> Ordinary Soviet people recognized the "artist" right away: no smears, no abstract horrors; solid, diligent ZhEK production. They asked me to remove my couch because artists weren't supposed to have couches in their studios. The Moscow Artists Union fought for the right to have a couch, claiming an artist should have the right to take a nap after long hours standing at the easel, but the ZhEK and the party committee maintained that there should be no couches in the workplace, for the studio was a place for work and a couch was a bed for debauchery. That's why spending the night in a studio was forbidden.

ME: Does this change of genres reveal a regularity, a vector of evolution? That you started with painting and have now returned to it—is that an accident?

IK: It's hard to say. All of this was elemental. When a genre ended, I had no desire to return to it.

You have to add my work with archives, with gluing various documentary rubbish, including illustrations, drawings, receipts, and notes, onto sheets of paper and keeping them in folders as an art genre. I exhibited the archive as an artwork many times. But there is no originality here, since it is part of the postmodern tradition—many artists exhibit in this genre.

ME: Do you use it in installations?

IK: In installations too. Stands with various materials posted under glass. But I repeat, many artists have worked in this genre.

21. Kabakov produced a number of sculptural objects called "stands" [*stendy*] while still in Moscow in the 1980s.

22. ZhEK (Zhilishchno-Eksploatatsionnaia Kontora) was the Soviet-era public housing authority.

23. Ilya Kabakov, *In Our ZhEK* (1982), was a "self-published" text on the theme of the communal apartment and collective forms of artistic creativity.

24. See, in the current volume, "How I Became a Character Myself."

ME: You say that you don't return to previous genres. Do you think now that you won't return to installations either?

IK: I don't know that now. I can't say anything about it.

### Universal Consciousness

ILYA KABAKOV: This term is becoming a sign for me, related to differentiating between today's artistic thinking and the thinking that was formulated in the Soviet Union, in my youth at school and at the institute and also during my unofficial artistic life in Moscow. That contrast between today and the past defines the intentions that were in the air then and reigned in our heads.

I'm talking about two factors. The first is Soviet education, which today I see positively, even though at the time it was unbearable falsehood, boredom, deadliness. Nonetheless, in its intentions it was directed toward forming a man of the universal type, who would know the entire history of humanity, world geography (even though we were unable to go anywhere), and the history of culture. In the dying world of capitalism, we were the only rock that resisted the ocean of destruction. I won't speak in detail about that mythology but the conception boiled down to Soviet man inheriting all of the qualities and bounty of human history. This universal project led to the idea that everyone had to know "everything."

Everything was geared to this at schools and universities. There was the sensation that if you didn't know something it was a kind of vice. You aspired to being thought of as "a well-read young person." Lack of education elicited surprise from people who knew the universal history of the world. The imperative of universal knowledge focused the intentions for the education and formation of the inner world of a young man. This, despite the fact that the reality of Soviet life had nothing to do with the concept of universal consciousness (it was crooked, cracked, fragmented, and local), and that squalid, rubbishy existence, verging on destruction, could be readily discerned. This destruction, fragmentation, and squalor were perceived in a remarkable way against the background and within the context of presumed universal knowledge and the concept of the perfect man. This paradox was inculcated by the Soviet regime itself. Soviet ideology told us that we had already created that perfect man, that we were all ideal, full-fledged people. But Soviet ideology failed to see the narrowness and fragmented state of Soviet man. Official life appealed to that universal, perfect human, imbued with knowledge, morality, and creativity.

The contrast between the purported “new man” and the hooligan from the communal flat created a very interesting effect.

You, brought up in the spirit of universalism, looked at these things and could appreciate them from the point of view of universal consciousness. That informed the construction of artistic life, at least in the conceptualist circle. The best talents, like Monastyrsky and Pepperstein, represented a unique example of “knowing everything.”<sup>25</sup> It’s hard to say how they managed it, but intention and intuition somehow prompted that turn of mind. When you talk to Pasha Pepperstein—on any topic—you get the impression that you’re talking to a universal brain. There are no topics he hasn’t worked through. Monastyrsky is the same way. I’m speaking of major figures, but in principle, this type of thinking was developed in the entire conceptual circle.

The conceptual circle in its Russian variant is the projection of universal culture, world culture, to study all the local facts and circumstances revealed “through the window” on a trip taken by an educated person through the fields, forests, and cities around him. Since this is projected on an enormous field of knowledge, it takes on its own, albeit phantasmagoric, descriptions and characteristics, which, by the way, were traditional in Russian culture. Radishchev’s travels, Chaadaev’s thinking, Herzen’s—it’s the scheme of thinking of the Russian man who “knows everything.”<sup>26</sup> Naturally, there is a difference between the education of Chaadaev and a graduate of an art school, but the tendency toward global knowledge was fundamental in the program.

This all stands in enormous contrast to today’s knowledge, and my soul resists the transition of man from the creating of universal thinking to today’s local time. Universal thinking, as it was understood by Monastyrsky and Pepperstein, and by me, means inserting today into the context of history. Historical thinking, inherently present in universal thinking, is not local in either space or time. The school is potentially the reservoir of universal knowledge. But school does not play this role today, and so a young person becomes an adult who continues to exist in the state of a child who has not finished school, who has no ability to reflect, who has

25. Andrei Monastyrsky (b. 1949) and Pavel “Pasha” Pepperstein (b. 1966), both visual artists, have been “members” of the Moscow Conceptual Circle since the 1970s. In Pepperstein’s case, he was involved in these activities even before his adulthood.

26. Aleksandr Radishchev (1749–1802), Petr Chaadaev (1794–1856), and Aleksandr Herzen (1812–1870) were major influences on the development of “Westernizing” tendencies in nineteenth-century Russian thought; see Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (New York: Penguin, 2008).

no “outside” viewpoint on what he is doing, on himself and on his time, and who has led a narrow life. But at the same time, every schoolchild knows what is happening on the horizontal, everywhere, and he is certain that everything everywhere is the same as what he is experiencing.

In this situation, the main nerve of life vanishes. The nerve is drama, the battle of opposites—hard and easy, air and earth, universal and real, and so on. The universe is made up of these polarities. A world devoid of the idea of drama becomes undramatic, even, sweet, and clear. The incredible clarity we now have is the clarity of kindergarten and the nursery, where there is a big window and all the toys are well lit and are all the same size. That’s all I have to say on this topic.

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: As our great leader used to say, you can’t become a communist without enriching your memory with everything that humanity has developed. But there was the strict and horrifying class and Party approach. The contemporary field of knowledge is specialized; it lacks the universality you were talking about. On the other hand, in its best forms, it also lacks ideological narrowness. Aren’t the benefits of universality inevitably offset by a marked and insistent narrowness, be it ideological, party, or professional?

IK: The universal principle and the education we got was totally devoid of communist ideology. I don’t mean those “external” words spoken on every corner; I mean the inner intention of groups of students who completely ignored that ideology. By the time I was a student the ideology had croaked, was nothing more than concrete monuments in the streets, and was completely absent from our consciousness. We were fully de-ideologized. Communism was represented by the Sharikovs, the careerists. There were some of those in school, but all the other people were normal.<sup>27</sup>

You can say that about Monastyrsky and Pepperstein and me, too. Because when I speak of the universal man, I mean that even in “our” time they no longer brought up communists but, in a paradoxical way, intelligent people once again. Of course, I realize that this was an incomplete education, or rather, self-education, which passed under the enthusiasm of general knowledge, but it wasn’t communist at all. We had no enthusiasm for building communism: for believing that we were new men who would build the future and therefore could discount the past, the way people did in the 1920s and 1930s. We were living in the 1950s.

27. A reference to Poligraf Poligrafovich Sharikov, the stray dog who takes on human form as the New Soviet Man in Mikhail Bulgakov’s satirical short story “The Heart of a Dog” (1925).

ME: I agree with you that just as communism was expiring, in the 1960s and 1970s, the universal man developed. In that sense, I can juxtapose that era with the era of German Romanticism, Italian humanism, and so on. But the established system of education in the Soviet Union, with its spirit of mastering all the wealth of human knowledge, had communist underpinnings. It's another matter that when the ideological intention weakened, there appeared a blissful little island of time, a very short period, some twenty or thirty years, in the 1960s to 1980s.

IK: Exactly. It gave rise to Mamardashvili, Ivanov, Averintsev, Lotman, and other philosophers devoid of communist ideology.<sup>28</sup> A truly small island in time and space.

ME: Castalia.<sup>29</sup>

IK: Yes. I am grateful that I had lived in Moscow in the 1950s and 1960s, when that flourished for some reason.

ME: The Soviet educational system bore features of the German humanities system. However, it deviated absolutely in the direction of ideology. But there was a negation of the negation, an overturning of the overturning. The German system had been overturned once by Soviet ideology, and then that was overturned.

IK: And that gave rise to a restoration of German Romanticism. Primarily because of the reading rooms, libraries, and good teachers. We have to mention good teachers here—they were our scholarly intelligentsia, not yet killed off, not swept out of the corners—teachers who continued “to open their mouths” and teach what they deemed necessary. I remember now how inattentively we listened, because we were intellectual savages, to our history and literature teachers, when they were the true fanatics of knowledge.

ME: Moreover, the universality of the classic model worked against the Soviet ideology that was imposing it, undermining it from within. Universality cannot be organic if it is not resisting something. This was a form of resistance to the ideological approach that was also a component part of the system. One system, instead of complementing the other, resisted it. And that gave it strength.

IK: That is absolutely correct. That is the juice of conceptualism. It is the

28. Merab Mamardashvili (1930–1990), Viacheslav Ivanov (1929–2017), Sergei Averintsev (1937–2004), and Yuri Lotman (1922–1993) were scholars of the late Soviet era who acquired international acclaim in their fields of cultural analysis.

29. A reference to the utopian academy described in Hermann Hesse's novel *The Glass Bead Game* (1943), which was popular among the Moscow Conceptual Circle.

counterposing of culture to art. Dmitri Alexandrovich Prigov properly called himself a person of culture, not of art.<sup>30</sup> Today, there are few who make the distinction.

### Conceptualism: A Chronology

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: How would you define chronologically the place of conceptualism and universality in late Soviet or post-Soviet history?

ILYA KABAKOV: It seems pretty clear to me. It's a postwar phenomenon, after the death of the monster, after he stopped moving around on earth, and after the perturbations with Malenkov, Khrushchev, et al. ended.<sup>31</sup> The Thaw, around 1957. And it did not last very long, I think only until the mid-1970s.

ME: Don't you extend the period until perestroika, even including perestroika? In my chronograph the period is approximately from the mid-1950s until the start of the 1990s, when capitalism descended upon Russia and there was no time for universality or knowledge, leaving only the art of survival.

IK: Perhaps. You know, I have very skeptical memories of the 1980s. First of all, because of the end of the "enthusiastic, passionate" period, it was a time of lethargy and decreased energy in almost everything. A time of merriment. The 1980s are of no interest at all for me.

ME: Why?

IK: It was a different generation, a different time. I don't see it as a time of new phenomena, but as a weakening of the 1970s.

ME: You spent only the first half of the 1980s in Russia?

IK: I left in 1987, first, for Austria. The 1980s for the older generation was a time of inertia, a continuation of what they had done. New people, a new generation, new artist groups were already working in Russia, but the sense of transition from a concentration camp to a softened Soviet variant, which had been the most interesting thing for me, was no longer in the air. Vague merriment followed. The feeble and aged Soviet regime could no longer do anything, and it left the populace in peace. But the people had lost the passion for liberation. The 1960s and 1970s were a time of blue sky, or as Pasternak put it, "the bundle of the man released from

30. Dmitri Prigov (1940–2007), an unofficial artist and poet.

31. Georgy Malenkov (1902–1988), a Soviet politician and Communist Party leader who briefly attained power following Joseph Stalin's death.

the hospital.”<sup>32</sup> That image of freedom and hospital at the same time. The patient remembers the prison, but the gulps of fresh air are energizing and creative for him. The next generation (in the 1980s) were children of those who had left the hospital. There were different tendencies at work, and they’re basically not very close to me.

ME: Are you talking about the 1980s chronologically? Beginning with 1980?

IK: The loss of energy began in the late 1970s. You had asked me about the exact dates of the explosion of universal thinking and liberation?

ME: Yes.

IK: That is freedom from the concentration camp, the passion that was maintained after the war.

ME: Around twenty years?

IK: Maybe even less: fifteen years. Until 1975 or 1976.

ME: I believe you and I met in 1980 or 1981. For me that was the height of that movement. And you were seeing it as the sunset already.

IK: Yes, in terms of the energy. But you have to put that down to my subjective experience. Objectively, it probably wasn’t quite like that. Some people consider the liberation from the Soviet regime to be from the 1960s to the end of perestroika. I think that’s correct, to take a larger period. But in my mind, I divide that period into two parts.

### The Cosmos

ILYA KABAKOV: Once again, I’m not going to use “we,” but “I,” speaking subjectively. I didn’t encounter the cosmic motif among my friends in the conceptualist circle. There were occasions of what Matiushin called “expanded consciousness.”<sup>33</sup> For me, it is fixed to the concept of *cosmos*, the idea of something greater than earthly existence. This combined the passion for escape and disappearance (Where can you go to vanish? Up) and the tradition of Russian cosmic thought, about which, to tell the truth, I knew little in detail. Borya Groys, in his marvelous work analyzing my installation *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*, relates it to that tradition of Russian cosmic thought, to its two main figures, Tsiolkovsky and Fedorov, and also the cosmism of the Russian avant-garde.<sup>34</sup>

32. From Boris Pasternak’s 1918 poem “Spring.”

33. Mikhail Matiushin (1861–1934) proposed his concept of “expanded consciousness” or *Zorved* (in Russian, a combination of the words for “vision” [*zrenie*] or “sharpness” [*zorkost*] and “knowledge” [*vedanie*]).

34. Boris Groys discusses the scientist Konstatin Tsiolkovsky (1857–1935) and philosopher

Almost all of the figures in the avant-garde found energy in the cosmos, sang its praises, and touched it (Kandinsky, Malevich, Lissitzky, Tatlin, Matiushin). Expanded consciousness consists not of understanding “cosmos” in the pragmatic sense (planets, flight, rocket ships, and so on) but, on the contrary, in perceiving all of the planets, flights, and rocket ships as a different, fuller life, a cosmic life into which ours must fit. It is not a life of technology, the life of the pilot; rather, the pilot is already a different person. Like Pasternak’s pilot.<sup>35</sup> The cosmos, on the one hand, is understood as a totally attainable space of flight and habitation and, on the other hand, in the Russian tradition, as a different life and other kinds of flight. This is a paradox that must be understood from the point of view of the Russian consciousness, which was very close to me.

At the same time, cosmism was unsubstantial, nonmaterial, and devoid of earthly cares. It is the acquisition not only of freedom but of another quality: not being a different person but being a not-person. Cosmonauts flying in the air are not human. What are they then? They are a substance, the best representatives of humanity. They may fly up into space as humans, but then they become inhabitants of the cosmos.

It is a mystery that the cosmos is a reservoir of another life, not in the odious sense of spiritual rebirth into other life forms, but literally new cosmic forms. This is an area in the Russian mind, and in my mind it is also absolutely unknown. There is a desire not to see yourself flying in space and peering out of some pathetic porthole, but rather to find yourself in another dimension, as you become a fish when you dive into water. When you dive into space, you become something else. The image of that cosmos is understood as a more interesting thing, a life that is enormous compared to earth and life on earth, which becomes minuscule and optional. The loveliness of cosmic thought is precisely that you can look at life on earth as being something whole, local, and small.

The paradox is that this is the obverse of another passion, the insignificance of life. Life is complex, rich, with varied emotions, and you have to plug into the wealth of the world—I think this passion comes from antiquity or the Renaissance. But Russian cosmic thinking paralyzes direct participation in life. The cosmos presumes your nonpresence in this life,

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Nikolai Fedorov (1829–1903) in *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment* (London: Afterall, 2006).

35. A reference to Boris Pasternak’s 1956 poem “Night.”



or presence in the capacity of a space alien. On the other hand, this is just the same old Oblomovism.<sup>36</sup>

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: That's an interesting view of cosmism. Instead of a powerful increase in energy, you get Oblomovism.

IK: Of course, it's the reverse of the couch and relaxation. It's good there. It's not labor, not work, not new responsibilities, no new creativity. It's flying over earth.

ME: "Flights in dreams and reality."<sup>37</sup>

IK: Yes, that levitation that is understood as something inanimate. Prostration.

ME: Space as prostration.

IK: It is not a workplace. You have complete freedom in space, in the couch sense.

ME: It is, of course, the secular version of religious consciousness.

IK: As Lermontov put it so exquisitely: "I want to forget and fall asleep! . . . But not the cold sleep of the grave."<sup>38</sup> I want an oak tree above me, a lovely voice singing, and my soul would fly up; it has to be a state in which you breathe well.

At the same time, I sometimes had the sensation of a profound connection to cosmic energy. During my travels, in some spots of the globe, I suddenly felt enormous waves of cosmic energy. It happened in Olympia in Greece, at the Acropolis in Athens, in Iceland, at the so-called Throne of the Gods.<sup>39</sup> The surge of energy literally engulfed me. Cosmic energy is not only intellectual; it is an energy gift from the other side, which is present in normal earthly conditions but in a weakened form. In some places, up in the mountains, it is spilled onto people who can receive it with incredible gratitude. And I repeat, it is not spiritual enlightenment, which can happen in a church (it happened to me when I lived at the Troitse-Sergieva Monastery).<sup>40</sup>

ME: You lived there?

IK: Yes, during the war evacuation, from 1943 to 1945. I started at the art school, which was then re-evacuated to Leningrad. During the voyage it

36. "Oblomovism" refers to the lackadaisical hero of Ivan Goncharov's 1859 novel *Oblomov*, Ivan Ilych Oblomov; see Ivan Goncharov, *Oblomov*, trans. Marian Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories, 2009).

37. A reference to Roman Balayan's 1983 film *Flights in Dreams and Reality*.

38. A quotation from Mikhail Lermontov's poem "I Walk Out Alone on the Road" (1841).

39. Thingviller, a locale in southwestern Iceland, the original site of the Icelandic parliament, founded in 930 AD.

40. Built in 1345, the Troitse-Sergieva Monastery is located in Sergiev Posad (formerly Zagorsk), forty miles north of Moscow.

turned out that a bomb had been dropped on the Academy of Arts, leaving a huge gaping hole in the roof, so we couldn't go there. Thus, the academy and the art school stopped halfway in Zagorsk [Sergiev Posad]. I became a resident of the Troitse-Sergieva Monastery, which back then was still in ruins, an abandoned place but with all the churches intact, and I explored all of them myself. It was like the movies—Mowgli in the abandoned temple. I was eleven, and it was a strange and very interesting adventure. I attended the Christmas service, and I had incredibly powerful experiences of a religious nature. I truly saw the Spirit descending.

ME: These experiences did not lead to anything further?

IK: Nothing, but the experiences remain.

But getting back to our topic: experiencing the current of energy coming from the cosmos served as a subject for many of my projects. The main one never worked: it was Center for Cosmic Energy, a construction where people would get cosmic energy in pure form.

ME: Are there models for it?

IK: Yes, big models, blueprints; there were even attempts to build it, but they failed, like all previous attempts to bring about cosmic fantasies (starting with Fedorov, Tatlin's Tower, Lissitzky's constructions, and Malevich's *architektons*, which were also variants of cosmic presence).<sup>41</sup> So there's nothing new in it. I am repeating in another time the tradition and tendency that were present in Russian cosmic fantasies.

ME: The cosmos is in the more humorous and ironic part of your creativity.

IK: I don't think so. Irony is everywhere in my work, but I don't have an ironic attitude toward the projects dealing with the cosmos.

ME: I know your ironic attitude toward the Fedorov-Tsiolkovsky tradition.

IK: It's ambivalent. On the one hand, it's delirium, but all human fantasies about the cosmos are delirium. However, I'm very positive toward the form I'm talking about now (cosmos as transformation of human life). As much as I can be when you say that space is Oblomov's couch. Nevertheless, this theme as the theme of something that exists and is enveloping and enlightening is present as something important. It is as important as utopia, or sentimentality, or humaneness. It's what you live with. What is not invented but is.

ME: How do you feel about calculating a person's character on the basis of the alignment of the planets?

41. On Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* (1920), El Lissitzky's constructions, and Kazimir Malevich's architectural models known as *architektons*, see Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863–1922* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986).

IK: Astrology? I have no feelings. It is connected to medieval thinking. You can believe in it, or not.

ME: Do you feel that it is cosmic energy (not destiny, not divine providence) that takes a concrete active part in your life?

IK: Yes: both the cosmic and destiny in that sense. It is what directs us. I am certain that we are like beetles. We are not the masters but little bugs whose backs are held by someone from behind.

ME: But the cosmos and God are different things? Space is a physical concept.

IK: It is physical, but space is also directed by someone. I'm no pantheist, and I don't believe that nature is our god. I believe that it is also in someone's charge. It's like humans, a project. I tend to think of the cosmos too as a conceptual project. I don't see nature as something natural but as a project created by someone. Nature, atoms, didn't grow on their own. . . . Someone "pulled it out of his head."

### Solitude and Public Life

ILYA KABAKOV: On one hand, the topic seems simple: what are *solitude* and *public life*? These states always turned into extremes for me, extreme states to which I devoted a lot of energy. I had fits of solitude, because I needed it. I was a man of the "residence halls" and I didn't even know what solitude was for years. There was only the constant public presence. Fortunately, my body was healthy enough to adapt to that public presence. The mask of "Kabakov," "Tolik," "the happy guy," was an elaborate public mask that I had pulled on early, as a child when I ended up living at the art school.<sup>42</sup>

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: "Tolik" is a put-down?

IK: Yes. Cheerful, gregarious, easy, sociable, and most importantly, extremely friendly. With a heightened ecstatic friendliness. For example, when you're staying in a hotel, you always look in horror at the crowd of tourists piling in. The horror comes from the ecstatic merriment of that crowd. Hysterical laughter emitted by the tourists—Ha-ha-ha-ha!—can be heard in every hotel. This psychopathic state arises in groups when people rub together for weeks at a time, in buses, hotels, and so on. This is heightened friendliness that has nothing to do with personal friendship or kindness. It is the ecstasy of a small crowd, a rejoicing herd, and that barking laughter, the tail wagging, and the giggling are a result. What's worse is

42. "Tolik" is Kabakov's nickname.

that normal people, who are calm and balanced in ordinary life, giggle or bray with that laughter in response to every statement. It's a terrible sight.

I was continually in a similar state of cheerful overexcitement and friendliness. It is automatism, an absolutely psychopathic syndrome. You can't talk about anything human or even social here. It's herd behavior, you're one of us, so you wag your tail like the others. By the way, there are two types in these herds. Those who live rather equably in the herd, passively, and those who feel the need to constantly talk, laugh, joke, and cheerlead. I unfortunately belong to that terrible second type. The herd excites me to the extreme.

Milochka [Emilia Kabakov] often tells me, "No one is expecting you to talk." But I have the feeling that I have to be entertaining, because if I shut up people will think, "Why isn't he saying anything? He must be thinking bad things." And I actually am. I'm thinking, "When will this ever end? Why don't you all go . . . yourselves." So this merriment covers up my normal state. It was like that in the dorm. Of course, I particularly disliked the guy in the next bed, but that was disguised by "extreme friendliness" and hysterical camaraderie.

But that life led to moments when I just wanted to run wherever my feet took me. By the time I was in college, at the institute, I would take my backpack and go off on my own for a walk outside town. Or I'd buy a ticket and go to the Caucasus or somewhere. I loved solitary journeys, I would call them "cosmic." Walking long distances on the beach. The Crimea wasn't divided up by sanatoria and private homes then. You could walk along the shore from Yalta to Feodosia. You could sleep in a sleeping bag in the vineyards, and no one bothered you. Solitary travel along the water, when you walk on the beach, right at the edge of the water, and sleep under the stars. That gave me powerful cosmic feelings. The joys of solitude: the feeling that you are alone in the world. Not despairing loneliness but the state of "me and the world."

This is very typical of Americans, by the way. Donald Judd, who lived on the Mexican border, had his own mountains, for example.<sup>43</sup> The American feeling of "me and the cosmos, me and my land"—the cosmic sense of ownership, so characteristic of American pioneers. I didn't have that, of course, because I was always an outsider in everything. The land was not mine. It belonged to no one; it could have been the moon. But

43. A reference to the American sculptor Donald Judd's Chinati Foundation, located in Marfa, Texas. Kabakov has a permanent installation, *School No. 6* (1993), located on this site.

Judd's an American—he had “his land.” The miserable Soviet experience is something completely different. Perhaps that is why my experience of cosmism during my travels was so strong.

Solitude is of course the desire to be alone in the studio or to leave your city for a neutral place. For instance, in the Soviet Union there were “houses of creativity.” They seemed like another planet. In the cosmic sense, Moscow was real and dreary. The Baltics were a wonderful place, abroad, where you lived in a remote cosmic space. The houses of creativity near Moscow also seemed remote. The important thing was that the anchor line that held you in your mundane Moscow life did not reach. Any place, if you live there long enough, becomes like a doghouse with a chain. A lengthy lifetime in a doghouse of any quality starts working against the doghouse and the desire to live in it. But that holds for everyone, I think. There is some temporal measure for how long you can stay in your doghouse. Even living in this marvelous house in Long Island, I get the desire to leave after three or four months. So monthly trips are simply exhalations. Something accumulates. During my life in Moscow, so much dirty breathing and smells accumulated.

ME: That you had to get away for twenty years.

IK: Yes. Took me away completely. The only thing that can be said about the need for solitude is that it returns you to yourself. But how long should this dose of solitude last? When you're alone for a long time, something starts coming to mind: you are back with yourself, and book pages appear to you and you leaf through them. But then, you want to tell someone about what you've read. So there's no peace! Solitude after a while is replaced by the desire to communicate, which in time leads to desperation and the desire to flee. A rather trivial story.

ME: There is another trivial and completely understandable way out of loneliness: love. The only profound alternative to solitude and public life. People yearn for the greatest closeness because they become equally sick of being public and being alone. Did this occur in your life?

IK: Of course. There's nothing of the hermit, always living alone, about me. After a certain time, the desire to live with someone comes upon you. It's another thing that in the past it had not gone very well. But the last twenty-some years have been completely astonishing. I am by myself, yet we are together. It's a very important point that we are working on the same thing. It's actually a double-headed creature. The joy is incredible, of course.

ME: Has the feeling of solitude lessened in these twenty years?

IK: Yes, I don't know it at all. We are always together.

ME: You don't desire it?

IK: Well, for one thing, I'm in the studio all day. The portion of solitude is huge.

ME: Harmony then, in that sense?

IK: Yes. We are together but in separate places, where we can intersect at any time. That is, the topic does not even exist. It's a phenomenal gift.

Once I emigrated, I lost almost all contact with friends I would like to see and talk with. It's literally only a few people, and the contacts are so brief that it's painful. I still have the need to communicate and socialize with them, but it doesn't happen. It's different with foreigners: pragmatism, business relations dealing with the organization of my shows. The ones I can "really talk" with are just a few: Borya [Boris Groys], you, Monastyrsky, and Pepperstein. You can count them on one hand. And yet it's impossible in the volume I would like.

### Text as the Foundation of Visual Expression

ILYA KABAKOV: This is a substantive issue for me. I've even published a book on the topic, "Text as the Foundation of Visual Expression."<sup>44</sup> I'm reworking it a bit now. The idea that text is the basis for the image came to me from two roots, for two reasons. The first is the way my psyche works. When I look at something visual, a painting and so on, I have a continual text about it in my mind. When I look, I have an internal monologue about it, forming thoughts right away. But my thoughts do not have a visual or musical quality; they are in the form of judgments that are immediately turned into language, into text. Constantly. The more text I can create about a painting, the more interesting the painting is for me. A painting's interest is measured by how long I can stand next to it and talk to myself about it.

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: Someone else's painting?

IK: Naturally. Or a sculpture, or some object. In general, everything that I see does not exist until I talk about it. And second, it turns out that my mind is so textualized, so full of literary texts, that whenever I start doing something visual, it is immediately plugged into all the text that already exists in our culture. I've said many times that Russian culture in its fullness exists only in literary form. Russian writers encompass all of Russian culture from all sides: moral, philosophical, all aspects of life. Two other kinds of creativity—music and ballet—describe only one side and don't give

44. See the text in the present volume.

the full picture. The visual arts, I think, are a very small segment in the spectrum of Russian culture. It seems to me that in the West, especially in French and German culture, the visual culture in parallel with the literary symmetrically describes many phenomena and can compose a full picture of the country's life and spirit. In Russia, "visuality" doesn't cover even a tiny part of Russian life. Naturally, it covers the critical zone for the Wanderers, the mystical for the avant-garde, and the ideological in Socialist Realism, but that is a blanket that only covers the toes and not the whole body. That proportion in scale that I see in the Russian correspondence of the visual and the literary struck me right away when for inexplicable reasons I started working in visual art.

I've talked about the accidental nature of my getting into the field. I don't think I was a born artist. I took it up because I found myself in it and because I can't do anything else. That's how it is. I derive no sense of completeness from my art, my visual work. For those reasons, I understood right away that my visual inadequacies had to be supplemented by a literary narrative. The emptiness and gaps in my images had to be filled with components that come from the literary genre. If I can put it this way, I had to invent a symbiosis of painting and voice. As for the stands, those were simply bureaucratic texts that I, naturally, perceived as paintings. When I started doing texts, they were completely visual for me. Texts filled my head to the point that even drawn and written on canvas, they were perceived as part of the visual world. When I started doing something visual in parallel, the visual for me was of course text.

I don't see the visual as a world of only visual things; for me it is just one available "language" among many. It is still a selection of clichés, because in every painting I worked with known forms (this is realism, this is Soviet hackwork, this is expressionism) as someone who had no particular liking for them, as one with no particular liking for the ordinary letters of the alphabet. For instance, the word "apple" is written down, but it is not an apple, just as a drawn apple is even less of an apple for me. It is simply a depiction of an apple, and a rather poor one. The Dutch depicted apples. For them, those images were apples in real life. I can draw an apple, but I don't know what an apple is actually like. It didn't interest me.

Visuality as a reflection of life, which is the basis of all Western painting—life and depiction of life—did not exist for me. But I suspect that it did not exist in Russia either. It came with Peter the Great, and before that there were only icons. So this was more a Western view of life. Like the

nose in Gogol, it stayed on the face as long as the hand kept it there.<sup>45</sup> In particular, the constant demands to create a Russian visuality, a Russian painting, were just a version of Western art. It was a national commentary on the base model that had been around for a long time “over there.” Of course, you can talk about Russian literature, too, as a revision of the Western novel. But it has permeated all the pores of Russian life, which is not Western life, and it has acquired features that are not similar but its own, and it is now called Russian literature. This did not happen with Russian painting, because it did not reflect the fullness of Russian life, all the “sore spots,” touching only some, for instance, critical or ideological. So it remains within the limits of those critical and ideological forms. The only thing they do is sometimes they reach the point of paroxysm and the grotesque, as in suprematism. Not spots, but one spot, though, essentially, this is just a trait of Russian maximalism.

When I started drawing images, I understood immediately that they were quotations from various styles. I didn't care whether they were high style, established in art history, or crap in the form of stands, Soviet receipts, and bureaucratic papers. It was all the same to me. This is a very important moment that I want to stress: I did not have gradations of high and low art. I could not find the point where art was when I basically did not know where art was hidden. And I still don't. But I understand perfectly well that you can use any material, from Rembrandt to a bottle label. My omnivorousness and, mainly, my indifference to the quality of the images, sliding all along the scale from painting to messes or bookkeeping accounts, still elicits an inexplicable reaction from people who see it. This kind of sliding: today I used Socialist Realism; tomorrow I use minimalism for some reason. To use high-flown words, that is polygenre-ism, but in actual fact, it is what is banned in the West. If you do minimalism, then you are not allowed to do realism. Market forces tell you that everyone has his own corridor and please run in it from youth to old age. Hopscotching is not approved. But the West is marvelous in that eventually it doesn't care at all and accepts things as they are. Let me reiterate: for me text and visuality are one and the same.

ME: You used the word “textuality” in two senses. First, roughly speaking, it is a letter or literary text, but the second meaning is visuality in general, that is, visuality as a set of ready clichés, styles, and stereotypes that can also be

45. A reference to Nikolai Gogol's 1836 short story “The Nose,” about a Major Kovalev who mysteriously loses his nose and whose nose then takes on human form to escape from him.



seen as text. I would like to clarify the role of the first, the narrowly textual component, in your works.

IK: Do you mean in paintings or in written texts?

ME: In literary texts.

IK: Here, it is the completely traditional genre. Everything that I said about mixing visuality and text refers only to visual works.

ME: What is the role of the letter text in your visual works?

IK: They are always voices. This is important. When there is commentary, it is in the form of a voice. That shows the big difference between literary texts and a spoken text. The commentary in paintings is always, except in the cases when it is a demonstratively bureaucratic declaration, a “recording” of a voice. It is someone, some critic, art historian, observer, or banal creature, and it is always a spoken statement, expressed with relative literariness. That is why my own “artistic” language is a mix of Soviet bureaucratise, bookish literary turns of phrase, emotional outbursts, and transitions from one to another. When I need something high-flown, I choose a literary formulation; when I need to lower the tone, I use a vulgar word; when I need rhythm, I used the bureaucratic, dull rhythm of instructions, something didactic. You address the viewer in three ways: explanatory-didactic, the literary is given in a gentle, flowing manner, and the sharpness or paradox that comes in the lowered vocabulary. The material in the paintings uses all three layers simultaneously or in turn.

ME: Your visual works do not have texts written by the author, narrative texts?

IK: Not in the paintings. In the paintings it is always a parody, always from someone else. And it is always someone who may be loved but not respected.

ME: For example, when you write in *The Palace of Projects* (fig. 48), you describe every project. What voice is that?<sup>46</sup>

IK: It is the voice of a character-artist. It is always written in the first person.

ME: I remember there was a medical statement . . .

IK: That’s a different installation. That’s the *Mad House*. There is a text by a patient and a text by a doctor.

ME: In recent works this textual component is gone?

IK: It is.

ME: How is that explained?

46. *The Palace of Projects* is a 1998 installation created by Ilya Kabakov with his wife Emilia that contains plans for dozens of projects to change the world and/or to change the individual. Some of the plans are inventive and touching, some are harmless and silly, and still others are destructive and ill-advised.



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IK: I think it's the influence of the "damned West."

ME: Which demands pure visuality?

IK: Yes. That influence manifested itself as the loss of the need for verbal material. As long as I held on to my Soviet mentality and expressed myself as a Soviet artist, the text was needed. Once I became simply an artist, remaining Russian but without the Sovietness, the need vanished.

ME: What role does your Russian language play in the loss of textuality? Say, if your native tongue had been English? Russian has a curious effect on Western viewers. Just hieroglyphs.

IK: Yes, they can't understand what that is. It's the same with Arabic calligraphy. People consider it an ornament, something from "over there," barbarian. Soviet texts have the same effect on the Westerner, who is not familiar and has no desire to be familiar with the "context."

ME: And if it had been English?

IK: People read English, because it is their language. Would I have continued to write?

ME: Yes, it's conditional!

IK: I don't know. No, of course not. It's hard to say. It's hard to imagine myself as an English-speaking artist. [ . . . ]

### Failure

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: The topic is *failure*.

ILYA KABAKOV: People have their main topics or main concepts. I had and still have, among others, the main concept of "failure." Failing, being a failure. My whole life I've had a sense of bad luck and failure. I understand that it's very hard to justify now. I'm getting on in years, and I've gradually become indifferent to it. I'm used to it. But even quite recently the sense of failure burned in me from morning till night. Failure in what? What didn't work? I'm talking about some inner struggle, some intention that didn't succeed and *by definition cannot succeed*. There is personal failure and our common failure.

What kind of failure can there be? There is failure in life, failure in your work. Another traditional subject is failure in love. That one tormented me locally but did not become a full, all-encompassing failure oppressing me like an absolute weight.

Let us start with the hopes and efforts expended on your profession. There are attempts and efforts that are supposed to lead to a result. But throughout my life, I've always considered the result to be unsuccessful. Who evaluates it? Who's the referee, who says it's a failure? For me, it comes from both sides. The first is this: when I do something myself and I evaluate the results with my own eyes, the results are always a failure. It is an entire bouquet of NOT: not complete, not energetic, not captivating, not talented, not clear, not original, not artistic. God knows what it is. It's like a cook creating a dish that ends up being a mixture of every vegetable, soup, main course, and dessert in one. [ . . . ] The reason is that I've never been an "artist" inside, just a person. I looked at my profession from the outside, and that's why the result is not "art" but some unknown moribund hybrid. And the second side is the reaction of the outside world. It has coincided with my own, by the way. Even if "it's a crock" is not what the viewer says, it's what is on his face. An artist can instantly read what a viewer's mug expresses. Without words. Words depend on friendliness and politeness. They can be almost anything. But the face never lies. Neither does the "attention span." What attracts the viewer is expressed in the following way: he looks, then his face has to take on a slightly carrotlike expression, stretch in my direction and for an

instant remain immobile. That means that his mind has been hooked by something. That slight pause, unconscious and unwitting, represents the result of interest, attention, and evaluation of the work. Another expression says that he's known this already and it doesn't interest him. If he's being polite, then you get just dull standing in front of your work, like an animal. If there's no politeness involved, then it's a sliding glance, as if over shelves in a store: don't need that, let's move on. "Let's move on" is a sure sign that he is looking at a failure. It never occurs to me to explain it in terms of a time factor—he'll get it later and so on. There is no "later." So, I would get the full dose of radiation from inside and outside from the same "shower." For example, when my friends, Monastyrsky, Makarevich, and so on, looked at the albums in my studio, even though it looked good, I still considered it a failure because it coincided with the intentions of my friends, who were working on similar things.<sup>47</sup> We were charged the same way. Plus on plus on plus. . . . When the charge is the same, as close friends, we can't discuss the topic. We come from the same kettle of stew. . . . You could say that my entire career is covered with a thick layer of similar failures.

ME: What about museum people, curators, who determine the degree of success?

IK: That's true, but it's also true that the sense of failure was not erased by the fact that they took me for exhibitions in their wonderful museums. Taking the works was motivated by many reasons. And the reasons, it seems to me, were not so much about quality as that the works represented something. Success for me is something complete and not relative. Something that works under any conditions. The way you lower the outboard motor into the water and it works. The curators' judgment was rather situational: this will be interesting to show; it fits our program of something that is all kinds of new things. I think that interest and significance, interestingly done and significantly done, are different things. In contemporary art, you can readily see that. "Interesting" is a "strong characteristic," but it's situational. Today it's interesting, tomorrow, less so.

ME: What criterion would you propose that would be satisfactory?

IK: Whatever your intuition tells you. . . . But a little bit more about being a failure. I understand that failure is ambivalent. There is objective failure and subjective failure. Sometimes, for all the objective components of success, the inner sense of failure does not weaken but actually

47. Igor Makarevich (b. 1943), a fellow Conceptualist in Moscow.

grows stronger. It is hard to analyze it deeply now. I think it's connected to a wider complex of everything brought out from Russia. The oddest things are always brought out of Russia. I feel that they are second-rate things. . . . Then there's the attitude toward Russian things as something pushed through, like the expression "they pushed it through" [*prodavili*].<sup>48</sup> In the sense that this Russian avant-garde was "pushed through" onto the West—it is not part of the Western process. It was pushed through by gradual effort. I mean that Malevich, first and foremost, and suprematism, Russian cubism, Liubov Popova, the "Amazons," and to a lesser extent Tatlin and constructivism, are perceived by the West primarily in the context of the West.<sup>49</sup> It's "Russian formalism." The search for formal combinations, that is, what the West elaborated well in classic modernism; it's a school of formalistic operations with a painting, with planes, and so on. But the essence of the Russian avant-garde is not formalistic. It is mysticism and worldview—cosmic, metaphysical, an analysis of life. All that is, of course, "worldview," but it is not the logic of development of the art itself and its formal qualities, or rather, it is not only that. The pushing and the success of the Russian avant-garde does not lie in the understanding of the main content of the Russian avant-garde, its world-creating substantive essence, but in its radical approach to form, which is extremely highly rated, and it is on that basis that representatives of the Russian avant-garde are revered and exhibited.

This extended to the next generation of artists, to our generation, where there is no sign of any new formal discoveries. Everything is seen only in one key—man's suffering under totalitarianism. The point is that this is not modernist language. The whole point is in the language. Modernism is basically concentrating attention on language. Conceptualism, cubism—they're language. Installation as well. Why, for what reason, can he be doing installations? The interest can only be formalistic.

ME: And this makes you feel . . .

IK: Like a failure, and unneeded.

ME: It is this substantive side—mysticism, the utopian side . . .

IK: General and local culture, human culture. What we all talked about.

ME: How exactly was your work understood?

48. Author's note: Ekaterina Degot first used the term in relation to the Russian avant-garde in her *History of Twentieth Century Russian Art*.

49. "Amazons" refers to the exhibition *Amazons of the Avant-Garde: Alexandra Exter, Natalia Goncharova, Liubov Popova, Olga Rozanova, Varvara Stepanova, and Nadezhda Udaltsova*, catalog edited by John E. Bowlt and Matthew Drutt (New York: Guggenheim, 2000).

IK: Pure formalism, spatial manipulations with installation, the placement of things inside a closed installation, light, color. All formal elements. But the content, that is the horrible life in a police state. The more remote from that the culture, the less interesting it is. For Americans, that finishes the artist completely. He shouldn't even be exhibited, since he shows social injustice in a totalitarian society, and that's been elaborated and done.

ME: What about the "Tevye the milkman" side of these works, the dreamy Jewish, utopian, melancholic side—is that perceived and accepted?

IK: No, it's not. Soviet-police Russia is not represented as a sentimental, ironic, sad place. That is the lot of prerevolutionary Russia. From the moment of the revolution, you had the damned police state, where people only suffer and the artist does not have the right to say anything except what his duty requires. In Africa he must speak about apartheid. If the artist talks about it, then he is a totally appropriate African artist. In Turkey he must talk about Muslim humiliations. Everywhere peripheral has a strict repertoire about which very little can be done. I'll say a little more about it because it involves my failure complex. When I started working and exhibiting in the West I encountered the fact that critics, artists, collectors, and curators had an absolutely standard and simplified view of other countries and other cultural territories. There was a fixed, immutable seal with three or four emblems for each. An architect from Argentina worked here. I told him that the problem the Russian artist faces in the West is that everyone he meets asks, "Shall we have some vodka?" and if you're Ukrainian, they want to know if you dance the Hopak. Vodka and caviar are our emblems; the Hopak is Ukraine's. His response was, "Yes, and they keep asking me how many times a day I do the tango."

You could say that once you're in the West, you encounter traditional colonial thinking, where there is the metropolis—Europe and America—and the rest of the world is mired in the colonial savage state. Russia is in no way distinguished from this general colonial world. But each place has its own repertoire: we have vodka, madness, and absurdity. . . . There are certain attributes of the Russian soul that you must embody. Absolutely nonmaterialistic, pointless activity, completely impractical, but with sweep and devil-may-care abandon. Mandatory madness of ideas. Everything that no one needs and that has no grounding—utopia, dreaminess, cosmism—those are typically Russian. Absolutely incomprehensible kindness, soul, sentimentality, sincerity, cries of the heart—those are our priorities, and being over the top, incredible irrationality, unmotivated behavior, extreme actions. Talent and madness simultaneously. With this

bouquet, if you are commensurate with the clichés (“nonmaterialistic,” not interested in profit, dreamy, generous, and wild, living an unmotivated life), you are the right exemplar of your country if you are an artist, musician, actor, or dancer. If you make a single mistake within this range—for example, if you mention how much your work costs—you violate the emblematic image of the Russian and you could even suffer for it; people might have a bad attitude toward you.

People of the metropolis are allowed to care about money, but you are supposed to be aloof and carefree. If your works or behavior have all of these elements, plus politeness instead of boorishness, you can work in the West and get all of the allotted preferences. Every nation has its emblems—in Africa, Eastern Europe, Latvia, and so on. The struggle with suffering, that’s a different typecasting, not Soviet. That’s probably Africans, they suffer. I have to make two or three points here that are a priority for Russian artists in the West. If we were dealing with other areas—music, ballet—they require mastery. Russians are acknowledged. They have the “mark of mastery” in these professions; it’s required. But since no one has demanded any mastery in the visual arts in a long time, if what’s offered is mad, strange, and unexpected, then it’s good, it’s Russian-style. That includes human sentimentality. Since Germans haven’t represented sentimentality in a long time, it’s left up to Russia. But suffering, that’s not in the Russian department; it belongs to the colonial nations, that is, Muslims, who have the right to suffer and show their ulcers. The Muslim artist must definitely show something to do with prison bars and so on. The African must show humiliation and oppression. It’s a small repertoire, ridiculously like Zhvanetsky.<sup>50</sup> But the conditions of your life and the exhibition of your works depend on it.

ME: But that’s not your failure.

IK: It’s our failure.

ME: Everyone’s. It’s the failure of the people who look at the world through such glasses.

IK: Naturally, but what’s interesting is that the guilt of those people, if I can put it that way, does not have reverse force. When a European or American artist is shown in those “colonial” countries, there is no symmetrical demand that the American be a minimalist, abstract painter, and so on. He is allowed to be various and multifaceted. Moreover, he’s allowed to have a name. But in our other half of the world, the scale is like this: a

50. Mikhail Zhvanetsky (b. 1934), a Soviet and Ukrainian satirist and performer, known for his evocations of everyday absurdities in the USSR.

young talented artist from Russia, an interesting Russian artist, an Eastern European artist. And only after some success, come the names—Ivanov, Kabakov, Petrov. Kabakov, who has been living in New York since some year. This is very important, for he is an émigré. And then the final step of respect, just using his name without modifiers.

ME: That's the general failure, built into the nature of things, in the colonial aesthetic. But what is your personal failure, *my failure*?

IK: That's very hard to explain. People you love managed to hit the bull's eye. But an enormous number of people missed. And you're among them.

ME: Who hit it?

IK: The ones hanging in museums. I have a psychological certainty that even a bad artist like Boucher hit the bull's eye.<sup>51</sup>

ME: First of all, not everyone will get into a museum right away, like you.

IK: I fell out as quickly as I got in. I mean a permanent exposition. You can be in the storeroom forever, and then they'll send you somewhere from the storeroom. It's all very relative. It's a different thing to be in the permanent exposition.

ME: Which contemporaries have made it?

IK: Many. For example, there are several contemporary Germans: Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, Anselm Kiefer. A group of Americans. Only two Frenchmen: Christian Boltanski and Daniel Buren. A group of British sculptors. They're known to everyone.

ME: And from Russia?

IK: No one. There are no Russians in the ranks of museum art, except for the avant-garde. There are museums of contemporary art all over the world now. And every city has the mandatory selection. That is what the museums of contemporary art are . . . five Germans.

ME: There are more Germans.

IK: Well, there are two periods there—the classic modernism, ending with the war, and the postwar moderns, already also canonized. Museums consist of prewar and postwar sections. It's very simple. And all of the rooms are full. The rest is the new, actual art, which naturally turns into five or six names.

ME: You're part of the contemporary . . .

IK: I don't fit in the contemporary because of my age.

ME: How about postmodern?

IK: There are some works in some museums, but from my pessimistic point

51. Francois Boucher (French, 1703–1770), a rococo painter and etcher, known for light-hearted pastoral and amorous themes.



of view, it's not enough. Even though in a few they are in the permanent exhibition.

ME: What about books, for instance?

IK: Some histories of art include me, some don't. There's failure for you. I realize that this is a millionaire's story about how a piece of his roof fell off yesterday. I'm talking about my fears with some distance, trying to see myself from the outside. But since we're talking about my inner psychopathy, I can't leave it out.

### Russia in the Art World

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: We're seeing a new topic: "Russia's Reception in the Art World" or "The Capital of Russian Art from the Point of View of the International Art Community."

ILYA KABAKOV: That has to be given a time frame. There's the situation yesterday, some time earlier, and so on.

ME: Russia in the world art market.

IK: The market is something else. The market doesn't describe the entire art world. The art market is only a part. The art world has at least four subdivisions, in the crudest approximation. The top layer, the most active and neurotic, is the art market. That is, the price of works in gallery exhibitions by artists who sell; that is, auctions that resell or exhibit; that is, the collectors who collect these artists and pay certain sums and then might throw them into the market. That is, we have all the operations relating to the games of dealers, most of which are speculative as a rule. It is a whole separate world in which artists also participate, not as passive figures (painted and sold; I paint, he sells—recall Pushkin's line "Inspiration is not for sale, but you can sell a manuscript").<sup>52</sup> That's an obsolete legend, the artist locking himself in the studio, the dealer forcing his way in, having heard so much about the art, grabbing his works while the artist protests. Today the artist is one of the competent participants in the market, who knows what's what, how much it's worth, who can be given the works and how they move in the market. The worst part is that most young artists pay attention to this layer. Everything that is in print comes from the art market. Especially Russian publications. For Russian artists, the art market is synonymous with the art world. This explains the situ-

52. A quotation from Aleksandr Pushkin's "Conversation between a Bookseller and a Poet" (1824).

ation in Russia, as well. A prosperous sale means a good artist and great success, and he doesn't notice the remaining three categories; he doesn't want to know them.

The second category is the academic perception of art, the academic adaptation of art. Here there are completely different protagonists. No one speaks of money. It is about including the artist in art history, books, education, and lectures—the artist as the presentation and evolution of art and culture. In a word, everything that professors throughout the world, from Japan to America, talk about. The art market is not the subject of discourse. Lectures are given on artists who perhaps have no commercial success at all, but who for the professors represent artistic movements. It's an enormous world. It is great luck to get into textbooks written there, into student auditoriums, to become part of the instructors' language. Basically, art history moves along that line—the academic. The market is the subject of “today-tomorrow,” but who knows, perhaps even “day after tomorrow.”

The third category is exhibition activity of a noncommercial nature. Biennales, festivals, Documenta, Manifesta, and so on. There are plenty of such presentations, led by young curators. Someone finances individual groups. But all of this activity is noncommercial in principle. An enormous number of young artists are involved in this. The artist may be most interested in selling, but he might gain more acceptance through inclusion in these exhibitions of artistic innovation. This is the third layer, and it's huge. Russians are gradually coming to understand that it is significant. Not sales and prices.

The fourth layer is museums, kunsthalls, and “serious” collections. This is a completely separate, closed area, mysterious and most often inaccessible.

ME: Do you put “classical” museums in the previous category?

IK: Museums belong to the past. Or they act as exhibition spaces, that is, they belong in the third category.

ME: Where the biennals are.

IK: But once they are in museums, there's nothing to say about them because—

ME: I mean museums of contemporary art.

IK: The artists there are already approved and legitimized. Museums are museums, memory of the past. That's not discussed. No one talks today about Picasso. That's like having lunch at the table. Picasso with all of his provocations has become . . . there's nothing to be said, really. What can

you say about the Romantics? It's not contemporary. I'm talking about the four layers that are active now: the art market; the academic layer, which is very active, forming art history; exhibition activity; and museum activity and collectors. The last zone is the most mysterious. It's hard to say anything about it, especially about the collectors—what is a “serious” collector? How and what does he buy? Art is bought through galleries. The system is this: first, the artist is accepted by a gallery, and the gallery, which has its group of prospective buyers, recommends the works to the collector. The collector trusts the gallery he has selected. If the collector trusts his own tastes, he will make mistakes. There are very few specialists around. As a rule, the buyer trusts the gallery.

ME: I don't quite understand how the fourth part differs from commercial activity, whether it's done through a gallery or a through a collector.

IK: It differs because the assumption is that the collector buys the painting for himself, to keep it and use it, and has it on his wall for a long time, consuming the painting. The market, by contrast, doesn't consume the painting. For example, in a store, no one eats a cucumber. It's for sale. The collector is different because he thinks he is eating the cucumber. But that's only in theory. In fact, everything is completely different now. First of all, the collector, who is usually a financier himself, also gets involved very actively, buys a painting as an “investment,” which the gallery guarantees he can sell at a profit in a year's time. Otherwise, he won't buy it. The gallery guarantees an increase in price, or at least its preservation. He stops being a consumer. He is told that in a year the painting will cost more, and if it doesn't, I'll buy it back from you, says the gallerist. He risks very little. He can buy a work by a young artist for a small sum. Even if the artist doesn't grow, in a year's time he can “dump” the painting, send it to his relatives. And buy a new young artist. But there is the chance that the young artist will rise at enormous speed. Then he will have an early work, and buying early works is considered the most profitable. They become very expensive later, because they were the first.

ME: You say that of the four layers, Russia can participate in three. Probably not the academic?

IK: Not the academic. It's mostly auctions and collectors. It's very strange. First, Russia rushed in wildly like a bull onto the auction and art sales scene, and now, when there is no money, it has undermined the market. It stopped buying. Now it's run away, like a bull, and nothing is selling.

ME: I meant something else, which artists are being bought?

IK: Nothing from Russia is being bought. Paintings are taken from Russia and shown at auctions, but at Russian auctions, where Russians buy them.

ME: There was a time when they bought Grisha Bruskin . . .<sup>53</sup>

IK: That was Sotheby's, foreigners. It was an exceptional event. It won't be repeated. Foreigners aren't buying. Only Russians and Ukrainians are buying Russian and Ukrainian art.

### The Character Technique

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: The character technique is when the artist ascribes his work to a character, for example, the way Pushkin used Ivan Petrovich Belkin.<sup>54</sup> He didn't write "Pushkin's Tales," but "The Tales of Ivan Petrovich Belkin"—that's a devil of a difference.

ILYA KABAKOV: We know that many works are made not in the artist's name but in the name of a character. What is the reason for that substitution, the mask? In literature, it's self-explanatory. But why in the visual arts do you need to talk about a character who has his own speech? In a visual project it can be done only when the artist takes the position of curator, distancing himself, and wants to say that I didn't draw this, *he* did. Playing that *he* did it. Who is *he*, or even the more numerous *they*?

The assumption is that the artist has no single narrative or single manner, or that he has no artistic identity. That is the first thing that comes to mind to explain why an artist uses a character. This contradicts the development of modernism, which demands that the artist form his own signature, his own image. The assumption is that finding your "image" in the sea of possibilities and other artists is so hard that once you've found your path and your identity, you must cling to it like a flotation device and not deviate, because death lies to the left and right. The found identity is a solid position: it is your artistic ego in the world of other egos, and it makes good commercial sense, because if you lose your identity, you will not be distinguishable and consequently not bought. Say you have set up to produce cars and then a month later you switch to soap. In principle, you can do that in business. But when somebody buys an artist, he has to know that he's buying soap and not a car. A loss of image (or brand) or the announcement that there is no image is perceived as very strange. Where is the one who drew this, then? The assumption is that the artist is the one

53. Grisha Bruskin (b. 1945), an unofficial artist who works in Moscow and New York. His *Fundamental Lexicon* (1986) became famous as the unofficial painting that sold for the highest price at the 1988 Sotheby's auction of contemporary Russian art in Moscow.

54. Aleksandr Pushkin's *The Tales of the Late Ivan Petrovich Belkin* (1831) consists of stories purportedly told by their narrator, the recently deceased landowner Ivan Belkin.

who drew it, and the curator, the one who exhibits the artist's drawing, occupies a completely different profession. In the case with a character it is clear that the artist is in the position of curator. Then the question arises: Who did the drawing? Was it your assistants? Of course, here in the West, the assistant is considered the artist's hand.

In short, from the point of view of modernism, working with a character does not fit in, but from the point of view of postmodernism it probably does. Most importantly, the reason the main artist uses other artists is that what interests him is not sincere, frank, and real language, but an attitude toward language in general. The work of any artist appears in the form of some language. What's interesting is that these languages can be socially significant (the language of the hack, of the passionate artist, of the dilettante, of the bureaucrat) or languages that are made up personally. When personal languages, over which the modernist artists struggled, are invented simply as a private language for one person, it follows that no discovery of a language is possible: just as there cannot be an identifying language, there cannot be a language that can be discovered. Because all languages have already been given, in principle. What is possible is a combination of languages or the elaboration of some language, but—and this is important—the presumption is that the person has no identity. All languages do not belong to the artist but float in a socio-artistic field.

This artistic pessimism lies at the base of work with characters. Language is taken from an existing alphabet. There is a repertoire, and the artist selects a language—attentive, passionate, weak, insulting, hooliganish, and so on—for a character. The main thing here is that they are alien to him. Working with an alien language was unacceptable in modernism, but it is completely natural in postmodernism, because everything is known and all languages are basically alien. It is impossible now to acquire a language. Even the invention of a new language is under doubt, as is the idea that the language is identifying. Thus, the character technique is simply following through to the end the assertion that there are no identifying languages and no new languages. They all exist in multiple forms in an enormous “menu.” And if that is the case, then each language is underpinned not by a visual concept but on a literary basis. Language is chosen on this principle: who is the character working in this language? Say, an uneducated and rude person uses this visual language for self-expression. An educated professional who knows theory uses that other language. And so on. Each language is assigned to a character in accord with his psychological and social status. The final step is very close: creat-

ing a full biography and personality for the character, which is a popular method in literature.

We know this character narrative is used in literature in various ways, but two are the most obvious. The first: in order to describe a real personality. The personality and character approach the complexity of a real person with secretiveness, strategies, and “masks.” The idea is to describe something in real life. That’s Maupassant, Balzac, Zola, et al. Tolstoy took this path too—to bring the character as close as possible to a living person, to animate a literary hero. The second method goes back to the medieval manner of writing about abstract things. The basis is an idea that obsesses the artist, and that idea is ascribed to various characters, distributed among representatives of that idea. That is Dostoevsky’s path. His characters are wooden dolls, Japanese cardboard, flat creatures, but each depicts a passion or ideologeme. That is, the artist uses the character as if in a cardboard shadow theater. Each person there is only an idea. There is no reality. It is the drama of ideas.

In my work with characters I tend to use the second method more. Naturally, these are not real people who draw something. Rather, each character is in the thrall of a single idea. You have a theater of ideas but explicated in a visual figure. It is the idea that motivates them to do what they do with their visual material: organize it strictly, as if they were bureaucrats. . . . In short, each time the visual operation is motivated by a single idea. Together they all, from the albums and other characters to the last three—Rosenthal, Kabakov, and Spivak, in a more maximalist form—represent various ideas that are in the head of the “curator” himself.<sup>55</sup>

Nevertheless, the dynamic of the ideas is present. This is not simply postulating ideas. There are such characters, who merely postulate an idea, but in general, all these manipulations of these characters take part in a great series that represents development: the birth of an idea; its burgeoning, inflating; when it suddenly seems almost healthy instead of sickly, looks like a flourishing creature; and then, following the logic of movement, its decline and death. In other words, it reaches its absurdity or end. Like any creature, it has a beginning, middle, and end. But not the person. The “person” who embodies the idea is attached to it, because he

55. Charles Rosenthal, “Ilya Kabakov,” and Igor Spivak are fictitious artists invented by Kabakov in the early 2000s; see the catalog *An Alternative History of Art: Rosenthal, Kabakov, Spivak* (Bielefeld: Kerber, 2005).

is a person-idea and appears, blossoms, and dies with the idea. These are models similar to the Italian theater of masks, as in Carlo Gozzi's work.<sup>56</sup> There is nothing incredible in this conceit. The idea is to transfer literary and theatrical methods to the visual, where this number hasn't been tried before. I'm not the only one to use the technique of characters. It occurs among an entire group of conceptualists. We have to remember Komar and Melamid with their Buchumov and Ziablov; the important character artist Dmitri Alexandrovich Prigov, who himself is a character, but who multiplied his own character but basically created only one hero—himself. Then there's Makarevich with his "wooden man," Albert with his *Karandash* (Pencil-Nose) and his "primitive artist," Zakharov with his aunt, Madam Shliuz, and Pastor, and so on.<sup>57</sup>

ME: Do any Western artists use this technique?

IK: Perhaps, but I don't know. It's such a literary method that it could flourish so abundantly only in the Moscow circle. I don't know any Western analogues. I heard that some young artists were showing something somewhere, but I think they were actually influenced by the Russians. In respectable art society, this is not quite understood or approved—again, because it's impossible to collect "characters." There are amusing situations when people say they would like to buy the painting "but if it's signed by Kabakov." "But it's Rosenthal's!" They don't want Rosenthal, they want "hard currency."

ME: Did this start with the albums for you?

IK: It began with the albums around 1970. Then there was *Ten Characters* in the form of an installation in 1988. Then at Feldman there was Koshelev, who came from Barnaul [in the Russian East] and set up his own teaching system called "Synthetism." The installation was called *Incident in the Museum, or Water Music*.<sup>58</sup> The exhibition consisted of Koshelev's "paintings," and I even fooled a sweet curator from the Pushkin Museum, telling her how hard it had been to get an unknown artist out of Barnaul. The

56. Carlo Gozzi (1720–1806) was an Italian playwright who specialized in satirical and comedic fairy tale–like stories.

57. "Nikolai Buchumov" and "Apelles Ziablov" are characters invented by Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid in the 1970s; the artist and poet Dmitri Alexandrovich Prigov invented a character named Dmitri Alexandrovich. Similar strategies were pioneered by Igor Makarevich (b. 1943), Yuri Albert (b. 1959), and Vadim Zakharov (b. 1959), all members of the Moscow Conceptual Circle.

58. *Incident in the Museum or Water Music* was a 1992 installation at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. The paintings displayed were supposedly created by a provincial painter named Stepan Koshelev.

curator, unsophisticated in the deceptive arts of installations, believed me. When you're using the character technique, you as curator have the right to use all kinds of thoughts, commentaries, and explanations to convince people of the "reality" of your hero, for the mystification to succeed.

ME: When you make regular paintings, non-character ones, is there nevertheless an unspecified, unrevealed character in them?

IK: No. When I'm painting as myself, I feel that I've made it up myself. Naturally, I use nonspecific forms, languages, fragments, quotations. But the concept, blank or tied to realistic images and relations, is my own. Of course, making any painting you inevitably become a "character in art history" . . . you become a "monster."

### Seriality

ILYA KABAKOV: Let's touch on a quality of artistic production that is focused on a group of similar works and not on individual ones. What is the reason? Starting with the album technique, my paintings keep turning into series. Rather large ones—twenty to thirty paintings on one subject, variations on the given theme. Why it happens that way, I don't know. Say, not one cherry but a cluster. Why a cluster or a bunch of grapes instead of one big sweet apple? Why is everything always born in a multitude? I think that multiplicity and variety, on the one hand, speak of a distrust of the "one," the single and unique. How is "one" work made? One work with such scope and such depth that it unites all the lines that are in the artist's head, where everything is concentrated in that work. He thinks simultaneously of a subject of infinite depth and of some perfect form, and exceptional consequences. In psychology, this would be labeled paranoid tendencies. The paranoid thinks that if he pushes at one point, he'll be able to turn the world around. He'll move the stone he's leaning against and something will happen.

An example of the extreme waste of energy on one painting is Ivanov's *Christ Appearing to the People*.<sup>59</sup> The man creates one painting, but that painting has absorbed his entire life, all this thought and effort. Everything is directed toward raising this impossible weight that holds "all" your life. The consequences of that titanic effort are intended to be incredible: all of humanity, gathered around the painting, will understand and see that it too is standing in the waters of the Jordan and seeing Christ, and

59. For twenty years, the Russian painter Aleksandr Ivanov (1806–1858) worked on his large neoclassical canvas *Christ Appearing to the People* (1837–1857).



humanity will be transformed by that “cinematic scene.” That is, we are talking about a one-time transformational event that happens through that painting. In order to paint that one painting, it has to be exaggerated many times over in its significance. Some artists have done one painting all their lives, repeating it multiple times in different variants. That means that the painting concentrates and unites on canvas in a frame everything for artists like that. Of course, actually any artist forgets what was in the previous painting when he moves on to the next one. “Everything” begins again in the new painting. The fact remains that each time he concentrates on compressing everything into a small magnetic ball, a planet that he sets loose into the world.

What is an artist who makes a series of paintings on a single theme? Series were done in the past—lives of the saints, for instance, series of icons or Renaissance paintings. It’s a story, painting in “film frames.” The life or story of war, say, would be paintings related to one subject, the expansion of a single painting. We can’t call that a series, they are different paintings. Linked by a single content. The series I’m talking about are a multiplicity of a single variant, where the content is always the same but it falls apart onto numerous paintings. One painting appears not in the quality of singleness but in the quality of being multiplied. When someone shoots buckshot instead of a bullet. Here, as with shrapnel shot, one bullet hits the duck, the rest miss. I would call this genetic excess. Instead of taking aim and hitting the target with one bullet, he releases a handful of stones, scattershot, so that at least one hits the mark. I think there’s something vegetative and biological here. Lots of seeds fly from a tree, and there is a great probability that one of the seeds will fall into soil and grow. And here there is the calculation that if there is an incomprehensible idea in one painting, the vibration of many such pictures will make the viewer understand what it’s about, on one hand, and on the other hand, remain confused. He will be uncertain if he understands correctly. This is another kind of blinking or vibration. To tell the truth, I can’t analyze the reasons for this maniacal “abundance.” I don’t know, it’s a sensitive issue. I’ve been talking about this for ten minutes and I haven’t clarified anything for myself. A psychologist would call this a schizophrenic’s phobia.

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: I think that artists in previous eras used a language that was more or less familiar to viewers and artists of the time. There was a common language that lasted for decades. So an artist could make one painting, that is, create a verbal act in a language that was understood by his contemporaries.

IK: Yes, of course.

ME: But now there is an infinite multiplicity of languages. . . . Movements and directions that used to have a common language have also dissipated. Every artist creates his own language and at the same time a statement in that language. This leads to a difficulty: how can I understand the statement if I don't know the language in which it was made. Seriality is an attempt to define the language in which each painting is a separate statement. That is, every statement immediately pulls behind it the entire language in which it is made, and from every painting comes an entire series, as a presentation of the grammar and rules of combining images.

IK: I think it's something like that. That's a very good explanation. The production of multiplicity. In Moscow they used to say, "I've got it already! Why do you need twenty pictures?" But the paradox is that you get it because there are twenty pictures. You have to establish the language, and then you can leave one painting in that language. It's a very correct idea.

ME: There is no other commensurate field where you can perceive the language of the contemporary artist beside the seriality of the same painting. The language does not precede the statement, as it would if it had been established by tradition and cultural system, it is born simultaneously with the statement, as a set of rules that allow it to be varied.

IK: In the case of preparing series, a new language is established each time. Thus, the author performs the roles of many characters, series after series.

ME: Multilingual.

IK: And that brings us back to playing characters, the character technique.

ME: It's very close. Character playing and seriality are strongly connected.

IK: Yes, I accept your explanation completely. It is the establishment of a language that is ready every time to produce a new language, a new alphabet. It's like an author's certificate, but without the name.

ME: Character playing and seriality are related by the ability to be multiplied. In one case it is the multiplication of the subjects of writing, characters, and in the other it is the multiplication of the subjects of drawing, paintings.

IK: Right. I'm thinking about *Ten Characters* now, and it's built on that.<sup>60</sup> Each album has its own technique of exposition. That technique requires a series.

60. Kabakov's album series *Ten Characters* appeared in 1975. An installation with the same title appeared in New York in 1988, but the "characters" were not the same.

### An Artist's Time

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: Your time and the time of others.

ILYA KABAKOV: There's a very beautiful parable, realized in the life, in this case, of an artist. Life is divided into three parts, by goals, by feelings, and by the persona's self-affirmation. The first thing is to find your place, do something for which you are responsible and which succeeds in your hands, basically, to hone a practice. This is best expressed in terms that my friend Yuri Kuper either likes to quote or invented; an artist, he says, has three tasks: first, find your shtick, some trick or method; second, perfect the shtick; and third, push the shtick.<sup>61</sup> I like this definition, which fully corresponds with the three stages of an artist's life. First, find your signature, so that your hand listens to your head, so that the head controls it well, and also so that there is something going on in your head for the hand to execute. In the second stage I want to move to a different plane: what place does my activity hold in the contemporary art field? Other artists may not have this concern. For me it is a sphere in which the contemporary artist acts. I want to participate in this artistic life. It is my time. When a person is pushed out onto the stage, it is his time, between the entrances of Ivanov and Petrov, and he must use that time completely. I had this very strong sense that I was about to be pushed out onto the stage and I had to perform my act. I think this sense of the shortness of time, a special time, rather contradicts the tendencies of the artist in antiquity, the icon painter or Renaissance painter, who believed that he was working for eternity and that his works "floated" in a very long time period. So it didn't matter at all if I painted today or tomorrow. The alarm clock was not ticking over my head. I worked in a lengthy stretch of time. I have never had that feeling.

When I started working, I understood immediately that I lived in the Soviet period and the paintings had to be made today, because I reflect that period. I'm glad that I could depict the times, those communal flats, the stands, the dying Soviet society. I felt that I had to depict it, and I did somehow. This went on for a rather long time, until 1998. I sensed that this was my time and I was expressing what was happening in that time. And definitely the post-Soviet period. I believed that corpse had to be depicted, that slaughtered cow, from various points of view—from the side of the hoofs, by describing the quality of the hide. The way corpses are

61. A reference to the unofficial painter Yuri Kuperman, a.k.a. Yuri Kuper (b. 1940), a friend of Kabakov during his years in Moscow.

photographed by police photographers at crime scenes. I had this feeling that I had to describe it, not young and galloping, in the “revolutionary” period, but when it lay on the ground and barely twitched its tail. I had the feeling that I must describe the animal’s death throes. And with great joy. Then, when it turned out my clock had run out on describing the death of the cow, I began painting in the spirit of the contemporary artists around me in the West. That’s approximately 1995. I painted in the language that people around me understood—curators and artists on the museum plane. It was good, and I felt that I was filling that space. I had a terrific desire to spread out within the limits of that opportunity, to “appear” as much as possible in various corners of the world. I accepted numerous invitations; we traveled all over the world. The animal instinct, like a dog, to piss on as many trees as possible around me. I would use these instinct terms to describe my joyous moves from museum to museum.

The sad moment began around 2003 when I felt that everything I was doing and other artists were doing in this new time period was no longer needed. First a small vacuum bubble formed, and then it got bigger. No one said, “Get out of here! Your time is over, get out of the train car!” But nevertheless, I understood that the train on which I had been traveling so sweetly was not going any farther. There were other expresses on other roads, while the train where other passengers and I were sitting had been sidelined. In 2003 I heard the alarm clock go off and as they used to sing, “The berries are ripening, but not for you!” It wasn’t our time any more. It belonged to others. The berries were ripening in other gardens, for others—for the young. . . . What was sad was that I imagined it would be like the three generations of conceptualists, older, middle, and junior, tied by uninterrupted links, with a handing down of concepts. The three generations in Moscow were like one family.

But living in the West, I see that there is no succession and no respect for tradition. I sensed that these people, these tendencies and concepts and their forms, were simply abandoned, forgotten, and a completely different history was being written. This is the third time period, when you continue dancing, but in the wings, while others dance on stage. The image of the world appears in the form of stage wings and camera shutters, where it’s “click” and on to the next picture. I know this image is neurotic, that art is multidimensional, but nevertheless, when we talk about my time and someone else’s time, it says it pretty succinctly.

ME: When did your time start?

IK: At the end of the institute, in the late 1950s. I was very lucky because when I graduated, the unofficial artistic life began almost immediately.

If the official life had continued, we could speak of delays, but I got right into the boat where others were already loaded, at about the same time. Somewhere in 1955 or 1956, Nemukhin and Rabin started working, but not earlier, as I calculate it.<sup>62</sup>

ME: Can you define in a substantive way what ended in 2003?

IK: Postmodernism and the entire era of modernism ended. Classic modernism and its derivative, postmodernism. Postmodernism is an addendum, a commentary, the gaps in classic modernism. The additions are literariness and a rejection of modernist purism, a diminution of ecstasy, distance—that is, a whole number of, on the one hand, playful moments, irony, parody, because modernism was too serious, and on the other hand, reflection and detailing. But basically, everything winds around the main trunk of modernism. They are our fathers, our parents, for whom we feel respect. What happened after 2000 is a new paradigm, a new life, new people.

### Current Art

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: What is the spirit of this current art?

ILYA KABAKOV: We've talked about it. It is incredible infantilization, the absence of the past, of any vertical criteria, comparison of high and low, a total lack of missionary zeal, a lack of responsibility, and a quick distribution of everything along the horizontal. It's very clear that everything I am saying is colored by anger and negativism. I wish it weren't! Because it's none of my business. They said the same things about you. Don't be an idiot and denounce everything. Something is moving toward us. I think that it's still at its very beginning and then it will take other forms, but you notice that impersonality is extremely high—there is no personal principle. There is a game with the masses, a games master for the masses. There are outstanding commercial talents. A well-directed rosy production. Take character narrative, for instance, which turned out to be totally in harmony, forming hybrids, and is unintentionally acceptable. Artists are mocking and playing out various genres: artist hooligan, artist financier, artist curator, businessman, and so on. So character playing is acquiring a place not only in remote artistic activity, but simply in life.

ME: You mean in this new, "irresponsible" era?

IK: Yes. Honestly, I don't want to make too many prognoses, since it sounds like grumbling, unfortunately, and an old-age thing—I do realize that.

62. Vladimir Nemukhin (1925–2016) and Oskar Rabin (b. 1928) were both unofficial painters.

ME: Judging by what I saw at the Biennale, it's total "relax, let down standards," no tension in meanings. Something jangles, something rustles. . . . There's no goal and no execution.

IK: Of course. The artist's role in the world has been devalued. Perhaps those of the writer and composer, as well. . . . But still, a writer bears responsibility for what he's written. There is a tradition. Musicians and dancers have tradition too. For example, a classic ballet production is in a serial tradition; at least the gestures have a memory of former meanings. Visual art, unlike everything else, even sport, is the complete absence of schooling. The artist today is not tied by anything and has no education. Even if he has graduated from somewhere, there is no process of teaching there. They just hang around there, chatting with the teachers, and if the teacher doesn't show up, they just sit there. It is total amateur stuff within the school. All the schools I know are practically abandoned places, although the teachers get paid, sometimes they even show up, but the teachers don't know anything, either. There are three generations of people now who know nothing. Their teachers knew nothing, as well.

ME: When did it start?

IK: At the start of the century. The destruction of schools in Europe. Academies exist, but these are free academies. The skills of transition from head to hand are practically destroyed.

ME: But it did exist in Russia.

IK: Yes, in a horrible state, but it was preserved in Russia. What's preserved is not even the rules but mechanical manipulation. A person doesn't remember why he's eating, but he makes motions with the spoon. Something mechanical is preserved in our time. They drew plaster casts, they drew from nature, but no one knew how to draw them, including the teacher. But today no nature drawing, no composition is taught. There may be nude models, but the students just smear paint around any which way. And everyone keeps saying that the best artists are former electricians. Actually, it's not the "teaching" in school that is important but just attending the space of the "school" for several years. As a result of those years you become imbued with its aura and become a real-life artist.

ME: As I understand it, the main focus is on self-expression. Express yourself as you wish. . . .

IK: Of course, especially when the concept of the project appeared. Art is the proposal of a project. If you can explain it and write it down, your assistants will do the rest.

## Metaphor

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: The topic is *metaphor*.

ILYA KABAKOV: A literary metaphor is a figure of speech that entails a paradox. The paradox radiates a huge number of meanings, and everyone understands that the final meaning of the metaphor cannot be found, but the explosive power of a metaphor stimulates the imagination mightily. Thus, the metaphor works in both directions—toward simple edification and the meaning that can be found in the metaphor, and the second layer is the insoluble abyss that opens with a successful metaphor. If a metaphor does not have that second layer, and it cannot be figured out, then you get a joking, funny, and often incongruous paradox. If the banality and stupidity on the surface of the first layer remains nontransparent, the metaphor loses the title of metaphor and becomes something didactic, an allegory.

With the literary metaphor, everything is clear. But only your intuition can suggest what a metaphor of a visual nature can be. You can create a compact image that will work as a metaphor. For example, *The Toilet* (fig. 49), which we did at Documenta XII [in 1992], was a successful visual metaphor, because it has incredible banality and stupidity in the first



place. To wit: it is the story of how Soviet people live in a toilet. The people who did not understand that this was a metaphor thought it was an ethnographic object. For instance, in Germany, I was asked what percentage of the population lives in toilets. I replied that before perestroika it was 80 percent, and now it was almost 100 percent. No one was surprised. The other question asked by every other visitor was, Is this the rule for people living in toilets in the Soviet Union, that the men's toilet is for the dining room, study, and room for the elderly, and the women's toilet is for the children's room and bedroom? That was the way we had planned out the rooms. This was the limit of the curiosity among "normal" Western viewers, which naturally roused the ire of Russian reviewers (one article, called "We Do Not Live in Toilets," was a furious attack on the émigré who slanders his homeland and makes money on its suffering). But a certain proportion of advanced people understands that this is a metaphor, that life in general is shit, but we live in it and nothing can be changed. But I repeat, for the outside observer, the meaning of the metaphor vanishes. All people talked about was the ethnographic details of Russian life, which had to be accurate because a Russian artist had made the installation. This is the traditional colonial effect at work, that we Westerners are complex and subtle people, but the savages from Russia to Cuba can only depict their lives, tell stories like Sinbad the Sailor about where they live.

I must say that this appeal to visual metaphor is one Emilia and I have long used in our installations. I always wanted to make works that could be understood metaphorically, on two planes: idiotically banal and expanded. If there is not expanded significance, the work did not succeed.

ME: What's the metaphorical nature in the *Flying Paintings* (fig. 50)?<sup>63</sup>

IK: In the most recent series of paintings, called *They Are Flying*, the paintings that depict reality are themselves flying. Each painting has rather thoroughly worked-out landscapes, faces, and so on. If it was simply trees, faces, and people flying in the air, weightless and without up-and-down orientation, the approach would be fairly familiar: life has no stability, has no top and bottom, and is generally flimsy. There is no metaphor in that. It's an expressionist story about no stability in life, everything is upside down and swimming around, and so on. But when a painting in which everything is placed "normally" is floating in emptiness, you get a very clear metaphorical meaning. The painting is flying upside down, but inside the painting nothing is spinning; everything is fine and dandy inside it. If you look at what's drawn there, you see two women seated on a ship, even

63. The *Flying Paintings* belong to a series of canvases produced in the late 2000s.





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smiling, and in a different place cars are driving along. That is, the world is revolving, but at the moment of turning, those who are being spun don't know that they are spinning. In a certain sense this is a literary metaphor. It is a direct reference to suprematism because, as we know, in suprematism abstract figures, geometry, fly, but in reality they never flew, the painting itself did not fly.<sup>64</sup> Because Malevich rejected objects, demanded nonobjectivity and abstraction, liberated art from the world, from weight, but he did not reject painting itself. Here I give a typical postmodernist correction: yes, everything is flying, but it's flying in the form of old paintings, and you can see that the paintings have no depth; yes, they depict depth, but in actual fact they are as flat as Malevich's suprematist forms.

ME: Does this affirm or reject suprematism?

IK: Neither, it recognizes it, but with a small addendum.

### The Viewer

ILYA KABAKOV: For me the viewer is a deified person. Almost a god. There is fear when he looks at me, and in general anyone who looks at me gets incredibly high preferential treatment. First of all, he is right, and second,

64. See, in this volume, "Not Everyone Will Be Taken into the Future." Kazimir Malevich exhibited his first suprematist canvases in Petrograd (St. Petersburg) in 1915.

he knows everything. The person looking at me knows everything. I have this terrible psychological flaw—I think that when he looks at me, he can see straight through me. I attribute these qualities to him.

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: Like a sorcerer . . .

IK: Like some higher creature. The last thing I think is that he is a real person, just like me. The fact that he is looking at me gives him incredible advantages. I don't know why that is. When I started drawing, the first thing I discovered was that there were eyes, comprehending, all-seeing, and condemning eyes, behind my back, looking at my work. And they were totally not on my side. For instance, I once asked Oleg Vassiliev about that "viewer."<sup>65</sup> His reply was completely amazing: "What? Which viewer? This is the viewer who understands me, who is like me." He assumes that since he painted the painting, the viewer immediately enters into a relationship with him and sees the painting in the same way as he does. It's the general rule, in fact. If the viewer is there like a stranger and isn't looking through my eyes, there is still hope and even certainty that, in the near or distant future, he will put on my glasses and start seeing with my eyes. We're chatting right now. You listen and don't ask what language I'm speaking. I speak Russian and say things that are fully comprehensible. In that same way, every artist feels that he is being understood.

But I have a completely different pathological strangeness. I think that what I say and paint (for me they are almost the same thing) is totally not mandatory for whoever is looking and listening. First of all, it is not interesting, because he has seen and heard many interesting things, many valuable and significant ones, and approaching my handiwork, he is not convinced that it is interesting. The first thing I have to do is to make the effort to offer him something worth stopping for and taking an interest in. He has to get the same portion of impressions that he had from others that he's already noticed. For instance, take someone from the conservatory, who has heard a lot of music before: if you scrape away at something, he'll listen for a bit and then his mind will wander, because he won't know where to place that scraping. Even in the case of . . . I understand that there is the concept of modernism, as in innovation. There is a subtlety there that is not to my benefit. I don't have enough modernist flair. If I had lived in Lissitzky's time, perhaps I would have that excitement: "I'll show you something and amaze you compared to everything you knew before me!" In a time when everyone wore peasant shirts, marked up their

65. Oleg Vassiliev (1931–2013), an unofficial painter and longtime friend of Ilya Kabakov.

faces, or made squares instead of normal pictures, maybe I would have come up with something. With my connivance with the situation, I would have probably done revolutionary things too. But in the period of post-modernism, I don't have the modernist drive. I'm not sure that it will be perceived commensurately.

I aim for a rather different effect: I want to make something familiar, known to others, but so that one part of the familiar is turned around, so that the viewer gets a portion of the familiar but with a twist. The viewer must recognize something familiar in my work and not recognize something else.

Then comes the next torture. Of course, I'm counting on a competent, intelligent viewer, one of "us." Viewers who have seen many works, who know a lot, but who are willing to have discussions, conversations, reflections, and are capable of getting references. Capable of two things: first, to understand the context from which it came and where it was inserted, and second, to get the meanings that might be found there and to react to them. I keep repeating this—meanings, not forms! My form from the very beginning was expressed in the word. For example, I build a sentence, and it appears easily on its own, and it crawls out of my head in what seems to me to be a clear form. I treat drawing the same way. If what I want to say is clear, well, fine then. Whether it has some special, vivid form, figure, plasticity, I don't know.

By the way, I am convinced that there is no special plasticity. It is simply the shortest expression of what I want to say in visual form. Which means that I am violating the basic tradition of modernism, which is built on the discovery of new forms, new methods, and the ensuing possibilities. Because of my school, my education, I simply do not know what formalism is. In that sense I am an absolute dilettante, for I have missed an enormous chunk of artistic evolution, which could be called avant-gardism, forming shapes, work with material, with elements—line, spot, square. That is, everything the great innovators—starting with Kandinsky—labored over, passed me by. Modernism for me is a threatening, scary old woman I try to avoid. I treat the image like writing on paper—you should be able to read it, whereas a signature isn't for reading.

My visual attack has weakened terribly. This is bad for work in the West, which has grown expert on that very visual storm. A work has to hit you in the eyes with its form. This modernist demand is preserved in full to this day. I took a gallerist to see an artist and he looked at the works attentively, and then we went back. "What did you think?" "He didn't scare me." Today, that's the only reaction. You have to wham him. Content is

of no interest. But the look of the work should not only be scary, but also necessarily obscene and if possible offensive. Another example. My gallerist offered my sculpture to someone. The collector refused. The reason: too sentimental.

ME: What sculpture is this?

IK: It doesn't matter which, but it touched on human material, warmth, humaneness. Seeing just a drop of that, he rejected it out of hand. Today's art is totally inhuman. Beastly and obscene, it operates with the vilest things—fright, crudeness, overtly sexual scenes. All of this is the field of visual art, its mandatory condition.

Anything that deals with humanity is for Hollywood. It's the field of mass media. . . . Toward which viewer is art oriented? The intelligent viewer is a tiny group or maybe just a fiction. Because the main viewer is a rather large range of viewers. The collector, who understands nothing. Or the person who wants to be amazed. Or the refined aesthete, the snob. You would think you could simply disdain all these people and leave only Misha or the intelligent and sweet Borya Groys, but I have this terrible need to suck up to everyone, to captivate them, something like a prostitute. I keep having this feeling that I should do something that will please everyone. I lack a selective beam: this is my viewer, who is an idiot. I want to be liked by the idiot, the banal man, the psychologist, the philosopher. I want basically everyone to like me. There, that's all I can say about the viewer. My viewer is the entire viewer.

ME: The measure of impression is determined by contrast. When life is dull and the background dreary, bright things heading aggressively at the viewer are stunning. But when, on the contrary, you are surrounded by the aggression of colors and noises of the modern city, flagrant advertisement, and the constant battle for the viewer's attention, then an artist might attract the viewer with dimmed, understated tones, in contrast with the blatant urbanism and the mass media environment. This hushed manner can be perceived as a method (in Shklovsky's sense) of defamiliarization [*ostranenie*].<sup>66</sup>

IK: I guess so. Now it's too late to change or even reflect on the topic, but it bothered me all my life like a splinter.

ME: You wanted to, but couldn't?

IK: Yes, I wanted to be brighter, more vivid, original, energetic, more captivating, more colorful, incisive, and paradoxical. Just as I wanted to have

66. The concept of *ostranenie*, which emphasizes the value of strangeness in artistic perception, was first discussed in Viktor Shklovsky's 1917 essay "Art as Device."

a higher quality mug. And that's why I don't like what I do. I know that it will never be better and it will be like this always. [ . . . ]

### Immortality

MIKHAIL EPSTEIN: What motivates the artist, unlike ordinary mortals? Is it the desire to become immortal, to live on in your works. "I have raised a monument to myself . . ."<sup>67</sup>

ILYA KABAKOV: The thought of immortality is tied to the fact that you continually feel your nonexistence. Your appearance in the world is related to the very strong sensation that everything exists, but you don't. You can consider that physiological or tied to the absence of attention, lack of love or feeling that you are needed and fill a gap for others. If that isn't present, then you understand, on the social level and the physiological, that you do not exist. You should not be here. Here, they've had everything for a long time, they've been here a long time before you, everyone came to the banquet or a concert, and you—even if you are present, it's as if you're not there. Absence in the world—especially since you find yourself in it—is incredibly painful.

ME: Why are you the one missing? Peter is, Vasya is, and you're not?

IK: I don't know why. The reason is hidden from me.

ME: Because I am me, and not him. He always exists. But "I" is a point of absence. Being yourself means not being, not being where they are or what they are. Right?

IK: Right. The constant presence and reality of everyone else is paradoxically tied to the fact that I do not exist only because they do. This experience of the presence of others and the absence of self, which automatically happens simultaneously and completely logically, persists to this day. I start fawning and apologize for not being there, for the fact that people address me and I'm not there at the moment they're addressing me. Apologizing for being taken for a person when actually you're not there. You not only do not prove your presence, but on the contrary are prepared to announce your absence.

An alternative to this horrible state is the instinctual search for places where "people" live eternally. What's interesting is that the concept of eternal life did not transmute into religious and mystical spheres for me. "Somewhere over there they live eternally." For unknown reasons, I think that there are creatures who live eternally here on earth. But not in terms

67. A quotation from Aleksandr Pushkin's poem "Exegi Monumentum" (1836).

of a voyage to Tibet or yogis. A museum for me is a wonderful example of how we can remain eternal after losing our physical substance. When I saw paintings by Rembrandt, say, beyond the beauty of the paintings, I was painfully struck by the fact that the man had long ago rotted away as matter, but thanks to his incredible efforts, produced in a mysterious way, he has the ability to be “here” now. And more importantly, he would be there tomorrow too, not only during my presence in the museum, but even after I vanished.

The phenomenon of culture merged with the phenomenon of eternity, immortality, for me. That is, these people discovered the trick of immortality. Not all of them. Because there is an enormous number of art objects that do not hang on museum walls. But twenty to thirty people who represent, say, ten rooms in a museum, the continually performed repertoire of conservatories, books that are always on shelves in every house, they have proven the fact of their constant presence. The most interesting part is that they will be on bookshelves in the future. That struck me to the bottom of my heart. This radical and happy performance of immortality—“here and now”—was so obvious that any talk of everything changing was intolerable to me. I felt that this “menu” of twenty artists, composers, and writers was a treasure store, mountains, and if they were not supported and held up, all of humanity would collapse. They are like mileposts moving from the depths of the past into the future. All of humanity travels between those tall, solid stone posts that serve as guidelines to keep us from getting lost on the trip. And if you pay the fee, not only can you look at them, but you can touch them and coordinate your own voyage, your own shortfalls, which is very important.

For me, immortality was not irrational (somewhere in the other world) but a material, physically given object. This may sound crazy, but if you want to have immortality, you have to be in the same situation. Otherwise, your immortality will remain desired but unachieved. The immortality of the soul also seems perfectly possible to me and goes back into the same unknown, the same insoluble questions. But the nearer, achievable immortality, which consists of effort, success, talent, and other components, is at your feet, in front of you—although, of course, it’s still up to that unknown.

ME: Maybe we should talk about *personal* immortality now?

IK: We can talk about it. But since I have merged completely with the professional man, I may understand all the forms of human immortality, which may be more profound, but my mind is not focused on them. I’ve lost the human image completely.

ME: We talked about it last time, but we didn't record our conversation then. You said that with age you are more aware of yourself as a role played by you, and the actor playing the role is ready for new transformations, already backstage, so to speak, ready to step onto the stage of another world.

IK: To a certain degree, yes, that is so. I don't know why I was born into this world, but my thought is, let the one who made me move my hand. I'm incapable of this action on my own. There are three stages that I think every person goes through: first, he knows nothing and can do nothing but undertakes to catch up with the times he lives in, gradually acquiring a face and some features related to the fact that he is on this earth at this given time. Then the second stage begins: he executes what should be done at that time in that place. That is, if he is not lazy, he works in the factory of his times, located in a specific territory. The third period comes when the carpet is pulled out from beneath his feet by new times. The same equipment appears in a completely different place, producing the same things, with different people turning knobs and dials in a different factory and a different time, and you are asked to clear out because this *Zeitgeist* belongs to other people, is now their property. You can stake your claim to this property as a screamer, usurper, or hooligan, but you have no legal right to do so.

Perhaps, in past eras, when concepts of eternity were more solid and everyone tried to create something eternal, the "crackdowns" by new times on the old were not so fateful, more like dominoes added to the previous ones. But for our times, collapse and attack are more characteristic. They don't chase you out of the house, but, for example, when guests come over to talk about interesting things, they politely ask you to move somewhere else: "Grandpa, take the bed at the end of the corridor! And actually, everything you have to say, gramps—it isn't all that interesting, and we all know it." And you shout, "No, wait, I haven't said it all, and more importantly, not everything is known!" But the resource of the secret of the unknown, which lies in former achievements, is retained in only a few new achievements and a few people. It is one of the rules of eternal works of art: the unknown resonates from them and always remains undiscovered. Everything else somehow appears to be second-rate and becomes well known, even though people often think that they are employing such mysteries and abysses that they will not be understood even in a hundred years. There is a historical mechanism that deciphers it all. And it's interesting, that it doesn't always understand it exactly. It

understands it in keeping with its understanding, but that is enough. That's all that can be said about that.

ME: Do you understand your works?

IK: Essentially, no, I don't. I now understand that they are understood in a completely different way. And that may actually suit me even better.

ME: Do people sometimes share with you an understanding that surpasses your own?

IK: First of all, I see very few people. Secondly, I don't speak foreign languages. So it's difficult for me to convey anything. With Russians, it's the "inevitable wave of inevitable esteem." First, we esteem old age, and second, everything that was in the past is esteemed over time. You don't need to esteem a father. But I've noticed I'm being moved from the "father regimen" into the grandfather one. In any case, in the Russian zone there are two separate categories with different ethical colorations. A father must be hated. He is a scoundrel, blackguard, a very bad character who prevents one from living, and everything he does is false, wrong, and ugly, but when that character crawls into the grandfather ranks, he is endowed with all the qualities the father lacks. He tells interesting and important stories. He cares about me, conveys important information. I can trust him. The image of grandfather speaking ultimate truths is extremely important, and if you are lucky in your health, you can crawl from the position of hated father into the position of respected grandfather. I think this happens in the West too, in different forms. If grandfather holds tight and long to an area, that is to his credit. He gets points for his steadfastness, for instance, for the stubbornness of his efforts. . . . But actually, I don't know a lot about this place where I've already been living for the last twenty-three years.





## Translation Credits

The following texts were translated from the Russian by Cynthia Martin with Matthew Jesse Jackson:

Culture, “I,” “It,” and Favorsky’s Light (“Rhombus”)  
*Kul’tura, “Ia,” “Ono,” i Favorskii svet (“Romb”)* (1980)

Nozdrev and Pliushkin  
*Nozdrev i Pliushkin* (1981)

... Everything Is in the Turning of the Pages  
... *Vsia sut’ v perelistyvanii* (1981)

On Emptiness  
*O Pustote* (1981)

The Creator Looks at His Work Twice  
*Avtor dva raza smotrit na svoe proizvedenie* (1982)

Dust, Dirt, and Garbage (Dust as an Object of Contemplation)  
*Pyl’, griaz’ i musor (Pyl’ kak predmet sozertsaniia)* (1982)

Discourse on the Perception of the Three Layers, Three Levels, into Which  
an Ordinary, Anonymous Written Product—Notices, Slips, Menus, Bills,  
Tickets, etc.—May Be Broken Down  
*Rassuzhdenie o vospriiatii trekh sloev, trekh urovnei, na kotorye raspadaetsia  
obyknovennaia anonimnaia pechatnaia produktsiia—kvitantsii, spravki,  
menu, talony, bilety, i t.p.* (1982). Published in *A-Ya* 6 (1984): 30–31.

Epistemological Thirst  
*Gnoseologicheskaia zhazhda* (1982). A variant of the text appears in Kabakov,  
*Mukha s kryl’iami* (Hannover: Kunstverein Hannover, 1991), 108.

Not Everyone Will Be Taken into the Future

*V Budushchee voz'mut ne vsekh* (1983)

New Rhombus

*Novyi romb* (1983)

Without Culture

*Bez kul'tury* (1983)

Park of Culture

*Park kul'tury* (1984)

The Artist-Character

*Khudozhnik-personazh* (1985)

Conceptualism in Russia

*Kontseptualizm v Rossii* (1986)

Edge, Border, Crack

*Krai, granitsa, shchel'* (1986)

Art Has No Unloved Children

*U iskusstva net neliubimykh detei* (1987). A version of the text was published as "Tsypliata belye, tsypliata chernye" (Little White Chickens, Little Black Chickens), *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 19 August 1987.

How I Became a Character Myself

*Kak Ia stal personazhem samogo sebia* (1989)

A Story about a "Culturally Relocated" Individual

*Povest' o "kul'turno-peremeshchennom" litse* (1994)

On "Total" Installation

*O "total'noi" installiatsii* (1995)

Text as the Foundation of Visual Expression

*Tekst kak osnova izobrazitel'nosti* (1995)

On Risk

*O riske* (1997)

On Cézannism

*O Sezannizme* (1997)

The Spirit of Music

*Dukh muzyki* (1997)

Public Projects, or the Spirit of a Place

*Publichnye proekty, ili dukh mesta* (2001)

Why Was It Necessary to Use the "Character" Device for the Exhibition Rather Than Signing My Own Name?

*Pochemu bylo neobkhodimo podpisivat'sia imenem "personazha" dlia vystavki  
vmesto togo chtoby podpisat' svoe sobstvennoe imia?* (2004)

Nikolai Petrovich (Commentary)

*Nikolai Petrovich (Kommentariia)* (2008)

The following texts were translated from the Russian by Antonina W. Bouis with additional translation by Matthew Jesse Jackson:

The 1960s and the 1970s: Notes on Unofficial Life in Moscow  
*60–70-e: Zapiski o neofitsial'noi zhizni v Moskve* (1982–1984)

An Apologia for Personalism in the Art of the 1960s: An Impassioned Monologue on 23 June 1986

*Apologiia personalizma v iskusstve 60-kh godov: Strastnyi monolog 23 iunია  
1986 goda* (1986)

Catalog

*Katalog* (2009)



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