Anton Vidokle

In Conversation with Ilya and Emilia Kabakov

Anton Vidokle: I'd like to start by asking you about artistic independence. Your oeuvre strikes me as an example of one of the most independent artistic practices, in the sense of being a comprehensive, personal universe of meaning, paradoxically developed in rather totalitarian conditions. It is considered to be more difficult to achieve this in a repressive environment, where speech and artistic expression are curtailed, like the former USSR. Yet it seems to me that this may be actually easier than doing so in our current neoliberal reality, in which mechanisms of containment are more disguised and control is largely economic in nature. Is there a way to preserve artistic independence in a world where everything has changed so much?

Ilya Kabakov: We will discuss how the works of an artist coming from the Soviet Union (in the autumn of 1987) were perceived in the "West." This was the time of the end of the Cold War and there was a certain interest in what was going on in the Soviet Union, whether from curators or museum directors or gallery owners. Moreover, this was heating up as a result of the absolute values of the Russian nineteenth century – the creations of composers and writers as well as the Russian avant-garde of the beginning of the twentieth century. Hence, one could say that there was potential attention. On the other hand, it was a full refutation of everything that had been done in graphic art during the Soviet period. So one could say that toward our generation there was a mixture of anticipation, and simultaneously a kind of fundamental skepticism.

E.A. Permyak, *Missing Threads*, 1980. Book cover, second edition, with design Ilya Kabakov. LS collection, Nijmegen.

It was a very interesting situation in which what was understood to be the world of culture, the human world, was the entire past culture of humanity, and all of that culture was located beyond the bounds of the Soviet state. Frozen

Installation view of the exhibition “Lissitzky - Kabakov, Utopia and Reality,” Van Abbemuseum, 2012. Photo: Peter Cox.

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eternity that would never end existed inside the Soviet country. Its past was found only in museum-like spaces: libraries, conservatories, museums, and theaters. Actual life was refuted, there was no real life in a material sense, and on the "cultural" level there was sots-realism, created forms that the censors monitored – forms of drawing, dance, folk art, and so on.

Let's return to the image of Mowgli[1], a person who feels disgust toward today's Soviet everyday life, who wants to jump beyond the bounds of that which is crashing down on us in the form of "culture" from reproductions and the television, who wants to go beyond that Soviet abomination; human nature rejected all of this. This is very interesting, because the extreme falsity, lies, and aggression that was in Soviet culture on all sides, from poetry to books and radio, was perceived as something non-human. This was a utopian mythology; we were all supposed to become some kind of Soviet heroes, there was a battle for quality raging everywhere, a battle for high ideals. In all of this there was something non-human. And for Mowgli, the human was that norm that was being sought for beyond the bounds of daily Soviet reality. Namely, the central point in this conflict between reality and what Mowgli had to imagine, to invent for himself, was in the past world, in the Western world existing beyond the bounds of the Soviet state, in the vanishing Russia of the nineteenth century.

The first, instinctive move was to find out what lies beyond that ideology. The history of humanity was idealized and perceived as the history of people with their own human civilization. But we were living in the world of non-humans, and it was as though this was final and forever. In this sense, there were no distinctions: this is right, and that is wrong. Everything Soviet that was produced is always a lie, an abomination. This was a kind of very important radicalism present in large measure in schools. But to somehow survive in Soviet society, adaptability was assumed as obvious.

There were no warriors, no revolutionaries except for five or six dissidents. Life consisted of two layers, each person was a schizophrenic. Any person – a factory worker, farm worker, intellectual, artist – had a split personality. From childhood, everyone knew what was necessary in order to survive in this country – how you had to lie, how to adapt, what to draw, what to sing, how to dance. By the 1950s, the entire repertoire, the whole menu, was sketched out; by then there were no discussions at all, like there were during Mayakovsky's time. This was so monstrously false, that underneath this bark emerged an autonomous layer of a different kind of human existence. For stealing from the factory, a worker could be very honored inside his own family. He would teach his child decency, but each day he would bring home a stolen sausage or milk. This was the norm in Soviet life. For the external world there was one structure – mostly verbal, chatter, all those meetings, the battle for peace. And then there was "human" life that transpired in the kitchen, among one's close family and friends. In the 1950s, it was possible to talk among one's close friends in kitchens, by that time there was a guarantee that no one would run and tattle about what was discussed there. After the death of the Cannibal1 this dual life became firmly established, it was recognized by absolutely everyone, including the official organs of the secret police. There was a very strict distinction between public and domestic, kitchen life.

The attempt to find out just what human culture consisted of was mastered in our art school where a few different circles of "self-education" were formed. A group of about five students would get together after their classes and each had his or her own role. There were no teachers at all. This was the natural desire to inhale oxygen, like frogs living at the bottom of the swamp.

One student was occupied only with poetry – he would get collections of Tsvetaeva, Mandelstam, Akhmatova,[3] and Western poets. Another, named Daniltsev, was in charge of music education – he collected records. Each had his own house, except for me, I lived at the boarding school dormitory. Khavin – who later became a well-known architect – was in charge of the literary part, and yet another was responsible for theater. Someone else was in charge of philosophy. We formed a circle of those who were initiated in "universal" knowledge. We were very proud that we did not belong to the Soviet world, but rather after school we breathed a different oxygen. This way of living outside of Soviet reality was preserved once we had finished school and transitioned into the institute. We would regularly go to the conservatories, libraries, and theaters. It was a kind of self-emerging, almost intellectual medium. It represented an instinctive attraction toward culture, knowledge, and the desire to find out just what was on the other side, beyond the fence, of the Soviet livestock yard. This naturally turned into a meeting point of the unofficial art world. We were terribly fortunate that in 1957, in Moscow, a circle of poets, artists, and musicians took shape. It was an entire "civilization" of sixty to seventy people. The main question now asked is: "How did you live, on what did you exist?" Each one earned a living somehow – someone illustrated children's books; Andrei Monastyrsky worked in a library. Each person had his own

biography of dual existence. In the internal world, no one talked about it, no one complained about how hard it was to live in the Soviet world. We were personages who existed autonomously, poets would read their verses each day in studios. The same kind of characters would come from Leningrad where the same kind of world existed in parallel. Life was unbelievably intensive, although, of course, there were no exhibitions, no galleries, no collectors.

We had our own philosophers, such as Boris Groys, and religious thinkers, Zhenya Shiffers being the most well known. And there was an entire group of musicians, modernists who were also protesting in their own way. There were an enormous number of poets, mostly from Leningrad.

AV: I was told that this unofficial sphere was very big, that it had its own commerce. Some things would be purchased on occasion, and it was possible to subsist this way. But this subsistence was oriented toward the West, and the uniqueness of your position, and the position of Moscow conceptualists, was that yours was an opposition within an opposition.

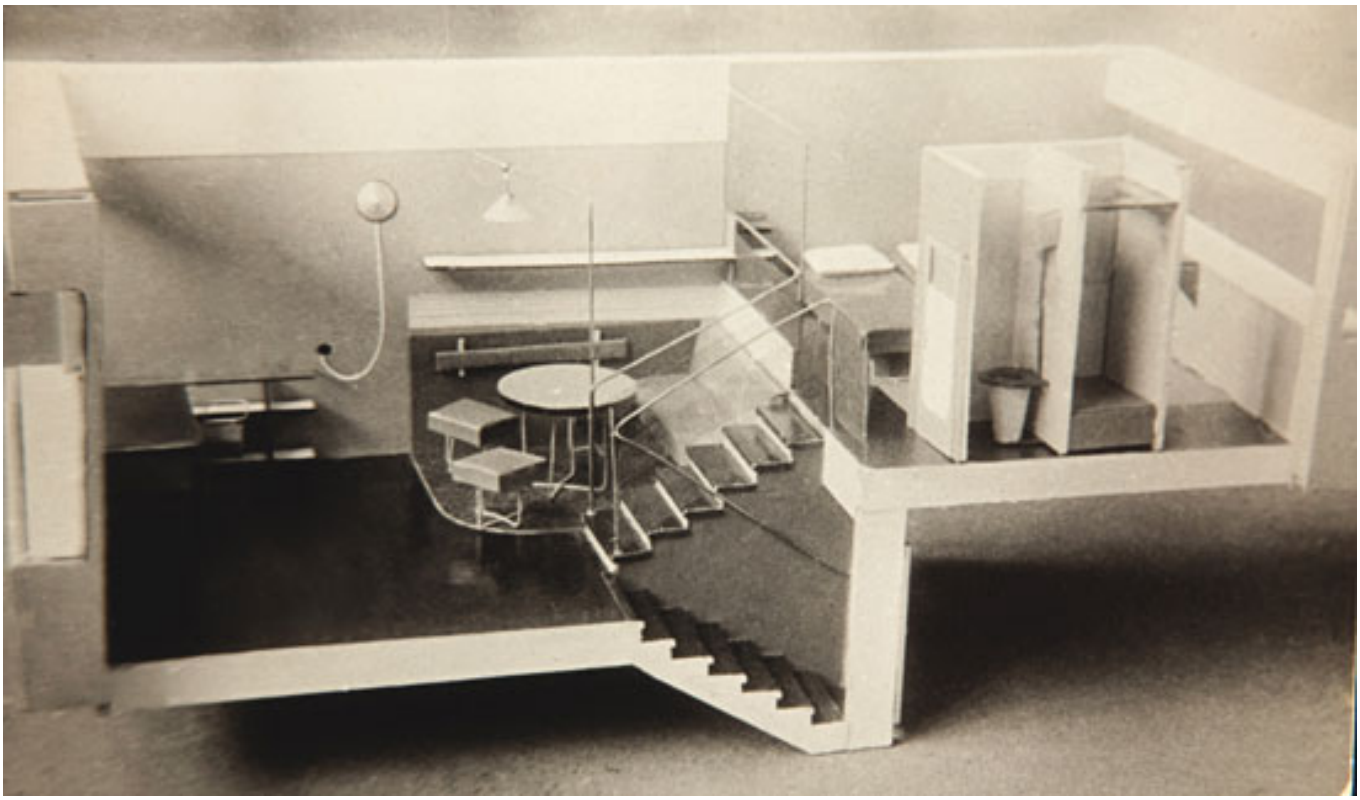
IK: That's true, the unofficial art world was not monolithic, it had only one thing in common – this abhorrence of Soviet life and culture. It was like prison, like a camp. Inside of that camp there were lots and lots of barracks that had autonomous and ideologically non-intersecting positions. This was silently recognized by everyone, but there was mutual respect, like among inmates in a prison camp. Each barrack had its own ideology. A few of the barracks were not oriented toward the West. I wrote an entire book about that, where these groups are identified: "The 1960s-70s ... Notes about Unofficial Life in Moscow." Some had the opportunity to make money on account of foreigners. But the conceptual group was not very oriented toward that. The fear of selling to a foreigner, for me, for example, was insane.

AV: What kind of consequences could there have been?

IK: You were immediately put in jail as a black-market currency speculator. The only thing that there could be was an exchange; you could ask for a camera in exchange.

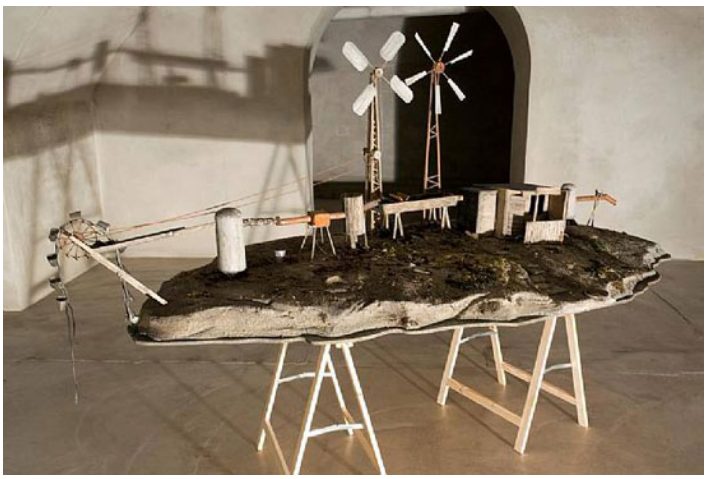
Emilia Kabakov: Any currency operations with foreigners were criminally punishable.

IK: Moreover, this entire circle was under the close scrutiny of the KGB. Some were dragged in for interrogation, but some figures weren't touched at all. In the eyes of the officials, it was very important that this was not of an anti-Soviet nature. The concept of art in the West had the quality of a dream about a young man



El Lissitzky, *Interior Project for the F-Type Residential Cell. Commune house of the architect M. Ginzburg*, 1927. Photo of maquette. Collection State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

meeting a woman. It was impossible to leave the country; one could only emigrate. The West was perceived as a flourishing cultural civilization. There was a very strong desire in the conceptual circle to orient oneself toward that culture, not to compare oneself with the Soviet tradition. I dreamed about doing what would please the West. I was one of those who during the Soviet period was called a groveler of the West. I created my works, thinking about what a Western curator would say about them. For many, the criterion was the artist himself and his ideas – if they were realized, that was enough. I had an inflamed reaction to what an authoritative Western person, an expert, would say about me. For me, the Western history of the arts was the beginning and end of my horizon.



Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, *Mock-up for the Ruhr-Atoll project at Baldeneysee, Essen,* 2010.

I would fantasize that somewhere there was some sort of world where I would feel at home, like one of them. I was rather indifferent to the opinions of my colleagues. Such an apologetic attitude toward foreigners existed amidst my friends and me over the course of probably thirty years of existence in our unofficial artistic life – from the 1960s through the 1980s. These thirty years passed in isolation except for the rare visits by representatives of the Western "expert" group. The life that had been established in the 1960s monotonously melded into the 1970s and 1980s. The generations of unofficial artists changed, but the lifestyle remained the same. The Brezhnev era was so stable, all connections had been verified, that it seemed that this Soviet "paradise" would last for millennia. Everyone had agreed to such an extent about how, how much, and where to steal, what to say and where to speak. My generation is situated between a generation of fear and a generation of relative calm. Fear remained, but it was understood that if you would only abide all the rules, you wouldn't be touched. The next generation in the conceptual circle was no longer constrained by fear, it was freer, and had fewer phobias and frustrations. I would count Monastyrsky, Zakharov, Albert, Prigov, Sorokin[4] as belonging to that generation. Perhaps there was not such a big difference in age, but the content of their psyche was already different. And the next that we still managed to catch – the Kindergarten home gallery, the Mukhomory group – lived a kind of upbeat, prankish life that did not take Soviet reality into consideration, and they existed in a relatively free world. It is a scale that goes from fear and torsion to the movement of paws and certain kinds of dance. I am talking only about the generations of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. It is believed that the most active work of conceptual artists was in the 1970s, but I am now making a gradation of the psyche from the frightened to the non-frightened. My generation, and that of Bulatov and Vasiliev, had a certain relationship with Soviet rules, signs. We, like Komar and Melamid, were always reflecting on the presence of Soviet ideological signs. Sots-art emerged as a humorous reaction to the presence of Soviet symbols.

AV: Where did you first see the works of Lissitzky or Malevich? How did that take place?

IK: I didn't see them at that time. Our education in the art school and institute was constructed in such a way that Western art history was presented up until the Barbizons. There were no Impressionists, Picasso, or Matisse. Our self-education in terms of the visual was sporadic, it was not methodical or thorough. Books on Malevich were not sold, his works were not exhibited, there was only one painting by Kandinsky in the Pushkin Museum and it was presented as the work of a French artist at that, and Antonova[5] hung it up only at the end of the 1970s. Therefore, our education, "knowledge" of the West was formed out of air. A feeling of sensitivity of the nostrils developed, such that given three, four molecules you could catch something in the air that could be Malevich or Kandinsky. This is from the realm of irrational phantoms – like in prison, when a young man hasn't seen a woman, but has conjured her up based on pornographic graffiti.

AV: I'd like to ask about your drawings with the Black Square from the end of the 1960s, I think.

IK: You are probably referring to *Sitting-in-the-Closet Primakov*. There was no such Black Square in my consciousness at that time. There was a consciousness of the blackness of a closed closet. It is difficult to say what I knew and what I didn't know. Some sort of cultural genetics kicked in and started working. This is a very important and essential moment in today's obliteration of the past. There is no actual object

El Lissitzky, *Pressa Exhibition,* 1927. Sketch. Collection Museum Ludwig, Cologne.

of the dreams of today's generation of extroverts. They react to any external irritant – Putin, Shmutin, their hand twitches because something is bothering it. Our generation is more introverted. It is that which lies in consciousness, in the capacity to develop cultural fantasies, signs. The manipulation of these signs is the fate of the introvert. These images arise at that point when, finding yourself in total isolation, you orient yourself toward the entire cultural field as a whole. This gigantic field of images is the country and homeland of the introvert. The extrovert operates differently – everyone is running somewhere, so I am running there, too. For the introvert, it doesn't matter whether he lives in America or Europe, your homeland is the cultural field. It is always in your imagination. It continually functions and produces. This is the fate of people who are detached from actual cultural phenomena, they are involved only with their own imagination. For the introvert, three components are important: memory, fantasy, and reflection. All of these are described as formulas of cultural production – memory about culture, reflection on culture, and imagination of returning to "that" time. Nothing material was ever discussed in our circle – who is living with whom, who bought what, how much it costs, and so on. Only topics of cultural reflection were discussed.

AV: When you arrived in Austria, for example, were you disillusioned by the West?

IK: Just the opposite! I was fascinated. I had arrived in the real art world. It was a happy time after the end of the Cold War. The Western world met the artist who had arrived from the USSR with high expectations. The Soviet wave had arrived. And according to the law of "waves," it started to ebb at the end of the 1980s through the middle of the 1990s. The same happened later with Thailand, China, and so on. There was huge interest from curators and museum people. I was included in this process as some sort of exotic character.

AV: Of an ethnographic nature.

IK: Absolutely. Because I had arrived from the USSR, I did not act like a hooligan, I painted, liked them, and looked at Soviet reality through their eyes. This is a very important point – I was not a patriot. I was not a Russian artist who wanted to show Russian art to the West. The conceptual position was to look at Soviet life through the eyes of a "foreigner" who has arrived there.

This was the position of an observer. My installations were well received, because this was a projection of Western consciousness onto a world unfamiliar to the West. Included in my task was to show the ordinary, banal Soviet world, with its communality, language, wretchedness, sentimentality. This view was following in the footsteps of the tradition of the "little person" of the nineteenth century, emanating from Gogol, through Dostoevsky, and Chekhov. This is not the heroic Soviet person, nor the Western superman. This is interest in the simple and banal.

In Western art I was astounded by the unbelievable individualistic isolation, loneliness, and exclusivity, from Pollock to whomever. This was very unpleasant for me. I saw in this the deformation of Western ideology, because the image of the little man comes from the tradition of the Enlightenment. The intellectual in this sense is understood not as a class attribute, but as a certain kind of norm of the individual. He cares, sacrifices, and is compassionate. The Russian intellectual in the image of the nineteenth century is a complete person. Not a noble, but an intellectual, namely a commoner. This tradition entered into the bloody twentieth century and has only vanished entirely just recently. It is the end of the epoch of the intelligentsia.

I think that the only function of art is to support this tradition. I repeat, I am talking in relation to the superman-artist, whose image now exists in the West, a champion in his own area. But when I moved to Austria in 1988, the image of the Western world and modernism was very strong. Now I have major reflections concerning modernism. But twenty-five years ago, I accepted absolutely everything. There was a complete idealization of Western artistic life.

AV: Did it ever occur to you that these foreign curators who would visit did not fully understand what you were doing? After all, it is very difficult for a Western person to understand Soviet dematerialization.

IK: I completely agree. I perceived a certain interest of the West in this world, but I understood that the context and content of Soviet life was inaccessible to them. But they had heard something. It was important for me that they had an interest in it. For me, this was enough. It was enough for me that they allowed me onstage, but as for what my dance meant there, I was fully aware that they virtually did not understand any of my body movements. What I was saying about my "Western" view of Russia was also an illusion. By that time, the Western view had shifted so much that it is difficult to say whether it was the same as it was during Diagilev's tours. In fact, the West right up to today, in principle, rejects that which was carried out of Soviet Russia. This has a reason. There is an enormous tradition of adaptation of the Western world to distant civilizations. There was a Japanese wave, an African, and a Chinese wave. But not a Russian one. After all, you could

say that it is the same as ours, only repulsive. Our child too, only lousy. To this day there exists a repulsion and rejection of everything that has come from Soviet Russia.

AV: Including the Russian avant-garde?

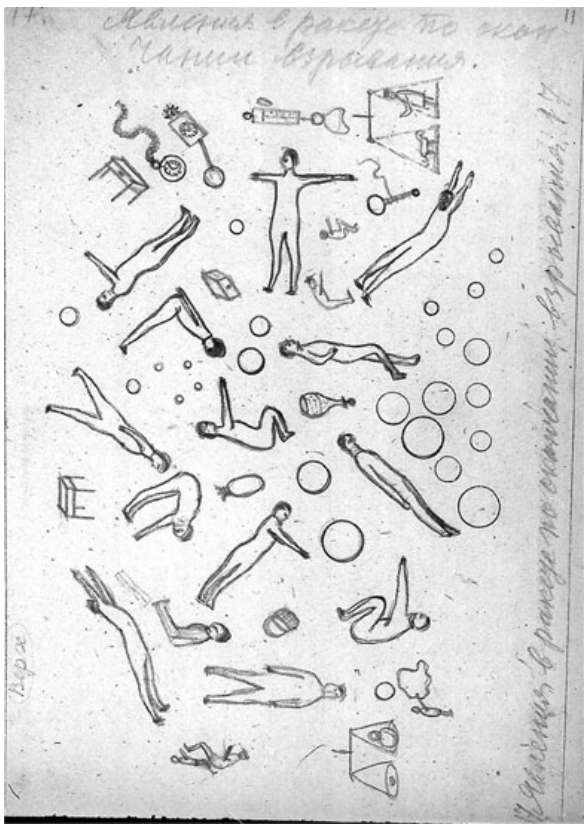
IK: No, of course that is an exception. It is understood as a Russian version of the Western avant-garde. We are getting close to our topic, to Lissitzky. The Russian avant-garde accepted the paradigm of Western artistic evolution, understanding it not as a critical attitude toward the past, but as a normal evolutionary movement. They perceived formal changes in the Western artistic process. By 1905–7, the perception had emerged that the old world had ended.

AV: We don't have that perception today.

IK: Of course not. Despite the fact that everything has changed, there is no such perception of the end of the old world. The new world was supposed to carry the perception of the cosmic. A new cosmos. All ideas come from the cosmos, and not from social life. The Russian avant-garde believed that a new cosmic era had begun. Technology, steamships, airplanes, steam engines were all perceived to be signs of the cosmos. There was no such cosmism in the West. Italian Futurists come the closest to this, but they are too technological. All the Russian avant-gardists were accomplished visionaries, mystics, from Filonov[6] to Malevich. You have to remember that we were talking about a radical repudiation of the past, of existence, as if it had died. It had rotted, had turned into the Black Square.

AV: The cosmos, of course, is also black.

IK: For Malevich it was white, for example. And for Lissitzky it was white too. This, of course, represents an unbelievable enthusiasm for the approach of the future. It was seen to take various forms: in linguistic forms, for example, in the work of Kruchenyh and Klebnikov and then Kharms; and in visual forms, in the shape of Suprematism. The degree of cosmism of that epoch is not understood fully. Everyone understood what was happening in the new Russia as a social utopia. Cosmism does not manifest its nature, only in rocket flights. Tsiolkovsky[7] perceived rockets to be a means to deliver things to space cities. It is important to note that the artistic creations of these artists wasn't strictly formalistic, they were not only about art. To a great degree they bore world-building, cosmic experiences. They attempted to illustrate this with their art. You can view Malevich as an illustrator of his mystical ideas.



Sketch from Tsiolkovsky's 1933 essay "Album of Space Travel." Drawing of people and objects floating around weightless.

Installation view of the exhibition “Lissitzky - Kabakov, Utopia and Reality,” Van Abbemuseum, 2012. Photo: Peter Cox.

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All it takes is to read the texts that he wrote. It is clear that he was in a state of agitation, exaltation from cosmic fantasies. The West poorly perceived this aspect. Western materialism, pragmatism, and rationalism does not want to adapt this artistic thinking. Even though there was an enormous quantity of mystics, such as Klee, for example, in the West.

AV: Not cosmic mystics.

IK: Not cosmic, but other pilgrims: mystics of the subconscious, that very same ill-fated Surrealism, Dali, and so on. The recognition of modernism as an unwavering artistic doctrine came very late. Essentially it came after the war, when museums of modern art started to appear. At that time, canonized figures took the place of prophets. In the end, a narrow group of formalists was victorious, thanks primarily to Matisse and Picasso. Modernism rejected the ideology of imparting content and transitioned to the realm of pure signs, blotches, scrolls, and commas. This formalization turned out to be the main line of modernist thinking that was in its own way also religious. Modernism lost its content-based meaning. In the end, formalistic emptiness prepared the soil for the appearance of Pop art, which is already the area not of aesthetics, but of ethics and the ethics of cynicism.

AV: Isn't there something in common between the cynicism of Pop art and the irony that is contained in your works?

IK: Irony is always filled with content. It is always the view of some sort of tradition of something alien. This is the tradition of Romanticism, German Romantics. A romantic was always laughing at something low, something not corresponding to his ideals. But Pop art is cynical in relation to the consumer and modernism ignored it. Since the appearance of Impressionist artists, the artist was liberated from the consumer. The artist is the pure producer. It is production for no one. The consumer remained for the realists. Pop art again appeals to the consumer, but this consumer is not someone the artist respects. Warhol made an important shift – the collector is such a stupid beast who will purchase anything on the level of his own understanding. This is kitsch, comics. He will eat what he is used to eating. But he is not only a beast, but also a snob. Cynical derision toward the buyer forms the basis of this production, and each of the artists of Pop art, beginning with smirks and giggles, ends with factory production. He himself becomes a bourgeois animal. Warhol was very smart at this. His art comments on non-existence, death in life that is ongoing.

The theme of the "corpse in life" is very widespread. Beuys is also such a figure, a kind of medium of death. Of course, Warhol is complete despair, he cannot be described merely as cynicism and commercial production, like others, such as Lichtenstein, Rosenquist. I sympathize more with Abstract Expressionism – Rothko and Barnett Newman – that is clear. Barnett Newman very precisely formulates the concept of the lofty. Art is the realm of the elevated. Let's discuss something else for a minute: the artistic gene in the area of art is woven from three threads. The first is the realm of the lofty. Subjects of the lofty dominated in old art. Without it, there was no motivation to draw – the lofty was embedded in the very commission for art, in the plot. The second thread is that of artistry. It is like a certain form of a congenital feeling of harmony and balance. It can have refined and multilayered forms or it can be simple. The sign of artistry is when an artist sees not the details on the painting, but the paining in its entirety, as a whole, consisting of details. So, for example, from this perspective, Ingres is unartistic. For all great artists there exists balance and the domination of the whole. They embody the gene of artistry – Titian, Rembrandt, Michelangelo. But Leonardo is too conceptual and analytical, he does not focus on that integrity of the whole. The third component is humanity and the humanistic. There are no misanthropes among great artists, and plenty of them in modernism.

Returning to Soviet art education: we were taught the heroic history of art. We were shown only the peaks, we were never shown the intervals, the genuine artistic process. Having arrived in the West, I understood that everyone was engaged in the artistic process. And the most interesting thing was that there were no models that you had to follow. That model-based Soviet pedagogy had really infiltrated my psyche – you are already twenty-five years old, and Raphael was your age! The very same thing existed in sports, ballet, and so on. So, why were we talking about this?

We were offered an exhibition at Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven that was to be based, first and foremost, of course, on the comparison of two eras, two epochs: the epoch of the beginning of Soviet power, and the changes at the end of Soviet power, when it became clear what these changes had led to. The main paradigm was hope and the establishment of a new world and the disillusion and insignificance of this world. The father who told us that everything would be okay and the son who said: look, old man, at where you have arrived.

For the exhibition we are presenting the work of Kabakov alongside the work of Lissitzky – who is entirely oriented toward the future; for him, everything is being built. Kabakov is turned

toward the evaluation of that which has already been built. The thematization of the eight rooms in the exhibition divides into the different themes of this project. Lissitzky is perceived as a person who is rushing into cosmic space and arranging various types of human activity from that cosmic perspective. Unlike Malevich, he is a Renaissance type. This type is capable of working in many genres, in many professions, of not clamping up. Hence, Lissitzky functions as an artist, an illustrator, an architect, a designer, and a polygraphist, working from drawings to installations. This goes back to the Renaissance, like Leonardo and Michelangelo. Such a universal type is not welcomed in the Western art community today. If you do one thing, you don't need to do another thing. There is this horrifying specialization whereby everything else is perceived to be a hobby. I myself am one of the victims of this corridor system. But in the past, you could get away with this, therefore such a personality like Lissitzky is perceived rather respectfully, but also anachronistically, in terms of various genres of an artist: any genre is perceived as a means to express specific ideas.

These ideas are being expressed literarily, architecturally, visually, objectively, and so forth. In the time of a given "author," a specific genre dominates. I'll tell about myself here: when you do albums, you practically don't produce paintings or installations. It is interesting to look at how this played out for the classics – when Rembrandt is transitioning from paintings to engravings and prints or when Michelangelo rushed headlong from painting to sculpture. Some genres need to rest in you head to be renewed. This is how it was for Lissitzky – *Prouns* were followed by architectural projects, and it is then that he makes his sketches for the Water Stadium.

The Renaissance type is closely connected, it is terrible to say, with the commission, the form of the proposal. The Western artist before the Impressionists in general didn't draw much in his free time, he was overburdened with commissions. They were his stimulus.

AV: Now we have the parallel situation when commissions are coming from curators.

IK: They are minimal. But in a well-known sense the unofficial art world also had such patrons. For example, the production of Oskar Rabin always had a large number of consumers. However, this is a terrible, ambivalent situation. The artist who knows that he is desired has a hard time hanging on to the podium of freedom. He knows that they want what he has already done. He is afraid to take risks. Although such an artist in demand, like Picasso, improvised a lot. But in a large number of his works there is the stamp of industrial production. The same is true with the later Matisse. It is difficult for me to judge; fortunately, I never found myself in this situation. No one is waiting in line, and it is only thanks to Emilia that somehow something sells.

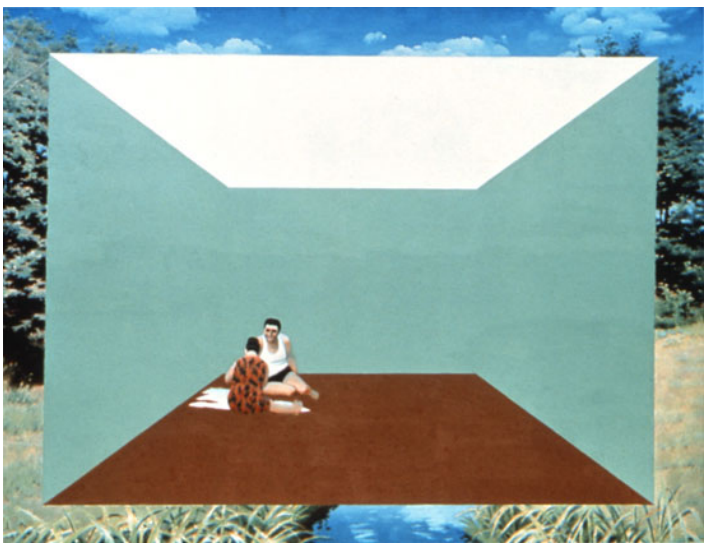
AV: The main question is about the independence of the artist and art. How can this be sustained today, when so much has changed in the world of art? Everyone thinks that it is difficult to preserve independence in a totalitarian situation, but in fact, it could be easier than in the situation we find ourselves in currently.

IK: I think that every time has its own repertoire of complexities, difficulties, and its own answers to these challenges. In each epoch, a person finds something that bothers him and there are those who have suggestions for finding solutions and those who think that it is impossible to do anything. During some epochs there is competition; in some epochs it is external pressure, in others it is total freedom that also poses a challenge that is no less terrible. Each epoch has its own challenges.

In observing myself, I understood that I exist in three mismatched ages: youth, middle age, and older age. These differ not only in terms of physiology, but also in terms of entire tasks that a person sets for himself at each age. The young age is the hardest. This is connected with the fact that the goal of this age is to exclaim: "I am here, too!" The inaudibility of one's voice in the stream of others is one of the main phobias, neuroses of the young person. If he didn't get a push in a certain direction from his parents or school, then he is left to his own devices, like a cat thrown in water. In this situation of complete loneliness, he doesn't have a language in which to speak. There is no speech. He has to acquire some form of speech. It is a great fortune if you have a professional skill. The majority of young contemporary artists are doomed, if they don't belong to a school. School is the transition from "I have thought about it" to "I can do this." The shout "I am here!" as a rule embodies some sort of action that brings attention to oneself. Attention not only from one's artistic community, but from the entire socium. This is why the popularity of art actions is widespread. An art action is done in order to find oneself in the art world. Simultaneously, the one performing the action is participating in socio-political life. A very important moment occurs with the mixing of the art scene and social reality. This mixing leads to genuine insanity. An enormous quantity of curators stimulates this activity. The argument in favor of it is usually related to the avant-garde – after all, the avant-gardists are also hooligans. But for the most part, this was a form of protest that was anti-artistic – you paint on a canvas, and I on my own body. Their functioning was

located inside the framework of outrageousness, and inside the framework of the artistic medium. Today, this is just an ordinary social protest that has now been ascribed to art. Everything that occurs in social and political space can now in hindsight be ascribed to the artistic realm, whereby the curator, who is the legitimate figure here, can decide what art is. This contamination creates a strange situation that destabilizes the consciousness of the author himself. He is called an artist from the sidelines. The classic example is Courbet who overturned the Vendôme Column. It remained in history, but this act was political hooliganism. As we say, we don't love him as an artist for this. The second example is from my student life. There was a game when students would board a bus and would see who could say the word "shit" loudest in a public place. The last one would shout in a terrible way. This is an example of how social insult counts on being successful in the art community. Both the first actionists, and the art group War/Voina[8] fit right into this tradition.

The second group of people is the tradition of clowning. It is based on the complete ridicule of everything that is happening around us. It is the right to mockery. Many made use of this: Blue Noses Group and others. The line running from the Leningrad underground was especially powerfully developed in the 1990s.



Erik Bulatov, *People in the Landscape*, 1976. Oil on canvas, 55 x 71 inches.

The third group is very popular and dynamic – these are conversations about art. It attracts a large quantity of intellectually-oriented artists. Chatter itself and conversations replace artistic production. The world of the conceptual groups of the 1970s was also built on dialogues. I find it in these dialogues, the ones that I managed to read, of Brenner, Osmolovsky – and, of course, it is clear that I am a person from a past epoch, and I cannot understand the urgency or today's excitability. But I am deeply convinced that, in principle, this is not a very effective endeavor. The conversations of that very same Monastyrsky were reflections on something that had actually been done. Simply put, conversations about my own notions that the artist should create something that will last in culture are ineffective. In my understanding, the world of culture is juxtaposed or relates tangentially to any social structure. Yes, it feeds on images, irritations, and phobias of the social.

EK: It is a reflection on the social, but it is not the social world.

IK: All the conversations – avant-gardist, by the way – that are about art as a part of the social process led to an unbelievable primitivization, politicization of artistic results.

When an artist descends into the socium, he must certainly merge with it. This is inevitable. The socium vanquishes him. At the end of Soviet power, the socium had become so unattached from artistic life that it was easy to preserve the autonomy of one's artistic consciousness. Today it seems that the artist can make whatever he pleases. But in fact, this is a professional, precise activity like tennis, having its boundaries, its rules. Each time the game is new, but it is entirely determined by rules. There is no freedom. This is visible from the third, mature age. In the first age it seems that you can do anything. During the second age period, as soon as you have acquired your voice, the task emerges for you to take up a position among your contemporaries. You need to be a participant in the process along with your contemporaries. You need to know what your neighbors are doing, you need to be a member of your own train car. The third period is connected with the feeling that your train car is no longer going anywhere. That other train cars are going places, in different directions.

EK: I wouldn't say that the train cars are not going anywhere. Either you've managed to get into this train car or you haven't, and this train car is setting out for the future.

IK: Your train is already not moving, even in its own time. Other trains are running, other generations, artists, thoughts, other goals. What happens to an artist in the third, mature age group? It is different for each person. One might muddle along and continue to turn out his products. For the most part what is produced by an artist in this age group is what he managed to achieve in the middle period. Some degrade, grow tired, some are compelled by circumstances to keep producing, like Chagall who was forced by his wife to keep making horrible little bouquets.

EK: But some rare people find a second

wind.

IK: This is a very unique phenomenon. I was terribly drawn to the past. I even suffered the illusion that the Baroque was the most interesting and relevant period for the future. For me, the Baroque is what Ancient Greece was to the artists of the Renaissance. This is my personal psychosis. When art comes to a dead-end, as in the late Middle Ages, then movement backward usually begins, like during the Renaissance. The rebirth of the past with a new consciousness yielded a phenomenal result. I also see the development of the genetic code that I spoke of earlier toward the revival of the Baroque and Baroque painting. After Modernism what remains for us is the non-confrontational painting, there is no dramatic effect in it. Each person has his own image of the world. The Baroque had a dramatic painting of the world and it has had a nice long "rest." Modernism introduced flatness and then departed from the depths. What begins with Modernism is a tradition of soiling the flat plane of the white canvas, in all kinds of different versions. I am talking about the leveling of depth, but during Modernism "depth" has had a good rest, like in a sanatorium. The Baroque could return the depth to painting and, in turn, the depth of the image to the world. This is a hypothesis, but I am ready to believe it at this point.

AV: Many contemporary artists, philosophers have noted that the present moment is distinguished by a sensation of groundlessness. It is as though we are constantly either falling someplace, or we are flying someplace, or disappearing. In your works there is the motif of flight, falling, disappearing. As a result, a kind of disorientation of the normal understanding of subject and object occurs, of time and space, of modernism and modernity.

IK: This is connected with an important moment that happened in the last epoch. And in how that epoch differs from many past epochs. Each person has a program. Today's program is how to survive in this world. Every person asks this question. And it is a rather well-known "how": apartment, car, vacation, salary, children, and so on. There is an absolutely normal repertoire of answers to the question "how can one survive in this world?" Everyone knows "how"...

EK: Instead of "why."

IK: The question as it was posed in previous times has disappeared. "Why am I living in this world?" It is primitive to such a degree that even the very posing of the question is incomprehensible. But still throughout the twentieth century people asked this question. And in the nineteenth century, they were completely permeated by it. And in previous epochs it was a fundamental question. "How" was an animalistic question. "Why" was a religious question. This meant that your human life was serving something bigger. The question "why" often annuls the program of the question "how." There is no single answer to the question "why," but the very posing of such a question transports you to a different realm of existence. From the moment a being starts to ask the question "why," he becomes human. The majority avoids the answer to the question "why" and "it is better for the children not to know about it," so as not to upset them. But here we run into difficulties in response to the question "why": I am either a free individual, or a medium, a servant, an "envoy" like in the work of Kharms, an intermediary of something that I cannot grasp. Then the answer to the question "why" might look like this: I am fulfilling a mission that is many times larger than my small life. Someone needed for me to be born. In some cases, this might be an answer that is entirely cultured. It might be the reproduction of a gene, of an uninterrupted line.

EK: A relay.

IK: A relay that has summoned me to pass something on to others. Behind my back there is something that was looking after my existence and made sense of it. Not about me physically, but about the meaning of my everyday activity. I am a representative of an infinite cultural process that was there before me.

EK: Cultural missionary work.

IK: Yes, there is religious missionary work, and there is cultural missionary work. You are convinced that culture is connected with the secret of our origin, that it has on the one hand a religious nature, and on the other, a playful, aesthetic nature. There is a wonderful example of such a "bridge" in the work of Pushkin. He took the European tradition and invented the Russian literary language. This was his mission. At a young age, you discover that there are no bearings, there is neither sky nor earth. In middle age you grasp at your contemporaries. But in elder age, you come to hear more and more a kind of code of cultural transmission. This period began for me about five years ago already. I hear the past very well, but a kind of indifference towards my contemporaries is emerging.

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This interview is published in conjunction with the exhibition at the Van Abbemuseum *Lissitzky - Kabakov, Utopia and Reality,* guest-curated by Ilya and Emilia Kabakov.

Anton Vidokle is an editor of e-flux journal.
Ilya and Emilia Kabakov are Russian-born, American-based artists that collaborate on environments which fuse elements of the everyday with those of the conceptual. While their work is deeply rooted in the Soviet social and cultural context in which the Kabakovs came of age.

Ilya Kabakov began his career as a children's book illustrator during the 1950's. He was part of a group of Conceptual artists in Moscow who worked outside the official Soviet art system. In 1985 he received his first solo show exhibition at Dina Vierny Gallery, Paris, and he moved to the West two years later taking up a six months residency at Kunstverein Graz, Austria. In 1988 Kabakov began working with his future wife Emilia (they were to be married in 1992); from this point onwards, all their work was collaborative. His installations speak as much about conditions in post-Stalinist Russia as they do about the human condition universally.

Emilia Kabakov (nee Kanevsky) attended the Music College in Irkutsk in addition to studying Spanish language and literature at the Moscow University. She immigrated to Israel in 1973, and moved to New York in 1975, where she worked as a curator and art dealer.

Their work has been shown in such venues as the Museum of Modern Art, the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington DC, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Documenta IX, at the Whitney Biennial in 1997 and the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg among others. In 1993 they represented Russia at the 45th Venice Biennale with their installation The Red Pavilion. The Kabakovs have also completed many important public commissions throughout Europe and have received a number of honors and awards, including the Oscar Kokoschka Preis, Vienna, in 2002 and the Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres, Paris, in 1995.

1
The fictional protagonist of Rudyard Kipling's "The Jungle Book" stories, a wild child character who is brought up by a pack of wolves.

2
The term "cannibal" is used in this case as an informal synonym for Stalin.

3
Marina Tsvetaeva, Osip Mandelstam and Anna Andreyevna Gorenko were Soviet modernist poets of the first half of the twentieth century, persecuted or disfavored by the regime.

4
For more information on Romantic Conceptualism, see http://www.e-flux.com/issues/29-november-2011/.

5
Irina Aleksandrovna Antonova, director of the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow since 1961.

6
Pavel Filonov, Russian painter contemporary to Malevich.

7
Konstantin Tsiolkovsky was a Soviet Union rocket scientist and pioneer of astronautic theory, which the author developed within a social utopian context.

8
A group of Russian artists and activists engaged in street protest actions. The group constituted in 2008 and are still active today.