

Conceptual art, installation, space, drawings, art politic, and art narrative are all words that can be used to refer to the works of Emilia and Ilya Kabakov, are Russian-born American-based artists. For a better comprehension on Kabakov's work we need to immerse in ambiguous space, and thus seek a meaning quite different from the standard. There is in their work the manifestation of a constant tension – and they use their art to raise the consciousness of viewers. Whether focusing on political or social questions, economics or esthetics, their work always evinces the fallibility and the limit of human comprehension. This online interview was conducted on August 9, 2012 by Emilia Kabakov, art collaborator and wife of Ilya Kabakov.

Flávia Berindoague: As an artist interested in collective memory, loss, the use of poetry as a political force, and the use of language as a visual construction, I would like to focus on the relationship between word and image in your work. I understand the writing in your work is used to discuss time, politics, fear, memory, disappearance, and reality vs. fiction. Hence, to begin, I will paraphrase the poet Rainer Maria Rilke from his book *Letters on Life*, in which he writes that, “perhaps, to create is not anything else than to remember deeply.” In your work, memory is a constant resource. Is this interest in memory one of the conceptual nuclei of your work?

Emilia Kabakov: The memory is human privilege and quality. We remember. It's our problem and our weakness, but it is also our strength. Ilya uses memory because its part of his human and cultural background. It is not a concept, just natural ability to use, the same way we use our vision, hands and mind.

Berindoague: The territory explored in your work is your own territory, but you are hidden behind your characters. The viewer wonders if you are narrator or if you are character. Behind the characters there are fictitious artists; personal or collective memories. It seems you are a collector of “ruins,” presenting your thoughts on a repressive period in Russia. The dramaturgical effects on your installations and the stories place the viewer in a place somewhere between reality and fiction. There is a sense of both the autobiographical and the historical. You are the storyteller who reveals secrets, intimacy, fear, loss and absence. In *Ten Characters* the transformed spaces, the narratives, and invented characters, created questions for the viewer: Is this artistic narrative about the artist, or is the artist presenting some other narrative? Who are these characters? What are their stories? Can you discuss how Kabakovs, the person, are related to these characters and their stories?

Kabakov: The territory we explore is the territory of time, place, nation, and culture. It's absolutely not personal. It's a combination of this “collective mentality” which was so cultivated and characteristic for Soviet Union. But of course, its transformed through personal understanding, intellectual and artistic vision. If he is a character or narrator? Both and neither. It's imaginary world and imaginary narrative, and of course, imaginary characters. Kabakov is related to the stories purely on artistic level. Same as the artists who create a painting or filmmaker who makes a movie.

Berindoague Maurice Blanchot, in a text titled *Literature, Work, Experience*, states that what attracts the writer or impels the artist “is not directly his work, but its search.” More than anything else, the documentation of your experiences shows an incompleteness that brings the viewer to the borders of metaphor and understanding. There is an intense illumination of experience. When you create a work, do you consciously

consider the likely viewers? Are you concerned with conquering your audience?

Kabakov All works are metaphor and those are used for creating a bigger “picture” of human fears, phobias, memories. There are not personal experiences of one person or one artist. Those are imaginary conversations, places, characters, situations.

Do we consider the viewer? Yes, and also art professionals. The art work: painting, installation, sculpture, Public project, has to take into consideration a lot of things: space, light, situation where the work will be presented, public, and professionals. It has to work on all the levels you can imagine: cultural, human, visual, etc. Not easy and not every artist think or is concerned about all those things.

Berindoague Ítalo Calvino, in his book *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, states that “each life is an encyclopedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every conceivable way.” Your installations seem to create a space, a field of multiplicity where objects are no longer merely objects, but windows into lives. Would you agree?

Kabakov If you agree that those windows are imaginary, then yes, we agree. And we never work with objects for the sake of the objects. They used to create a special very precise atmosphere we need in each installation. So, yes, the objects are real. The atmosphere is fictional. It’s a painting or let’s say a lot of paintings in three dimensional form.

Berindoague In *The Toilet*, presented in Documenta in Kassel, Germany in 1992, you constructed six toilettes with furniture inside that gave a sense they were being used as living spaces. There was a real sense of presence, as if the resident could be back at any time. At the same time, they looked liked ruins, decadents. There is ambiguity in the work in terms of time, reality and truth. Svetlana Boym said in her book *The Future of Nostalgia* that the objects bring a “sense of being fragments of a vanished (Soviet) civilization.” What memories did you bring to this work?



The Toilet, 1992

Stone, cement, wood, paint construction,
men's room, women's room, household objects,
furniture

Overall h. approx 450 cm, 417 cm, l. 1100 cm

Installation, Documenta IX, Kassel, Germany

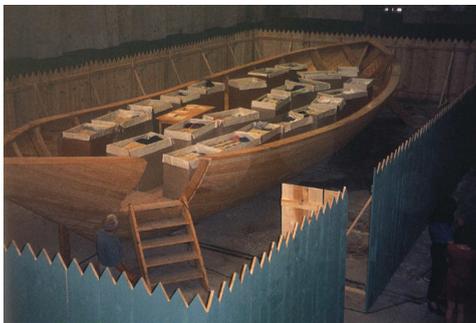
entrance men's room

next page, women's room



The Toilet, 1992
entrance women's
room

Kabakov It's a "public toilet" with stalls, as used to be in train stations, or military camps, etc. We build this building and those stalls with "holes." They don't look like ruins. They are just look like "used before building which served as a "public toilet". This is a metaphor of life: especially Russian in this case, but could be anywhere, any country: "Yes ,our country is a toilet, but its still our home and very comfortable at it. " And it is universal, because we didn't use any real Russian objects. Everything was "international: German, Italian, French".



The Boat of My Life, 1993
Wood construction, boat, steps, 25
cardboard packing boxes, found ob-
jects, photographs, texts, relating to
different periods in the artist's life
Boat, 260 x 550 x 1740 cm

Berindoague In *The Boat of My Life*, life is presented in boxes of objects you have saved. These artifacts bear witness to the growth of a child into a mature artist. Their forms, textures, labels and scents represent a human presence. It is a private archive, a private museum. What is your relation to archives? What kind of collector are you?

Kabakov *The Boat of My Life* is not personal. It is just objects and sometimes you use your own photographs, memories, but you use them in the context of personal memories in a public space so eventually they represent anonymous memory and story, not personal. We don't collect.

Berindoague Georges Perec said "Things describe us." We can represent existence through objects, the space that surrounds them, and the manner in which they occupy this space. Do you intend to question reality, and dialogue with memory, through the use of artifacts and art?

Kabakov We work with culture more than with reality. So there always is reference to cultural events, movements, visual elements. Using the objects to create this visuality.

Berindoague Doesn't art consist not in disfiguring the truth through artifice, but in lending the artifice a simple physiognomy of the truth?

Kabakov Can be both ways, probably. Who knows?

Berindoague Word and image are non-dissociable in your work. Most of your work gives an impression of absence and emptiness that sustains the narrative and makes it rich. Something is missing, and this absence is what intrigues the viewer. It seems to complete what is missing, to lead the viewer into the story. Even your works without text tell a story. What comes first, the story or the visual work? How the characters are created?

Kabakov The only missing part in installation is the "character" itself. And the viewer substitutes this missing character. The narrative is there, the visual "painting" also, the viewer becomes the actor on the stage of installation, and nothing comes first. It's like a painting: idea is visual and it is already an idea.

Berindoague What art and/or literary references influence your work, past and present? What have you read recently?

Kabakov Edgar Poe. He is the first absurdist, like Sorokin, Kafka. He is very strange and intriguing. Influence? Music, writers, old masters. *The River of Culture*.

Berindoague What are you currently working on, and what are the inquietudes in your work at this time?

Kabakov We work on a lot of projects. Utopia is one of them now. "The Utopian City" was supposed to be built in Grand Palais, Paris as next Monumenta, but due to economy it was canceled. So, Utopia will remain Utopia. Paintings: idea of collage: painting as a collage, space as a collage, life as a collage.