Soviet Trash:
The Reception of
Ilya Kabakov's Art
Beyond the USSR

Ann Komaromi

Abstract

This article examines Moscow Conceptualist artist Ilya Kabakov's work with trash, as well as the meanings ascribed to it by the artist and his audiences. Komaromi compares Kabakov's artistic use of poor-quality objects (*plokhie veshchi*) and trash (*musor*) with other contemporary practices in "poor art" (Arte Povera) and Pop Art to clarify the distinctive features of his practice. The analysis draws on statements and writing by Kabakov and by his critics. They show that trash implies a complex dialogue with Soviet reality and the utopian art of the early Soviet avant-garde. Juxtaposing Kabakov's works with Robert Rauschenberg's "combines" helps clarify the way materiality signifies: while Rauschenberg highlighted the resistant materiality of discrete objects, Kabakov's serial staging of works fosters what Komaromi calls a *syntax of reception*. Audience responses to Kabakov's works with trash, reveal changing attitudes to history and evolving notions of Russian and western identities.

Keywords Ilya Kabakov; Soviet Union; Trash; Robert Rauschenberg

Soviet Trash:
The Reception of
Ilya Kabakov's Art
Beyond the Soviet Union[1]

Ann Komaromi

"[W]hy does the dump and its image attract my imagination over and over again, why do I always return to it?" – The Garbage Man[2]

One of the most original Soviet nonconformist artists, Ilya Kabakov has enjoyed great success with audiences at home and abroad. Beginning with his first exhibition in Italy in 1965, Kabakov's work appeared in a series of international venues. By the 1980s he began receiving serious critical attention and renown for his work

---

[2] From the text written by "The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away (The Garbage man)" in the installation of the same name (Kabakov 2003, 179).

individually, and in partnership with Emilia Kabakov.[3] This article looks at the evolution of Ilya Kabakov's distinctive use of poor-quality objects (*plokhie veshchi*) and trash (*musor*) in comparison with some cognate post-war art movements to help clarify the distinctive features of his practice. The materials Kabakov uses become part of a complex reflection on Soviet life and consciousness, art history and humanity. Kabakov's statements and writings and those of his critics and interlocutors form an integral part of works staged in a series of locations spanning Soviet and post-Soviet eras and various national contexts. Kabakov has used "trash" to provoke responses that relate to western and post-Soviet perceptions of Soviet and Russian identity, with implications also for the changing ways those audiences understand history and themselves.

Empty Space and "Poor-Quality Objects"

Having graduated from the Surikov State Art Institute in Moscow in 1957, Kabakov worked officially as a book illustrator. However, the beginning of his original nonconformist (unofficial)[4] artistic work dates to the "Shower" series of drawings begun in 1962.[Fig. 1] Italian Communist Party official Antonello Trombadori visited the Soviet Union in the early 1960s and was struck by

---

[3] Ilya Kabakov (b. 1933) emigrated from the USSR in 1987 and began working with Emilia, who became his wife, in the late 1980s. The Kabakovs' retrospective exhibition was on display between 2017-2019 at the Tate Modern, and then at The State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, and finally at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow (Kabakov 2017).

[4] For Kabakov, "unofficial" applied to the uncensored art of the 1960s, the positive alternative to everything official in the USSR. In the 1970s, as Kabakov said, the artists who would become known as Conceptualists abandoned their uncritical faith in everything "unofficial" and made their own practice the object of critical reflection (Kabakov 1993: 29). While the term "unofficial" remains widely used, the term "nonconformist" seems less dependent on binary evaluation and more capacious to cover all types of uncensored Soviet art.

Kabakov's work. He arranged for a series of fourteen of these drawings to be included in a show in L'Aquila in 1965, which critics hailed as the first appearance of Soviet avant-garde art in the west since Stalin (Crispolti 1966: 19-22). Enrico Crispolti seized immediately upon the humour and ambivalence of Kabakov's work, which he described in terms of a demystifying approach to Soviet reality that seemed at the same time fully complicit with that reality (Crispolti 1965: n.p.). Kabakov's "Shower" series presented the figure of a regular Soviet man, standing and waiting under a shower that persistently fails to work as it should to deliver a purifying wash. Reflecting on the series decades later, scholar Matthew Jesse Jackson drew attention to the man's blocky rectangular legs and his folded arms forming the bottom of a square set up on a downward pointing triangular torso. The geometrical figures recall in deliberately impure form the geometry of Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist paintings and his obsession with the purity of fields and shapes (Jackson 2010: 39-41).

Based on Kabakov's writings, we know that his relationship to the Soviet avant-garde legacy was crucial and complex.[5] In the 1960s, that legacy was just being recovered. Kabakov would have known about Malevich from an exhibition at the Maiakovskii Museum in Moscow.[6] The white expanses and other solid color fields in Kabakov's drawings and albums recalled the pure monochrome backgrounds of

---

[5] Kabakov's short, ironic essay on Malevich begins, «You don't even know what to say about Malevich. A great artist. An inspirer of terror. A great boss (*velikii nachal'nik*)» (Kabakov 1983: 34-35). Kabakov used the essay title for an installation featured in the Tate retrospective exhibition (Kabakov 2017: 186).

[6] In 1964, Kabakov and Iulo Sooster moved to a studio across the street from the Maiakovskii museum (Kabakov 2008: 27). The Malevich show that year was part of a series of exhibitions of otherwise mostly inaccessible avant-garde works by El Lissitzky, Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, Pavel Filonov, Velimir Khlebnikov, Mikhail Larionov, Natal'ia Goncharova, and others, presented as «illustrators of Maiakovskii» (Aigi 2002: 43-44). Kabakov could also have seen avant-garde works in the Moscow apartment of collector George Costakis.

Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist paintings, or the infinite space of El Lissitzky's *Prouns*.[7] Kabakov wrote about the energy of light (*svet*) pouring out of the white page or white painted canvas onto him during his work in the mid-1960s (Kabakov 2008: 28-29). However, in contrast to the purely metaphysical interests developed by other unofficial Soviet artists and writers in the late 1960s and the 1970s,[8] Kabakov described the effect of white "light" in his paintings as ambivalent. His paintings presented a choice: the viewer could choose to go deep into the painting toward the source of this metaphysical light, or resist being lost in "emptiness" and focus instead on the surface «badly tinted with whitewash, the broken board with nails, with badly painted, absurd and pathetic representations, in short, a senseless, pointless object» (Kabakov 2008*:* 45).[9] As opposed to Malevich's imperiously abstract and utopian vision, Kabakov's work gave the viewer options and the freedom to decide. This orientation to the undetermined engagement of the audience distinguishes Kabakov's approach from both avant-garde utopian art and the didactic Socialist Realism of official Soviet culture. Such ambivalence in his art is programmatic.

Kabakov as artist showed more flexible attention to the audience and environment of his works than Soviet avant-garde artists. In this way, his art resembled other innovative trends in the post-war era, including, in a limited way, the contemporaneous trend in Italy that acquired the name Arte Povera in 1967. Art critic Germano Celant, who named the movement, referred to experimental Polish theatre director

---

[7] Kabakov might have read Nikolai Khardzhiev's 1957 article associating El Lissitzky's *Prouns* with «breaking away from the earth», and his ideas about an impending «new birth in the cosmos» associated with the revolution and new scientific and technical possibilities (Khardzhiev 1997: 238).

[8] Kabakov mentioned Eduard Shteinberg's abstract paintings as exemplary of this "metaphysical" trend (Kabakov 2008: 44).

[9] On Kabakov's attitude to Malevich's «misguided utopianism» and the white that represents for him both «ontological depth and existential emptiness», see Amei Wallach (1996: 44).

Jerzy Grotowski, whose 1965 article "Towards a Poor Theatre" was widely reprinted and much talked about at the time.[10] Grotowski made the relative poverty of his theatre company, which could not afford elaborate stage sets, costuming, lighting or music, an advantage that allowed them to focus on the technique of the actor (Grotowski 2002: 15). The artists associated with Arte Povera aimed in their way to free the consciousness «from layers of ideological and theoretical preconceptions as well as from the norms and rules of the language of representation and fiction» in order to stage, by means of basic organic and man made materials, an open and process-oriented encounter with the audience (Christov-Bakargiev 1999: 25).

Kabakov's work was not seen by Italian audiences as an example of "poor art." However, like them, he resisted the conventions of fine art. He sought to strip away the metaphysical pretensions of painting. Moreover, like Arte Povera artists, Kabakov began to embrace a more materially pronounced theatricality. Like them, he began to make his work project out of the canvas and off the wall, into the space of the spectator. At the same time, Kabakov's use of poor quality materials and slapdash or unrefined techniques distinguished his art from theirs, and reflected, in part, the deficits of a strained socialist economy and the lack of support for nonconformist art. Kabakov's *Cubes* (1962),[Fig. 2] for example, appears to have been knocked together from scavenged wood pieces covered with planes of uninspiring paint.[11] That work,

---

[10] Germano Celant coined the term "Arte Povera" for a 1967 exhibition in Genoa: «The insignificant has begun to exist – indeed, it has imposed itself. Physical presence and behaviour have become art […] Cinema, theatre and the visual arts assert their authority as anti-pretence […] They eliminate from their inquiry all which may seem mimetic reflection and representation or linguistic custom in order to attain a new kind of art, which, to borrow a term from the theatre of Grotowski, one may call 'poor'» (Celant 1981: 31).

[11] Jackson quoted Kabakov on the problem of «Moscow's widespread lack (*defitsit*) of usable plywood (*fanera*), Masonite (*orgalit*), and white enamel paint» (Jackson 2010: 70). Instead of trying to compensate or conceal the material poverty, Kabakov learned to embrace it. Jackson compared Kabakov's works to Arte Povera's objects and Grotowski's "Poor Theater," in the sense

with its sculptural rows of cubes protruding to various degrees from the picture plane parodies Constructivist works by means of its planes of «unaesthetic colors: red, green, yellow, blue» (Wallach 1996: 39), as well as the unexpected appearance of two completely incongruous miniature landscapes painted on the final bottom right cubes.[12] This poverty was no simple reflection of material conditions – it can also be understood as Kabakov's response to the utopian art of revolutionary avant-garde artists, those who could not really imagine what it would be like to live in late Soviet society.

Mario Merz, to whose installations Kabakov later referred,[13] demonstrated something about the attitude of Italian artists and intellectuals to the Soviet Union in his piece *Che fare?* (What is to be done? 1967). Evoking Lenin's 1902 pamphlet and Nikolai Chernyshevsky's novel of the same name, Merz created a series of works with the words "Che fare?" rendered by neon tubes and embedded in a pot of beeswax, such that the slight heat of the tubes softened the wax it emitted a faint smell.[Fig. 3] The question "What is to be Done?" resonated with the energy of social unrest culminating in May, 1968, the time of widespread Italian and international protests.[14] Merz reflected the energy coursing through Italian society at that time, while using the question to imply openness about where the process might be headed. As their interest in Soviet nonconformist artists showed, some Italian intellectuals understood themselves to be part of a European left with a role to play in helping to lay bare the

that they all exemplified the "aesthetics of empty" in opposition to Pop Art's "aesthetics of plenty" (*Ibid.:* 70).

[12] Amei Wallach quoted Kabakov saying, «'I made these things with great conviction that this is not art. My enthusiasm was that I made something that is not art.' Or at least, not the language of any art that he had ever heard spoken» (Wallach 1996: 39).

[13] Kabakov cited Mario Merz's installations as one significant type preceding his own development of the "total" installation (Kabakov 1995: 243).

[14] A fuller account of the range of potential intertexts for Merz's *Che fare?* was provided by Elizabeth Mangini, "Mario Merz's Autonomous Artist," *Art Journal* 75. 3 (Fall 2016): 21-23.

contradictions of late socialism in order to facilitate its evolution toward more democratic values.[15]

Kabakov's "poor-quality things" (*plokhie veshchi*) cannot be treated as a critical reflection on a deficit economy. They do something else. These objects show up in works of the late 1960s: in *Pipe, Stick, Ball and Fly* (*Truba, palka, miach, mukha*, 1966),[Fig. 4] three-dimensional objects project out of the plane of the painting, engaging the tactile imagination of the viewer.[16] The items seem to be partly found objects – a piece of pipe cut in half is stuck onto the canvas in cross-section, and the stick looks like it was sawed off lengthwise and painted grey before being stuck onto the white canvas to give the appearance of being embedded in it. The ball is a geometrically painted protruding hemisphere with deformed triangles in unattractive green and red colours. The fly appears most obviously artificial, oddly oversized, with a dark-blue painted body rising in slight relief out of the surface of the painting, with painted grey wings on either side.[17] The

---

[15] Enrico Crispolti noted the opposition of the Soviet Embassy in Rome to the so-called Dissident Biennale in Venice in 1977, a high-profile event featuring Soviet nonconformist art. Citing the official Soviet press denunciation of Soviet nonconformist art as works "to be trashed" (*da spazzatura*) he nevertheless defended their exhibition in terms of an engagement with the dialectical reality they reflect. Crispolti saw dissent as an issue not confined to Eastern Europe, characterizing it more broadly in terms of a reality that is «close too, anywhere the arrogance of cultural and political power imposes itself» (Crispolti 1977: 20).

[16] The retrospective exhibition presented *Pipe, Stick, Ball and Fly* as a work that «complements the aesthetic and conceptual experiments undertaken concurrently in American pop art and Italian arte povera, both of which Kabakov came to know second-hand through critics and collectors who had seen such works overseas» (Kabakov 2017: 105).

[17] Flies appeared in drawings, paintings and installations by Kabakov. The fly connects the lowest material reality with the theme of flight and thus the heavens (as a sort of debased angel). In the installations featuring flies,

materiality and conventions of representation are thus inconsistent among the four items, and they have no relationship to one another. The combination was deliberately "absurd," a term much used in western (*absurdnaia*) and Russian (*nelepaia*) forms by unofficial Soviet artists and poets at the time. While evoking international existentialist and theatrical discourse, Kabakov wrote of absurdity as a defining feature of Soviet life. People were shoved together in the collective Soviet project via communal living and working spaces, but this experience tended to isolate individuals and foster essentially a-social communication.[18] In this composition, the unrelated objects emerge out of the white background without quite taking on their own existence and without being justified by clear symbolism, narrative significance, or utility. As Kabakov said, they embody a 'flickering' (*mertsaiushchaia*) ambivalent quality (Kabakov 2008: 55) almost arresting our eyes as worthy of attention, while repelling them with their lack of aesthetic value, the senselessness of their juxtaposition and execution. Kabakov saw these features in the things of the world around him:

> All the things (*veshchi*) that surround us, as I conceive of them, are "bad" (*plokhie*) […] they only partly possess the look and function of cups, televisions, chairs, trams, houses and so on, but

Kabakov plays with the space of the museum and notions of order and hierarchy (Kabakov 2003: 60, 278, 366).

[18] Consider Kabakov's painting *Answers of the Experimental Group* (1970-71), which balanced another absurd assemblage of multi-media objects (stick, hanger, nail, toy train) scattered on a white background with a grid of responses to them: «Nikolai Pavlovich Malyshev: I will hang my new raincoat here», «Volodya Malyshev: This nail can easily be pulled out», «Ivan Anatol'evich Sisakian: These are symbols: a threat, the absence of something, pseudo-motion and fictitious effort», etc. (Kabakov 2017: 116-17). The people, like the objects, do not communicate with one another. Ekaterina Degot' glossed the representations of things and people in Kabakov's installations based on communal Soviet life this way: «This is a world of ground-down sociality: steamed cabbage soup and eggplant caviar stand forth here as symbols of communal life, an eternal human puree» (Degot' 2002: 16).

most of all they belong to that sightless, wordless and formless "nothingness" (*nichto*), to that chaos that penetrates and soaks into everything that surrounds us. (Kabakov 2008: 54)

The white background of the painting, associated in the historical avant-garde with positive associations of divinity and infinity, here signifies the chaos, nothingness and emptiness threatening the things (and, by implication, people) of his world with insignificance and annihilation. [19]

Kabakov complicated his ambivalent references to avant-garde art by "contaminating" the abstract color fields and geometric shapes with poor-quality objects or primitive drawings and banal verbal elements. A significant precedent for Kabakov's explorations in this regard, too, was served by El Lissitzky, who worked, like Kabakov, as a book artist and whose brilliant constructivist designs in painting, theatre, book and journal design and exhibition installation made him a valuable ambassador of Soviet art in western Europe. Lissitzky's famous propaganda poster *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (*Klinom krasnym bei belykh*, 1919-20) combined verbal and geometric verbal elements for efficient and impactful communication.[20] By contrast, Kabakov's use of words in his albums, where color planes evoke the abstract elements of Suprematism and Constructivism, takes away from the utopian potentials. The aspirations of characters such as

---

[19] Kabakov worked out this idea at length for a 1982 essay, "On Emptiness," a reflection on the perspective he gained on his Soviet home by traveling as far west as he could at the time, to Czechoslovakia. He perceived the "vampirism of energy" in the all-encompassing void at home that isolated people into islands swimming in a sea of emptiness (Kabakov 2018: 38-39).

[20] In a letter of September 12, 1919 to Malevich, Lissitzky wrote about the semantic function of elements of visual language designed to activate the content of a book, drawing attention to the way letters, punctuation and lines of text should be printed for visual impact and a stimulus to construction. Khardzhiev compared the realization of these principles in Lissitzky's book *About Two Squares* (*Pro dva kvadrata*), which he compared to *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (Khardzhiev 1997: 242-43).

Sitting-in-the-Closet Primakov (*Vshkafusidiashchii Primakov*, 1972, Album),[Fig. 5] whose story begins with the black rectangle of the closed closet and ending with the white expanse of the space into which he has flown, seem naïve and individualized. While in Primakov's eccentric dream he flies out and above his everyday reality and into space, Kabakov calls into question the purity and generalizability of his story by employing narrative elements (the character and the seriality of his story). His mundane illustration of a Soviet apartment interior and buildings and the hand-written labels in the lower right corners of the panels further compromise the suggestions of utopia. Kabakov's albums, which he began performing for audiences in his apartment in 1974-75, marked an interim stage between his book illustrations, drawings and paintings, and the installations he would mount beginning in the 1980s.[21] If this theatricality in Kabakov's practice resonates with the work of Arte Povera artists, the intensified literary character of Kabakov's work as seen in these albums also distinguishes his work from theirs.

Kabakov progressed from "poor-quality things" and a degraded or trashy version of avant-garde art to an engagement with trash as such in his painting *Taking Out the Garbage Bucket* (*Raspisanie vynosa pomoinogo vedra*, 1980).[Fig. 6] This painting utilizes the pure white background and hand-written verbal elements with a nearly all-over grid structure that represents something of a culmination of his polemical engagement with modernist painting. The grid, as Rosalind Krauss puts it, is «emblematic of the modernist ambition within the visual arts».[22] Kabakov, characteristically, sought to deflate those

---

[21] Boris Groys dated the beginnings of the distinctive Moscow Conceptualist approach to text in the space of the visual work to Kabakov's album *Ten Characters*, created in 1972 – Primakov was one of those characters (Groys 2000: 36). Jackson talked about Kabakov doing (unofficial) readings of his albums for invited audiences beginning in 1974-75 (Jackson 2010: 120).

[22] Krauss wrote, "the grid is the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the lateral spread of a single surface. In

artistic emblems by juxtaposing them to banal reality. The handwritten names and schedule mimic the do-it-yourself character of the typical Soviet housing office (*ZhEK*), which organized communal duties and cultural life for a housing unit but typically lacked the means for printing posters, announcements or cultural projects.[23] The density of information presented resists reading and pushes the viewer to contemplate the eccentric use of receding perspective for the slogan "For Cleanliness!" (*Za chistotu!*) leading back towards the white depths of the painting. Next to it a realistically rendered image of a garbage bucket appears incongruous and arrests the eye in the foreground of the painted surface.

Kabakov used "poor-quality objects" (*plokhie veshchi*) and deliberately jarring juxtaposition of painterly cues from different regimes of representation and painterly systems to forge a style that expressed his historical time and place. Kabakov's art was self-consciously belated and disillusioned with respect to early avant-garde utopian aspirations: it insistently drew attention to the banal material and social reality of Soviet life. His works expressed the paradoxes of isolation and the lack of communication among people within Soviet communal society. By doing so, Kabakov aimed to break through to an international audience with an artistic language that would be both recognizable (in its references to the avant-garde and Soviet realia) and defamiliarized in its use of jarring cues and registers. As we will see in the next section, the theme of "trash" came to be a means of working out various potentials of these artistic principles.

---

the overall regularity of its organization, it is the result not of imitation, but of aesthetic decree" (Krauss 1985: 9).

[23] Kabakov wrote about the documents collected in the Soviet housing office, the ZhEK (*zhilishchno-ekspluatatsionnaia kontora*), related to cultural work and the running of life in the building, as a sort of archive of the universal "totality" of "our" life, the life he and other Soviet citizens of the time shared (Kabakov 2011: n.p).

Soviet Pop Art?

"Soviet Pop Art" is how early reviewers and collectors described Kabakov's work, well before Soviet or Moscow Conceptualism became the label of choice.[24] Enrico Crispolti noted the resonance of Kabakov's works with "Pop," but distinguished his artworks from American Pop thanks to its "ironic touches" (Crispolti 1966: 420).[25] While people regularly compared Soviet nonconformist art with Pop Art, particularly in the early reception of it abroad in the 1960s, Kabakov's work seems much less like it in retrospect than so-called "Sots Art," with its instantly recognizable visual clichés. Soviet Sots-Artists such as the duo Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid, who signed Soviet propaganda banners, or Aleksandr Kosolapov, who juxtaposed Lenin's profile and the Coca Cola logo on a red background,[Fig. 7] made clever use of Soviet iconography and style for subversive jokes designed to be comprehended at a glance. As we have seen, the objects used by Kabakov, like those of Arte Povera artists, were much less image-based and self-contained. This is particularly true of Kabakov's trash objects, which in many cases defy any visual consumption of them as discrete objects.

We might, however, find it useful to pursue a limited analogy between Kabakov's trash and the heterogeneous found objects in Robert Rauschenberg's assemblages known as "combines." Critics also talked about Rauschenberg as a Pop artist: while that label is debatable,

---

[24] Boris Groys first applied the term "Conceptualist" to artists including Ilya Kabakov in his article "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism," which appeared initially in the Leningrad Samizdat journal *37* no. 15 (1978) (*37 [Tridtsat' sem', Thirty-Seven]* 2015), and was reprinted under another title, "Nulevoe reshenie" (The Zero Solution) for a book accompanying Kabakov's installation *NOMA or the Moscow Conceptualist Circle* (Kabakov 1993: 42-59).

[25] The collector Dina Vierny called Kabakov's art "Russian Pop art" (Kabakov 2008: 21). Paul Jolles said: «I recognized Ilya because of [Roy] Lichtenstein. I was fascinated by Pop art. How does Pop art emerge in the closed system of the Soviet Union?» (Quoted by Wallach 1996: 70).

he was an inspiration to the movement. [26] Unlike the at-a-glance works created by Pop giants such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, both Rauschenberg and Kabakov produced works that invite and problematize the act of reading. Leo Steinberg wrote: «it seemed at times that Rauschenberg's work surface stood for the mind itself – dump, reservoir, switching center, abundant with concrete references freely associated as in an internal monologue – the outward symbol of the mind as a running transformer of the external world, constantly ingesting incoming unprocessed data to be mapped in an overcharged field» (Steinberg 2000: 42-43).[27] Rosalind Krauss characterized Rauschenberg's canvases in terms of the "space of memory" (Krauss 2002: 51). She argued that an "entirely original" aspect of Rauschenberg's practice consisted of the fact that, unlike in a Cubist collage or a collage by Kurt Schwitters, objects in Rauschenberg's compositions retain their materiality – they are never entirely absorbed.[28]

We can find these features in Rauschenberg's combine *Charlene* (1954), [Fig. 8] which presents a heterogeneous collection of found

---

[26] Lucy Lippard wrote, «Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns had significant one-man shows at the Leo Castelli Gallery, providing the links […] to Pop Art. Neither of these men is a Pop Artist in style or subject matter, though they are still considered to be such in Europe and by the mass media, and they have influenced and sympathized with Pop» (Lippard 1966: 22).

[27] Steinberg 2000: 42-43. Steinberg's essay "Reflections on the State of Criticism" originally appeared in *Artforum* 10.7 (1972).

[28] In Rauschenberg's practice, «an object is taken out of the space of the world and embedded into the surface of a painting, never at the sacrifice of its density as material». Even the images he used had density (Krauss 2002: 50). She emphasized the duration of the viewing experience: «by giving to images the property of actual physical resistance that objects or actions have in our ordinary experience, Rauschenberg endows them with a sense of having to be encountered through time. In this way they are returned to an experience that is fully durational, an experience which we said in the beginning was like memory, reflection, narration, proposition» (*Ibid.*: 52). Krauss's essay was reprinted from *Artforum* 13.4 (1974).

objects and images, including a broken and flattened umbrella, a man's undershirt, various fabrics (scarf with images, lace), newspaper, a plastic mirror and an electric light. The items are to varying degrees covered or dripped with paint and thus partially incorporated into the composition, although they do not entirely lose the materiality that points to their origins outside the painting. The protruding, reflective, light-generating or otherwise idiosyncratic character of individual items emphasize this independent materiality. While we may posit formal relations among, say, the various circular elements, the sequence of vertically positioned rectangular units, as between the colors and textures of different fabrics employed, we cannot escape seeing them also as discrete and more or less enigmatic items. In another well-known Rauschenberg combine, *Canyon* (1959), themes of beauty and flight, as well as classical references (e.g. the myth of Ganymede), resonate with similar themes and allusions in other Rauschenberg works. Nevertheless, they fail to absorb entirely the striking corporeality of the stuffed bald eagle coming out of the composition or the surprising puffiness of the suspended pillow hanging below it.

The gritty urban landscape – of New York for Rauschenberg and Moscow for Kabakov –informed the works of both artists. Rauschenberg's technique echoed the «rough surfaces with splattered paint» (Mattison 2003: 46) common to the buildings of lower Manhattan, where he lived as he began his art career. It may be that the protruding elements and rectilinear grids of Rauschenberg's composition also echoed the cluttered building facades, marked by signs and fire escapes. In addition, «the discarded and worn-out materials and objects that were often thrown into alleys and left at curbsides for disposal» (*ibid.:* 47) furnished items for art: Rauschenberg talked about his use of car tires as an expression of their ubiquity as discarded items on the streets.

Kabakov may have been familiar with Rauschenberg's works from early in his career. Wallach talked about an exhibition of prints by Robert Rauschenberg, Jim Dine and others in the Soviet Union in 1963 (Wallach 1996: 39). An official Soviet collection of essays on

"Modernism," while critical, was relatively comprehensive, covering movements from Dada to Rauschenberg's combines.[29] In any case, Kabakov, like Rauschenberg, picked up materials for his works off the streets. His use of "laboriously refashioned discarded rubbish and construction materials" including wooden crates, plywood, nails, etc., was programmatic as well as pragmatic – there was a chronic shortage of good art materials, and Kabakov worked on the side, during the hours left over after his official commissions on pieces not authorized by the State (Jackson 2010: 70). At the same time, such rubbish materials functioned to resist the impulse to apprehend art as an autonomous window onto a beautiful and transcendent sphere. Kabakov also intended the trash to convey something about the world he inhabited. He spoke of the impulse for his works with garbage, which he began early in the 1980s. They were connected, he said, with:

> the special sensation, physical and mental, that everything which surrounded us living in the Soviet Union represented an enormous littered space […]. This image of a cluttered, dusty, half-abandoned, ownerless existence is firmly connected for me with the feeling of my Homeland and with the hopeless feeling that it is impossible to get rid of the situation, that it is here forever and that garbage and dirt are the very unique 'genius' of our place, having taken up residence in it forever.[30]

This feeling was both personal – connected to his impression of being a person abandoned in this littered place – and metaphysical.

The philosophical and personal aspects of trash in Kabakov's art works can be related to the principle of heterogeneity, which is characteristic of the collection of items, rather than their individual material qualities. Boris Groys wrote about the endless heterogeneity

---

[29] *Modernizm: Analiz i kritika osnovnykh napravlenii*, (Ed. Viktor Vanslov and Iurii Kolpinskii, Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1969). The book was known to all nonconformist artists in Moscow at the time (Jackson 2010: 109).

[30] From Kabakov's commentary to the "Works with Garbage" (Wallach 1996: 171).

of trash and its challenge to philosophical attempts to order the world. The idea of "the just, the beautiful, and the good" implies an operation of "taking out the trash" that alienates life and reality (Groys 2016: 24-25).[31] Thus, there is something philosophically insurgent about the dirt and trash that resist ideal metaphysics and grand narratives.

Kabakov spoke in more personal terms in his dialogue with Groys about "Trash" (*Musor*). In addition to being shorthand for Soviet reality as Kabakov saw it, trash comprised an archive of memories (Kabakov and Grois 2010: 73).[32] Moreover, Kabakov identified himself with his surrounding Soviet reality and for that reason understood rubbish to be his artistic vernacular. He talked about the important moment of "hesitation" (*kolebanie*) associated with trash: «It happens that a person is standing near a rubbish pail and holding something in his hands and he thinks, he hesitates: should I throw it away or keep it?» (*Ibid.:* 73) Kabakov related this hesitation to the conceptualist principle of "flickering" (*mertsanie*): at that moment, the thing hovers between existence and non-existence. It "flickers," as does the consciousness of the person holding it. That person – who is like the artist, but also like an imagined character (*personazh*) in the situation – stands at that moment like a demiurge (*polubog*), deciding whether the thing will exist or be consigned to oblivion. However, in that moment the person also decides something about his own fate, whether that bit of himself, a used transportation ticket, an old receipt or bottle cap, associated with an experience and a memory, will be retained or

---

[31] Groys discussed Plato's *Parmenides*, in which Socrates denies that hair, dirt and rubbish have any ideal form – their only existence lies in the contingent material reality that meets the eye (Groys 2016: 23).

[32] Nostalgia has been an important concept for Kabakov criticism, although, as Svetlana Boym acknowledged, "The object of Kabakov's nostalgia is difficult to fix," she acknowledged (Boym 2001: 325). Marchesini drew attention to the objects of everyday life that evoke longing "because this past is intertwined with dimensions of memory, childhood, and youth" (Marchesini 2015: 156). Marchesini addressed Kabakov's installation *Monument to a Lost Civilization* (1999). Many of the objects in the installations discussed here are less identifiable.

thrown away (*Ibid.*). Kabakov is perfectly aware of the improbability of layering all these deep considerations onto insignificant trash objects. As in his other writings, the overly long and digressive reflection, careening from highly abstruse to grotesquely emotional considerations, reflects the particular irony of Moscow conceptualism. Setting up the architectonics of "flickering" – of the ideas and the pose – appears to mean more for Kabakov than the individual material texture or implied memory of trash items.[33]

Found items, as we saw, helped both Rauschenberg and Kabakov bring art works off the wall and into three-dimensional space. The "combines" were a signature genre for Rauschenberg in the 1950s and early 1960s. Kabakov began to grow into his signature genre, the installation, in the 1980s. A relatively simple installation, the *Box with Garbage* (first realized in 1986 in Kabakov's Moscow studio),[Fig. 9] illustrates the indistinct materiality of the rubbish items. Items are jumbled together and not specified in the description – photos from the installation show an old shoe, empty bottles and paint cans, rags and pieces of cardboard or paper in or around a nondescript box (Kabakov 2003: 120-125). The text associated with it describes the irritability of an unnamed character who is tired of being constantly surrounded by people and feigning good social behavior. The objects have labels with rude interjections, for example, "Fuck off! Go fuck yourself," and "Why are you staring, pig?" Kabakov wrote about his use of text labels affixed to objects in his installation with garbage: the fragmentary text «has a lot in common with the garbage itself – it is anonymous everyday speech, belonging to 'each and every person.'»

---

[33] Kabakov took the term "flickering" (*mertsanie*) from fellow conceptualist artist Dmitrii Prigov who used it to indicate the way the author seems both to identify with the voice and character (usually eccentric or dubious, often mouthing Soviet values or fixed speech patterns) in a work and to be distanced from it. The artfulness of the works consists of provoking an impression that these incompatible positions are both possible at once, so they "flicker" in the perception of the audience. "Flickering" (*mertsatel'nost'*) was a key conceptualist term (Monastyrskii: 1999, 58-59).

(Wallach 1996: 179) Although the only thing we know about the incompletely realized character is that he desperately wants to avoid being submerged in the crowd among which he lives, the objects and interjections that express him plunge him, ironically, back into anonymity.

The installation *The Rope of Life* (1985) more directly suggests that the objects connect to memory and experience. [Fig. 10] However, the description of the installation is tellingly imprecise: «All kinds of small pieces of garbage are attached to the middle section of the rope by thin strings: a broken toothbrush, empty bottles, buttons, papers, etc.» (Kabakov 2003: 83) Each item here, too, has a small label, but the labels do not explain the items, as one would expect, and they do not cohere into a life story. Sample labels read: «Autumn 1935: Running through the grey gates along the cobblestones pavement until the next block» and «1940: The cover on the table» (*Ibid.*). Incorporated later into the large installation *Ten Characters*, the rope was linked to the character Parfenov, who, a text tells us, had moved out but left the rope. The children played with the rope, the cat played with it, and then the other residents notice the rope with its objects and labels and try to decipher it. Most of the speculation concerned the two empty ends with no objects – what did they signify? The children found a note left by Parfenov in which he discusses the project: «I decided to describe my life in the form of a rope and to arrange on it all of the events of my life in the order in which I remember them, not distinguishing the important from the unimportant, since, for me, they were all equally important and significant. Isn't that so?» (Kabakov 2003: 85) These items themselves are too small and banal to signify much. They are barely specified, and they struggle to impress themselves upon our perception in any meaningful way. The labels, too, though supposedly related to the life of the character, seem isolated and incoherent: the objects, like the events, surface as we contemplate them only to slip back almost at the same time into the meaningless void, like the poor-quality objects of earlier paintings.

One view of the installation *The Rope of Life* [Fig. 11] shows the rope lying in the corner with dirt. In the dialogue about "Trash,"

Kabakov suggested: «I am that dirt that they didn't sweep away» (Kabakov and Grois 2010: 81). It is possible to interpret this as a comment about being marginalized as a nonconformist artist, though it seems to apply more widely: «All of us in the Soviet Union live in trash, in the broken pieces of an alien civilization» (*Ibid.*). Kabakov went on, «Our civilization does not function, and it is not beautiful. All the things brought in from abroad don't work here. Everything is sure to be broken or to be lacking something» (*Ibid.*). He sees himself as like those things, or even less interesting than them: «If I were a good writer, they would have arrested me and thrown me out. If I were a good thing, they would have broken me and, again, thrown me out» (*Ibid.*). Trash is overdetermined in Kabakov's art and thought. The ramified possibilities for what it symbolizes – memory, the person, the artist, the whole society – proliferate such that the trash cannot be absorbed or transformed into any coherent message or meaning.

Kabakov spun out the possibilities of trash further. In the installation *16 Ropes* (1984),[Fig. 12] the ropes are hung at eye level, 168 cm apart, so that they form a horizontal surface filling the whole room. Spectators wander among the ropes and examine the pieces of trash suspended vertically from the rope at regular intervals of 12-15 cm: «a cork, the top of a can, an empty match box, etc.» (Kabakov 2003: 67). Viewers, as if submerged in a sea of trash, will likely examine discrete labels, which in this case contain fragments of everyday speech: «Viten'ka, come over this evening, I'll make crepes»; «Which, short ones, three rubles?»; «Let's not wait for the bus… Let's walk a little bit.» (*Ibid.*: 68-69). Trash in this installation appears more neutral and de-individualized: trash is the stuff of everyday Soviet life (*byt*). This installation adds the aspect of ordering, separation and labelling of meaningless everyday items. Kabakov described such a mania as the product «of our Russian imperial consciousness, to think that every separate thing is just trash and rubbish (*drian'*), but that all this rubbish should be accounted for and labeled. Everything, including a person, is given a number, like in a warehouse. Chaos is given order. Unending chaos and trash and at the same time unbroken order coincide» (Kabakov and Grois 2010: 74). Kabakov spoke here of something

specific about the Russian (or Soviet) imperial consciousness, which despises the life and territory within which it operates (although it is its own), and which relentlessly tries to corral it into something valuable – without, it would seem, really thinking that is possible.

Sven Spieker analyzed the installation in terms of the archive. In *16 Ropes*, wrote Spieker: «such 'stringing up' of objects was one of the most ancient forms of filing, and the English word 'file,' which is derived from the French *fil* (string), originally meant 'to line something up on a piece of string'» (Spieker 2008: ix). The question posed by *16 Ropes*, as Spieker saw it, is «whether its strings can deliver what archives promise us, a sense of (and in) time» (*Ibid.:* x). Kabakov's installation makes literal the function of the archive, Spieker said: «archives contain paperwork that no longer circulates in the bureaucracy, paperwork that has lapsed and become garbage [or a record, a trace]. The crux of *Sixteen Ropes* is the way in which it provides garbage in a literal sense – from cigarette butts to wrappers, scraps of paper, and railway tickets – with the archive's formal trappings, such as strings, labels, ropes, knots, and written words, all functioning to tame the trash by turning it into documents of culture and history» (*Ibid.:* ix-x). In Spieker's reading, the installation is not specifically Russian or Soviet – it represents a more basic modern, archival impulse, the urge to tame life itself, in time.

Kabakov's installation *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (a.k.a. The Garbage Man, 1988) [Fig. 13] concentrates the potentials of the trash theme. The "Garbage Man" (he has no other name) is another absent character we know through his room filled with trash and his writings. One day, men arrive to read the water meter (*vodomer*), which is supposed to be in the man's room. Since the man is out, Uncle Misha, the senior tenant of the apartment, breaks down the door to let them in. The tenants and the workmen stand amazed: the entire room is filled with neatly sorted trash: flat things, containers and jars, piles of paper and manuscripts, and small items strung up in bundles are all arranged according to their form. There are papers and folders, including a series of "Trash Novels" in many volumes, which seem to be something like memory books of the man's life and experiences.

While notes in the book and labels on the items record the moments of collection, in this case, too, they yield no coherent narrative or profile of the man (Kabakov 2003: 174-177).

Uncle Misha bends down to read one of the man's manuscripts, which contains ruminations that echo many of Kabakov's own: in the piece labelled "Dump" (*Svalka*), the man writes, «The whole world, everything which surrounds me here, appears to me a boundless dump with no ends or borders, an inexhaustible diverse sea of garbage». The essay swerves into bathos as the man ponders the endless array of trash items produced by the city which «cry out about a past life, they preserve it». Is the dump a feature of socialist life? he wonders. A visit to relatives in Czechoslovakia produced the impression of such "cleanliness": «Why, why is it so clean there?» he wonders, «and what about this land which belongs to no one behind our house and has become a dump? […] doesn't it loom threateningly beyond our walls, like an enemy surrounding a fortress, returning over and over again to our building, submerging it?» What if, he thinks, it's even worse than that: «our entire place, all of our enormous territory is a dumping ground for the garbage from all the rest of the world?» (Kabakov 2003: 178-181) This is, among other things, the anxious rumination of the global provincial, the person who knows he inhabits a country outside of the global center, and who fears that the mental (and physical) processes of sweeping out the trash on a global scale will simply bury him in the dump of the unseen and the insignificant.

In another way, the man's quixotic project to collect and sort all the detritus of life around him overshadows the person. The work of collecting and labelling can seem mindless, reducing the human figure supposedly represented by it to a grotesque caricature. Like Nikolai Gogol's Akakii Akakievich, from "The Overcoat" (*Shinel'*, 1842), Kabakov's Soviet "little man" (*malen'kii chelovek*) voluntarily, enthusiastically copies the Soviet imperial project to colonize life and reality in a pathetically absurd attempt to archive his life and the life around him. The literary heritage is meaningful here. As reviewer Jamey Gambrell commented, "it seems that Kabakov's installations

emerged full-blown from the tattered folds of Gogol's overcoat" (Gambrell 1995: 172).[34]

Contrary to the effect in Rauschenberg's combines, where things resist absorption thanks to their distinctive materiality, trash in Kabakov's installations resists becoming valuable or meaningful as part of a story or a metaphor even as the trash compels us to look at it – this effect is realized with objects and characters so non-descript and banal they almost defy description.

The verbal and literary elements in Kabakov's works, like images in Rauschenberg's combines, possess status roughly equal to that of the objects and other physical elements of the composition or installation space. Yet, in the case of Kabakov, that status is always precariously placed on the boundary between existence and non-existence, barely rising to level of discrete significance and always potentially lapsing into the void. The characters never quite feel like human people. Their stories are not exactly stories – something happened, but it is hard to say what, or what it means. The viewer is invited, indeed, compelled by the installation space to engage with the process of reading the elements of the installation. However, there is ultimately nothing that entirely captures the viewer's eye, mind or heart. The work engenders a "flickering" state of engagement that arrests the attention but also systematically repels it, leaving the viewer free to decide whether the elements add up to something (and what that something is), or to leave the installation altogether.

---

[34] An epigraph from Gogl's story "The Nose" ("Pick it up, you dropped something there…") opened the section on "The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away," in the catalogue *Ten Characters* (Kabakov 1989: 42). Boris Eikhenbaum's classic analysis of Gogol's story outlined the alternation between bathos and grotesque comedy that seems to be a meaningful intertext for Kabakov's character (Eichenbaum 1974: 269-91).

A Syntax of Reception

Kabakov's work has long been established as part of international art culture. His works on the genre of the "total" installation are particularly well known. Influential art scholar Claire Bishop opened chapter one of her book on installation art in recent decades with Kabakov's *The Man Who Flew Into Space from His Apartment* (1985).[Fig. 14] This is another one in Kabakov's *Ten Characters* series, whose room, with its red walls, the hole in the ceiling, and the slightly terrifying catapult seat hanging from the ceiling, certainly arrests viewers' attention. Bishop described Kabakov's work as exemplary of one type of installation art experience, which is like *dreaming*. According to her, works like Kabakov's demand that we «imaginatively project ourselves into an immersive 'scene' that requires creative free-association in order to articulate its meaning» (Bishop 2005: 16). In this way, she wrote, we may read the elements of the installation symbolically, as metonymic parts of a narrative. We might take note, however, of the distinction Kabakov drew between objects and space for different audiences: western art is oriented to the object, while objects hardly matter for the Soviet or Russian mentality, he argued – the latter consciousness was much more attuned to the demands of a space, whether of a communal apartment, school, bureaucratic office, or other environment.[35]

Kabakov's comments on the differences between audiences seems particularly significant. I have argued that trash in Kabakov's art resists absorption into any stable interpretation, and that the discrete trash objects impinge with difficulty on our perception. Kabakov's comments about the obviously constructed nature of the installation space – which he says should turn attention to the "ideal" nature of the project or event they enclose – implies a different type of reflection and

---

[35] Kabakov contrasted audiences in "the West," for whom objects matter more than they do to audiences "in the East, or more precisely in Russia," for whom the objects are always wretched and insignificant, and for whom the space determines the situation (Kabakov 1995: 244).

association, one which the space partially dictates, but which also leaves viewers free to pursue that reflection in any direction available to them.

Claire Bishop's claims about absorption and her suggestion of a psychoanalytic framework for processing a "dream" sequence seem rather too uniform to accommodate the varied potentials of Kabakov's installations. Bishop referred to the "conscious and unconscious associations in the beholder" of the installation (Bishop 2005: 16). These "unconscious" associations hearken back for Bishop to the Surrealist predecessors she sees as significant for this type of installation art (*Ibid.*). However, the associations, cultural or everyday analogies and personal memories are not, for Kabakov, part of a Freudian subconscious, where powerful impulses capable of exploding or transforming the bourgeois world are buried: the eccentric attempts of Kabakov's odd characters to achieve utopian escape or dreams of order are staged right in front of us, and they seem less opposed to the reigning order than weirdly reflective of it. Moreover, inasmuch as the installation of a Soviet communal apartment might recall personal memories for a former Soviet person familiar with that lived environment, it evokes different associations for westerners, who have an ethnographic interest in life from behind the Iron Curtain and politicized ideas about it. The Soviet specificity of Kabakov's installations brings out a difference in viewers' perspectives depending on what they know or think they know about Soviet and Russian life.

Krauss wrote about the "syntax" of items (objects and images) in a Rauschenberg combine, which encourages a modality of discourse and a sense of *durée* that evokes the extended temporality of memory and narration, even if it does so in no recognizable language (Krauss 2002: 40-41). Bishop talked about something like a syntax of elements (verbal, visual, physical) in Kabakov's works and installations, but those elements are not resistantly material in the same way. We need to think again about the way materiality matters. The Kabakovs' serial re-staging of works, elaborating them over and over again in new installations, anthologies and retrospectives suggests another sort of materiality associated with the context of staging, including the

historical moment (from late Soviet to early post-Soviet, to recent times) and the economic and political contexts, in Italy, in Germany, in America, Israel, the U.K. or Russia. Kabakov's installations comprise a sort of screen for projection within these contexts – in this way they are rather like Rauschenberg's early White paintings, that catch the shadows of passersby. Kabakov's works elicit and catch the projections of meaning by different audiences. In this way they support, I suggest, a *syntax of reception*.

The initial audience viewing Kabakov's works in the USSR was a tight circle of fellow artists and friends who created their own "space of reception" through a complex set of oral and written texts, featuring their own slang terms and ways of speaking.[36] This early and limited reception facilitated the "flickering" of roles – people working as artists adopted the perspective of audience members for their friends' works and portrayed themselves as characters in their own art (Kabakov 1993: 24). The artist's identification with the social context and characters represented in the work was something Enrico Crispolti perceived already in Kabakov's early "Shower" drawings. Such ambivalence in the work made it less susceptible to the label "dissident" and the reductive politicization that could entail. Crispolti recalled trying to navigate the turbulent politics on the left around the 1977 Venice Biennale, the so-called "Dissident" Biennale, where uncensored art from Eastern Europe, including three of Kabakov's paintings (*The Answers of the Experimental Group* was one of them), were shown. Crispolti favored "un-official" over "dissident" although this did not neutralize the scandal (Crispolti 2007; Crispolti 1977).

Despite some shows abroad, Kabakov's group of conceptual artists and friends in the USSR remained a relatively closed circle with no interest in irritating Soviet authorities. Kabakov recalled showing the installation *The Man Who Flew Into Space* in his Moscow studio. He

---

[36] Pavel Peppershtein described the group, later dubbed "NOMA," this way in "Rapport 'NOMA – NOMA'" (Kabakov 1993: 9). The installation entitled *NOMA, or The Moscow Conceptual Circle* was shown in Hamburg in 1993-1994 (see also Kabakov 2003 486-91).

set it up only when Groys or another friend was coming over, after which he "quickly rolled everything up, and shaking from fear, carried it off to various corners," since officials coming by to give him commissions would have disapproved of his nonconformist work and perhaps cut off his means of earning a living (Kabakov 1999: 86). Shown in the west years after the fall of the Soviet Union, such installations cannot function the same way, Kabakov remarked, since their esthetic qualities can be read only "in contrast to that culture in which they are being exhibited" (*Ibid.*).

Western audiences read his works in terms of such a contrast during Perestroika. The Sotheby's auction in Moscow in 1988 brought a new level of scrutiny from the international art market to Soviet nonconformist art. Westerners saw an exotic art scene and the potential for exploiting works seen during their "art safari" to the Soviet Union (Gambrell 1989: 26). As Kabakov's work became better known also through the *Ten Characters* show in New York and London, American observers described it in terms of an allegory of "personal freedom" crushed by the "social order" (Gookin 1988: 136). One critic marveled that art from the Soviet Union could express the "confidence in the authenticity of the individual" that western artists seemed to have lost (Heartney 1990: 63). It seems reasonable to think that the Anglo-American ideology of the individual, perceived in opposition to Soviet suppression of individual rights, influenced these Perestroika-era interpretations.

Kabakov remained concerned during the Perestroika and early post-Soviet years about journalists and critics understanding his art works in "merely political" terms, as they did his installation *The Red Wagon* (1991)[Fig. 10] when it was first shown in Dusseldorf. In fact, Kabakov said, his polemic was with the Soviet avant-garde artists of the 1920s and their utopian aspirations, instead of with the (soon to be defunct) Soviet regime (Kabakov 1999: 51). *The Red Wagon* portrayed the totality of Soviet history in art historical terms, from the constructivist design of the front-end ladders, to the Socialist Realist portrayal of a happy life inside the red wagon, to the heap of trash outside the back door of the wagon, symbolizing the era in which

Kabakov and his friends worked after Stalin. Kabakov portrayed both the Moscow Conceptualist Circle (NOMA) and Soviet history in retrospect as "total" environments, subject to mythologization and nostalgia, but never without the destabilizing effect of the "flickering" that came from shifting between the perspectives of artist, audience member, and character or environment represented.

After being shown in Dusseldorf, *The Red Wagon* was supposed to be shown in Jerusalem and Moscow. Apparently, damage to the work in transport and inadequate space made it impossible to mount the installation as planned in those two cities. The circumstance provided an opportunity for Jurgen Harten to meditate on the way the work responded to its context and acted as a catalyst for that context, even – or maybe especially – when it was materially absent (Kabakov 1999: 130-32). Kabakov joked with an interviewer in Israel that he himself started to doubt the existence of the installation after it failed to arrive. Perhaps, he speculated, the reasons were metaphysical – the Biblical allusions to Ya'akov's staircase and Jonah and the whale (allusions obvious in Israel but hardly remarked elsewhere) – were too straightforward and vulgar. Perhaps the big and heterogeneous object (18 m. long) was "rejected by the local atmosphere" as being too aggressive (Kabakov 1999: 140).

In recent years, the retrospective exhibition of the Kabakovs' work travelled from the Tate to Russian museums, evoking new echoes of the "ethnographic" interest in a history now far enough removed one might wonder whether it even existed. For Russian viewers, the exhibition evoked a range of feelings. A reviewer of the show in St. Petersburg recalled in the early post-Soviet years, around 1992, the ironic conceptualist analyses of late Soviet style, everyday life, symbols and sign systems taken to absurd extremes seemed to have little to do with Russian audiences: people were ready to shake off that old communal life in search of a bright individual future. However, by the time of this 2018-19 retrospective, Kabakov's works suddenly evoked "chaotic and fearsome" feelings. The albums in particular struck a nerve: «[T]he mothballs of Kabakov's closet are impossibly active still. We are all ready to hide in that closet, and the only place to fly out of it,

it would seem, is into the cosmos» (Dolinina 2018: 12). Perhaps albums such as *Sitting-in-the-Closet Primakov* tapped into the disappointments of post-socialism, evoking a sense of nostalgia combined with a new desire for impossible escape.

British reviews revived some old clichés about the horror of the totalitarian State: the header on a review for the Tate show for *The Guardian* said: «With its harrowing echoes of repression, deprivation and murder, the Kabakovs' art is a magnificent, moving monument to the millions crushed by communism» (Jones 2017). Such emotional language suggests that a new context for recycling Cold War fear has emerged. A photograph of the installation *Not Everyone Will Be Taken Into the Future* [Fig. 15], accented by red light and patches of darkness illustrates reviews, suggesting a sense of danger now recoded in the context of new mutual western and Russian suspicions.[37] Jackson, who spent much time studying Kabakov's art, identified the main theme of the retrospective as "failed utopias." And yet, the Kabakovs said, the elimination of utopianism is "another form of utopianism" (Kabakov 2017: 27). Above all, wrote Jackson, the Kabakovs' art, «allows us to see more clearly all of the things that we have lost over the course of those years, as well as all of the things that we never could have had». He concluded, «[L]earning to discern the difference between the two may be the ultimate instruction to be discovered within the art of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov» (*Ibid.*: 33).

A *syntax of reception* means that the materiality of these works is realized by their interaction with different audiences in varying historical moments and contexts. There is an irreducible materiality to encounters with these works that Kabakov invites us to consider through the repeated staging he and Emilia continue to do. That meta-series of staged works and installations entails the passage from the Soviet era to post-Soviet times, as well as the passage from Russia to

---

[37] Such a reading is by no means necessary: Emilia Kabakov described a creeping darkness as characteristic of a late stage of Ilya Kabakov's art (Wallach 2014).

the west, but it does not yield to any grand narrative about what has happened or what the Soviet experience meant. Most of all, it reminds us that the lived Soviet experience was real, and that its reality resists our attempts to wrangle and organize it with narratives about a lost utopia or a triumphant liberal order. It shows us that the memory of the Soviet Union is part of our shared collective imagination, even if we may not agree on its historical significance.

Works Cited

Aigi, Gennady, "Nikolai Khardzhiev and the Maiakovsky Museum, Moscow," *A Legacy Regained: Nikolai Khardzhiev and the Russian Avant-Garde*, Ed. John E. Bowlt and Mark Konecny, St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2002.

Bishop, Claire, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, London: Tate Publishing, 2005.

Boym, Svetlana, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books, 2001.

Celant, German. "Arte Povera/Art Povera", Trans. Paul Blanchard, *Identite italienne: L'art en Italie depuis 1959*, Ed. Germano Celant and Giovanni Anselmo, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1981.

Christov-Bakargiev, Carolyn, "Survey," *Arte Povera*, Ed. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1999, 14-47.

Crispolti, Enrico. Interview by Laura Cantone. "Il senso del dissenso." *Exibart*, 8 Oct. 2007. www.exibart.com/politica-e-opinioni/il-senso-del-dissenso/ . online (last accessed 15.05.2020).

Crispolti, Enrico, "Una mostra non ufficiale della nuova arte sovietica," *La nuova arte sovietica: Una prospettiva non ufficiale* [cat.], Ed. Enrico Crispolti and Gabriella Moncada, Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 1977.

Crispolti, Enrico, "I primi documenti dell'avanguardia pittorica e plastica nell'U.R.S.S.," *Marcatre*, 4.19-22 (1966), 418-21.

Crispolti, Enrico, Alternative Attuali 2: rassegna internazionale di pittura – scultura – grafica [cat.]. Milano: Lerici editori, 1965.

Dolinina, Kira, "Naftalinovyi kosmos: Retrospektiva Il'i Kabakova v Ermitazhe," *Komersant* 72 (April 25, 2018), 12, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3613164, online (last accessed 02.04.2019).

Eichenbaum, Boris, "How Gogol's 'Overcoat' is Made," *Gogol from the Twentieth Century*, Ed. Robert A. Maguire, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974.

Gambrell, Jamey, "Disappearing Kabakov," *The Print Collector's Newsletter* 26.5 (1995): 171-74.

Gambrell, Jamey, "Perestroika Shock," *Art in America* 77 (Feb. 1989), 124-35.

Gookin, Kirby, "Ilya Kabakov," *Artforum* 27 (Sept. 1988): 135-36.

Gray, Camilla, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863–1922*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1962.

Grotowski, Jerzy, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Ed. Eugenio Barba, New York: Routledge, 2002.

Groys, Boris, "Text as a Ready-Made Object," Trans. John Meredig, *Endquote: Sots-Art Literature and Soviet Grand Style*, Ed. Marina Balina, Nancy Condee and Evgeny Dobrenko, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000.

Grois, Boris, *Stat'i ob Il'e Kabakove*, Moscow: Ad Marginem Press, 2016.

Grois, Boris, "Moskovskii romanticheskii kontseptualizm," 37 *[Tridtsat' sem', Thirty-Seven]* 15 (1978), Samizdat, published in *Project for the Study of Dissidence and Samizdat*, Ed. Ann Komaromi, Toronto: University of Toronto Libraries, 2015, https://samizdatcollections.library.utoronto.ca/islandora/object/samizdat%3A37_15 , online, (last accessed 02.10.2020).

Heartney, Eleanor, "Post-Utopian Blues," *Sculpture* (May/June 1990): 63-67.

Jackson, Matthew Jesse, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Jones, Jonathan, "A terrifying trip to the USSR's dark heart – Ilya and Emilia Kabakov review," *The Guardian* (17 October 2017), https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/oct/17/ilya-and-emilia-kabakov-tate-modern-london-review, online (last accessed 02.04.2019).

Kabakov, Il'ia, et al. *On Art,* The University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Kabakov, Il'ia, *V nashem ZhEKe*, Vologda: Biblioteka Moskovskogo Kontseptualizma Germana Titova, 2011.

Kabakov, Il'ia, *60 – 70e…: Zapiski o neofitsial'noi zhizni v Moskve*, Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2008.

Kabakov, Il'ia, et al. *NOMA, ili Moskovskii kontseptual'nyi krug*, Zurich: Cantz, 1993.

Kabakov, Il'ia and Boris Grois, *Dialogi*, Vologda: Biblioteka moskovskogo kontseptualizma Germana Titova, 2010.

Kabakov, Ilya, *Installations: 1983-2000. Catalogue raisonné*, Ed. Toni Stooss, Dusseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2003, 2 vols., vol. I.

Kabakov, Ilya, *Der Rote Waggon: The Red Wagon*, Nurnberg: Verlag fur modern Kunst, 1999.

Kabakov, Ilya, *Uber die "Totale" Installation / O "Total'noi" installiatsii/ On the "Total" Installation*, Ostfildern: Cantz, 1995.

Kabakov, Ilya, *Ten Characters* [cat.], London: ICA, 1989.

Kabakov, Ilya, "Not Everyone Will be Taken into the Future," *A-Ya* 5 (1983): 34-35.

Kabakov, Ilya and Emilia, *Not Everyone Will Be Taken into the Future* [cat.], Ed. Juliet Bingham, London: Tate Publishing, 2017.

Khardzhiev, N. I., "El' Lisitskii – konstruktor knigi," *Stat'i ob avangarde v dvukh tomakh*, vol. 1, Moscow: RA, 1997, 235-50.

Krauss, Rosalind E. "Grids" (1978) *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1985, 8-22.

Lippard, Lucy R. *Pop Art*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1966.

Mangini, Elizabeth, "Mario Merz's Autonomous Artist," *Art Journal* 75. 3 (Fall 2016): 11-31.

Marchesini, Irina, "The Presence of Absence. Longing and Nostalgia in Post-Soviet Art And Literature," *Melancholic Identities, Toska and Reflective Nostalgia. Case Studies from Russian and Russian- Jewish Culture*, Florence: Florence University Press, 2015, 149-65.

Mattison, Robert S. *Robert Rauschenberg: Breaking Boundaries*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003.

Monastyrskii, Andrei (ed.), *Slovar' terminov moskovskoi kontseptual'noi shkoly*, Moscow: Ad Marginem, 1999.

Spieker, Sven, *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2008.

Steinberg, Leo, *Encounters with Rauschenberg (A Lavishly Illustrated Lecture)*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Wallach, Amei, "Emilia Kabakov," *Bomb* (Jan. 13, 2014), https://bombmagazine.org/articles/emilia-kabakov/ , online (last accessed 02.03.2020).

Wallach, Amei, *Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996.

The Author

Ann Komaromi

Ann Komaromi is Associate Professor and Acting Director of the Centre for Comparative Literature with a cross-appointment in the Slavic Department at the University of Toronto. She created the Project for the Study of Dissidence and Samizdat at University of Toronto Libraries, and authored the book *Uncensored: The Quest for Autonomy in Samizdat Novels* (Northwestern University Press, 2015). Komaromi's research of Ilya Kabakov is part of a comparative study of the use of trash and discarded objects in art.

Email: a.komaromi@utoronto.ca

The Article

How to cite this article

Komaromi, Ann, "Soviet Trash. The Reception of Ilya Kabakov's Art Beyond the USSR", *Le culture del dissenso in Europa nella seconda metà del*

Novecento, Eds. T. Spignoli – C. Pieralli, *Between*, X.19 (2020), www.betweenjournal.it