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**Ilya Kabakov and the concept of "Total"**  
**installation.**

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## *Introduction*

The concept of installation art, as developed throughout the last couple of decades, is not easily defined and is still rapidly evolving. Ilya Kabakov has stated; " I know from experience that virtually no one knows how to see the installation as a work of art." (Storr, Jan., 1995, p. 69).

In dealing with the nature of installation art, Kabakov has found his own artistic expression through this art form, and has developed what he has named "total" installation. Based on his own experiences from the former Soviet Union, he developed his artistic ideas and fully executed them after emigrating to the West in 1988. The diverse aspects of a "total" installation, have been explained in different sources by the inventor himself. Its complexity, its form, its background, the issue and questions it arises, its interaction with the viewer, as well as the artist's own role as a creator, are all important.

Kabakov's artistic career will be discussed, where his position within the Russian and International art scene and how his work can be regarded as "spiritual", will be evaluated as important regarding the development of his art. Through a few chosen Total Installations, an effort will be made to illustrate the different aspects, which make out such a piece. For example "The Children's Hospital", exhibited at Imma (20/11-98 - 11/4-99), was created in collaboration with his wife Emilia, and shows an example of where his work stands today. Through a lengthy talk given at Imma, to accompany this exhibition on its opening day, Kabakov talked about his own artistic background and development, aspects of "total" installations, his aims as well as the ideas behind them.





## *Chapter 1*

### **Introducing Ilya Kabakov;** **Within the context of Western and Russian conceptualism**

Russian art, at the beginning of this century, was full of invention, exemplified by artists such as Malevich, Kandinsky and Tatlin. Alfred Barr, the first Director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, visited Moscow in 1928, and regarded Russian art as avant-garde, thus placing it as central within the art world.

With Stalin's arrival in the 1930's, however, experimentation and freedom of artistic expression came to an end officially, and the historical development of Russian art expression was cut off from the West. (Ross, 1990, p. 61-62). A long time was to pass, but throughout the seventies, when Russia was still closed off from the Western world, the term "conceptualism" first appeared within the Russian art scene. What Western artists had, through the concepts of Joseph Kosuth, Terry Atkinson and the British Art & Language Group, learned and adapted as conceptualism, the Russian artist Ilya Kabakov (b. 1933), recognized as reflecting "some very essential aspects of the entire artistic process in Russia". (Ross, 1990, p.73).

There are many opinions as to when "conceptual art" arrived in Europe. Robert C. Morgan, (1996), suggested that it first came in the year 1913. When, as explained, the "bicycle wheel" by Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), and Kasimir Malevich's (1878-1935) first Suprematist painting together formed a mixture on which conceptual art would be based. In the same way "the bicycle wheel" exemplifies the restriction of Cartesian logic





and the Suprematist painting put forth the correspondence that form equals feeling.(Morgan, 1996, p. 9).

The term "concept art" as used by the American artist Henry Flynt ( a member of the Fluxus movement), was acknowledged by the American conceptual artist Sol Le Witt as the source for what today is called "conceptualism". Henry Flynt, in recognizing the connection between art and philosophy, in 1961 claimed that "concept art is a kind of art of which the material is language". (Morgan, 1996, p.31).The articles written by Joseph Kosuth (b.1945) which reached the Soviet art scene in the seventies, reflected similar ideas to those of Henry Flynt. Among his writings, Kosuth expressed: "Fundamental to this idea of art is the understanding of the linguistic nature of all art propositions, be they past or present, and regardless of the elements used in their construction". (Guerico, 1991, p. 74).

In its newly defined form, conceptual art emerged within the Western art scene at the end of the 1960s.Incidents of 1968, such as the student riots and demonstrations against the Vietnam war, show how conservative authorities were being questioned throughout the Western world. Conceptual art, along with other tendencies, reacted towards politics, as well as stated notions regarding art. Based on a new scepticism, and the destruction of Utopian views, conceptualism questioned, investigated and found answers to the meaning of art, the object and its place within the gallery scene. ( Wallach, 1996, p. 51).

Different tendencies within conceptualism took place. The British Art & Language Group exhibited work in 1969, which took the form of file cards and documents with notations and, through this analytical approach, wanted to illustrate that art was a kind



of investigation. By contrast, Sol Le Witt suggested that art is a catalyst which comes from the mind of the artist, even though it might not always connect with the onlooker. (Morgan, 1996, p. 2). The idea that conceptual art was recognized as "anti-formalist" had been initially influenced by Marcel Duchamp. To him, "art was less a matter of 'retinal' pleasure than a provocation that would incite new ideas". (Morgan, 1996, p. 5). In his essay "Art after Philosophy", (1969), Kosuth discussed the importance of Duchamp's contribution, and acknowledged him for questioning the function of art. To Kosuth, after the invention of the readymades, the ideas about art changed in the sense that the way an art object appears is less important than the concept of it. (Guerico, 1991, p. 18).

Elisabeth Sussmann, in her essay "The third zone; Soviet Postmodern", compared the ideas of the Russian writer/artist Sergei Anufriev, who wrote on early conceptualism in Moscow, and that of Hal Foster who described anti-aestheticism within the Western art scene. Anufriev and Foster both "delineate the tendencies toward an art with layers of meanings or codes that are buried in strategies (such as irony, parody), systems and references. This art is linguistic and textual (without necessarily being narrative)". (Ross, 1990, p. 63). Sussmann sees that Russian and Western art of the last 20 years seem to investigate or analyse, in order to explain. (Ross, 1990, p. 63).

Among the sources from which Russian conceptualism has evolved, are Western conceptualism, American Pop art and Soviet Sots art ("Sots" being short for "socialist"). Elena Izumova, a Soviet critic, recognized the similarities between American Pop art and Sots art, but whereas Pop art made use of symbols taken from Western mass production and consumerism, Sots artists (as part of the underground or "unofficial art"), used





Soviet ideology within their art works as a reaction towards the advertisement of socialism. (Ross, 1996, p. 64). A generic term to Pop art, "Sots art" was invented by the artists Komar and Melamid, due to a friend believing their paintings, based on mass cultural imagery found in the Soviet Union, to be a variation of American Pop art. (Tupitsyn, 1986, p. 4.) Ilya Kabakov explained that by using the poster forms of social realism, the "artists wanted to show the psychology and mentality of the Soviet citizen, who is not a Homo Sapiens, but a Homo Sovieticus". (Barzel, and Jolles, 1990, p. 48). As a leading artist within Russian conceptualism, Ilya Kabakov in describing the everyday life of the Soviet being, has brought his form of representation away from traditional aesthetic values of art. (Ross, 1990, p. 65). Through recognizing Western conceptualism as an art form already expressing itself in the Soviet Union, Kabakov realized that through this movement the unofficial art of his own country could take part in a larger debate within the international art scene. (Wallach, 1996, p. 51). As with its Western counterpart, Soviet conceptualism also deals with Post Utopian themes, as a reaction towards the failure of the modern. (Ross, 1990, p. 63).

Kabakov has explained regarding the Utopia of "The Russian Revolution" that they had, at the beginning of the century, tremendous illusions of a gigantic transformation of the entire world and that all dreams were belonging to the future. To them the present, which included people being starved or hunted, didn't exist. "Our generation appeared in a world where Utopia had already been realized and the explosion had already cooled down". (Jolles & Misiano, Nov./Dec., 1987, p. 82). Within Russian conceptualism, the political ideology and the modernist experiment which didn't succeed, are reflected in the use of metaphors such as "emptiness", "garbage", "nothingness" and "degeneration". (Ross, 1990, p. 68).



According to Ilya Kabakov, even though there are similarities between the western world and Russian conceptualism, there are differences which illustrate that these two movements must have evolved independently of each other. (Wallach, 1996, p. 52).

Dmitri Prigov, explained in an article "everything you ever wanted to know about moscow conceptualism....", that when Western conceptualism arrived in the Soviet Union, its mysteries were not revealed at once, "because in our culture, the names of things already traditionally occupy a position equivalent to the things themselves". (Appignanesi, 1989, p. 27). The way figurative art was verbalized and the object of fine art was connected with explanations, mixed in with the role which the literary has within the Russian culture. ( Appignanesi, 1989, p. 27).

Ilya Kabakov's conceptualism and his way of approaching art, are of a very Russian nature. In dealing with Soviet life, portrayed as communal spaces such as communal apartments, mental hospitals, toilets etc., Kabakov pursues the concept of "communal speech". Since most people lived in communal apartments (where many families had to share kitchen and bathroom), the Russian mentality is based on a life among others. Kabakov explained that "the communal apartment is an autonomous linguistic organism with its own textual laws". ( Tupitsyn, Oct., 1991, p. 51). The lack of privacy and silence, left the Soviet being with feelings of social desperation. (Storr, jan., 1995).

Whilst the Western world has a tradition of understanding and experiencing the world through visual symbols, Kabakov has stated that the literal tradition is stronger in Russia, and has even challenged the visual arts. "I don't believe a genuine visual art exists in Russia, and I am absolutely certain that it does exist in the West". (Tupitsyn, Oct., 1991, p. 54.) By using the forms of the narrative, storytelling and the use of text, Kabakov





illustrated the concept of speech. This work reflects both that of the Russian literary tradition and that of the Soviet mentality. As well as this the linguistic nature of his art places him within the conceptual movement.

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## *Chapter 2*

### *"The Bridge"* *from painting to installation*

#### *Ilya Kabakov's evolution from illustrator to installation artist.*

Today, Ilya Kabakov is internationally acknowledged for his installations, which portray different aspects of the Soviet communal life. He is considered a leading Russian conceptualist, both in the Western art world and within Russian art circles.

Ilya Kabakov was trained and worked as an illustrator for the Official Artists Union. Throughout his career, where he is known for illustrating several children's books, he was regarded as a successful artist, and it is this which ensured him membership of the Artist's Union. Unofficially, however, until Glasnost in the late 1980s, the artwork he considered important, consisted of paintings, albums, the use of text and installation ideas, which were only shown and discussed within his circle of friends.

(Cembalest, May, 1990, p. 179). The drawings, painting and mixed media work, which Ilya Kabakov executed during the sixties, depicted ordinary or banal objects, for example a ball, a stick or furniture, and he made use of his illustrative manner to underline his aims. Kabakov regarded the commonplace and the banal as full of potential for an artist. He explained that what is grey, banal or middling might not appear to have any metaphysics "because metaphysics assumes a field of activity which is either lofty or earthly, either heaven or hell". That here is nothing to express about this grey zone, is what attracted Kabakov, and therefore he dealt with "the metaphysics of the commonplace". (Appignanesi, 1989, p. 46).



Kabakov's first conceptual works executed in 1972 were also depicted in a graphic style. These works took the form of illustrated albums, in which he dealt with psychological and metaphysical questions. He created imaginary stories and drawings which described the lives of different personalities. In, for example, the series of "10 Characters", made from 1972 - 1975, the artist portrays the individual lives of ten people experiencing the Soviet communal life. The conclusion to the stories, through the use of white pages as a metaphor, illustrate these personalities' death. (Tupitsyn, 1989, p. 40). His unofficial art, consisting of paintings, drawings, mixed media work and albums, created during the sixties and seventies, describe and illustrate the concepts which his installation ideas are based upon.

### ***"The Bridge"***

Ilya Kabakov didn't find the use of painting or two dimensional work satisfactory when it came to what he wanted to express. In 1972, he realized that in order to illustrate the Soviet experience, he had to invent a new art form. He had already found installation a proper means by which to recreate a space that depicts the world of Soviet life. The installations "10 Characters", "The Mental Institution" and "The Bridge" are about this new concept, which Kabakov named "total" installation. (Wallach, 1996, p. 86). He believed installation art to have originated in painting, and the paintings are placed together in such a way that the viewer is not able to see the borders between them, and therefore enters the picture's inner space. "The total installation is a collection of pictures that were imprinted on, and are part of the mind of the viewer who enters the installation". (Kabakov and Zinik, winter 1997, p. 59). The idea that installation art takes



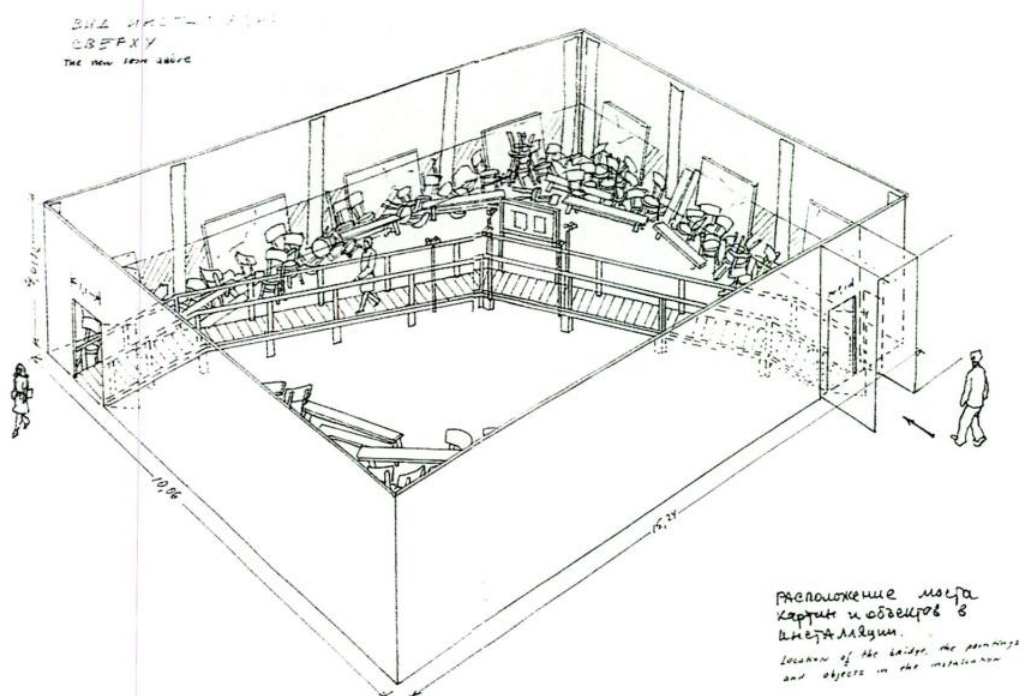


the place of painting is revealed in the installation "The Bridge" (1991) (Plate. 1 ). The installation consists of a room, 10 x 15 meters, which is entered through an old green door, leading onto a bridge which has a handrail attached to it, preventing access into the room.(Plate 1.2). In the middle of this room, the bridge turns to the left and the viewer leaves the installation through a door at the end of the bridge. In the middle, the room is illuminated and, because the corners are left dark, the room first appears to be empty. But, in the semi-darkness, familiar objects can be recognized, such as chairs, wrapping paper and even a table. There are also paintings leaning towards the walls. In the center of the room, there is a text which describes how something mysterious took place and interrupted the planning of the art exhibition in the Club Zhek No. 8 in Moscow. In this fictitious story, it is explained that the room had to be vacated because of the event which was going to appear in the very center of this room, and that after the incident, the floor was full of groups of little white people. Next to the board, with the text attached to it, there are six binoculars linked to the railing. Looking through one of them, these little white people are revealed on the floor of the empty illuminated space in the middle of the installation (Plate 1.3.)

Ilya Kabakov explained this work as a metaphor for art, which in this instance is represented as paintings being moved to the sides, to the dark corners, "yielding to the mysterious 'mystical' center which is brightly illuminated". And he continued: "then a new genre of art appears onstage, likethe 'installation'". (Storr, 1991, p. 61). An installation might not be considered as art, but it gives another angle to everything. Kabakov explained in his notes on the exhibition, that a "rather ambitious attempt to establish the correlation between art and 'mysticism' is embedded in the installation". (Storr, 1991,p.61.) In referring to the arts of the middle ages, seen for example in icons and the



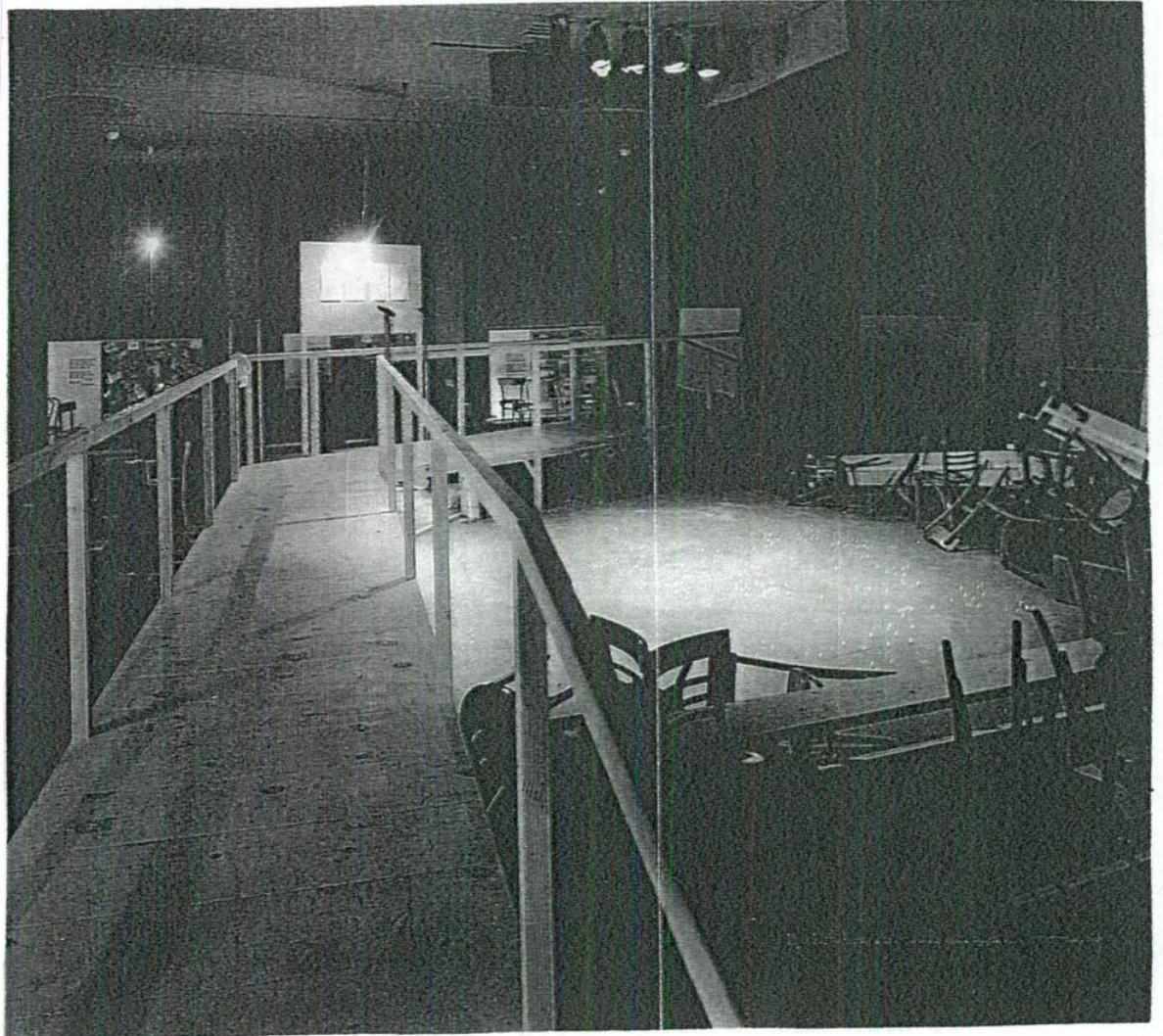




**Plate 1. "The Bridge" (1991)**

General concept.





**Plate 1.2.** *"The Bridge" (1991)*

View from entrance.







**Plate 1.3.** *"The Bridge" (1991)*

Detail of the floor with little white people.



gothic style, Kabakov saw that there was a link between art and religious - mystical experiences, whereas during modern times art has become independent. (Storr, 1991, p. 61). Spirituality in art might be regarded as absent today. In the past and in its original sense, spirituality, though vague in its meaning, was a part of people's adherence to religion; the divine and the human existence within this context. In our secularized society, as a result of science and technology, the term "spiritual" is understood as something separate, mostly connected to what is religious or mystical.

Roger Lipsey, in writing on spirituality in 20th century art, regarded spirituality as an experience of "looking beyond, or looking more deeply within". (Lipsey, 1997, p. 7). However, this experience might not occur to everyone within our modern society, because it reveals itself as some kind of revelation about finding oneself isolated, although also a part of a meaningful whole. Therefore, to Lipsey, spirituality is a positive experience.

As with his paintings, drawings and albums, Ilya Kabakov's installations deal with the restrictions and yearnings of contemporary Soviet life. Melancholic humour and nostalgia are what one finds intermingled with the imaginary worlds that Kabakov creates. His installations, which have to be entered by the viewer, are empty of people and are full of deserted objects. They create an ambience of nostalgia. Robert Storr, in describing the nature of Kabakov's work and "The Bridge" installation, regards the work as constructing some kind of a social surrealism, which is dual in the way it is both down to earth and of another dimension. Storr believed the little white people occupying the central space of the installation to be "not just nightmarish improvisations of collectivization. They also protect their dwellers from being cast adrift in the still more





terrifying wastes of a nation forever tearing itself down to build itself up". (Storr, 1991, p.23).

Wassily Kandinsky, (1866 - 1944), wrote in "Concerning the spiritual in art" (1912), that "when the external supports threaten to collapse, the man's gaze turns away from the external toward himself". (Harrison and Wood, 1996, p. 91). These external supports which are threatened whether concerned with scientific, religious or ethical matters, will leave within the human being something dark, and force a step away from external events towards an inner reflection. Kandinsky explained that since the arts are sensitive to social changes, this is where one will first recognize this change, since what is noticeable to the artist might not reveal itself to others within the same society. (Harrison and Wood, 1996, p. 91).

Kabakov explained that "The Bridge", because of its nature, might bring together different aspects of culture, such as objects, texts or pictures, as well as ideas or phenomena which at first impression seem unconnected. Such aspects, for example politics combined with everyday objects, although they keep their independence within the installation, might show "their profound connection with each other, which was perhaps lost long ago, which they at some time had, and which they always needed". (Storr, 1991, p. 61).



## *Chapter 3*

### *"10 characters"* *make a total installation.*

#### *Installation as expression*

Ilya Kabakov invites the public into his space, and in his "total" installations, the onlookers become a part of the tale the artist is making known. "The total installation is something the viewer enters, it is not outside", and concerning the main aim of such an installation, Kabakov has said "it is to get the viewer involved, to get him into the space..." ( Lingwood, IMMA, Interview, 1998.) He emigrated to the West in 1988, as he found it difficult to see himself working in a changing Russia, since his generation is a part of what used to be. He regards himself as a storyteller, but as his own people already know his story too well, he wanted to express his tale outside Russia. (Bonami, Summer 1994, p. 92). In recreating the Soviet experience in his installations, Kabakov made use of already assumed notions that people might have regarding Russia. To foreigners, Russia has a positive past which is represented through Russian literature from the end of the 19th century, and the artistic avant-garde at the beginning of this century. The preconceptions the audience have of the Soviet Union is of a rather negative nature, as being for example chaotic, confused and full of scandals. Though aware of these presumptions in the back of his mind while creating his installations, he has faced the fact that the metaphors he has been employing, for example dirt and garbage, have been misunderstood because the viewers believed him to express a realist picture of the Soviet existence. (Storr, Jan., 1995, p. 62). Some people have understood his work to be some kind of an ethnographic explanation of Soviet life, as though the Soviet being was an



alien species. Kabakov has responded to this misunderstanding by saying concerning "total" Installations: "As metaphor it is some kind of artistic image. It talks about a concept of the world." (Barringer, Sept., 1995, p. 135).

Leo Tolstoy, (1828 - 1910), in "Art as expression" (taken from "What is Art?", 1896), defined art to begin when a person, who intends to communicate with other people his own experiences, invokes this feeling in himself again and expresses this by using external signs which are well known to others. (Thompson, 1990, p. 6). To Tolstoy, art is "a means for the intercourse of men, necessary for man's life and for progress toward the good of the individual and of humanity, uniting men in the same feelings." (Thompson, 1990, p. 7).

Together with Andrei Monastyrsky, Ilya Kabakov evolved the idea about "dual aesthetic vision", which brings together both the gaze of the artist and the person he portrays. (Ross, 1990, p. 75). Joseph Bakshtein considered that this "artist-ideologue" is dual in the fashion in which the artist expresses what is real on one hand, but also depicts collective principles. (Ross, 1996, p. 74). Margarita Tupitsyn, in referring to the series of albums describing the "10 Characters", explained "the artist's semilogical polyphony", that it is connected "to a struggle against the feeling of 'psychological and social' alienation, whose distress the artist hopes to escape by a schizophrenic splitting into different personalities". (Tupitsyn, 1989, p. 41). Louis A. Sass described schizophrenic individuals through statements they expressed regarding their understanding of existence, which might for example both be "I feel that it is not me who is thinking" and "my thought can influence things" at the same time. (Sass, 1992, p. 325). What Sass found interesting is that this duality, though paradoxical, reflects that of modern thought. He







explained that through Kant, we have been taught to understand "Being" as dependent on "Knowing", and that the post-Kantian individual discovered himself from inside of the consciousness. (Sass, 1992, p. 328).

Michel Foucault also expressed that Modernism started when the human being began to exist within his own head or organism. (Foucault, 1974, p. 318). He explained that modern thought "is imbued with the necessity of thinking the unthought-of reflecting the contents of the *In-itself* in the form of *For-itself*, of ending man's alienation by reconciling him with his own essence.)". (Foucault, 1974, p. 327). "The unthought" is, in relation to the human being, the Other. To Marx, for example, this Other was the "alienated man". (Foucault, 1974, p. 326-327). Renato Poggioli, explained that the state of alienation must be understood as a "psychological alienation", which is "caused by a process of social degeneration, an ineluctable crisis of society at once unable to die or renew itself". (Poggioli, 1968, p. 109).

### ***"The Garbage Man"***

The "total" installation "10 Characters" has been depicted as on large installation broken into fragments, where each room of the work represents that of one character. The piece also belongs to the super-installation "Memorial".

Individual installations have also been created out of "10 Characters", where personalities such as "The Man who Flew into His Painting", "The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment", "The untalented Artist" and "The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away", among others are portrayed. (Wallach, 1996, p. 228). Kabakov explained that in the Soviet Union after the 1917 revolution, communal apartments were



common in the larger cities. The individuals who occupy the 10 rooms of the installation wished to escape this depressive and oppressive world. Through the fictitious texts, in relation to the installations, he said that what is depicted is the individuals "own special means for departure, or at least a way of ignoring the surroundings", and this was done by " the collecting of postcards, or a return to one's past, an examination of one's garbage or a flight into a painting that was drawn by him ...". (Schwabsky, March-April, 1995, p. 18).

The installation "The Garbage Man" was first exhibited in the Ronald Feldman Gallery in 1988 as a part of a bigger installation. Before becoming a permanent installation at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Oslo, 1995, it was also exhibited in different places around the world. (Hellandsjø, 1996, p. 3). The installation is entered through a grey iron door, and the space consists of three rooms arranged next to each other, which are gained access to through open doors between them. The first room consists of items of furniture, chaotically placed on top of each other, as though thrown away or about to be moved. (Plate 1.4.) The second room, which is entered through a door from the first room, is tidy and has a sterile atmosphere. (Plate 1.5 and 1.6.) The furniture is neatly placed and belongings are put in drawers or wall cabinets. A glass cabinet divides this room into two. The last room entered, is similar to the first, long and narrow, containing furniture which isn't in use anymore. (Plate 1.7.) This space, which looks like something between a storage room and a museum will, when further investigated, reveal a collection of garbage shown on the walls and in the glass cabinets. ( Hellandsjø, 1996, p. 43).







**Plate 1.4.** *"The Garbage Man" (1995)*

The first room.





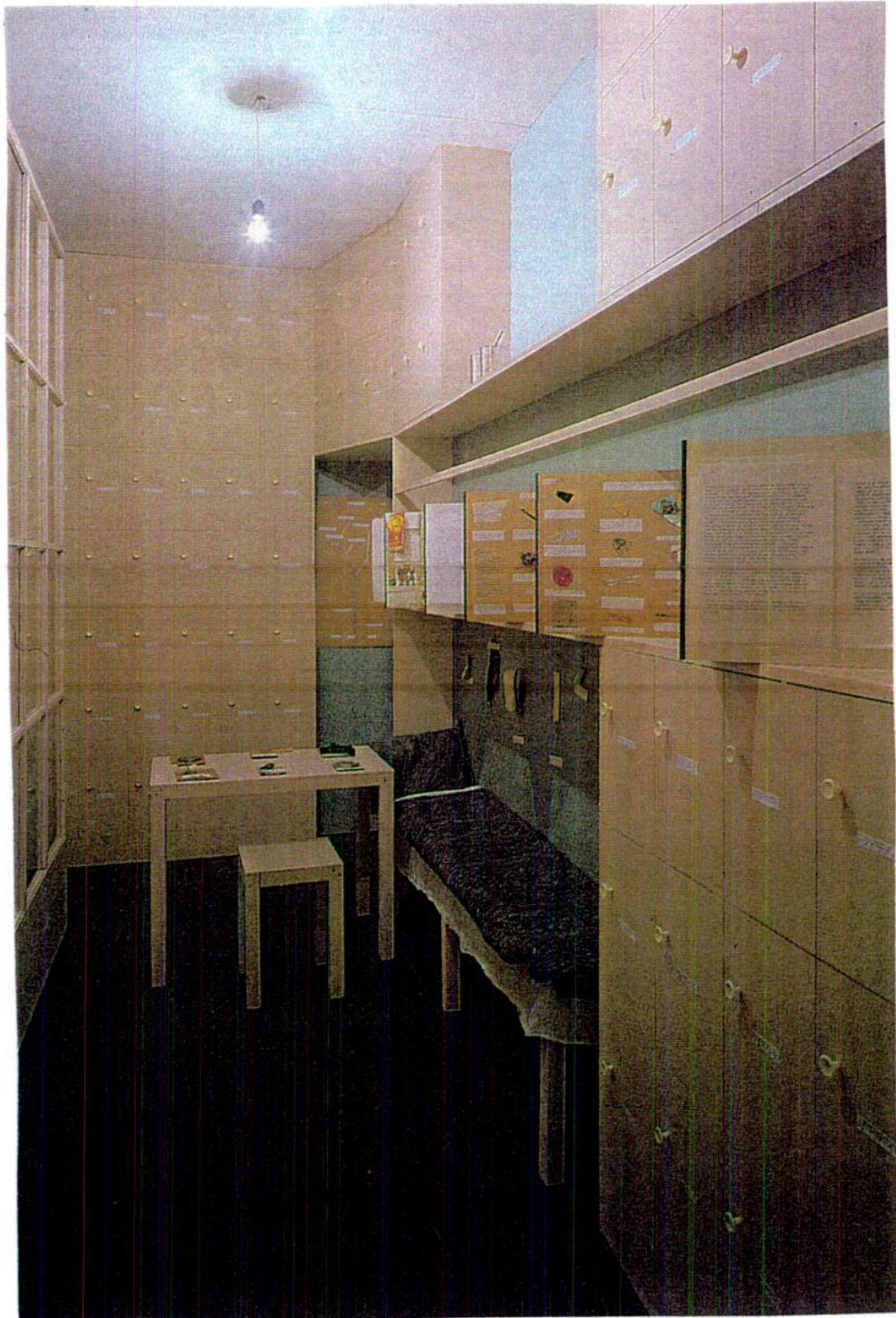


**Plate 1.5** *"The Garbage Man."* (1995)

The first part of the second room.





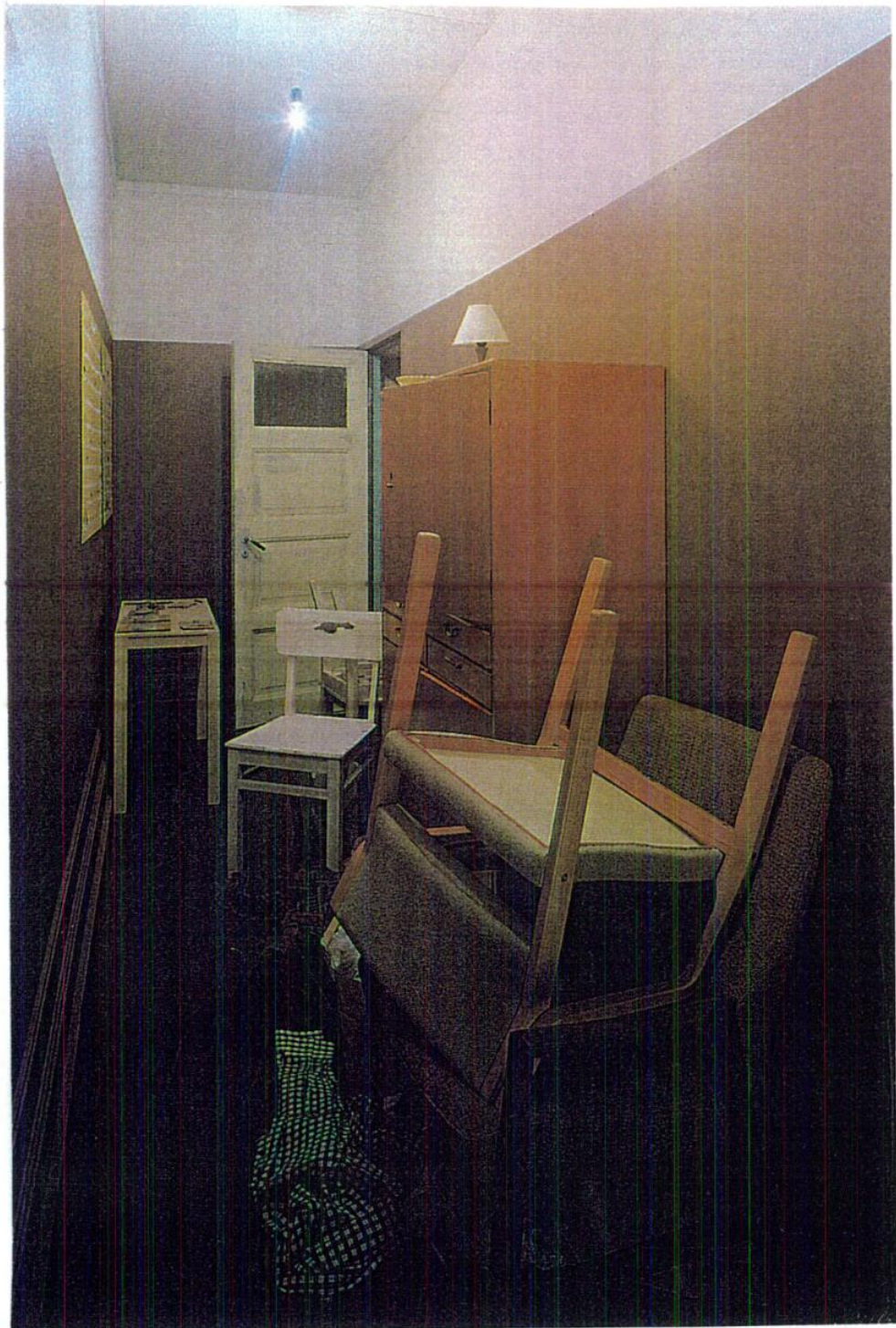


**Plate 1.6.** *"The Garbage Man" (1995)*

The Second part of the second room.







**Plate 1.7.** *"The Garbage Man"* (1995)

### The third room

This place belonged to a person who has disappeared, but his life is transformed through his garbage pinned onto the walls, into the fragments which his life consisted of. By the





bed, there is a fictitious text (written by Kabakov), which explains why this "garbage museum" was created. (Hellandsjø, 1996, p. 58). The story written about "The Garbage Man" is told in a third person narrative by a neighbour in the apartment, and gives the impression of being written at a later stage when the owner is no longer alive, and the room was made into a museum available for viewing. The story consists of several pages describing the incident when the apartment was opened by uncle Misha, the senior attendant responsible for the apartment, and it retells what he saw and found inside the apartment. Among the findings, there were books called *The Garbage Novel* and *The Book of Life* in several volumes.

"The Garbage Man" had written in a manuscript called "Garbage" that

*"All points of our recollections are tied to one another, they form chains and connections in our memory which ultimately comprise our life, the story of our life. To deprive ourselves of all this, means to part with who we were in the past and, in a certain sense, it means to cease to exist"*. (Hellandsjø, 1996, p. 63).

Ilya Kabakov explained that the psychological aspect of his interest in garbage "consists of the fact that to discard something which I had contact with at some point, is in part to identify with my own death". (Hellandsjø, 1996, p. 17). In the installation in Oslo, the metaphor is that the personality portrayed was a collector of garbage and, because he dedicated his whole life to this collection, it was an event. (Hellandsjø, 1996, p. 29). Kabakov has said that this installation was "built on the notion that there are no important events, but neither is there anything that needs to be discarded - in essence, there is not garbage". (Hellandsjø, 1996, p. 39).

The installations portraying the 10 characteres which reflect part of Kabakov himself, is revealed in "The Garbage Man". This is seen in the way the garbage used is his own, such as documents, bills, letters and magazines. "Anonymous garbage is not interesting"



he explained. (Cembalest, May 1990, p. 179). He believes that a person who lives in a communal situation is "burned from all sides in this social, communal body, and he dreams about being alone in his own small corner with his own constructs of a personal utopia". (Storr, Jan., 1995, p. 68). This person would not only dream about a social project where everybody could be content, but also about being able to create something for himself. (Storr, Jan., 1995, p. 68).

Kabakov, doesn't necessarily find that his work is a "spiritual critique", but he has stated that hate and fear was in the art he produced in the Soviet Union, and is still present in the work he makes today. "I am a very pessimistic person, who still believes that creativity comes from fear and anguish". (Bonami, Summer 1994, p. 92). Martin Heidegger, (1889-1979), wrote in his essay "What is Metaphysics", (1929), that metaphysical questions had to be based on "the essential situation of existence". (Kaufmann, 1975, p. 242). In describing the problem of "Nothing", he explained that it is revealed in dread. (Kaufmann, 1975, p. 250). "Nothing" is that which makes the revelation of what-is as such possible for our human existence". And he said that "Nothing" and "What-is" are conceptual contrasts, but that "Nothing" is also a primary fragment of "essence". (Wesen). "It is in the Being (Sein) of what-is, that the nihilation of Nothing (das Nichten des Nichts) occurs". (Kaufmann, 1975, p. 251).

In his essay "On Emptiness", Ilya Kabakov described the first encounter he had with seeing his own place from the outside, when he visited Czechoslovakia in 1981. The emptiness of a place just left, is also to be discovered in his "total" installations, where the space is empty of people, but since it's filled with objects, the viewer is reminded of the absence of the inhabitant. Robert Storr, has defined Ilya Kabakov's major theme as





"existential hollowiness" where the spaces recreated, though representing actual places within a historical time setting, are spaces where nothing is changing or moving. (Wallach, 1996, p. 10). To Kabakov, the emptiness he is describing, is not a "vacant place" as the Europeans would conceive it, in the sense of a space not yet filled or developed. The emptiness of his space ("our space") is "an extraordinarily active volume, as a reservoir of emptiness, as a particular void-like state of being, staggeringly catalyzed, but opposed to genuine existence, genuine life, serving as the absolute antipode of any living existence". (Ross, 1990, p. 54). In explaining the psychological state of those people living in emptiness, he described them as living in two dimensions which are opposing each other. The first dimension is "construction" and the other is the "deconstruction" of the first. This separation is experienced on an everyday basis as "a feeling of the universal destruction of everything that man would do, the uselessness, groundlessness, and senselessness of what he would have built and undertaken". Kabakov has also exclaimed that the life of these two dimensions produces "neuroticism" and "psychopathy", and that emptiness produces "a peculiar atmosphere of stress, excitedness, strengthlessness, apathy and causeless terror". (Ross, 1990, p. 55).

### ***"The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment"***

The ten characters Kabakov is portraying, are all longing to escape out of the restrictions of Soviet life. The residents of Ilya Kabakov's imaginary communal apartment have escaped in the way that they have been able to construct their own utopia, and create some order within the chaos of their existence. Concerning the main figures or inhabitants of his installations, Kabakov has expressed that "most of them are built on their dreams, ideas, feelings of just an ordinary person, it is not a hero, it is somebody





who is terribly scared of what is going on, who doesn't know how to cope with reality, often trying to find a way to escape from this reality." (Lingwood, IMMA, interview, 1998.) In the case of "The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment", he has managed to vanish all together. The melancholic humour one is confronted with in the works by Kabakov, has by Francesco Bonami, been compared to that of the Russian writer Michail Zoscenko, (1895-1958). Kabakov has explained that in his work, he describes the Soviet world through a certain type of humour, which as in Zoscenko's short stories is "the kind of humour that can help you escape the cage". He believes this humour to be a sort of irony, which lets you "reflect your situation in your surroundings, that's the humour of our times". (Bonami, Summer, 1994, p. 92). Paul de Man, in his essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality", (1983), discussed the use of irony within the arts and philosophy. In interpreting Beaudelaire, de Man suggested that irony "as a 'folie lucide', which allows language to prevail in extreme stages of self-alienation, could be a kind of therapy...", and that it could cure insanity by using written or spoken words. (de Man, 1983, p. 216). He also concluded that allegory and irony were linked because of their common finding of a temporal dilemma, and that they are connected "in their common demystification of an organic world postulated in a symbolic mode of analogical correspondences, or in a mimetic mode of representation in which fiction and reality could coincide". (de Man, 1983, p. 222).

Along with the Russian literary tradition seen in writers such as Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Nabokov and Bulgakov, Ilya Kabakov has been dealing with the theme of the conflict between the yearning for a rational social order, and the wish for an unconstrained personal freedom, which often can be self-destructive. (Heartney, March 1990, p. 177).



In the work "Notes from underground", (1864), written by Fjodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881), we encounter ideas which can be associated with extensialism. The story, being told in a first person narrative, portrays the individual, his inner life, his temper and decisions. (Kaufmann, 1975, p. 14). The narrator expresses his belief that consciousness is a disease through recounting the following experience:

*"that day I had committed a loathsome action again, that what was done could never be undone and secretly, inwardly gnawing, gnawing at myself for it, tearing and consuming myself till at last the bitterness turned into a sort of shameful accursed sweetness and at last into positive real enjoyment".* (Kaufmann, 1975, p. 57).

Kabakov has explained that the work he is doing, though it mirrors the problems of "small " people, is also personal, in the way the characters in the installation "10 Characters" "touch all the problems of my own self". (Cembalest, May 1990, p. 179).

Jose Ortega y Gasset, (1883-1955), wrote in "History as a system", (1941);

"Man invents for himself a program of life, a static form of being, that gives a satisfactory answer to the difficulties posed for him by circumstance". This person tries to make real this imaginary character and, by becoming this person, he will be convinced that this character is himself. (Kaufmann, 1975, p. 156).

In relation to the installation "The Man who flew into Space from his Apartement"

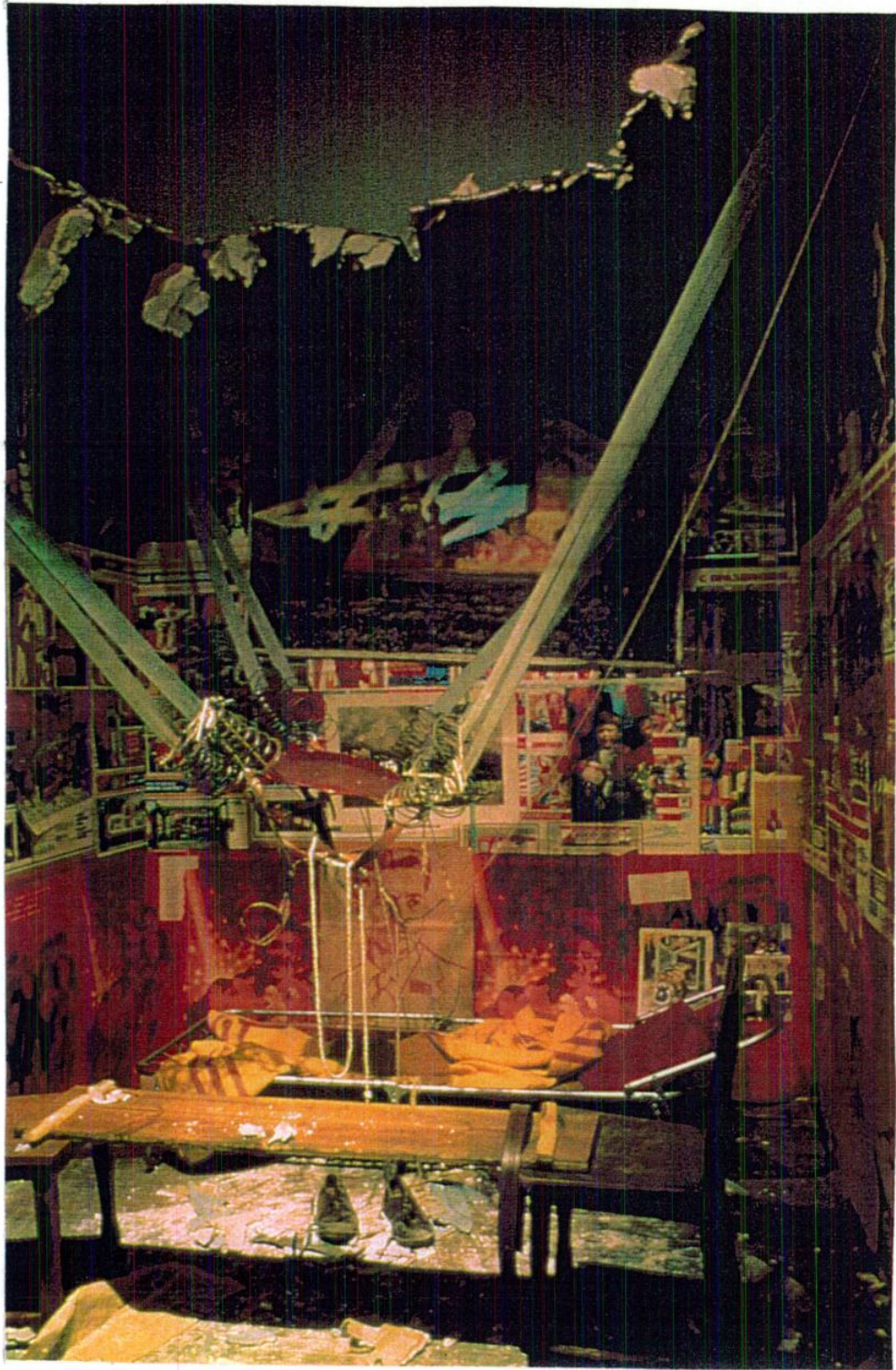
(1986), (Plate.1.8.), Ilya Kabakov wrote two fictitious commentaries. The shorter one explains the following:

*"The person who lived here flew into space from his room, first having blown up the ceiling and the attic above it. He always, as far as he remembered, felt that he was not quite an inhabitant of this earth, and constantly felt the desire to leave it, to escape beyond its boundaries. And as an adult he conceived of his departure into space."* (Wallach, 1996, p. 196).

In contrast to his other total installations, this room is impossible to enter. The room is closed off with boards, but because of a large gap between them, the viewer is able to







**Plate 1.8.** *"The Man Who Flew into Space from this Apartment"*  
(1996) View.





look into the room. The room is deserted, and in the ceiling there is a gigantic hole, which the inhabitant of the room "flew" out of. The walls are covered with political and industrial posters, and to the left of the door there is a model of the city which is lit up. From the ceiling, a man made catapult, made out of a chair, which is attached to the corners of the room by rubber braids and springs, is hanging. The implication is that it was with the help of this catapult that the man was able to fly into space. The rest of the room is filled with only a couple of chairs and a bed. On one of the walls facing the entrance, there is a painting showing the flight of Spassky tower into space. The room is illuminated by a light which comes from the hole in the ceiling.

Felicity Barringer compares Kabakov's stories and installations to the Russian writer Mikhail Bulgakov, (1891-1940). In the novel "Master and Margarita", (1930), the devil enters Moscow and creates more absurdity to that era's madness, and when he leaves, the asylums are full of people affected by his doings. Barringer finds Kabakov's use of irony and "magical realism" close to that of Bulgakov's allegorical tale. (Barringer, 1995, p. 136). The Master and Margarita, an author committed to truth and his lover, were helped by the Devil to escape (through death) from their unbearable situation in Moscow. "When the black veil blew aside for a moment, Margarita turned round in flight and saw that not only the many-coloured towers, but the whole city had long vanished from sight, swallowed by earth, leaving only mist and smoke where it had been". (Bulgakov, 1996, p. 419).



## *Chapter 4*

### *" Total" installation as a total experience.*

#### *The artist, the onlooker and the installation as space.*

The artist escaped the claustrophobia of his past by entering the Western world. Since he emigrated to the West, his work has taken the form of " total" installation , which recreates his past Soviet experience and invites the onlooker to take part in this experience. In producing his installations, Kabakov adjusts himself to the viewer. In making a "Russia for foreigners", he makes use of his own experiences and elements that are Russian, but "using such a language, as to be understood by an outsider who doesn't know a thing about Russia. " ( Kabakov and Zinik, Winter 1997, p.58 ) He has expressed that the main aim of "total" installations, is that the viewer is the center for which everything is planned and intended. The "total" installation is a space built within a gallery space but, as an autonomous space, it is constructed in a way which creates an illusion for the viewer to perceive. ( Kabakov , 1995, p. 275)

The space Kabakov has created out of his memories of his past experiences of the Soviet era , is built for the viewer to feel enclosed within the four walls of the installation, to feel both as a " victim " and as a "Viewer". The artist compares the experience of a "total" installation to that of a book. The reader is only able to enter the world of the book if the author is successful in his creation of a literary illusion, and that the writer himself believed in this illusion. ( Kabakov, 1995, p. 245) " Total installation in a way, is like a book , given to you, there is something which employ your imagination, you are alone with the book inside the installation. It is your reaction. That is what is important." ( Lingwood, IMMA, interview, 1998 )





The maker of a "total" installation, makes use of certain modes in order to depict an illusionary space. In able to convince the onlooker, this space should be "socially recognizable", in the way the viewer will identify the space as familiar and act accordingly. By knowing how to behave, the onlooker believes himself to be important to the space in which he has entered. In the "cosmology" of a "total" installation, the walls serve to separate the viewer from the gallery space, and play a role in the creation of the onlooker's belief and perception of the space, as a "model of the world". The ceiling, represents the "sky", where the height decides whether the "sky" is perceived as "gloomy" or "clear". The floor, represents the "earth", where the empty floor is understood as the "death of the earth" and forces the onlooker's attention towards what is depicted further up in the installation. Whereas a dirty or filled floor, represents the opposite of dirt, which suggests something hidden or alive.

To Kabakov, the entrance to a "total" installation is regarded as important because it suggests the difference between the gallery space and the independent world of the installation. This entrance should be an ordinary door, which to the audience serves as a signal of permission to enter this space. (Kabakov, 1995, p. 257.) To maintain the attention of the viewer and to keep him convinced of the illusionary space of the installation to be real, Kabakov has stressed the importance of the onlookers own participation. "Losing the attention of the viewer is the end of the installation". (Kabakov, 1995, p. 276). To keep the onlooker's attention, Kabakov has placed many objects in certain parts of the installation, so that the viewer has to examine these objects at a close distance. Further, the artist has put up walls or barriers to lead the viewer to the details. The arrangements within "total" Installations are consciously created to force the viewer to move through the space without concentrating too long on any details.





The details are arranged in a manner in which they interact with each other " in such a way that the viewer 'is forced' to return again to the overall impression, in any case, to feel its presence as an active background ", and he has related this interaction to the way the details and the whole work within a painting. ( Kabakov, 1995, p. 276.)

He realized when arriving in the West, that there had been a preoccupation with 19th century culture in the culture he had left , which doesn't exist in the Western world. He has said that what is important to the Eastern European consciousness, such as the metaphysical, the transcendental, sentimentality or anything to do with matters of the soul, is something that is "taboo" in the West. ( Gross, Ross and Blazwick, 1998, p. 24 ). Concerning installations as an art form, Kabakov has stated that, " It recreates archetypes and phobias, touches upon pain centres that are ingrained in the mind and connected with our past ". By the same token as the "total" installations close off the world outside to the onlooker , they make the viewer enter a sort of a "cave" or a "womb". (Kabakov and Zinik, Winter 1997, p.58.) The technique of a "total" installation is trying to understand and spend time inside it. In becoming a part of it, you work with it, and the installation works with you ,"in a way of your own response, your emotional response, your physical response, your cultural response, your memories, actually the installation forces you to employ your memories." (Lingwood, IMMA, interview, 1998). He links his installations to the past, through the use of objects and fictitious stories. The everyday and familiar objects which are placed within the installations, connect with the viewer's memory of similar objects in personal past experience. Also, the atmosphere created, through the use of light, where shadows and semi-dark corners appear, forces the viewer to enter a "mental twilight", where the thoughts break loose from reality and take part in the past. (Kabakov and Zinik, Winter 1997, p.58 )



Kabakov believes the most important element in making a "total" installation to be the effect of atmosphere, which he creates from the interaction between light and colour. In producing an independent installation world, he has omitted the windows and painted the lower part of the walls in either green or reddish brown, to represent earth. The upper part of the walls and the ceiling are painted in one colour and becomes the sky, and a dark blue fine line divides the sky and the earth, representing a line of the forest or the horizon. Also, the way the installation is painted, recalls that of public spaces, both in the former Soviet Union, as well as the rest of the world, such as toilets, offices and hospitals. (Kabakov, 1995, p.298). Illumination of a "total" installation is the essential means for producing atmosphere. The main light source in the installation is created by uncovered light bulbs, which to Kabakov represent a neutral light, and a metaphor for the sun, but also a form of illumination which leaves the corners of the space in semi-darkness. When the illumination of the installation seems both clear and dull, the atmosphere leaves in the onlooker a sense of discomfort and places the viewer in a state of inbetweenness of reality and fantasy. (Kabakov, 1995, p.300.)

In the "total" installations, Kabakov makes use of local light as well as the overall light, which together create a unified light source within the installation. The local light might be a floor or table light or a reflection of light in a mirror or a painting. (Kabakov, 1995, p.301.) In referring to the dramatic use of illumination in the paintings by Rembrandt, Kabakov regarded the local light as a means to draw the attention of the viewer to the objects, such as a book or a table, which are illuminated. The local light, in a metaphysical sense, stands for a "mythological basis" and, within a semi-dark installation,





its meaning illuminates a memory which is forgotten. "What exists is only what is illuminated, what is illuminated does not exist at all".

(Kabakov, 1995, p.302.)

The notion of artwork as "environment", developed in the Western world throughout the sixties. The main idea was that the viewer was to inhabit the artwork rather than looking at it from the outside. Robert Smithson evolved the concept that there is a difference between a "Site", which is a specific located place within the world, and a "Non-Site", which is placed within the gallery through the forms of photographs, maps and relevant documentation. Ilya Kabakov's installations show an example of how the artist uses the gallery space as a "Site". He does this by recreating, within the gallery, communal flats or other public spaces, such as schools and institutions. (Oliveira, Oxley and Petry, 1994, p. 33.)

Kabakov's installations will, according to Henri Lefebvre's theories on space, be an example of representational space, since it as art is "embodying complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life..." (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33). Representational spaces have their origins in history, "in the history of a people as well as in the history of each individual belonging to that people". (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 41). The representational space, is a space which is "directly lived through its associated images and symbols", which the imagination wishes to change and adapt. (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39). And art, in dealing with what is symbolic and imaginary, is the only product of a representational space. (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 42).





### ***"Total" installation as a metaphysical space.***

The viewer, confronted with Kabakov's installations, is entering an imaginary space, based on reality. The objects observed are all familiar, which onlookers can relate to their own experiences and memories. The space, though representative of something that could have existed, is also abstract in the way the different objects, the illumination and the space together form an environment, which the viewer has to experience and mentally connect with.

Richard Kearney, explained Immanuel Kant's, (1724-1804), theories on imagination, where the sublime is the discovery of the very depths of imagination. Art becomes sublime in the manner in which it produces "symbols" and, since these "symbols" signify what the mind cannot fully understand, the viewer is left with an awareness of the fact that there exists in the human mind something " mysteriously great." (Kearney, 1988, p. 176). In discussing the imagination and the sublime, Kant believed imagination to belong to the faculty of the mind, and that sublimity represents our imagination. The sublime "must be sought only in the mind of the judging subject and not in the object of nature that occasions this attitude by the estimate formed of it". (Kant, 1991, p. 104).

Margarita Tupitsyn, in referring to the albums Kabakov made in the 1970's, regarded "the representational hypostasis" in these albums to be tried by Kabakov against its counterpart which is abstract. Tupitsyn saw that the abstract is not connected to "nothingness" but "to its absolute negation in order to attain the state of ultimate being or pure 'Idea' which in Hegelian terms is synonymous with freedom". (Tupitsyn, 1989, p. 45). In "The philosophy of fine art", (1920), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, (1770-



1831), stated that fine art is not art until it is liberated and when it has become a part of the sphere in which religion and philosophy belong, its function is fulfilled and becomes a mode in which spiritual truths and the Divine are revealed and expressed.

(Hofstadter and Kuhns, 1964, p. 388). Whereas Hegel believed that the highest function of art was to express the Divine, Anna Moszynska explained that, by contrast,

Schopenhauer suggested that separation of the form from the matter brought the form closer to the Idea and, therefore, he contributed with a philosophy for abstraction.

(Moszynska, 1995, p. 46). Arthur Schopenhauer, (1788-1860), in "The world as Will and Idea", (1818), expressed that the aim of the arts is to promote the knowledge of the Ideas of the world (which to him is the Platonic sense of the world), and since these ideas are perceptible and its fuller understanding infinite, the "communication of such an idea can therefore only take place on the path of perception, which is that of art." (Hofstadter and Kuhns, 1964, p. 454).

In referring to installation art, Kabakov stated that Western installation had its sources in Happenings and Action, whereas the roots of East European installations are situated in painting. "In installations people actually stand and look at the paintings contained within them". (Storr, Jan., 1995, p.125.) The space of Ilya Kabakov's installations appears empty, but filled with traces of people. This suggests a feeling of isolation in the presence of others. Kabakov has compared this feeling to the experience of being inside a temple. "We are all together, and each of us feels good because of the presence of the thing in whose name we are standing here". (Storr, Jan., 1995, p.125.)

His "white paintings" and "monochromatic" works, represent similar ideas to the albums executed during the 1970's. In the white paintings, the centre of the canvas is left white,





whereas imagery is painted onto the margins of the surface. (Plate 1.9.) The whiteness dealt with in these works executed in the late 1970s, belong to another tradition, one seen in the work by Kasimir Malevich. In Malevich's suprematist painting "Eight red rectangles", (1915), geometric shapes are situated against a white background. The different shapes, in various colours against the white background, give the impression of movement, as though they are floating. Other paintings from the same era, have titles which refer to "the Fourth Dimension". The theories of "the Fourth Dimension" was discussed in Russia at the beginning of this century. Peter Damianovich Ouspensky (1878-1947), was influenced by Charles Howard Hinton's hyper-space theories, but evolved his own philosophy in "Tertium Organum", (1911). "The Fourth Dimension" was not interpreted by Russian mystical theorists and Ouspensky as time, but rather as a new consciousness which "provided an escape from death into the real world of the spirit". (Moszynska, 1995, p. 56-57). This new consciousness was first to be found in art. To Ouspensky, only "the soul of the artist" can sense and understand the way "noumenon", (a thing's hidden meaning and function), is reflected in the phenomenon. The function of the artist is to "see that which others do not see, he must be a magician; must possess the power to make others see that which they do not themselves see, but which he does see." (Ouspensky, 1923, p. 162). Ouspensky believed the ideas of the fourth dimension to have arrived from a connection with mathematics, but that there is a dimension which exists outside the three already known dimensions of space, (which are length, breadth and height). This dimension might exist since there are incidents which can't be measured, such as "various effects of vital and psychic processes, such are all ideas, mental images and memories; such are dreams". (Ouspensky, 1931, p. 73).



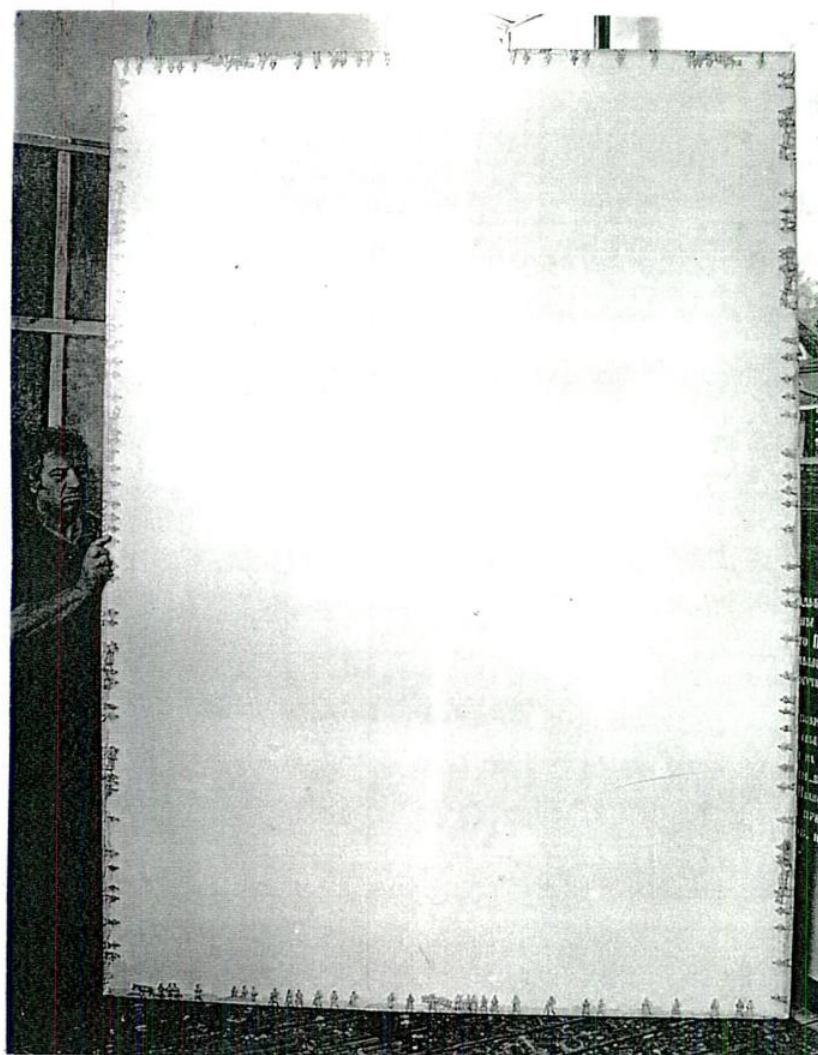


Plate 1.9. *"On the Edge"* (1974)



So, Kabakov's "total" installations have their origins in the albums he executed throughout the seventies. It can also be recalled that in the sixties and seventies, there was an interest in metaphysical questions within Moscow's intellectual circles. Kabakov has explained how there was interest in white as a metaphor for the holy light, and as emptiness (an infinite space of light which is warm and positive). "This is the metaphysical space in our world, but we are in a room and through the window on the other side is the celestial beam of light..." (Wallach, 1996, p. 44). To him, the white painting was some sort of a "provocation of the viewer's consciousness", and there were two aspects to these paintings. These two aspects were the belief that the white light had a deeper meaning or, if there was no belief, this meant that the viewer would recognize that the painting was made of poor material and was not professionally executed, illustrating "simple Soviet incompetence". Kabakov explained that "The viewer who is a believer sees one painting, the one who does not believe sees another, the choice is the viewer's". (Wallach, 1996, p.45).

In his "total" installations, the aim is to let the viewer become a part of the installation and believe this imaginary space to be real. The illuminated centres of the installations, where the corners are left semi-dark, but filled with objects, recall the white empty space of Kabakov's earlier albums and paintings. Since he believed the origins of the installation to be a painting taken down from the wall, which the onlooker can enter, it can be suggested that the viewer enters the whiteness or the emptiness similar to that which the artist depicted in his earlier work.

Ouspensky claimed that the fourth dimension is a space which we are unable to see.

According to him, this space lies within us "inside the objects of our world, inside our





atmosphere, inside our space", and he continued that "the fourth dimension *is not only inside us*, but we ourselves are inside it, that is, in the space of four dimensions."

( Ouspensky, 1931, p. 108).



## *Conclusion*

The earlier installations created by Ilya Kabakov reflected the artist's own experience of Soviet life. Recent works, often produced in collaboration with his wife Emilia, are dealing with more universal notions of existence where the themes of the irony of modern life and the individual's struggle within this context are depicted. He has stated that he has little interest left in the theme of his Soviet past, where he illustrated, through metaphors, the nightmarish result of the Soviet utopia which didn't succeed, and this is a theme which is starting to become empty for him. Kabakov has observed that the world is full of utopias, where we all dream of different ones. When an utopia is being realized there might be problems occurring; "sometimes there are catastrophic results. That moment when a utopia can become a dangerous thing...probably this moment is a project". And he regarded the art world as "perfectly measured to catch this moment." ( deLisle, March 22 1998, p. 28 )

In the "total" installation "The Children's Hospital", (Plate 1.10 and 1.11.) exhibited at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, ( 20/11-98 -11/4-99) Ilya and Emilia Kabakov created an installation especially designed for the building which has a past as a British army hospital for pensioner soldiers. The gallery space was transformed into an imaginary children's hospital, where each of eight rooms consists of hospital furniture such as a bed, a couple of chairs and a night table. In each room there is also a model theatre placed on a table from which music and storytelling can be heard.

These rooms, being empty of children, invite the public to create their own imaginary space. The onlooker can sit down on a chair next to the bed and watch the model







**Plate 1.10.** *"The Childrens Hospital" (1998)*

Drawing from the project.



Коридор в инсталляции "В детском госпитале"  
Corridor in the installation "IN THE CHILDREN HOSPITAL".



Plate 1.11. "The Childrens Hospital" (1998)

Drawing of the corridor in the installation.





theatres, the movement of the objects inside and listen to the music and the fictitious stories being told.

The artists have explained "perhaps these shows were created by the head doctor in the hospital in order to make the children's time there a little bit nicer and easier, to distract them from their illness ". The Kabakovs wanted the onlooker to believe that this really took place, but as they also stated, the environment in this space, the silence and architectural simplicity "all create an atmosphere which even for a 'grown-up' visitor, will be just what he needs. " ( IMMA, Nov. 2 1998 )

" The Children's Hospital " resembles as an institution, that of the installations representing Kabakov's Soviet past , as well as a hospital, it is a space we all can relate to. The evolution of "total" installations through the early conceptual work of the albums, paintings and three dimensional work, was fully realized at the end of the 1980s and is still developing today.

Public spaces used as metaphors for the claustrophobia of Soviet life, have turned out to exemplify, as in "The Children's Hospital", metaphors for a universal experience of existence and the difficulties the individual might face within our modern society.

Kabakov seems to have observed that in the West, the individual, though surrounded by others, senses a feeling of solitude as well as stress resulted from the pace at which we live. The space of a total installation, can be regarded as an experience, where the viewer in the presence of others, can enter a different world through imagination, and the solitude experienced is similar to that of being inside a holy building, such as a church or





a temple. The onlooker is able to calm down and focus on his or her own presence within the space entered, and this can turn out to be a positive experience. Entering a total installation is a total experience of escape from the boredom of everyday life , and it forces the audience to rediscover the soothing effect of entering a metaphysical realm, be it in the form of imagination, daydreaming, emotions or mental escape.

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