

DIRECTIONS

ILYA KABAKOV
TEN CHARACTERS

MARCH 7 - JUNE 3, 1990



The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment, 1981-88 (detail). Mixed media; dimensions variable. From *Ten Characters*, 1988, installation at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Photo: D. James Dee.

How shall I describe what is most important to me . . . and what I wish to express? It has to do . . . with consciousness, with forms of a continuous, irreconcilable contradiction, the abyss that divides the two sides of our existence, our psyche and our attitude towards culture and its various meanings. This contradiction stems mostly from the deep discrepancy between language and contents, i.e., what the language is trying to convey. . . . I see this fundamental contrast, a language without meaning and a meaning not shaped by language, all around me, and mostly within myself. Therefore, in my art—paintings, albums, installations and other works—I aim to demonstrate the various manifestations of this contradiction.¹

LIKE SO MANY OF HIS KINDRED spirits in the unofficial Soviet artists' circle, Ilya Kabakov has expressed his aesthetic vision as an alternative to the official style of Socialist Realism. This unsanctioned approach generally became known as *samizdat*, a genre of work that "represents the original, unrestricted impulse to engage moral and ideological problems, extending the idea of the artist's book into new territories . . . transforming the book into various unusual objects with intense messages."² During the mid-1960s, Kabakov was one of the seminal members of the Sretensky Boulevard group of conceptual artists in the Moscow avant-garde. Yet, it may well have been his experiences illustrating more than one hundred children's books that suggested to the artist the format for creating a body of work that is at once engaging, beguiling, and witty.

Beginning in 1970, Kabakov produced two groups of more than thirty "albums," unbound narrative sequences of works on paper that have illustrated tales focusing on individual fictitious characters. For many years, Kabakov's albums were the central and most influential aspect of his artwork.

Kabakov's new form of art contributed to the changes that occurred within the relatively small group of unofficial artists in Moscow. The development of a more overtly satirical, neo-Dada tendency, which was led by the collaborative team of Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, who produced self-proclaimed "sots art" (slang for "socialist art"), had involved the use of a pseudoacademic style of official Socialist Realism to mock the heroic depiction of Soviet history and thereby subvert it. Art critic Margarita Tupitsyn has observed that Kabakov, by contrast, "envisioned

his goal in a departure from the ideological imperatives into a space of his own self. Joining a tradition associated with Russian symbolists and some of the early avant-gardists, he turned to questions of a metaphysical and psychological nature."³

The preoccupation with "his own self" that Kabakov realized in his albums from the 1970s not only created a new genre but also initiated another dimension of his work in the early 1980s. The transformations in Kabakov's art became visible "when he shifted his interest from personal myth to collective ones. His private conflict with ideology turns into his acceptance of its validity. Of this change he writes, 'We can no longer ignore ideology as a cultural phenomenon. Our streets, houses, our whole reality is penetrated by it. It has become an important lyrical language.'⁴

The most dramatic work to come from this time is the installation *Ten Characters* (not to be confused with the albums of the same name), a dramatic mise-en-scène re-creating the ambiance of the communal apartment, a phenomenon that evolved immediately after the 1917 revolution. In order to accommodate the swelling masses of immigrants to Moscow, the large, luxuriously appointed twelve to sixteen room apartments of the bourgeoisie were "consolidated," partitioned off as single rooms with shared kitchen and bathroom facilities. The cramped quarters alienated many of those forced to live under the close scrutiny of their neighbors.

To Kabakov, the communal apartment was the perfect metaphor and an ideal stage set to express the banal aspects of daily life in Soviet society. Individual freedom was considered a threat to the solidarity of the State, and thus the artistic need for free expression was unilaterally repressed. Kabakov's overriding concern with—and allowance for—human foibles within his art reflects his own plight as a singular Soviet artist confined within the strictures of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Moreover, this psychological dimension became the fundamental element of his work and yielded the universal, poetic absurdities of his *Ten Characters* installation. The domestic dwelling is depicted as a dimly lit, dilapidated, and unstable structure that ironically echoes the matrix of the social reality of daily life in the Soviet Union. "In Russian society there is one very dominant image: things are always in a state of construction or demolition, and it becomes difficult to distinguish between the two. We don't know whether things are new or old, whether they are being knocked down or put up,"⁵ Kabakov has said.

While it is immediately evident that Kabakov has designed this installation to be claustrophobic, he claims that it is a fair depiction of life in communal apartments. The artist explains that the concept of *Ten Characters* evolved from vivid recollections of his younger years. "When I submerge into my childhood world, I see it inhabited by a number of the most strange and comic individuals, neighbours of our large, communal apartment. Each one of them, it seemed to me then, had an unusual idea, one all-absorbing passion belonging to him alone."⁶

Equally important in this installation is the tone of the texts of the characters themselves. The variety and relationships of individuals represented in this cast of dramatis personae is important. From the artist's seemingly simple, yet wonderfully complex stories, combining an omniscient narrator's voice along with others—at times complaining, other times commenting on the narrator's observations—the viewer is drawn in and becomes a voyeur, peering into the rooms with the detritus—like so many absurd relics—of these characters, but never encountering them directly. The delicately spun tales of these nameless individuals, each with his peculiar idiosyncrasies, each with his melancholic isolation and misfit uniqueness, constitute an epic poem on the human condition.

The eavesdropping philologist, "The Man Who Collects the Opinions of Others," records the spontaneous remarks of his neighbors, who are responding to the objects he has placed in their way. Then he writes them down and arranges his notes on the wall physically to manifest his theories. This character's behavior is foiled against that of "The Collector" (fig. 1), the equally well-organized man who assigns meaning to otherwise useless junk by making elegant collages out of kitsch and bureaucratic paperwork. He treats this material with utmost seriousness, care, and concern to arrange order out of the chaotic accumulation of garbage. In considering the complexity of this microworld, Kabakov has said, "Fear in the face of chaos leads to the establishment of order. Then horror in the face of order brings chaos—so we swing between chaos and order. For me this is also a fundamental, personal concern. Faced with total chaos, the attempt to impose complete order seems equally absurd."⁷

Kabakov's other characters also manifest obsessive-compulsive behavior akin to that of many artists. For example, we meet "The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away" (fig. 2), who rigorously adheres to a specific system of logic. His absurdist argument for

preserving and cataloging everything is in direct response to the garbage that pervaded the interior hallways of communal apartments. Kabakov asks rhetorically, "When is rubbish not rubbish? . . . I always think of artists messing around in their own imaginations as if with their own rubbish. . . . I also associate rubbish with the banality of everyday life."⁸

Indeed, Kabakov recognizes that these characters are at least an extension of himself as an artist. He has said, "Perhaps they represent different sides of myself.



Fig. 1. *The Collector*, 1981–88 (installation view). Mixed media; dimensions variable. From *Ten Characters*, 1988, installation at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. Photo: D. James Des.

In a cultural sense, my characters represent ideas, in the same way that Dostoevsky's characters do."⁹ One in particular, "The Man Who Describes His Life through Characters," is the most obviously autobiographical, a reference to his albums entitled *Ten Characters*. In the installation text, Kabakov gives what amounts to an explanation of his primary motivation for undertaking such work. Describing this character, he writes, "If he looked in the mirror he saw himself, but on the other hand, thinking about something, he saw in himself not one, but many. He made a decision: to unite this diversity into a kind of artistic



Fig. 2. *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*, 1981-88 (detail). Mixed media; dimensions variable. From *Ten Characters*, 1988, installation at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. Photo: D. James Dee.

whole, but to allow them to enter into arguments, outdo one another, but let all express themselves in turn. Let each of them have his right to vote completely and fully, in complete internal silence, say everything that he knows, and tell his story, and his ideas fully."¹⁰ Like other younger artists of our times, notably the Americans Jenny Holzer and Cindy Sherman, Kabakov's use of a tapestry of multiple voices or personae suggests that what is most valuable and authentic emerges out of the accumulation of truly subjective perspectives, not from a singular, authoritative objectivity otherwise known as "The Truth."

We then meet "The Untalented Artist," who represents a wry condemnation of those artists who are supported by the corrupt Soviet system of State commissions. In fact, by featuring this particular type, Kabakov satirizes the official art that such self-delusive artists practice. As to the relation Kabakov has with the objects this pathetic character produces, he has said, "I'm not so much concerned with the painting itself, [but] rather with the character who painted it. I didn't paint it, you see. I created this character, the untalented artist, and I began to paint as this character. . . . It's our schizophrenic way of life."¹¹ For Kabakov, escape from this sober reality is manifested by the metaphor of flying. Like his spiritual ancestor and compatriot Marc Chagall, transcendence and ecstasy are expressed through the pictorial triumph over gravity. Two of his characters fly as a means of fleeing from their otherwise grim existence, an idea that appears in the artist's earlier albums.

The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment (cover and fig. 3), the most physically impressive room in this installation, is Kabakov's tour de force. The text recounts three witnesses testifying to an inexplicable event. Yet the visual evidence appears to be quite persuasive. It is especially humorous that we learn of our hero's "scientific" theory, which accounts for the otherwise confounding fact that he has indeed disappeared, somehow blasting through his apartment ceiling, the attic floor above, and the roof, with the help of a ridiculously primitive contraption. It is as if Kabakov needed to make the religious notion of ascension into a cartoon-like reality within this piece. The artist's attention to detail, the various diagrams and maps, as well as the poignant presence of a pair of shoes out of which the man apparently flew, make this piece a thoroughly entertaining sculptural environment.

But perhaps the most important of the characters is "The Man Who Flew into His Picture." Here we are exposed to the creator of an empty canvas who willfully projects himself into the blankness of the monochrome white field. For Kabakov, this whiteness, as in the Suprematist paintings by the Russian painter Kazimir Malevich, represents the potential of the infinite, a sensual openness that offers ultimate hope and freedom, a potential escape into gentle emptiness, and a spiritual liberation through fusion with an ethereal oneness of color, light, and space. "With his art he has positioned himself against a cultural vacuum and has sought a personal approach to fundamental religious, sociological, and philosophical questions,"¹² one writer has observed. To live within one's art, through the force and vigor of imagination, is the thematic refrain of the *Ten Characters*. This essentially human aspiration is the vital core of Ilya Kabakov's vision.

Ned Rifkin Chief Curator for Exhibitions

1. Ilya Kabakov, "About Myself," in Mordochai Omer, ed. *The Beautiful Sister in Moscow* (Tel-Aviv: Genia Shtreiber University Art Gallery, 1989), pp. 7-8.

2. Rimma and Valery Gerlovin, "Samizdat Art" in Charles Doris, ed. *Russian Samizdat Art* (New York: Willis Locker & Owens Publishing, 1988), p. 67.

3. Margarita Tupitsyn, "Ilya Kabakov," *Flash Art* 126 (February-March 1986), 67.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

5. Kabakov, quoted in Jill Lloyd, "The 'Untalented Artist'—A Schizophrenic Way of Life," *Art International* 8 (Autumn 1989): 70.

6. *Ilya Kabakov: Ten Characters* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1989), p. 1.



Fig. 3. *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*, 1981-88 (detail). Mixed media; dimensions variable. From *Ten Characters*, 1988, installation at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Photo: D. James Dee.

7. Lloyd, "The 'Untalented Artist,'" p. 70.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

10. *Ilya Kabakov: Ten Characters*, p. 34.

11. Lloyd, "The 'Untalented Artist,'" p. 73.

12. Claudia Jolles, "The Strategy of Open Discussion," in *Ilya Kabakov: Ten Albums/Ten Characters*, exhibition catalog (London: Riverside Studios, 1988), p. 4.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine, September 30, 1933. Educated at Moscow Art School, 1951; Surkov Fine Arts Institute, 1956. Awards include: Ludwig Prize, 1969; Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst Fellowship, Berlin, 1989; Aachener Kunstpreis, 1990. Lives and works in Moscow.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1985 Galerie Dira Vierny, Paris, Kabakov: *Oeuvre peinte et dessinée*; Kunsthalle Bern, Ilya Kabakov: *Am Rande*, and tour to Galeries de la Vieille Charité, Marseilles, Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf, Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Paris.
- 1988 Opernhaus, Graz, Austria, Ilya Kabakov: *vor dem Abendessen*; Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, Ilya Kabakov: *Ten Characters*.
- 1989 Galerie de France, Paris, Ilya Kabakov "Que sont ces petits Hommes?"; Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, Ilya Kabakov: *The Untalented Artist and Other Characters*; Riverside Studios, London, Ilya Kabakov: *Ten Albums, Ten Characters*, and tour to Orchard Gallery, Derry, Ireland; Kunsthalle Zürich, Ilya Kabakov: *Das Schiff—Die Kommunalwohnung: Zwei Installationen*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, Ilya Kabakov "Who Are These Little People?"
- 1990 Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, Ilya Kabakov "He Lost His Mind, Undressed, Ran Away Naked"; Fred Hoffman Gallery, Santa Monica, California, Ilya Kabakov: "The Rope of Life" and Other Installations.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1965 Castello Sforzesco, Aquila, Italy, *Alternative attuali 2*.
- 1969 Galleria Pananti, Florence, Nuova Scuola di Mosca, and tour to Galerie Behr, Stuttgart, Galerie Interior, Frankfurt.
- 1970 Museo Belle Arti, Lugano, Switzerland, *Nuove Correnti a Mosca*.
- 1974 Museum Bochum, West Germany, *Strömungen in Moskau*.
- 1977 Venice Biennale, *La Nuova Arte Sovietica: Una Prospettiva non Ufficiale*; Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, *New Art from the Soviet Union: The Known and the Unknown*.

- 1979 Museum Bochum, West Germany, 20 Jahre unabhängige Kunst aus der Sowjetunion.
- 1981 Gorvy Galleries, Paris, *La peinture Russe d'aujourd'hui 1971-1981, Russian Painting Today; Contemporary Russian Art Center of America, New York, New Wave Russian Art; Museum Bochum, West Germany, Jankilevskij, Kabakov, Stejnberg*.
- 1987 Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel, *Gegenwartskunst aus der Sowjetunion: Ilya Kabakov und Iwan Tschukow*.
- 1988 Madrid, ARCO '88: *Feria Internacional Arte Contemporáneo; Venice Biennale, Aperto 88*.
- 1989 Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, *Les Magiciens de la terre*.

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- Gookin, Kirby. "Ilya Kabakov." *Artforum* 27 (September 1988): 135-36.
- Hall, James. "Absurd Half-Life." *Apollo* 129 (June 1989): 417-18.
- Heartney, Eleanor. "Ilya Kabakov." *Art in America* 76 (September 1988): 179.
- Ilya Kabakov: Am Rande*. Exhibition catalog. Bern: Kunsthalle Bern, 1985. Foreword by Jean-Hubert Martin, preface by Boris Groys.
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- Jolles, Claudia. "The Strategy of Open Discussion." In *Ilya Kabakov: Ten Albums/Ten Characters*. Exhibition catalog. London: Riverside Studios, 1989.
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Window. Introduction by Ilya Kabakov. Bern: Benteli Verlag, 1985.

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- Russell, John. "Ilya Kabakov Portrays Communal Soviet Life." *New York Times*, May 20, 1988, sec. C, p. 23.
- Tuplitsyn, Margarita. "Ilya Kabakov." *Flash Art* 126 (February-March 1986): 67.
- _____. "Ilya Kabakov: The Simulation of a Soviet Communal Apartment in Soho." *Flash Art* 142 (October 1988): 115-16.
- _____. *Margins of Soviet Art: Socialist Realism to the Present*. Milan: Giancarlo Politi Editore, 1989.
- Woodward, Richard B. "Other Places, Other Rooms." *Art News* 87 (September 1988): 13-14.

CHECKLIST

All works are from 1981-1988, are of mixed media, and have variable dimensions.

The Composer Who Combined Music with Things and Images. Private collection.

The Rope (Abandoned Room). Nancy and Norton Dodge, Washington, D. C.

The Short Man (The Bookblinder). Bob and Manyse Boxer, London.

The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

The Man Who Saves Nikolai Viktorovich. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

The Man Who Collects the Opinions of Others. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

The Collector. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

The Man Who Flew into His Picture. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

The Untalented Artist. Frayda and Ronald Feldman.

The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

The Man Who Describes His Life through Characters. Nancy and Norton Dodge, Washington, D. C.

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