Kabakov
como ilustrador


Es un gran placer y honor para mí estar aquí y poder dirigirles la palabra en Chinati. Ilya Kabakov es conocido mayormente en Occidente como un artista que produce instalaciones a gran escala. Estas obras poseen características que las distinguen inmediatamente: son narrativas; están llenas de texto, objeto y dibujo; y su autoría se atribuye casi siempre a una persona o institución imaginarias. Ahora bien, me parece difícil comprender y apreciar debidamente las cualidades específicas de las instalaciones de Kabakov sin antes informarme acerca de su larga experiencia como ilustrador de libros infantiles en la Unión Soviética, y de hecho fue un ilustrador muy exitoso y reconocido de este tipo de libros. Ilustró unos 150 libros que tuvieron amplia difusión en el país. Es por eso que la pequeña exhibición de libros infantiles de Kabakov que ustedes pueden apreciar ahora en Marfa me parece tan importante, pues revela la cultura y antecedentes profesionales de la obra tardía del artista, la cual es mucho más conocida, y

Boris Groys

Kabakov as Illustrator


It's a great pleasure and honor for me to be here, and to be able to speak at Chinati. Ilya Kabakov is mostly known in the West as an artist of large-scale installations. These installations have some specific qualities that make them immediately recognizable and identifiable: they are narrative; they are full of text, object, and drawing; and their authorship is almost always ascribed to an imaginary person or institution. Now, it seems to me that it is difficult to understand and rightly appreciate the specific qualities of Kabakov’s installations without being informed about his long experience as a children's book illustrator in the Soviet Union, and, actually, a very successful and well-known children's book illustrator. He illustrated about 150 books that were widely distributed in the country. That is why the small exhibition of Kabakov's children's books from the Soviet time that you can see now in Marfa seems to me to be so important: it shows the culture and professional background of Kabakov's later, much better known work, and it helps to understand his work better. I think it is really a wonderful initiative by Marianne Stockebrand to break the silence for the first time in an exhibition of his early work right here.

First of all, it shows the origin of Kabakov's main concern as an artist. Indeed, one can safely say that the whole birth of Kabakov is informed by this concern. The central problem of Kabakov's art can be formulated in the following way: How does the coordination between image and text work? This question has, obviously, two sides: Firstly, what does it mean to illustrate a fairytale, a story, and, generally, a text? And secondly, what does it mean to tell, to explain, to interpret a picture? An illustrator is a mediator between image and text. By illustrating a text he or she has to make a lot of choices relating to what is especially important in the text, what should be stressed by an illustration, and what can be neglected. On the other hand, what is possibly missing in the text and what should be additionally explained, commented on, compensated for by the image? This kind of reflection immediately brings one to the conclusion that there is a fundamental gap, a fundamental discrepancy between text and image—a gap that actually cannot be bridged. Every image can be explained in a thousand different ways, and every text can be illustrated in a thousand different ways. Of course, this gap between image and text is not news. Philosophers, as well as art and literary critics, have written about this gap extensively, at least since the Greek antiquities. The general insight of the discrepancies is one thing; a completely separate thing is the rich experience of these discrepancies that an illustrator accumulates during years of practice, as Kabakov did during his Soviet years. This experience afforded him the possibility not only to identify or to deplete the gap between text and image, but to work with this gap productively, analyzing and demonstrating again and again how an artist makes choices, how he or she tries again and again to bridge the gap, to coordinate between image and text, even if, at last, the artist has to admit that every such coordination remains a temporary compromise. In a certain sense, the whole work of Kabakov can be interpreted as a catalogue of all the misunderstandings, failures, and absurdities that emerge out of the attempt to coordinate image and text; also as a catalogue of all the artistic devices that one applies in an attempt to achieve such a coordination: selecting, combining, reducing, shifting, simplifying, creating, and placing into the context. In the Kabakov installation, this unending interplay between image and text is immediately found, but sadly the artist does not believe that this interplay can be unpleasantly interrupted by possible success. The unofficial, analytical, ironic, and critical adult works of Kabakov somehow keep the atmosphere of storytelling, even a fairy-tale—the pleasure of playing with the nonsensical, absurd, and infinite. That is the real pleasure which can be felt in the works of Kabakov. He really enjoyed repeating the interplay, the absurd, nonsensical interplay in the discrepancies between image and text.

The actual discovery of his own
about what the death of God meant. It means, first of all, that after the death of God the individual feels himself without an observer that would be able to observe his soul, so that he wastes his thoughts if only he thinks them. If he doesn’t write them down they are just wasted. The death of God is the death of an observer who is interested in your soul, who is interested in your thoughts. The artists of the state actually filled the role of the divine observer, and the absence of this divine observer is very much inwardly deplored by the individual who became fundamentally uninterested in his own state and in that of his fellows.

In many of his works, Kabakov explicitly engages the vanquished dreams of socialism and coarsely summarizes the breached transition between construction and decline, the moment between genesis out of garbage—historical garbage—and the dissolution into garbage. Civilization as such reveals itself to be a ruin: the transition between one kind of garbage and another as a temporary installation which doesn’t guarantee longevity and can vanish without a trace at any moment. All of Kabakov’s installations are based on this insecurity, ambiguity, about the status of the exhibited work, as if it were something in construction. This ambivalence is very much an ambivalence of the figurative transition between the socialist Soviet state and its resolution in the 1980s. The Soviet civilization is the first thoroughly modern civilization which died before our eyes. All other famous dead civilizations were pre-modern. The Soviet Union dissolved so completely that it landed dor divino lo lamento hondamente el individuo que se desinteresó fundamentalmente por su propio estado y también por los demás. En varias de sus obras Kabakov aborda explícitamente los sueños vencidos del socialismo y resuelve abruptamente la transición interrumpida entre construción y declinación, el momento entre la génesis desde la basura—la basura histórica—y la disolución otra vez en basura. La civilización como tal se revela como una ruina: la transición entre un tipo de basura y otro como instalación temporal que no garantiza la longevedad y puede desvanecerse totalmente en cualquier momento. Todas las instalaciones de Kabakov están basadas en esta inseguridad y ambigüedad acerca de la situación de la exhibición de obras artísticas que si fuera algo bajo construcción. La ambivalencia es la transición metafórica entre el estado
on the garbage heap of history irretrievably, because it left behind no unmistakable monuments comparable to Egyptian pyramids or Greek temples. This civilization simply fell apart and became the same modern garbage out of which it, like any modern readymade civilizations, was made. It is very interesting that after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, you cannot find anything from it now. What is from it? Marxism? Marxism is a Western idea. Industrialization? Industrialization doesn't work. The only thing that brought all the things together and organized them artistically was an installation, an assemblage of different elements that existed as a whole. It made a very interesting and unusual impression. But after this installation dissolved and all the people, all the things, went back to their native soviético socialista y su resolución en los años ochenta. La soviética es la primera civilización absolutamente moderna que murió ante nuestros ojos. Todas las demás célebres civilizaciones murieron prematuramente. La Unión Soviética se disolvió tan completamente y fue a dar al muladar de la historia tan irremediablemente porque no dejó ningún monumento inconfundible como las pirámides egipcias o los templos griegos. Esta civilización simplemente desintegró y se convirtió en la misma basura moderna de la cual estaba hecha. Resulta interesante que después de la desintegración de la Unión Soviética no se pueda encontrar ahora nada que venga de allí. ¿Qué viene de allí? ¿El marxismo? El marxismo es una idea occidental. ¿La industrialización? La industrialización no funciona. Lo único que reunió a todos estos elementos y los organizaba en forma artística fue una instalación, un conjunto de elementos dispares que existían como un todo. Daba una impresión muy interesante y poco común. Pero después de desintegrarse esta instalación y de regresar toda la gente y las cosas a su lugar de origen, no quedaba nada. Sólo el vacío. Es como si tomáramos una bote- lla de Coca-Cola de Warhol y lo devolvíramos al supermercado: no se le reconocería como una obra de arte. Si reponemos todos estos elementos en su lugar, el conjunto simplemente desaparece. Una y otra vez Kabakov represen- ta la disolución de la Unión Soviética y su conversión en basura histórica. Una y otra vez presenta este fenómeno como algo doloroso, barato, repugnan- te y al mismo tiempo sublime. Cuanto más radical e inexcusable sea el deterioro, más exaltado parece la imagen del mismo. La utopía comunista haceía en sus principios las más altas reclamacio-
ry offers the most extreme case of historical defeat; therefore, it may also offer an exalted historical image. Decay, destruction, and dissolution are thereby given their own special signature and assume authorial status. They are also invoked by Kabakov in his theater of authorship, as his installation School No. 6 demonstrates. This installation is actually a very good contrast to the exhibition of Kabakov’s children’s books. School No. 6 has also the Soviet childhood as its main topic. The visual material that Kabakov uses in his installation is fundamentally of the same type and of the same style as his own children’s books. The images are positive, optimistic, joyous, but this optimistic Soviet childhood is now deserted and the images are in decay. The installation evokes the paradise lost. Of course, childhood is often seen retrospectively as a paradise. But the Soviet childhood was a very specific kind of paradise. It was maybe shabby and lacking in consumer goods, but it was designed in an extremely optimistic and idealized way—even in a more optimistic and idealized way than in the West. It is enough to say that the Soviet childhood was still a childhood before Freud. It was not supposed to be a time of sexual anxiety. It was not even recognized as a specific period of the development of an individual human being—maybe that is why it was so paradisiacal. The Soviet childhood was collective. A child was seen by the Soviet ideology as a member of the future, better communist society. The Soviet childhood was experienced as a happy childhood because the desierta y sus imágenes están en descomposición. La instalación evoca el paraíso perdido. Desde luego, la infancia se ve como el paraíso perdido. Pero la infancia soviética fue un paraíso muy específico. Tal vez muy ordinaria y le faltaban los bienes de consumo, pero estaba estructurada de una manera optimista e idealizada, aun más que en Occidente. Basta con decir que la infancia soviética era todavía infancia antes de Freud. No debía ser un tiempo de ansiedad sexual. No se reconocía siquiera como un período específico del desarrollo de un ser humano individual, y por eso quizás fue tan paradisiaca. Fue una infancia colectiva. La ideología soviética veía en el niño al miembro de la sociedad del futuro, una sociedad mejorada gracias al comunismo. Se vivía como una infancia alegre porque los niños debían vivir en una sociedad comunista mejor que la
children were supposed to live in a better communist society than their parents. The Soviet childhood was not so much a paradise, but a utopia. It was futuristic. Not accidentally, the writers and artists who were working for the children were allowed to have more artistic freedoms than the majority of Russian artists of the time. The second generation of the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s—poets like Charms or Vvedensky—were writing poems and stories—very absurd ones—for children. If you look at the Malevich books currently exhibited at Chinati, the style only survived through the children’s books of the second generation Russian avant-garde. There is a kind of continuity between the 1920s and 60s. In the 60s and 70s some new avant-garde writers made their living by writing children’s books in cooperation with the artists. Kabakov participated in the designing of this idealized image of childhood at the same time he created the most striking images of its destruction. The project to build a better society was abandoned by the Soviets of the time, and the Soviet school was deserted by teachers and students. So now we look at this abandoned School No. 6, and at the children’s books that the children of our own time would not read anymore, with nostalgia, that is related not only to the childhood as an individual past, but to the childhood as a utopian, futuristic, modernist project—although we actually don’t know if we have become so much grown-up, so much adult after we have left this project behind us.

participaba en el diseño de esta imagen idealizada de la infancia al mismo tiempo que creaba las imágenes más impresionantes de su destrucción. El proyecto de construir una mejor sociedad fue abandonado por los soviéticos de la época, y la escuela soviética fue abandonada por sus maestros y alumnos. Ahora contemplamos esta escuela abandonada, la Escuela No. 6, y los libros infantiles que los niños de nuestro propio tiempo ya no leerían con una nostalgia relacionada no sólo con la infancia como un pasado individual, sino a la infancia como un proyecto utópico, enfocado en el futuro, un proyecto de los modernistas. Lo cierto es que en realidad no sabemos si hemos crecido tanto, si hemos llegado a ser tan adultos, después de haber dejado atrás este proyecto.
The artistic problem is quite dramatic. It came to Kabakov at the beginning of the 1970s, with a series of albums entitled Ten Characters, which he created between 1971 and 1976. Three of these albums are also shown as a complement to the present exhibition, so we can compare his children's books and the way he uses the illustrations of his children's books to do something completely different. Each of these ten albums looks like a book with loose pages which tells in words and images the history of an artist who lives on the margins of society, and whose work is not understood or recognized or fully preserved. The images in the albums are to be understood as inner visions or artworks of the artist's hero.

El descubrimiento mismo de su propio problema artístico resulta bastante dramático. Ocurre a principios de los años setenta, con una serie de álbumes intitulada 10 Personajes, creada entre 1971 y 1976. Tres de estos álbumes se exhiben también como complemento a la exposición actual, así que podemos comparar sus libros infantiles con la manera como se usan las ilustraciones de sus libros infantiles para lograr algo completamente diferente. Cada uno de estas álbumes parece un libro con páginas sueltas que relacionan con palabras e imágenes la historia de un artista que vive al margen de la sociedad y cuya obra no se entiende ni se aprecia debidamente ni se conserva en su totalidad. Las imágenes del álbum deben entenderse como visiones interiores u obras de arte de los héroes del artista. Todas estas imágenes se acompañan de títulos en que los amigos y parientes del artistas comentan la obra. El álbum cuenta una historia, la historia de la vida de los héroes. La imagen final de cada álbum es una página blanca que anuncia la muerte del héroes. Se les ha llamado la biografía de este héroes desconocido, ficticio. Cada álbum concluye con un comentario general sobre todas las obras del artista. Los comentarios se escriben desde el punto de vista de los comentaristas, los cuales, se debe suponer, representan las opiniones de la clase culta que ha tenido control absoluto sobre la obra del artista y la evaluación definitiva. También es una ironía dirigida hacia los historiadores del arte y las críticas y filósofos del arte como yo. Las visiones privadas con las que los héroes de los álbumes se abren son reflejadas en muchos casos a la

cases to the glorious history of modern art in this century. But the artistic execution of the albums themselves refers, in contrast, to the particular aesthetic of the production of the Soviet children’s book illustrations that Kabakov practiced in his official role as a book illustrator. The avant-garde or modernist visions of the heroes are subverted by the trivial visual language in which they are manifested. The history of modern art is told here as a kind of fairytale for children. Modern art famously protested against the story, against the narrative, against the telling of a story, the telling of history. But the understanding of modern art is very dependent on the knowledge of the history of modern art
Kabakov created an imaginary audience for his artist-heroes through the accompanying commentary. This imaginary audience compensated for the absence of the real audience for unofficial Russian art. Of course, unofficial Russian art could survive under the sort of regime of that time, but it was almost completely excluded from the general public attention.

These albums also bear witness to a difficult situation for Kabakov and for his art as it was situated in Moscow during the era of late communism. As a book illustrator, Kabakov was a part of the official Soviet art and culture industry of that time; but at the same time, he was also deeply engaged in the activities of the unofficial, alternative Moscow art scene. It was a kind of schizophrenic position in which he las del público que lo coloca en el mismo nivel intelectual e interpretativo como las imágenes mismas. Al mismo tiempo, estos álbumes son maravillosamente poéticos y llenos de genuinos patrones artísticos. La ejecución precisa y minuciosa de las ilustraciones es impresionante: da la sensación de que Kabakov se identificaba profundamente con sus héroes, mientras que al mismo tiempo se identificaba con el deseo de ellos de ser héroes e inmortales. Así, los álbumes visualizan las limitaciones y los fracasos de los héroes, pero que sus historias se revisten de un aura seductora. Es una representación eficaz, fascinadora, y al mismo tiempo irónica del arte no oficial de Moscú durante los sesenta y setenta. Kabakov creó un público imaginario para sus artistas-héroes mediante el comentario acompañante. Este público imaginario lo compensaba por la ausencia del ver-

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the American and Americanized mass culture which today dominates the global mass media. Not accidentally, people in Europe and even Russia are speaking about the mass culture—as if mass culture is something unique and homogeneous. But the mass culture of the Soviet time was very unlike American mass culture. Today, we have, for example, Indian mass culture, not only Hollywood, but so-called Bollywood, and Islamic mass culture. We know many mass cultures. A Russian spectator can immediately recognize this Soviet mass culture quality in the work of Ilya Kabakov. The aesthetics of the book illustrations to which he is referring in his work have little to do with the aesthetics of Disney's comics and movies, which are associated in the West with the birth of a child's imagination. They do display no como un esfuerzo por unir una brecha aún más peligrosa entre las prácticas oficiales y no oficiales del arte de aquel tiempo, entre el contexto cultural oficial y el contexto de oposición, que constituía un problema mucho más serio, un problema vital. Como ilustrador de libros, Kabakov se movía menos dentro del contexto del llamado arte alto soviético y más en el contexto de la cultura soviética de masas. Creo que, en Occidente, con frecuencia no se toma en cuenta suficientemente este aspecto de cultura de masas, y es por falta de conocimiento de esta cultura. Al hablar de cultura de masas, nos referimos generalmente a la norteamericana o a la parecida a ésta, que hoy domina los medios de comunicación global. No es de extrañar que las europeas y hasta las rusas hablen de la cultura de masas como si fuera una sola cosa homogénea. Pero la cultura de masas de la

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the same degree of neutrality and impersonality as the language of Disney movies and comics, and even inflict a little bit of satire. Soviet book illustration at that time was very much based on the book illustrations popularized in the first half of the nineteenth century. It has also developed this simplified and very flexible visual language which is distinctive and quite different from the traditional nineteenth-century illustration. It is a very specific kind of visual language. Kabakov takes a very specific place inside the Russian unofficial neo-modernist art scene of the 1960s and 1970s precisely because of the experience he accumulated working in the context of the Soviet mass culture—the experience of art-making as an anonymous, standardized practice, though a practice that, at the same time, takes the audience seriously, that tries to make itself accessible and understandable, that seeks and finds an immediate response for all kinds of possible spectators. It's a strange comparison, but it seems to me that there has always been a certain affinity between Kabakov and people like, let's say, Andy Warhol, using mass cultural images in the context of high art, even if they did it in an absolutely different way.

The unofficial art scene in the Soviet Union formed as early as the mid-1950s, almost immediately following the death of Stalin in 1953, and from then on, developed parallel to the official culture industry. The artists belonging to that scene turned away from the official art of socialist realism, attempting to link up with different traditions of Western and Russian modernism. No longer as ruthlessly oppressed as they had been under Stalin, these artists were assured of both physical survival and the possibility of continuing to pursue artistic work; yet they were almost completely cut off from the official art system: the official museum, exhibition, and publication system, as well as the possibility of traveling abroad and establishing connections with Western art institutions. As a result, the unofficial artists built their own scene in major cities such as Moscow and Leningrad, existing in semi-legality at the margins of Soviet normality. They could earn a living by turning to applied art, as Kabakov did, by taking up another profession, or by selling their works to a handful of private collectors. Due to the precariousness of their social status, they felt their health and security were threatened, but alongside this anxiety, their social isolation also generated a kind of euphoria: they could practice a relatively independent and often extremely bohemian lifestyle in a country where such a thing was unimaginable for most of the population. Despite lack of offi-

resposta inmediata en todo tipo de espectadores. La comparación es extraña, pero me parece que siempre ha habido cierta afinidad entre Kabakov y personas como, digamos, Andy Warhol, que utilizan imágenes de la cultura de masas en el contexto del arte alto, aunque lo hayan realizado de manera totalmente distintas.

El arte no oficial en la Unión Soviética había cuajado ya para mediados de los años cincuenta, casi inmediatamente después de la muerte de Stalin en 1953, y de ahí en adelante su desarrollo se dio paralelamente al de la industria de la cultura oficial. Los artistas del grupo no oficial rechazaron el arte oficial del realismo socialista, procurando enlazar con diversas tradiciones del modernismo ruso y occidental. Estos artistas, que no sufrían la despiadada opresión a la que eran sometidos bajo Stalin, podían contar ya con la seguridad de su supervivencia física y con la posibilidad de seguir cultivando su obra artística. Y sin embargo, estaban casi totalmente divorciados del sistema de arte oficial, el sistema oficial de los museos, exhibiciones y publicaciones, además de la posibilidad de viajar al extranjero y entablar relaciones con las instituciones de arte occidentales. Por consecuencia, los artistas no oficiales crearon su propia "escena" en ciudades como Moscú y Leningrado, existiendo en la semilegalidad al margen de la normalidad soviética. Podían ganarse la vida recurriendo al arte apli-
cial recognition, their lifestyle was secretly envied, and during the three decades of the unofficial art scene’s existence, until the dissolution of the Soviet Union, from the mid-1950s until the opening of the Soviet system in the mid-1980s, many people in Moscow and Leningrad thought it a great and exciting adventure to have an unofficial artist as a friend. The word didn’t exist at that time, but to be an unofficial artist was cool, and very obviously so. I am told it was a very privileged situation because Soviet life was kind of gray, or was experienced as something gray and boring and monotonous. Inside this life were small circles where some lived differently: completely different lifestyle that was attractive to people’s imagination, not necessarily because of their art, but because of the different social role they represented in society. Unofficial artistic circles also included independent authors, poets, and musicians who had even less opportunity than visual artists to survive on the margins of the Soviet system. Small exhibitions, poetry readings, and concerts were held regularly in artists’ studios in an informal, closely knit, social environment, mainly, as we were doing it in the West. During the years that Ilya Kabakov was living in Moscow, more or less, regular discussions, lectures, and poetic readings took place in his studio. It is interesting that Kabakov’s studio is still now such a place even after his emigration. A small center of contemporary art was organized there that is now supported by the city of Moscow and also by the Soros Foundation. The constant fear of possible repression forged solidarity among artists following very different and even opposing artistic programs. And, indeed, the unofficial art scene of the 1950s and 60s was pluralistic and heterogeneous, reflecting the plurality of the styles being oppressed by the officially dominating social realism. The unofficial artists adapted and brought into the Russian cultural context all kinds of artistic practices which were excluded by Soviet censorship. So we can find in Muscovite unofficial art everything from icon painting to cubism, as well as expressionism, surrealism, abstract expressionism, folk art, minimalism, conceptual art—everything that was more or less represented internationally was represented on a small scale. It was a circus. Behind the plurality of styles and techniques was a shared understanding of the role of the artist in society: to manifest his or her individual truth in the midst of the official, public lie. Most unofficial artists at this time saw their art in terms of a higher mission, a way of bringing important truths and deep insights into the profane Soviet world that surrounded them. músicos independientes, los cuales disponían de todavía menos oportunidad que los artistas visuales de sobrevivir al margen del sistema soviético. Se celebraban con regularidad pequeñas exhibiciones, lecturas de poesía y conciertos principalmente en los estudios de los artistas, en un ambiente social informal e íntimo, como lo estábamos haciendo en Occidente. Durante los años en que Kabakov vivía en Moscú, hubo discusiones, conferencias y lecturas públicas más o menos frecuentes en su estudio. Resulta interesante que su estudio es todavía un lugar así, aun después de su emigración. Se organizó allí un pequeño centro de arte contemporáneo financiado ahora por la ciudad de Moscú y también por la Fundación Soros. El constante temor a la posible represión forjó la solidaridad entre artistas que seguían líneas artísticas diferentes y hasta opuestas. Y cierto es que el mundo no oficial del arte de los cincuenta y sesenta era pluralista y heterogéneo, reflejando la pluralidad de los estilos que estaban siendo reprimidos por el realismo social que predominaba oficialmente. Los artistas no oficiales adaptaron y conformaron al contexto cultural ruso todo tipo de prácticas artísticas excluídas por la censura soviética. Así es que encontramos en el arte no oficial moscovita todo desde la pintura de iconos hasta el cubismo, además del expresionismo, el surrealismo, el expresionismo abstracto, el arte folklórico, el minimalismo y el arte conceptual. Todo lo...
They tried to exhume the radical claims of modernist art in a culture which had forgotten them. The single utopia of communism was suddenly replaced by a myriad of private, individual utopias, each of which became thoroughly intolerant of all the others, even if the artists themselves remained on friendly terms. It was a very strange situation. Everybody was friends even if they were working in completely different ways. The situation at that time for unofficial art circles in Moscow was actually very much enjoyed, analyzed, and ironically commented on in Kabakov’s albums. This claim to the individual truth, advanced by most of the Russian unofficial artists at the time, appears to be somewhat problematic retrospectively. Their almost complete isolation from the international art scene meant that they could not produce an innovative art that would give an objective art-historical credibility to their claims of genuine individuality and authenticity. After the Soviet system had opened itself in the 1980s to the outside world, most of these artists had to learn that if the artwork does not appear innovative or original in the international art context, it cannot be regarded as being developed out of an authentic inner impulse. This discovery was a painful realization for many of the unofficial artists, who had tended to appropriate, and rather naively invest in, the radically individualist rhetoric of modernism, and above all, in its radically oppositional posture of contempt for all manifestations of contemporary mass culture. They believed that the authenticity of their art was enough to make them great artists, but, of course, what was lacking was the comparison with the art of the West—a comparison that was impossible at that time.

By the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 70s, several unofficial Russian artists had already begun to engage critically and ironically with characteristically Soviet mass culture. They tried to subvert the clear-cut opposition between official and unofficial, Soviet and anti-Soviet, high culture and mass culture. These artists tried to describe the specific Soviet ideological and visual context as neutrally and objectively as possible. They began to arrange into themes the Soviet cultural codes and visual clichés which were completely ignored by most of the unofficial Russian artists, who were searching for a reality hidden behind them. This attempt to stop looking behind the façade of official Soviet culture and to open people’s eyes to the structure of the façade itself was undertaken by a small group of artists that became known as Moscow conceptualists. Ilya Kabakov participated in this circle and was actually its leading figure.

The artistic practice of Moscow conceptualism was strongly influenced by the various trends in Western art at that time, from minimalism to conceptual art to pop art, which dealt in diverse ways with the cultural codes and visual clichés of Western commercialized mass culture. But highly idealized Soviet mass culture was possible. Yo para finales de los años setenta y principios de los ochenta, los artistas rusos no oficiales habían comenzado a relacionarse en forma críti- ca y ironica con la cultura de masas típicamente soviética. Intentaron subvertir la clara oposición entre oficial y no oficial, soviético y antiso- viético, cultura alta y cultura de masas. Estos artistas procuraron describir el contexto ideológico y visual soviético específico con la mayor neutralidad y objetividad posible. Comenzaron a agrupar en tem- mas los códigos culturales y lugares comunes visuales soviéticos de los cuales hacían caso omiso los artistas rusos no oficiales en su mayor parte, los cuales buscaban una realidad escondida de- trás de ellos. Este intento de dejar de buscar detrás de lo fachada de la cultura soviética oficial y de abrirles los ojos a la gente para que vieran la estructura
extremely idiosyncratic. Selling ideology is different than selling Coca-Cola, even if there are some obvious similarities. The Western artist experience in dealing with mass culture could not simply be transposed onto the Soviet Union of the 1970s. Artists had to develop new means to deal with a Soviet culture which was based more on narrative than on image. Soviet ideology was a narrative. It was a narrative about self-liberation, about controlling the society, about the emerging of the new man. It was a story, it was a history. It was a vision of the future which could be only told; it could not be represented as an object, as commercialized Western objective art does in relation to consumers of Western culture. So the reflection of this narrative ideology also could only take on the form of storytelling of a certain kind.

Kabakov began as a specific storyteller of Ten Characters, in which he tried to deal precisely with the idea of a new man, of somebody emerging out of the grayness of Soviet life and trying to formulate a greater plan. At the same time, he felt himself very isolated from the outer world. I would like to quote a passage from Kabakov's text, written as a preface to a book of memories by Paul Jolles about his Moscow experiences:

For almost thirty years the life of an unofficial artist was spent inside a locked and sealed world. All this time unofficial artists and authors were barred by strict political, ideological, and aesthetic censorship from exhibiting or publishing their work. Caught in this virtually "cosmic" isolation, artists in these circles had to be entirely self-reliant and dependent upon one another to perform the roles that others should have played: viewers, critics, ex-
de es mismo fecha fue realizado por un pequeño grupo de artistas que llegaron a conocerse como los conceptualistas de Moscú. Ilya Kabakov participó en este círculo y de hecho fue su figura principal.

La práctica del conceptualismo moscovita fue influida sensiblemente por las diversas tendencias del arte occidental, desde el minimalismo hasta el arte conceptual hasta el arte pop, que trataba de diversas maneras con los códigos culturales y lugares comunes visuales de la cultura de masas comercializada de Occidente. Pero la cultura de masas soviética, altamente idealizada, fue sumamente idiosincrásica. Vender ideologías es muy distinto de vender Coca-Cola, aunque también hay semejanzas obvias. La experiencia del arte occidental al tratar la cultura de masas no podía ser transferida simplemente a la Unión Soviética de los años setenta. Los artistas tuvieron que idear nuevos mecanismos para representar una cultura soviética que estaba basada más en la narrativa que en las imágenes. La ideología soviética era narrativa. Una narrativa acerca de la autorresolución, el control de la sociedad, la aparición del nuevo hombre. Un relato. Una historia. Una visión del futuro que sólo podía contarase; no podía representarse como un objeto, como lo hace el arte occidental comercializado y objetivo en relación con los consumidores de la cultura occidental. Así que el reflejo de esta ideología narrativa podía cobrar únicamente la forma una narración de cierto tipo.

Kabakov comenzó como un narrador específico de 10 personajes, donde trató de manejar la idea del nuevo hombre, de alguien que surgía de la grisura de la vida soviética e intentaba formular un mejor plan. Al mismo tiempo, sintió muy aislado del mundo exterior. Quisiera citar un extracto del texto de Kabakov que él escribió como prefacio...
La escuela de arquitectura, conocida (en el frente 0.94 m) según
la carrera y el lugar en que reside, en la realización de la obra,
(que sigue, en el espacio de la obra) y luego. En conclusión,
la obra es "amplia" y "coherente".

*Obrazná Vizija za Srednjo Platno pada*

General view front the main entrance side.

PAINTING OF THE INTERIOR:
The whole school interior is painted (on the height: 0.64 m) with black-green paint, with gives
it boxing-official sight (of course, with the blue line on the top - for - beauty and neatness).

Era interesante que, para Kabakov, la aprobación de sus amigos y familiares es algo terrible, algo de lo que debía escapar, salirse del pequeño círculo de sus amigos y familia, ir más allá de las fronteras trazadas por el sistema en que vivía y esta especie de ambivalencia relativa a su propia situación entre la cultura soviética oficial y el círculo...
space. Living with foreign people, living with others in the same intimate space, is meant to be an art because it meant to be exclusive of the gaze of the others. This is something which is described by Ilya Kabakov again and again. If you are living in a system, a totalitarian system of surveillance like the Soviet Union was—not only a total system of surveillance on a state level, but a total system of surveillance on the level of the communal existence—you are all the time exposed to the gaze of the other. This is something which is typical of artists because an artist is somebody who in a very manipulated, maybe strategic, way escapes and renounces the privacy which is a basic norm of human existence. In a certain sense, we can say that the whole Soviet Union at every level of its existence was an


no oficial, entre estar encerrado en la Unión Soviética y tener visión del mundo. Todo eso lo representa muy bien, me parece, en sus instalaciones que se presentan como un apartamento comun. Hasta los 10 personajes descritos en los álbumes vivían en un apartamento comun, el cual, para Kabakov, es algo así como la dimensión fundamental de la existencia humana que sólo se ha manifestado claramente mediante el orden del estado comunista. El apartamento comun era un espacio en que diferentes familias vivían al mismo tiempo, compartiendo lugares como la cocina o el baño, pero cada familia tenía su propio cuarto. Vivir con gente extranjera, vivir con otros en el mismo espacio íntimo, debe ser un arte porque significaba excluir la mirada de los demás. Esto lo describe Kabakov uno y otro vez. Si uno vive en un sistema totalitario de vigilancia, no sólo en la institución, y maybe an art inst-

art institution, and maybe an art installation. Everybody was a picture, everybody was an image, everybody was looked at, everybody was commented on, everybody was interpreted, maybe by the party, maybe by the KGB, maybe by a friend. It is very interesting now, after this dissolution of the state artworker, state as artworker, artwork as state, what people are actually lacking most is this keen interest that was invested in them and their work as an artist. Everybody was an artist in the Soviet time. Now they are left alone. They are not watched at home any more; they are not interesting for anyone; they are not interesting for their neighbors; they are not interesting for the state; nobody is interested in them.

It reminds me of Nietzsche. Nietzsche remarked in one of his writings el nivel de estado sino también en el nivel de las existencias comunales, uno está expuesto constantemente a la mirada del otro. Esto es algo que caracteriza únicamente a los artistas, porque el artista es alguien que, de una manera muy manipulada y tal vez estratégica, escape y renuncia a su privacidad, que es una norma básica de la existencia humana. En cierto modo, podemos decir que toda la Unión Soviética, en todos los niveles de su existencia, era una institución de arte, y tal vez una instalación. Todo el mundo era un cuadro, una imagen, todos eran mirados y comentados e interpretados, tal vez por el partido, tal vez por el KGB, tal vez por un amigo. Resulta muy interesante ahora, después de esta disolución del trabajador artístico del estado, el estado como trabajador artístico, el trabajador artístico como estado, que lo que le falta más a la gente es este ge-