Cosmic energy:
Real or ridiculous?

The Kabakovs meditate on the power of unseen forces

By Ken Johnson
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MEDFORD — Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, the Russian-American
team internationally celebrated
for their complex
storytelling installa-
tions, have made a
tremendous discovery. They have
learned that caves with ancient
paintings on their walls are em-
bedded in Walnut Hill, which is
now occupied by Tufts University,
and they have discovered that a
huge, ancient sculptural object is
buried in the ground directly be-
neath the Tufts University Art Gal-
lery.

The Kabakovs believe that this
buried object — a looming tower of
modular, funnel-shaped elements
made of a concrete-like material —
also served to gather and store
cosmic energy. It is now undergo-
ing excavation, and the artists, who are husband and wife, have
made it the focus of their current
exhibition, "The Center of Cosmic
Energy:"

Why have the Kabakovs' amaz-
ing discoveries not stirred up
greater excitement in Boston and
around the world? One reason
might be that they never really
happened. They are the basis of an
elaborate fiction whose purpose
remains tantalizingly ambiguous.

Set up to imitate a combination
public museum, archaeological
site, and New Age tourist attrac-
tion, the exhibition, though con-
ceptually intriguing, is disappoint-
ing as an actual experience. Gallery
director Amy Ingrid Schle-
gel has overseen an impressive
transformation of the space, but there
is a perturbing quality to the ex-
ecution of the Kabakovs' vi-
sion that undermines the trans-
porting effect it is meant to have.

Entering the first of a series of
darkened chambers, we view a
slide show of an expansive, com-
plicated architectural model: the
Kabakovs' proposal for a fully
functioning Center of Cosmic
Energy, where cosmic energies
would be received and stored.

In the next room, along with texts explaining the Kabakovs' theories about the cosmos, flat-screen
monitors offer images of construc-
tions from the past believed also to
be centers of cosmic energy:
places such as Stonehenge, Machu
Picchu, and Walter De Maria's "Lightning Field."

Next comes the main attrac-
tion: We proceed into a small cir-
cular amphitheater centered
around a rough, huddle-like ob-
ject with a deep, dark hole in it.
Overhead is a round, back-lit,
hue-covered panel surrounded
by metal rods directed downward
like rays of light. Sitting on tiered,
semicircular plywood benches, we
listen to a taped 15-minute lecture
about cosmic energy, at the end of
which we are invited to become
aware of a feeling of well-being in-
duced by the concentrated energy
that the object in the center — a
icosmic energy "reservoir" — has
gathered. At this point the over-
head circular light panel glows
brighter for half a minute or so.
(Whether any other visitors felt
any effects from cosmic energy I
can't say, but I didn't feel any dif-
ferent.)

We then go down a flight of
rough wooden stairs to another
dark room directly below the am-
phitheater. Here we find the tower
under excavation: a segmented,
stacked structure of massive
stone blocks forms each resembling
the business end of a toilet plug-
er. The topmost protrudes into
the amphitheater above.

The space here is cave-like and
mysterious. The tower apparently
continues downward below the
plywood flooring deep into the
earth. Implicitly it connects un-
known depths of the earth to un-
known upper reaches of the cos-
mos — or, metaphorically speaking, the depths of the in-
trinsically unconscious to the
heights of spiritually enlightened
consciousness.

That all this is not as thrilling as
it ought to be is partly because
of the production values. In previ-
ous works, the Kabakovs created
carefully finished environments
that replicated with uncanny real-
ism places such as old Soviet hos-
pital rooms or tenement hallways.
Here, there is no such magical real-
ism, and the sense of being swept
up into some other, fictive univer-
se isn't fully realized. It's more
like a set for a play or a movie.
As background it might work fine,
but as the main vehicle of mean-
ing and object of visual scrutiny,
it's not enough.

What the Kabakovs are up to
conceptually, however, is compel-
ing, in part because their project's
purpose is left provocatively un-
certain. Do the artists really be-
lieve that there are centers of
icosmic energy around the world
that people using modern (or ancient)
technology can tap into? Do they
really think that cosmic energy
might solve all the world's prob-
lems? Taking the exhibition at face
value, it seems that they do — if
only as a poetic vision — you may
find yourself wondering if there's
anything to their theories.

On the other hand, perhaps
they are spoofing wishful New Age
thinking. Belief that salvation will
come from the heavens has a long
history — longer, probably than
the idea that humans have no
choice but to solve their own prob-
lems using their own ingenuity.
The penchant for imagining mag-
ical solutions to worldly troubles is
a great subject for satire, and the
Kabakovs' exhibition could be
seen as a sly mockery of pseudo-
scientific enterprises that prey on
human gullibility.

Ultimately the tension between

CRITICS' PICKS

Globetrotters
Artists from all over the world live and work in the
United States. Often they combine traditional
styles from their homelands with contemporary,
postmodern approaches to art making. Seven
such artists, whose countries of origin include
China, Egypt, Korea, India, and Iran, are featured
in "Merging Influence: Eastern Elements in New
American Art," at the Montserrat College Art
Gallery, Beverly, through Oct. 27. 978-821-4242, ext. 1319, montserrat.edu/galleries.

New England's finest
Curated by Karen Haas and Arlette Kayfas, "2007 New England Photography Biennial"
presents 78 works by photographers residing
throughout New England, including newcomers
and well-known professionals. At the Danforth

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