

Continuing Aesthetic Education

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“Where character is rigid and obdurate, we see Science keeping strict watch over its frontiers, and Art moving in the heavy shackles of rules; where character is enervated and loose, Science will strive to please and Art to gratify.”

Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*

Schiller’s phrases capture the paradoxical energies that flow through the installation art of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov. The husband and wife duo grew up in the ostentatiously “rigid and obdurate” Soviet Union, a place in which the tenets of Socialist Realism ensured that Art moved “in the heavy shackles of rules,” yet for the last twenty years the two have deftly navigated the global art circuit, a zone populated by enervated avant-gardes and gratifying multi-media extravaganzas. How appropriate then that the Kabakovs’ *Communication with the Cosmos Building* celebrates the harmonious spaces of Schiller’s idealized Greece, while exploring the German Romantic’s pregnant juxtaposition of Art and Science. In retrospect, it seems no coincidence that Ilya Kabakov and his friend the philosopher Boris Groys referred to themselves in 1970s Moscow as *Romantic Conceptualists*.

The prosaically-named *Communication with the Cosmos Building* is actually part of another, larger ensemble called *The Center of Cosmic Energy* which is itself intended to be constructed within the Kabakovs’ even more expansive plan for a “Utopian City.” It is crucial that the installation of *Communication with the Cosmos Building* defies the viewer’s expectations of the art museum. The structure resembles nothing so much as a display at a World’s Fair, EPCOT, or – in the Soviet context – Moscow’s famous VDNKh (the Exhibition of Agricultural Achievements), a Stalin-era state socialist Disneyland. Or perhaps the viewer imagines that she has landed within the walls of a research laboratory, or inside an educational institution. One thing is certain: the installation does not resemble most other artworks.

Ilya Kabakov returns to the themes of “self-education” (*samoobrazovanie*) and the “cosmic” (*kosmicheskii*) throughout his art. In particular, his installation art teems with “characters” (alter-egos?) who obsessively gather dubious information (*The Man Who Collected the Opinions of Others*, 1988) or who zealously desire to reach another plane of existence (*The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment*, 1985). In this way,

the installation's ostensibly serious discussions of "intuition" and its courteous instructions about "how to become receptive to cosmic energy," renew the artist's commitment to exploring otherworldly experience and self-directed learning. Most important, by obstinately confusing the realms of the aesthetic and the analytic, the design of *Communication with the Cosmos Building* suggests that something fundamental may be missing from most contemporary art.

As shorthand, the Kabakovs refer to this absent ingredient as "cosmic energy" -- an elusive and vital substance that can apparently only be produced in situations in which Art appropriates the pedagogical gravity of Science, and Science assumes the pleasing aspect of Art. Not exactly "Art" in appearance, not exactly "Science" in ambition, the installation's insistent liminality suggests that cultural production cannot remain purely didactic, nor merely entertaining, it must always strive to be something more. Much more.