

Absorption and Theatricality in the Kabakovs' "Total Installations"

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Ilya Kabakov has secured a place in art history not only as the most important artist to emerge from the Post-World War II period in the Soviet Union, but also as a major theorist and practitioner of installation art internationally. In a series of published lectures delivered in the early 1990s, Kabakov coined the term "total installation" to describe what he believes to be Art's teleological drive to surpass the primacy of the singular, unique Object, and hence also the conventional art museum experience. If the power of art-- and the image, more broadly—resides in its affective impact, its ability to conjure a sublime experience for the individual who beholds a single (and singular) work of art, what hope does the Total Installation have of affecting a similarly subjective transcendent experience?

A different kind of auratic experience might be had by visitors to Ilya and Emilia Kabakovs' installations. Neither mimicking the exclusively ocular experience of Modernist painting à la Clement Greenberg, nor the "theatrical" experience of non-representational sculpture à la Michael Fried, the Kabakovs' collaborative installations of the past two decades combine characteristics of the absorptive and the theatrical experiential models to create a "third" model. Unlike painting, these installations are not meant for single individuals to encounter in isolation but for groups (oftentimes of complete strangers) to experience collectively in an intimate setting. Unlike the Theater, the Kabakovs' installations are not multi-sensory spectacles reliant upon a fixed spectator, yet they share some of the same magical effect and suspension of disbelief; they are absorbing. Often, the Kabakovs' installations are comprised of a multitude of everyday objects, even detritus, though they have become leaner in recent years. And, unlike live musical concerts, where a seated audience is oriented towards the performers during a largely passive experience, visitors to the Kabakovs' enveloping architectural installations are not just viewers but readers, mobile spectators and passive listeners; they are receptive "patients", daydreamers, and eves-droppers. They are "observer-participants."

First and foremost the Kabakovs' work requires an active imagination and, secondly, a willingness to participate in a conceptual and metaphorical journey. Transcendence, for collaborators Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, lies in the mind's eye of the visitor to the museum or to an exhibition; it is a profoundly subjective experience framed by an architectural and ideological context. The Kabakovian "total installation" might be described as an ethnographic mise-en-scène with an increasingly conceptual, utopian, and otherworldly bent. Imagine the merger of the Museum, the Temple, the Library, and the Laboratory.

In *The Communication with the Cosmos Building*, realized for the first time at Tufts University, and part of the larger as-yet-unrealized Center of Cosmic Energy (planned for the former industrial Kokerei plant in Essen, Germany), a paradoxical interactivity between observer and environment offers stimulation of the intellect and the imagination through a meditative, aural and sensory encounter in the form of a "lecture." The quasi-architectural scale yet of the Communication with the Cosmos Building renders it a "monumental model" and a fragment of the larger Center, itself a pseudo-sanatorium-factory-scientific research facility-sacred site, which itself is a component of a "realized utopia" city plan. None of it is Sculpture. . . . For the Kabakovs, the Model is "an image of the world," the Installation is a proposal, the City Plan is a microcosm of a better future. . .