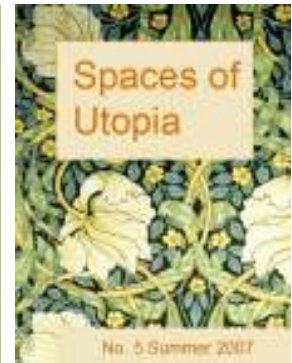


**The House of Dreams:
Program and Impulse within the Work of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov**

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In their remaking of a totalitarian scheme to increase the productivity of workers, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov have provided a promise of restorative slumber in their work *The House of Dreams* (2005), shown at the Serpentine Gallery in London between 19 October 2005 and 8 January 2006. The work burns with an intensity of imaginative possibility that can be traced back to Kabakov's time in the USSR. Kabakov recalls the necessity of imagining the audience for the forbidden work he and his colleagues would make. I would like to suggest that *House of Dreams* retains that imaginary relationship in the form of what might be possible with real and imaginary audiences. This might be read as the gulf between utopian project and failure.

Kabakov describes an "unofficial world" in which artists existed in total isolation in the Soviet Union of the 1960s and '70s in order to maintain any form of practice, communication, intellectual exchange, necessitated inventive and persistent strategies of survival. This was characterised by a "self-description". An

outside perspective was rendered impossible, artists isolated from any external world in order to get away with continuing their activities:

He became simultaneously an author and an observer. Deprived of a genuine viewer, critic, or historian, the author unwittingly became them himself, trying to guess what his works meant “objectively”. He attempted to “imagine” that very “History” in which he was functioning and which was “looking” at him. (Kabakov 2002: 8)¹

Artists functioned through fantasizing about the world that lay outside of Soviet boundaries and influence. Implicit within this context were attempts to envision interpretations of this internal world from the outside. This required the artist to occupy two simultaneous positions: “The artist had already become not only the author of his own works, but also the “cultural observer” standing beyond the walls of the Soviet home and peering in through the window” (*ibidem*). An artist had to be both observer and object.

However, while wanting to retain this formative tension in thinking about *House of Dreams*, there is a more general formative approach that I would like to draw attention to here in framing this specific work. I would like to consider a particular conception of installation as medium. Ilya Kabakov moved to the West from the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and in an interview published in 1995, commented on an apparent desire to hear about how things were different there: “(...) I have often been asked about the differences in both lifestyles and artistic principles which are accepted in Russia and ‘here’. And whether I could formulate these distinctions in one sentence” (Kabakov 1995: 1175). Kabakov’s response is that he does have such a formulation. It is to do with a difference between how an

object correlates to its environment. In the West, the space surrounding an object is ignored, and attention is primarily upon the artefact itself:

This attention is all embracing. The object is being dissected and assembled, everyone is interested in how it functions, it is imbued with all inventiveness. The objects in their turn look beautiful, they are always new, clean, shining, brightly painted, each one has its own individuality, one could say that they are almost animated, they have an independent life. (*ibidem*)

However, the interrelationships these objects establish both among themselves and, more significantly, with their surrounding space are indifferent. Of that space itself, Kabakov argues that the only thing demanded of it is that it must not interfere with the object's existence and its demonstration of itself.

The environment must be protective, and visually it must not impede concentration on the object: "In principle, it's as though the space shouldn't exist at all" (*idem*, 1176). When created intentionally, the space around an object is shaped from the objects themselves. The Russian correlation between object and space is presented as the diametric opposite:

Items as real objects don't have any significance there, for a few reasons. In the first place, they are all old, dusty, broken, "previously used", and if they are still new, they are poorly made, don't work, ugly, shapeless. In the second place, they mostly don't serve pragmatic goals – to work, to help, to make life easier (they are not capable of doing this at all) – but symbolic goals: objects act as indicators of the social membership of its owner, his social status. Therefore, it's not important for us "what kind of thing it is" and how it works, but where and in what sense it is presented. For us, a thing doesn't speak about itself, but about the one who owns it and why he owns it. (*ibidem*)

This speaking about the owner is of course a reading of objects that suggests a return to Mauss's evaluation of the gift – that objects are inalienably bound to the subject – and is perhaps universal rather than functioning as a specific distinction

between “East” and “West”. However, I will not attempt to critique Kabakov’s account here, but rather use it to think of a relationship between materiality and utopia. This is made possible by the more general shifting of emphasis from object to environment in Kabakov’s argument.

Environment is also accounted for by the term “incidental circumstances”, forms of instantly readable information. It is an inseparable connection between material object and remote meaning that forms a dense contextual (and perhaps textual) substance around a thing. It is the circumstances that are important. Kabakov provides some obvious example: “The very same table in your home and in an office is two different tables. A conversation at the train station or a conversation about the very same thing in the office is two different conversations” (*ibidem*). Similarly, one finds oneself as two different people in different circumstances. And these circumstances are themselves, in Kabakov’s argument, repressive and stifling. This is all-pervasive. A medieval notion of spirit of the place seizes those within. But the spirit is oppressive. Kabakov goes through the qualities of interior space in Russia:

In the first place, the rooms are always deconstructive, asymmetrical to the point of absurdity or, on the contrary, insanely symmetrical. In the second place, they look dull, oppressing, semi-dark, but this is not so because the windows are small or weak lamps are on. The main thing is that the light both during the day and at night is arranged so excruciatingly, so awkwardly that it creates a peculiar discomfort distinctive to that place alone. (*idem*, 1176-1177)

Space is also affected by an inadequate or perhaps malicious attention, to the degree of absurdity, to construction from planning to realisation. All is crooked, unfinished, cracked and stained. Place is haphazard, based upon a low standard

that is just fit to pass. Everything is old, without any sense of when it was made. There is no patina of time, rather just a sense of useless decrepitation even if it were completed only yesterday, while dust and dirt appear to be everywhere. There is also an overwhelming sense of spaces, even private apartments, belonging to no-one. They are temporary places of residence.

There is something of a contradiction in Kabakov's argument. He makes a case for things not mattering, as they are decrepit, but then describes their environments in the same terms, as places one wants to ignore and will forget. They are perhaps akin to the invisible institutional spaces of the West (or at least its art). But Kabakov instead suggests an extreme sensitivity to place based upon these qualities of places, as they were places that he would be thrown into, and pass through, for his entire childhood. He tells how he lived in dormitories until the age of twenty-four, while his mother spent sixteen years without a living permit, constantly moving from one landlady to another. This sensitivity to place goes further, to become a pervasive socialisation of consciousness. External life seeped in to the pores of consciousness like thick syrup. Sociality was total and dominated everything. Sociality was Soviet government structure, but also community. Intersubjective relationships could transform surrounding space. At a small level, it can be a making "positive", but the model of family expanded to scale of state is catastrophic. Dissolute, space belongs to no-one, everything is transformed to "common-use", or "uselessness". There is in Kabakov's distinction between material cultures a possibility of hope, then, as well as despair. Hope is present at the level of a small-scale, accountable intersubjectivity, but lost in the saturation of

totalitarianism in the everyday. And at the centre of these possibilities, a space, or a no-place belonging to no-one. More's *Utopia* – which is of course from the Greek for “no-place” – was overseen by Ademus, whose name derived from “no-people”. We have in both *Utopia* and Kabakov's material culture, therefore, no-one as the mediator of the law of no-place. Independently of any Blochian analysis, Kabakov is describing utopian impulse and possibility within the totalitarian actuality of the Soviet Union. This is translated directly as a principle that determines an operational aspect of art. Not its function within society, but the way it functions in a more phenomenally-orientated and formal manner within institutional space. So Kabakov returns to the oft-asked question:

If we turn to the difference between artistic principles in our country and in the West in this sense, it can be formulated this way: if in the West the object is exhibited as the main hero and the surrounding space doesn't exist at all, “we”, on the contrary, should perhaps primarily exhibit “space” and only then arrange objects in it. (*idem*, 1178)

This exhibiting of space rather than object is what Kabakov describes as “total” installation. The term functions as a recognisable shorthand for the large-scale installation-based work that Ilya and Emilia, his wife and collaborator, have been making since the late 1980s. It has become something of a brand identity for their work, in has lost something of its critical impulse, hence necessitating an account of its specificity. While I have tried to suggest that utopia is at the core of total installation, *The House of Dreams* addresses both project and impulse, as explicit and implicit.

At its spatial centre there is a radial arrangement of oversize pedestals, complete with steps, at the top of which is situated a divan to rest or sleep upon.

Inside each large pedestal is a small chamber, again furnished for institutionalised rest. The adjoining rooms have become hallucinatory adaptations of a hospital ward. Beds are separated from each other by floating white curtains. The form here is derived from a scheme within the history of Soviet utopias devised by architect Konstantin Melnikov. After identifying the problem of fatigue as a hindrance to the growth and development of the Stalinist collective, he proposed a *Laboratory of Sleep* (1929), which would allow up to 4,000 workers to rest in order to restore them to their full productive potential. The plan of a central rotunda flanked by two wings is mirrored in the creation of the Kabakovs' installation, as is its promise of a restorative slumber. However, in its (re)construction, the *Laboratory* is detached from its pragmatic attempts to improve both efficiency and the overall functional productivity, as well as the operation of totalitarianism through mechanised forms of the cooperation and conformity of its subjects. What is on offer here, perhaps, is a chance to dream. There is more than a reflection of the (clumsy and slightly embarrassing) utopian project in facilitating a space of contemplative reflection. The dream in itself is not the object of interest here. Rather, it is that this is a state from which one will awaken that is more significant, as an analogy that depends on an ontological certainty that the dream/fantasy is not inimical to wakefulness/reality.

Note

¹ It is worth noting that, as imagined and personal contexts, these histories were as diverse as the artists were numerous: “One artist might imagine a ‘world of contemporary Western art’, for others in was the ‘Pantheon of the great masters of the Renaissance’, and still others imagined this to be the ‘Russian avant-garde of the 1920s’. This is to say nothing of the fact that reproductions served as the material for these fantasies, and in the case of ‘Contemporary Western Art’ or the ‘Russian avant-garde’ these were extremely rare in those years. But this was no misfortune at all! What was important was that these images which had nothing to do with reality burned rather brightly and constantly” (Kabakov 2002: 8).

Works Cited

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