

**El Lissitzky -  
Ilya & Emilia Kabakov**  
Utopia and Reality

07.02.-11.05.2014

Space01

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**El Lissitzky -  
Ilya & Emilia Kabakov**  
Utopia and Reality

**Kunsthaus Graz  
Universalmuseum Joanneum**  
07.02.-11.05.2014

In cooperation with  
the Van Abbemuseum,  
Eindhoven (NL)

**vanabbemuseum**

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The exhibition *El Lissitzky - Ilya and Emilia Kabakov. Utopia and Reality* compares and contrasts a representative selection from the work complexes of two of the most significant figures in Russian art of the past hundred years. Ilya and Emilia Kabakov present and narrate their view of Russia in seven chapters here as witnesses to the failure of the Communist Utopia. *The Fallen Angel* can no longer see the red star in the centre of space.

# Ilya Kabakov

born 30 September 1933 in Dnipropetrovsk  
(Ukraine)

Ilya Kabakov is considered to be the most important representative of Moscow Conceptualism, which regards the painted image, language and the real object each as elements of equal value in art. Moscow Conceptualism examined art on a basis very far from any market economy concerns (since there were none) and on this side of formulations that had been censored hundreds of times (since this was the requirement of everyday life at the time). Starting from this position the Conceptualist artists placed the Soviet mass culture of the 1960s and 1970s at the centre of their work.

Ilya Kabakov studied at the Moscow Academy of Art after which he lived primarily as an illustrator of children's books. With increasing professional routine he was able to organise the work with which he earned his living and also the requirements of family life so that he had time for his own art. He lived a double life through this – on the one hand as the perfect, system conformist illustrator, and

on the other as an independent and creative artist – in order to be able to develop further while living and working in a repressive political system, which had a concept of art ending before Impressionism began. He established his atelier in a Moscow attic flat, which soon became a meeting place for many critics of the system. In the eighties Kabakov was able to exhibit his work for the first time in Switzerland. His first stay in the West was in Graz in 1987, where he was invited – following Peter Pakesch's suggestion – by the Grazer Kunstverein. He received a grant from the city of Graz and was able to arrange an exhibition by himself for the first time, which was shown at the foyer of the Opera Graz. A few months later the same work was shown at the Venice Biennale. This was followed by intensive international exhibition activities. Kabakov left the Soviet Union permanently. He received the DAAD grant in Berlin and was invited to participate at Documenta in 1992. Then he moved to New York, where he still lives and works with Emilia, his wife and collaborator. 20 years later he returned to Russia with first exhibitions. He has developed only little sympathies for the new Russia.

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## The Fallen Angel

*The Fallen Angel* triggers a chain of possible associations in the viewer. Why have his wings failed him? One could refer to a number of well-known stories to explain this: Icarus, Satan or the Angel Samael. The barrier tape is a reference to a contemporary accident. Who was this angel? The question remains unanswered. The fallen angel of this exhibition draws attention to the relationship between Utopia and reality, for Ilya and Emilia Kabakov two contradictory elements. Both experienced over many years in the Soviet Union how the communist Utopia of an egalitarian society was in reality characterised by surveillance, repression and fear.

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## Voices in the Void

The series *On the Edge* presents white paintings in large formats, the edges of which are strewn with tiny figures. What is actually happening is pushed aside to the edge, sometimes chaotically, sometimes statically. These paintings are among the largest workgroups ever created by Kabakov and were produced in Moscow during the nineteen-seventies. , At this time he secured his income as an official and successful illustrator of children's books . The rest of his time he spent in his attic studio where he met his artist friends to talk about art. These paintings were produced without a thought of them ever being exhibited, let alone sold, simply and alone for their own sake and to be discussed and take their place in a discursive reality. This form of art was officially undesirable, although it was not actively persecuted. Nevertheless these paintings were the first of Kabakov's works, which even before he himself was able to do so - could leave the USSR and be exhibited in Switzerland. White has a special significance

for Ilya Kabakov: on the one hand it stands for an endlessly wide empty space, for nothingness, as it was seen in Suprematism, yet equally for something transcendental, possibly even mystically religious. The abstract empty surfaces that are framed by human events may well be a reference to collective forgetfulness, but also to icon painting, where the frame has an elevating function as the surrounding to the sacred image, with which it is inseparably linked. White contains all the other colours and it is the most powerful reflector of light, which is also why it has such a potent luminous aura. White is humble, true and also neutral. Museum and gallery walls became white when they encountered the abstract and the images incorporated the entire available space. The white of the classic museum of the 20th century is the serious background against which a sense of security develops for Ilya Kabakov. The museum for him is a place where time stands still, where it is frozen solid. In these terms the project at the Kunsthhaus Graz is a thoroughly remarkable journey through time.

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## Garbage

In 1981 Ilya Kabakov began his story of the *Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*. In the view taken here garbage is something special which he catalogues, brings into order and comments on. It is his own garbage which he manages, his own private "Museum of Garbage". Simultaneously it is a mirror of Soviet society, an archive of memories and also a symbol of a culture characterized by its untidiness and failure to achieve completion. The museum of rubbish collects those objects that are of no further use to their owners, where a line of decision is drawn between memory and forgetfulness. Everything is carefully preserved in the Museum of Garbage, and clearly every single object is of equal value and significance.

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## Everyday's Victory

"Who does this fly belong to?" is written on the corner of a painting dating from 1966. It is a note on the margin of the long confrontation between the Kabakovs and the *shok*, the building administration, which managed and categorized every aspect of life in a Russian apartment. It robbed every citizen of every responsibility, of all privacy and thus of initiative of whatever kind. The *Shok* series now comprises more than 100 paintings, and their structure is always very similar. A press-board panel is covered in a pale coloured layer of paint and a dialogue unfolds in the top corner, it is conducted in Russian written in the Cyrillic alphabet and in a typically bureaucratic style. "Who's grater is this?" a voice in the top left-hand corner demands and the answer comes from the right "I don't know." In other cases a name is given. But nobody ever says: "It is mine." The real object about which the question has been posed is attached to the centre of the picture.

The colours in these pictures are matt blue, dirty brown or green – the same colours that were used

everywhere in Russia at the time. The property question is a double edged one and it refers to the common life in the "kommunalka", where there was no private property.

Life in a communal apartment was considered to be the practical realisation of the communist ideal, the implementation of which began immediately with the revolutionary changes of 1917 with the expropriation of the urban bourgeoisie. Multiple families with nothing whatsoever in common, people with the widest range of interests and styles of life were expected to share an apartment, and above all the kitchen, the bathroom, the toilet and the connecting corridors.

"*Hell – is other people*", Sartre said and scored a bull's-eye with the phrase in the memories of countless apartment tenants. The kitchen was the centre of life, used and dirtied by all and never cleaned up gladly by anyone.

Everything belonged to everyone and thus to no one at all. As a result dirt and with it the flies were everywhere in the memories of the Kabakovs. Apparently even the shared work plans were of little help here.

The flies make their appearance ever and again in Kabakov's work in many different forms, they have left their mark in his entire oeuvre and have become, as it were, the icon of his former homeland. The flies were everywhere, he said, in chaos, in dirt, in garbage. They ruled the everyday world, crept out of every crack and corner – to watch everything and get on everyone's nerves. The reference to the political regime is all too obvious. At the same time Kabakov identified himself with the flies: *"I have felt like an ordinary Soviet citizen since my childhood: I am frightened, I feel small, pushed into a corner, I am like a little fly, a tiny element in a giant state."* No matter how one sees and understands the flies, or their symbolic content: Kabakov gave them a scientific treatment for an exhibition in Cologne in 1992 highlighting the significance of these insects for the possibilities of constructing reality. Flies frequently soil the white surface, whatever is clean, leaving their traces behind them. And this is perhaps something with an everlasting validity.

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## Monument to a Tyrant

The *Monument to a Tyrant* presents a ruler who has stepped down from his high pedestal, who has turned his back to it and wobbles away to the edge. While El Lissitzky presents Lenin in a photographic section as an active speaker for his monument, the Kabakovs present Stalin in his uniform as a Marshal of the Soviet Union, a lonely figure who seems to have risen from the dead. It is also clear from the drawing that people passing by chance are fleeing in terror. Reality has long since overtaken the Utopia.

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## Escaping Life

Ilya Kabakov developed his “Total Installation” in New York. In this he created an interaction between images, texts, objects and also sounds from fictional worlds, all of which tell stories. A good installation disorients the public and also draws them in completely. *The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment...* is a story of this kind.

The room is a total mess; there are sketches on the walls that are completely papered with propaganda posters. There is a catapult in the centre of the room that appears to have been put together with materials from the bed, the few remaining parts of which are left lying around beneath it. There is a giant hole in the blanket covering it; a pair of shoes has been left on the floor, which is covered in rubble from the breach-hole that has been made. The catapult has already been used.

The room tells the story of a man who has lived his dream and has broken out into the space of the cosmos, and will never return to Earth. The trajectory which he has calculated can be seen on a

small city model. He has left the dark little room behind him – and ahead of him is a new and endless universe of worlds. The dream of the “little man from Russia” is one that has long occupied Russians. The conquest of the cosmos was the quintessence of the Russian Utopia.

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## Unrealized Utopia

Ilya and Emilia Kabakov believe that stories, dreams, illusions and Utopias can only survive when they do not become realities. . Realising a dream leads to its destruction, gigantic social Utopias, such as the Communist one, are condemned to destruction in a living reality. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, Utopias are so very important for the couple. The work in this last chapter gives an insight into Utopias the couple has not realised – one of these is the *House of Dreams*, another is *The Vertical Opera*. In the latter the possibility is intended for the audience to remain active and to move upwards to follow the action that is taking place parallel to the installation in the core of the building.

Utopian spaces have changed in the course of the hundred years between El Lissitzky and the Kabakovs, the starting point both then and today is the Opera and the theatre auditorium. For Kazimir Malevich the opera *Victory Over the Sun* introduced the first Suprematist forms in 1913 and with the Kabakovs it is the vertical opera, the performance pieces of which link the idea of the theatre with a lively installation as a means of involving the audience in a fictitious world.

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### **The Artist as a Reformer**

Books have a central position in the work of Ilya Kabakov. He initially secured his income as an official and successful illustrator of children's books. While extending beyond this censored official work he also cultivated his unofficial work that started on the "kitchen table". The Moscow Conceptualists met regularly in ateliers, but also around the "kitchen table", the table that belonged to everyone and to no one and where a discussion was always on the agenda - whether it was

wished for or not. These discussions were intensified by the artists, however, and formed the basis of a number of (illegal) papers which they distributed to others as the basis for further discussion. These polemics were characterized by their combination of text and image. The fly that has already been mentioned also made an early appearance in these notebook texts; it was a motif that had also played a role in the work of Dostoyevsky or Gogol. During the nineteen seventies Kabakov began to work on his own albums, which were notable for their combination of words, images and blank pages. He wrote his own narratives. A frequent imagining expressed in these albums was the desire for "normality"; this was a real Utopia that appeared to be completely out of reach in the USSR at the time. As a fictitious antihero he slipped into his book world in a varied series of painful reality metaphors.

The exhibition *El Lissitzky - Ilya and Emilia Kabakov. Utopia and Reality* compares and contrasts a representative selection from the work complexes of two of the most significant figures in Russian art during the past hundred years. El Lissitzky's work is shown in seven chapters, covering his revolutionary ideas for an entirely new art, his schemes for redesigning everyday life in a radically changed society, through to propaganda for Stalin such as the giant red star at the centre of the exhibition.

# El Lissitzky

Pochinok 1890 – Moscow 1941

El Lissitzky is considered to be one of the most important representatives of the Russian avant-garde of the early 20th century. As a Jew in Czarist Russia he was barred from studying at the Imperial Academy of Art in 1909 and like many other Russians he left for Germany. There he studied architecture in Darmstadt. He concluded his studies in 1915 and returned to his homeland where he saw the dawn of a fresh start for mankind in the arts and in society with the October Revolution of 1917. His highly eclectic teaching activities took him to the art school of Vitebsk in 1919. It was here that he encountered Kazimir Malevich and his idea of Suprematism as an all-encompassing concept of art. El Lissitzky

was filled with enthusiasm for this system which provided a basis for his own development as an artist and architect, and he soon promoted his own Suprematist position as PROUN. He maintained an intensive exchange throughout his life with the *Bauhaus* in Germany, with the *De Stijl* in the Netherlands and also with the Swiss Dadaists. He returned to Berlin in 1922, co-publishing the magazine 'Gegenstand' with Ilya Ehrenburg. He also worked with Kurt Schwitters on the periodical 'Merz'. Two years later he married the art historian Sophie Küppers and returned to Moscow with her. Throughout this period he was constantly employed on the design of official exhibitions. He died in Moscow in 1941.

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## The Cosmos

PROUN, the 'Project for the affirmation of the new' is how El Lissitzky termed his work, and beginning with his intensive interest in Suprematism he brought a further development to its vocabulary of forms. Kazimir Malevich the founder of Suprematism, had his roots in painting which he sought to change completely with a radical renewal of its formal idiom, but also in its very nature by seeking to reduce it to a programmatic absolute zero.

In the *Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10* of 1915 Kazimir Malevich not only presented his celebrated Black Square for the first time, but also showed the entire Suprematist vocabulary of forms, geometric shapes in single colours on

a white background. The pictures were presented without frames in a white exhibition room, uncoupling the works from any sense of a defined and anchored top and bottom. The intention was of shapes floating freely in space and suggesting motion. This was the new cosmos from which many new things emerged. El Lissitzky sharpened these forms into constructs of geometrical precision and he created three-dimensional bodies in space through the use of shadow, giving the pictures depth in addition to motion. The colours black, red and white are as with Malevich fundamental in the work. Significant also is that El Lissitzky regarded PROUN as a 'train-changing station' on the way from painting to architecture.

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## Clarity of forms

El Lissitzky was a trained architect. He was constantly engaged in a lively exchange of ideas with colleagues in Germany and the Netherlands and was, of course, thoroughly informed about all the latest international developments in architecture and the art of building. Clarity of the vocabulary of forms is the trademark of his own architecture, which is also distinctly articulated in all his other work. The *Wolkenbügel* is a spectacular design for a skyscraper, reaching not only up to the heights, but also and above all claiming the horizontal dimension and making equality possible in the distribution of the best floor space. The *Wolkenbügel* is also homogenous in the impres-

sion it creates, since it does entirely without any clearly declared front side. It is in these terms a clearly intended counterweight to the typical capitalist skyscraper from the USA. He designed the *Wolkenbügel* for implementation in eight versions in the centre of Moscow, with the intention of achieving a city gates effect on the Moscow Ring. Three gigantic pillars rise from a minimal surface area, establishing a link between a floating architecture and the city traffic below. High above the city offices extend horizontally over the streets and parallel to the urban landscape below. Clarity of forms is also a clearly recognisable concern in all the other designs and concepts El Lissitzky produced.

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## Victory over the Everyday

El Lissitzky wrote in an essay on residential culture in 1926: *'Before the Revolution our urban proletariat was unable to live in a manner worthy of human beings, but existed in the most miserable of housing conditions.'* The Bolsheviks started the expropriation of bourgeoisie homes in 1917 and made these available as separate rooms for worker families and the entire apartments were then shared by several families. The bathroom, WC and kitchen were in communal use by everyone. The communal apartment as a way of living had come into existence. The severe accommodation shortage was eased and the revolutionary restructuring of society was pushed ahead at the same time. Ten years later the first specially built worker communal apartment buildings began to appear. El Lissitzky concerned himself with the question of what a Soviet apartment type should be like, when taking the fundamentals of the new order into account. A living space standard was required, taking all levels of

society and all needs into account. The distribution of roles in the new Soviet society too, in which man and woman had complete equality, would also need to find expression. The limited space available meant the new apartment would have to be purpose engineered and elaborated in much the same way as the 'best modern travelling suitcase'. Total organisation of living space, making perfect use of every last corner in the built-in cupboards and of the different heights in each of the rooms are all elements that had been in consistent discussion since the turn of the century in every avant-garde architectural current and had been much influenced by the apartment standard in the USA. For El Lissitzky as also for his colleagues outside Russia, it was important to plan the new home in such a way *'that the greater part of the fittings and furniture would be produced simultaneously with the building, as a single homogenous unit. The entire kitchen equipment, cupboards, partition walls, fold-away tables, beds – all of this can be produced in the simplest manner*

as part of the interior design.’

Everyday life was to be designed down to the smallest detail, with Soviet requirements in focus and achieving a significant difference to capitalist notions in the planning of the home.

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### **Memory: Monument to a Leader**

When Lenin died in 1924, El Lissitzky not only designed the *Wolkenbügel*, but also a speakers platform to raise public orators high above street level and ensure that they would be heard. The intention was to glorify Lenin’s ideas – such as the New Economic Policy – giving them a structurally functional form and to serve the personality cult of Lenin. Designing this platform was a task El Lissitzky set his students at the UNOWIS Art School in Vitebsk; it was intended as a plea for the industrialization policy of the USSR. The striking feature of the design is the dynamic upward trend of the structure in combination with monochrome colour surfaces orig-

inating in drawings by the student Ilya Tschaschnik. The platform was not only mobile with a motor installed in the foundation pedestal, but the upper surfaces could also be used for projections. This platform for setting up in public spaces represented an extension of the Suprematist vocabulary of forms to an urban environment and gives clear expression to the background of political agitation that was an aspect of this art movement. During public parades the students of the art school of which Kazimir Malevich was the head, also went out into public space to demonstrate the new system in art in a comprehensive form. Suprematism was in the process of putting an end to every individual style and taste in art in the view of its founder Kazimir Malevich. The aim was to create a new collective style for the communist future.

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## Transforming Life

Albert Einstein published his Theory of Relativity in 1905, establishing a relationship between *space* and *time* that was to have far-reaching consequences. Time as the fourth dimension was also to become a very important component of art. Kazimir Malevich brought it into his pictures by attempting to represent forms in motion. Movement in space is also of central importance in El Lissitzky's *Proun* room. The line of vision is directed into the room, moving along the forms, seemingly at the mercy of the weightlessness of the forms. The image has become real space and space a pure sensation of abstraction

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## Trust in the New World

Russian artists designed a new Soviet world – carried along by revolutionary thrust and impetus – a world that turned away from the past, to a new zero point and to develop something entirely fresh seemingly from nothing. Space followed the image, inhabited space, public space and ultimately the entire city. “*We have set ourselves the city as our task (...) this dynamic architecture is creating the new theatre of life and because we are seeking to encompass the entire city in a given plan and at a given moment, the mission of architecture as the rhythmic structuring of space and time will be completely and simply fulfilled.*” Utopia has no borders. El Lissitzky's pictures function in these terms as a bird's eye view of the city, and represent in their vocabulary of forms a thorough further development of his art and architecture. This same language of forms can also be clearly seen in his work for the theatre.

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## The Artist as a Reformer

In 1928 El Lissitzky was commissioned with the design of the Soviet pavilion at the International *Press Exhibition* in Cologne. The pavilion was devised as a complete work of art as propaganda, in which everything was coordinated and nothing left to chance. The red star was at the centre, the symbol of the way forwards to a classless society and like the hammer and sickle, a symbol of the communist world view. "Proletarians of all countries unite!", was written in giant letters, flyers were provided and illuminated lettering and photography completed the image presented of a perfect new world that had begun its march to victory. The USSR was already ruled at this time by Josef Stalin. El Lissitzky concerned himself with propaganda ever and again for the rest of his life.

# Fast Forward

When in 1917 – in the middle of the First World War – the Revolution against the Russian monarchy was a success, an opportunity was seen for breaking entirely with the image of mankind that had existed in czarist Russia, which had been marked by oppression and serfdom. Communism supplied the idea of complete equality for all and of people living together without private property and with a just distribution of the means of production in a completely democratic society. The dictatorship of the proletariat, as established by Lenin through the assertion of the Bolsheviks that by no means shied away from violence, permitted the emergence if not of a democratic, then at least a powerfully ideological framework. The hammer and sickle symbols show how this upheaval in a Russia that was still 70 % peasant agricultural, could not be achieved by the industrial workers alone, but would require the strong participation of the farmers. Lenin expropriated the land from the big landowners and distributed it to the farmers to farm it on their own account. A few years later all private ownership holdings were nationalized and the population

in the country was forced to give up their harvests and seed, above all to supply the Red Army and its needs. It was the New Economic Policy of 1921 that saw a first achievement of economic growth and some modest prosperity. Furthermore literacy was increased considerably under Lenin through the establishment of educational measures. The art world in Russia, where EL Lissitzky had a significant influence, developed an incredible vehemence for renewal in the pull of the Revolution, which has proved to be of enormous importance for the entire further development of art.

In 1924 Stalin moved into the centre of power and put an end to the mini-capitalist interlude of the New Economic policy. The end of the Communist Utopia began with Stalin and with it the avant-garde in the arts and in particular all abstract trends which were forced to vanish completely. Socialist Realism celebrated the ornament of the masses, the portrait of the able and heroic worker, the collective farm operative on the tractor and presented the dictator as the unchallenged and heroic leader. The dictatorship became totalitarian under Stalin and was thus significantly stricter than it had

been under Lenin. Major purges, compulsory labour and the Gulag defined this period. The Moscow *intelligentsia* was totally decimated under Stalin.

The climate for art did not improve after the Second World War: Khrushchev, who had supported Stalinist policies for many years, took over the leadership after the death of Stalin and now introduced a change in direction, by condemning the brutal policies of Stalin and by introducing a cautious thaw of reform. In 1961 he met J. F. Kennedy in Vienna; the results of this meeting were the building of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain. Any seeds of revolt in the satellite states of Eastern Europe (the Hungarian Uprising of 1956, the Prague Spring of 1968, the Polish revolt of 1972) were regularly crushed by Russian force of arms. It was the period of a massive arms race, in which Khrushchev found an ally in Cuba and the USA came under significant pressure (the Cuba Crisis). Poor harvests and the threat of hunger, however, forced Khrushchev to buy seed in capitalist countries of the West and also to give the collective farms more own responsibility. This was not to the taste of the party functionaries, he was deposed and Brezhnev succeeded him in 1964. Stability

was all-important for Brezhnev who maintained an unchanging system by refusing to introduce reforms and whose stagnant term of office was given the byname "the age of lead". Strong regulation and heavy-handed paternalism, strong limitations on freedom of opinion, the rehabilitation of Stalin and the re-introduction of his principles and traditions brought about a neo-Stalinist situation. These were also the formative years Ilya Kabakov experienced as an artist and with his family in Moscow.

It was only in the mid-1980s that the rigid Russian structures began to break apart, as Mikhail Gorbachev (a man of the "Prague Spring") took on the leadership of the USSR and opened the way to more transparency and re-structuring in Soviet society with his GLASNOST and PERESTROIKA policies. In his non-violent approach he firmly maintained a belief in Communism with a human face. The result was a disarmament policy (together with Ronald Reagan), the dissolution of the USSR by permitting independence for the separate Soviet republics and for the dependent satellite states, the opening of the Iron Curtain and the fall of the Berlin Wall.