Ilya Kabakov and the shadows of modernism

Fiona Woods, 2008

This essay explores the work of Ilya Kabakov through a consideration of an alternative to the binary opposition of modern- and post-modernism, suggesting that his work occupies a more hybrid place, what Bruno Latour calls 'the amodern'[1]. The assertion of post-modernism in Western culture marked a conceptual break that made it possible to assess modernism as a cultural construct based on specific conditions. For the purpose of this essay my reading of modernism will emphasize two of its aspects in particular. The first derives from modernism's exaggerated sense of rupture with the past, in which the present moment developed a singular, forward motion; the reconfiguration of modernism has made visible a complex relationship between modernity, tradition and nostalgia. Drawing upon the theories of Latour, Svetlana Boym, Jacques Rancière, Susan Stanford-Friedman and others, I propose that the work of Kabakov represents a counter-modern sensibility aligned to a non-linear temporality.

The second aspect that I emphasize relates to modernist aesthetics, or more accurately what I call its shadow-aesthetics. I use this term to refer to that which is nominally excluded from the realm of the aesthetic – for example garbage, kitsch, the amateur, the fetish - but remains necessary in order for the aesthetic to differentiate itself from everything else. Drawing upon Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss's identification of a counter-narrative running through modernism (as demonstrated in the exhibition *L'Informe; Mode d'Emploi, Centre Georges Pompidou*, Paris, 1998) I will demonstrate how the seemingly marginal, disruptive and contradictory aspects of shadow-aesthetics, which, as I argue here were integral to the modernist dynamic, operate in the work of Kabakov.

Kabakov's work can be understood as having two distinct phases; one as a self-proclaimed Soviet artist (which lasted until approximately 1993/4) and one as a post-Soviet artist. Each phase is contained within the other and they share many aspects in common. Nonetheless, the nature of public space in the Western world has gradually overtaken Kabakov's experience of a space dominated by totalitarianism

and this has impacted on the character of his works. From 1989 he began to work in partnership with his wife Emilia Kabakov who, by the late 1990's, was very much a co-author of the works; where appropriate I will make reference to the work of the Kabakovs.

Kabakov was an official artist under the Soviet regime. Until his emigration to the West in 1988 he worked as a children's illustrator whilst developing an underground practice as a member of NOMA. Also known as 'The Moscow Conceptualists' this was a group of unofficial artists who met regularly and secretly in one another's apartments. They were united not by any single style or particular philosophy but in their covert attempts to exert agency in the face of a stifling, collective will. Svetlana Boym, in *The Future of Nostalgia,* has described NOMA as more of a subculture than an artistic school, a kind of underground Soviet pop-art whose real resistance to official Soviet culture was posed in a continuation of the modernist tradition of art-making as lifestyle, invoking a semi-autonomous sphere of cultural existence.[2] Modernism had been repressed in the Soviet Union since the 1930's, its early critical and utopian potentials, which had long since been challenged in the West, remaining current for many Soviet artists prior to *perestroika*.

As an official artist Kabakov was completely subject to the will of the Soviet state and lived with the possibility of severe consequences arising from his underground practice. As an individual he was traumatized by collective living and he said 'by the fact that my mother and I never had a corner to ourselves'.[3]

> The communal apartment is not just a social misfortune and catastrophe that must be done away with, it is the normal state of the communality of the Russian psyche. It's the same for a person living in a Russian communal apartment. . . . He's charred, burned from all sides in this social, communal body, and he dreams about being alone in his own small corner with his own constructs of a personal utopia. He dreams not only of a social project where we will all be

happy, but he also dreams of having his own individual project where he will build something for himself.[4]

Ilya Kabakov, *The Toilet,* 1992. Stone, cement, wood, paint construction, men's room, women's room, household objects, furniture, Overall h. approx. 450 cm, w. 417cm, l. 1100cm. Installation, Documenta IX, Kassel, Germany. *Image courtesy of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov.*

The Toilet, 1992, part of Documenta IX, was Kabakov's first 'total' installation in the West. Located behind the main building of the exhibition, the work consisted of an exact replica of a provincial Soviet toilet, which had been turned into a two-room apartment, complete with table, glass cabinet, bookshelves, a sofa, uncleared dishes, children's toys, casually discarded garments, paintings, a clock, a radio. All of these were placed around or alongside the open toilet stalls, cohabiting peacefully with them.

A definitive account of this work has been given by Boym.[5] She discusses various possible readings of the work, ranging from psychoanalytic (Kabakov's mother was, for a time, forced to inhabit a laundry-room housed in a former toilet, to be near her son while he studied in Moscow) to socio-historical (the

changing quality of public and private toilets in Russia during and since *perestroika*) to avant-garde (an appeal to scatological sensationalism as employed by Marcel Duchamp, Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris, Mario Metz etc.) to archaeological (fragments of a crumbling Soviet civilization) and so on.

She says:

> Kabakov's toilet does not offer us the conventional satisfaction of a single narrative, but leaves us at a loss in a maze of narrative potentials and tactile evocations. What makes it obscene is its excessive humanness and humor. . . . The toilet is embarrassing, not shocking. It does not contain the excrement of the artist, but his emotion. . . . The black hole of the toilet might be equally mystical, but its power lies on the border between art and life.[6]

She describes his work as also engaging with the 'drama of captured, or constipated, time' describing a 'temporal and narrative excess . . . that makes it new and nostalgic at the same time.'[7] Embarrassment, gaps, estrangement and empathy – these are part of what she terms the ironic nostalgia that pervades many of Kabakov's works.

Irony plays a complex role in Kabakov's work. There are narrative tensions that are more accurately captured in the uneasy duality of allegory, which can be described as a story with two meanings, one symbolic, one literal. Largely discredited in the modernist period, allegory according to Stephen Melville ' . . . . as it (re)appears for us now, appears as a belated rewriting of "irony."'[8] He linked it to the concept of the tableau which includes an acknowledgment of the presence of a spectator.[9] Many of Kabakov's installations, from the earliest *The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment,* (1980-81) to some of the most recent such as *In the Closet (*2000) read as tableaux, from which the actors have inexplicably vanished, unambiguously anticipating the presence of a spectator, foregrounding both disbelief and its suspension.

The suspension of disbelief that takes place when reading a novel has been a reference for Kabakov in the development of the 'Total Installation'[10], the form of work for which he is best known. The term captures very accurately the complete control he exercises over every last detail of his installation environments, generating an all-encompassing atmosphere that allows the visitor to become completely absorbed in the 'fiction' of the work, no matter how bizarre or unfamiliar the premise.

Many of the earlier installations are peopled with a cast of semi-fictional characters, and have a strong textual element, consisting of multiple written texts or spoken recordings, often contradictory. This corresponds to Kabakov's assertion that more than any visual art, it is Russian literature that he sees as his primary inspiration.

Along with his Soviet contemporaries, Kabakov operated within a twilight zone with regard to Modernism, which is often described as a response to the conditions of modernity. For Jacques Rancière modernity itself is 'an incoherent label' which seeks to trace 'a simple line of transition or rupture between the old and the new'.[11] 'The idea of modernity would like there to be only one meaning and direction in history, whereas the temporality specific to the aesthetic regime of the arts is a co-presence of heterogeneous temporalities.'[12]

Similarly Bruno Latour, author of *We Have Never Been Modern* argued that

> (Modernism's) dream of emancipation has always been counteracted by an opposite movement of attachment. Because it was turned so thoroughly toward the past with which it wanted to break, it has run blindly through history, producing in its wake very strange hybrids, mixing up all periods, confusing all sorts of epochs.[13]

Latour's complex argument suggests that the modernist version of time is not one that we have to accept. 'The moderns have a peculiar propensity for understanding time that passes as if it were really abolishing the past behind it.'[14] The deconstruction of modernism revealed a complex operation of

temporalities in which tradition is actually the invention of modernity, always constructed retroactively. The need of Modernists to demonstrate a total break and even to suppress continuities with the past, was part of their allegiance to individual autonomy and rationalism. Tradition, nostalgia, fetishism – these things would bind the individual to a moment other than the present and thus prevent him or her from functioning in a completely rational way.

Boym has coined the term 'off-modern', describing off-modern art as existing between the poles of modernist and anti-modernist, exploring hybrids of past and present that mediate between modernism and post-modernism. Amongst those whom she lists in the off-modern category are Igor Stravinsky, Vladimir Nabokov, Walter Benjamin, Milan Kundera and of course Kabakov. Locating his work in this category of the off-modern means that, for Boym, Kabakov's works play with an idea of being out of time, locked out of both future and past, occupying a more hybrid temporality. They involve complex co-dependencies between tradition, modernity and nostalgia that always seek to transcend rational explanations, yet are meant to be read neither symbolically nor 'in the quotation marks of post-modernism'.

> My installations are oriented toward the viewer as well, but a viewer who is standing before a broken vase and thinking, "This vase existed, and now it is no more. Why did it break? Was it a good vase?" There is uncertainty and a melancholic question to which there is no answer. [15]

Boym's thesis sees reflective nostalgia as constructing from fragments of memory a narrative that is ironic, fragmentary and inconclusive, in which the past is 'a multitude of potentialities, non-teleological possibilities of historic development'[16] not anti- but counter-modern.

The counter-modern appears again in *Formless; A User's Guide* (*L'Informe; Mode d'Emploi),*a publication and exhibition (*Centre Georges Pompidou*, Paris 1998). Curators Yve-Alain Bois and

Rosalind Krauss set out a number of postulates and exclusions central to the modernist narrative, and then set about cataloguing practices within modernism that diverged from these normative principles.

The postulates they put forward were as follows. Firstly, that the visual arts address themselves uniquely to the sense of sight, leading directly to the second postulate, namely that the temporal is denied by the effect of works revealing themselves to the eye of the viewer all at once. The third inherent claim of modernist art lies in the verticality of the viewer; the subject is addressed as an 'erect being' which separates the viewer from his or her body. Finally, a modernist work must be 'bounded' so that any apparent disorder is contained.

Drawing on the anarchic writings of Georges Bataille and the counter-surrealist *Documents* group, Bois and Krauss took the de-structuring, anti-architectural, unforming operations described by Bataille as *Informe* and employed these as a curatorial strategy to 'redeal modernism's cards' as Bois described it;

> . . . . to see to it that the unity of modernism, as constituted through the opposition of formalism and iconology, will be fissured from within and that certain works will no longer be read as they were before.[17]

In opposition to the 'foundational myths' of modernism outlined above, they proposed four operations; base materialism, pulse, horizontality and entropy and used these to generate alternative readings of art practice in the twentieth century based on the work of those very artists who are at the heart of standard accounts of modernism. The exploration of this contrary narrative has a rupturing effect on any unified account of modernism, allowing Bois to describe the latter as an 'interpretive grid'.[18] This is a valuable metaphor because the architecture of the grid exists only by virtue of spaces that are not-grid; spaces that are ambiguous and flowing in contrast to the grid's structural formality. The 'non-spaces' of modernism suggested by this metaphorical not-grid present a means of considering all that which did not sit comfortably within the modernist programme.

These non-spaces were exploited by the avant-garde in the creation of the anti-aesthetic, a complex operation in which the non-aesthetic is re-contextualised and given a new existence within an aesthetic frame of reference. In Kabakov's work objects/ ideas are also re-contextualised, but this is never part of an anti-aesthetic stance, because his aims are otherwise; his work is always located within a framework of affects arising from human actions and relations. Speaking of the "Total Installation" he described its conceptual goal as 'a sacralization of banal space'[19]. While recent works seem to focus more on the sacral, the installations from the 1970's and 1980's were saturated with the banal.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the use of garbage which features repeatedly in earlier works, sometimes overtly and sometimes in the form of the broken-down or dysfunctional. In conversation with Boris Groys, Kabakov has spoken of the importance of garbage in his work; 'it is like a swamp in which both art and philosophy are submerged'.[20] Garbage, according to Groys, 'forms the great Other of our culture' a kind of shadow twin to the art object in that they are 'equally useless, non-functional, superfluous things, peripheral to the universal traffic in commodities.' That which ends up in the museum could equally end up in a dump, rendering garbage 'as the final, fantastic, universal context of all art'.[21]

Ilya Kabakov, *The Red Wagon,* 1991. *Image courtesy of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov.*

In *The Red Wagon* first installed in the Kunsthalle, Dussledorf, 1991, the spectator was presented with an exhibition within an exhibition, where mediocre socialist realist paintings adorned the exterior of a stationary train-wagon. At one end was a series of wooden platforms culminating in a ladder ascending pointlessly or optimistically to arrive at a no place in empty space; the front door to the wagon was locked. At the other end was a pile of garbage, outside, on the ground, in front of the back door through which Soviet-style music was blaring, mixed with tango music. Inside there was a dark space and a painting, a panorama of a future Soviet paradise, lit up from below. There was a bench where people could sit in front of the painting and listen.

Speaking of this installation, Kabakov described how viewers were often reluctant to leave. ‘Everyone understood that there is nothing more beautiful than the past. There was no irony, no derision: people rose reluctantly and sluggishly and walked out, so overwhelmed with emotion that they were unsteady

on their feet.'[22] Visitors would exit through the back door again and pick their way through the rubbish on the ground.

Ilya Kabakov, *Carrying out the Slop Pail,* 1980. Enamel on masonite, 150 x 210 cm. Collection Kunstmuseum, Basel. *Image courtesy of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov.*

Carrying out the Slop Pail, 1980, probably the best known from a series of white paintings, also makes reference to garbage. It takes the form of an apparent schedule for a fictional apartment block, a rota for residents to take out the garbage over a five year period. Against the bureaucratic weight of this schedule is contrasted a small splash of colour in the form of the garbage pail and its contents. It seems to stand for all that is formless, spontaneous, anarchic – the word 'refuse' seems particularly appropriate – what is ephemeral and excluded.

White is much more than a colour in the work of Kabakov; he uses it repeatedly in different ways, drawing upon its ambiguity and multiple associations to suggest complex and often contradictory realities. White can suggest purity, Divine Light, emptiness, absence, the clinic, the laboratory. Kasimir Malevich employed white as the embodiment of the ideas of Russian Suprematism; - ' . . . white

suprematism is on the way to white non-objective nature, to white excitations, white consciousness, and white purity as the highest stage of every condition, of repose as of motion'[23] Kabakov employs dirty white to suggest the tarnishing of such modernist transcendentalism, or uses fields of white to represent the possibility of escape as in his early work, the *Albums,* (1970 – 75*),* where characters float upwards into white emptiness; collaborative works by the Kabakovs increasingly employ pure white and/or white light interchangeably (*Palace of Projects* (1997) *House of Dreams,* (2005) *Manas,* (2007)) to explore utopian ideas of hope and possibility.

Boym describes the work of Kabakov as exploring '. . . the sideroads of modernity, the aspirations of the little men and amateur artists and the ruins of modern utopias.'[24]

> At the beginning of the century the visionaries were easily able to break with the past because all of their hopes were located in the future; they believed that a new era had begun and that they were part of it. Our generation, the generation of unofficial artists, did not have any future, because all of us were convinced that Soviet power would last for 10,000 years, that nothing would ever change. . . . . Therefore, each of us oriented his art not to the future but to the varied spaces of the past or of the existing Soviet environment.[25]

As this quote from Kabakov illustrates, the 'achievement' of utopia represents an irresolvable contradiction, what Ernst Bloch called '*the melancholy of fulfilment'*.[26] Utopia, once realised, would be subject to infinite repetition, posing an end-point of history and the negation of the future, a secular eternity without change - *'the boredom of Utopia".*[27]

This inherent contradiction binds the idea of utopia firmly to its dystopian shadow - a dark twinning that is at the core of all of the Kabakovs' work. Such is the case in *The House of Dreams* (Serpentine Gallery, London, 2005/06) in which visitors to the installation are lulled into a false sense of security through the installation's promise of a restful space in which to dream.

For their exhibition at the Serpentine, the Kabakovs designed a new installation responding to the tranquility of the Gallery's setting within Kensington Gardens. In *The House of Dreams*, they transformed the Gallery by creating a series of distinct meditative spaces, encouraging visitors to enter into a world of fantasy and daydreams. The installation was a place for rest and quiet contemplation.[28]

Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, *The House of Dreams,* 2005. Installation and mixed media. Serpentine Gallery, London. *Image courtesy of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov.*

After donning white plastic shoe covers, visitors were allowed to enter the installation where they were initially dazzled by intense whiteness; walls, floors, billowing white curtains surrounding an outer circle of cubicles containing white beds, white light, bright windows. Unlike earlier installations, there was a minimum of text or instructions. The visitor wandered freely, accepting the invitation to recline and dream, or not. The outer ring of cubicles surrounded a domed, central rotunda which had four structures built against its inside wall, each containing a chamber the size of a small walk-in cupboard. These darkened chambers also contained beds, but here the walls were lit with colorful moving images of

child-like cutouts; animals and fish, people on horseback. Each chamber had steps leading up its side to further beds on platforms; these were roped off and inaccessible, raising vaguely disturbing questions about their purpose, invoking the relationship between sleep and death.

The description of the installation from the Serpentine Gallery website is very much in contrast to comments that Kabakov himself has made about the nature of his installations;

> The fact of the matter is that I do not plan for any installation to be smooth and naturalistic; rather, it is meant to be an entry into repressive, communal zones. . . . . Generally, we're touching on a very important subject here: the subject of freedom, and of the coercion of the viewer in the installation space. In normal conditions, viewers forget about their bodies, which helps create the aesthetic effect. But what if they have to push their way past something or someone, as part of the author's artistic agenda? [29]

This is borne out by the experience of many visitors to the installation. The first impression of an oasis of restfulness gradually gave way to feelings of uncertainty and confusion about the kind of social behavior that might be appropriate in this conflation of public and private space. To enter a cubicle in which a stranger was lying on the narrow, white, slab-like bed, resting or dreaming, produced awkward sensations of voyeurism and intrusion. What kind of House was this – sanctuary, sanatorium, asylum, mortuary?

Like many of Kabakov's works, *The House of Dreams* was both oppressive and humane; it seemed to capture an affection for the frailty of the individual and to recognise the individual's need to temporarily escape from or transcend immediate circumstances. At the same time it suggested a controlled utopia that contained at every moment the possibility of becoming its opposite.

This theme continues in *The Center of Cosmic Energy* (Tufts University, USA, 2007) and *Manas* (Venice Biennale, 2007). Here, the Kabakovs have created works in which an awkward juxtaposition of

the credible and incredible leave the visitor in some confusion about how the work is to be received or understood, generating a certain friction in its play of narcissism and idealism, naïvete and a knowing appropriation of pop culture.

Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, *Manas,* 2007. Installation and mixed media. Aresnale, 52nd International Exhibition, Venice Biennale. *Image courtesy of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov.*

Each work is related to a larger project, *The Utopian City* and *Museum of Dreams,* planned for an abandoned industrial complex in Essen, Germany. This 'city' will be complete with technology for detecting and receiving 'cosmic energy'. *The Center of Cosmic Energy* is one aspect of the plan for this *Utopian City* which was realized at Tufts University by invitation. It took place over a number of levels, incorporating an archaeological 'dig' that revealed an ancient 'cosmic energy reservoir', authoritative 'academic' and 'scientific' accounts of cosmic energy and a museum-type exhibit of other sacred sites such as Stonehenge, the Pyramids of Sudan, Uluru, Angkor Wat etc.

Manas establishes a precedent for *The Utopian City*, with its intricate scale models of a 'former' utopian city in northern Tibet. It consists of a series of mountain observatories circling a crater, designed to collect cosmic energy, special dreams, and views of alien civilizations. One short text by the Kabakovs accompanies the work;

> The model of utopian city of Manas represents a reconstruction of a city that existed at one time in Northern Tibet. This city existed on two levels; on the level of the banal, everyday life that is occurring on the earth; and on the level of contact with a loftier world, primarily with the cosmos. This contact arose when the inhabitants of the city had ascended to the peaks of the 8 mountains that formed a ring surrounding the city. There were various objects located on each of these peaks, and inside of these objects one could receive cosmic energy, one could interact with extra-terrestrial civilizations, wind up in gardens of paradise . . .
>
> In the center of the city there was a deep circular cavity resembling the crater of an extinct volcano. But the unique thing about this place was not just these 8 mountains and the crater, but the fact that there was an exact identical city that was clearly discernible during certain days of the year only this one hovered in the sky. Hence the 'earthly' Manas was an exact copy of the 'heavenly' Manas.[30]

This is a long way from Kabakov's first work for the Venice Biennale, *Red Pavilion*, 1993, in which the fenced-off pavilion of the Russian Federation was filled with abandoned scaffolding and empty paint cans while a small, brightly painted hut located at the back of the pavilion played loud, Soviet-style music. The evident parody of the first work cannot be assumed to be present in *Manas*. There is absurdity but not the easy comfort of irony. The Kabakovs are, once again, engaging with material that is excluded from the realm of the aesthetic – alienology, altered states of consciousness and theories of mind expansion, mysticism and otherworld longings. Like garbage, this seems to represent a disavowed Other of 'serious' culture. 'Becoming receptive to cosmic energy' can be read

as an appeal to the visitor to suspend disbelief and surrender to the power of imagination, but it is suggestive also of other ideas, for example Mikhail Bakhtin's 'dialogism'[31] or Theodor Adorno's 'nonidentity thinking'[32], ideas that introduce into the standard subject/object mode of relation a third position, a field; not a spatial register but an active constituent of all exchanges, all communications, all processes.

This essay has put forward the idea that running right through modernism, as well as around and underneath it, were alternative forms of knowing that rejected or exceeded the architecture of thought within which modernism had been framed. These alternatives fell largely within the shadows and non-spaces of modernism, excluded from its formal configuration; the operation of inclusion /exclusion is such that the two are irrevocably bound together. This is evidenced by the way in which revolutionary avant-garde projects such as Dada and Surrealism employed shadow-aesthetics at critical, oppositional moments indicating the extent to which they were integral to the dynamics of modernism.

The fissuring of the modernist edifice was inevitable, given that modernism was 'a condition of tension, instability and, ultimately, irresolution'[33] as described by Elizabeth Mansfield. Susan Stanford-Friedman's account of 'multiple modernisms' reflects a reconfiguration of the geohistory of modernism which has made possible the recognition of "alternative, alterior, heterogeneous, hybrid and polycentric modernities"[34] contradicting both the temporal break asserted by post-modernism and the modernist idea of a progressive, linear time. This has generated the need for a more rhizomatic account of multiple, overlapping modernisms, which challenge the myth of a pure modernist form.

In his use of allegory, multiple temporalities and shadow-aesthetics (such as garbage, kitsch, excess, the drab, the amateur etc.) Kabakov aligns himself with a post-modern sensibility, shunning the rigid absolutes that he perceived in the work of Malevich and the revolutionary Russian avant-garde, rejecting also the pure forms and transcendent individual aesthetic such as one might encounter in Mondrian. Despite this, I propose that his work, individually and in partnership with Emilia, evades easy

classification under a simple opposition of modern and post-modern. There is a direct engagement with hopefulness, a lack of cynical detachment and, in spite of the preponderance of texts in his work, a belief in the possibility of a place beyond speech that defy a clean break with everything modernist. His work occupies a more hybrid place, between borders, out of time, where critical, oppositional residues of modernism have not yet ceased to resonate.

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BIOGRAPHY

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ENDNOTES

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