

Hidden in Plain Sight

ILYA AND EMILIA KABAKOV // THE SHIP OF TOLERANCE

By Jill Silverman van Coenegrachts



Since 2005, USSR-born and New York-based artists Ilya and Emilia Kabakov have presented *The Ship of Tolerance* in twelve locations around the world. The work began in Siwah, Egypt, as an installation where children of diverse backgrounds made drawings that became part of a boat's sail. In some way, this almost fairytale vision of a wooden-sided vessel—perhaps how children imagine Noah's ark—has a special set of qualities that question its nature as art or performance, as well as an articulation of one cryptic understanding of the universal need for tolerance. Across each of the cities, contributors to the installation are connected, if only by suffering the indignities that many large-scale cities do: poverty, violence, racism, discrimination against one ethnic group by another; similar headlines fill newspapers in whatever country you read them.

—The extended oeuvre of the Kabakovs has, in this project especially, seemingly leapt beyond the page, beyond the canvas, beyond the museum, beyond the gallery, and into a society that includes the young. Every iteration is somehow different; each time it is presented, the audience of children who have participated gather like a magic carpet around the boat—they are laughing and happy, as if the subject of tolerance itself evaporates into the daylight that surrounds the structure. This is not exactly the display an art installation usually garners, but the Kabakovs have never done art like any other artists.

—*The Ship of Tolerance* is both beyond the so-called “serious” studio practice many contemporary artists adhere to, and yet very much connected to it. I would suggest, in spite of their philanthropic and educational intentions,

The Ship of Tolerance bears a resemblance in its presence to certain large scale installations I have seen and often helped stage in exhibitions and museum shows.

—In the catalogue for their recent retrospective at the Tate Modern in London, *Ilya and Emilia Kabakov: Not Everyone Will Be Taken Into The Future*, both Robert Storr and Matthew Jesse Jackson, interestingly came to a similar moment of shared vision, though through much different methods. The trope of failed utopia, which often appears in the work of the Kabakovs, is used as a device that does two things at once. It presents the viewer with a likeness of something that appears to be ‘real,’ but is taken from a remembered past—notably, from



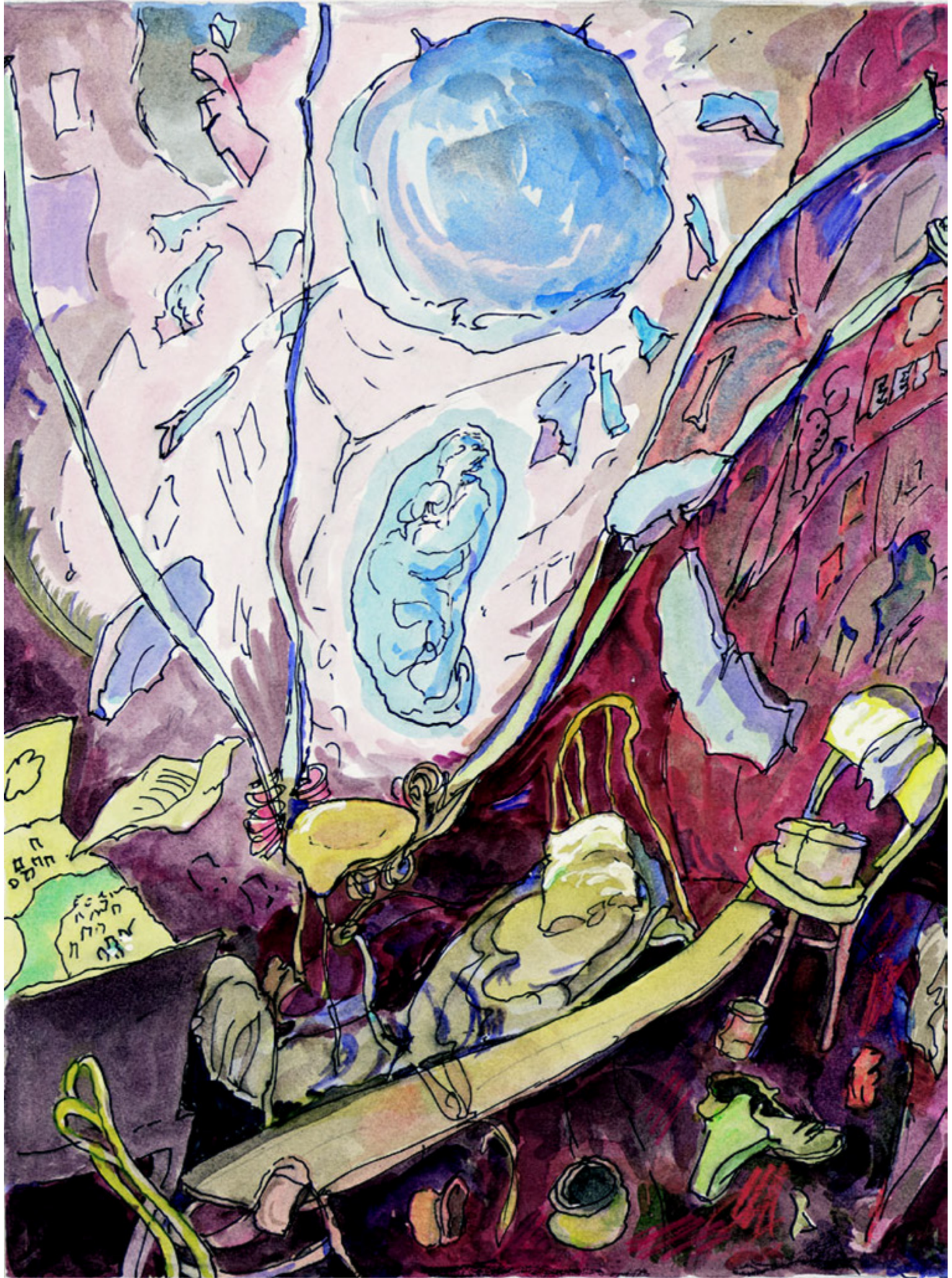
a time before the fall of Communism. Yet, there is an underlying sigh of relief within their work, audible as we walk through or past the Kabakovs' iconic large-scale installations. In the case of the piece *The Toilet*, exhibited at Documenta IX in 1992—a replica of public toilets the Kabakovs were familiar with in the USSR—viewers stand, noticing the dank smell of used clothes, old damp linoleum, and furniture from thrift shops. One is overwhelmed with the notion that even within this dreadful structure, we humans found a way to make a daily, happiness-filled reality, even if it was necessary to turn a communal out-house into a home. The Kabakovs' installations show us one thing while meaning something else—yes—but then the two opposite positions might be sides of one coin.

—Perhaps this dialectical position is what makes *The Ship of Tolerance*, in its apparent innocence, so interesting. The young participants are part of a larger picture; they bring the pain of real-world discrimination and racism to the work. Ilya Kabakov revealed this same type of desire—magical thinking and hunger—in *The Man Who Flew into Space* (1982–84), a staged installation of the aftermath of a man (the artist) who catapulted himself into outer space, like a Cosmonaut. While every one of us has felt this need to escape, few of us understand the seriousness of the Kabakovs' desire to escape Moscow in the 1970s and '80s. As a young artist working under the watchful eye of the USSR, Ilya illustrated children's books in which utopias were imaginative and story-like. In a sense, one can argue that these young eyes were his very first audience. Here, decades later, they become his interlocutor—they are his imagination in a *defacto* conundrum where we are forced to see the impotence of art's potential. This type of contrived naiveté in the drawings continues to be an immense source for the Kabakovs' installations today.

—At its best, the Kabakovs' viewers have a sense that walking through and experiencing their works could somehow make us better human beings. Wash our souls. Ignite a glimmer of celestial humanism for just a split second. This perhaps is a tongue-in-cheek unraveling of the utopian thinking fascists often employ for support, like the happy peasants that pepper the Kabakovs' installations and paintings. *But was not everyone happy under Stalin?*, they seem to ask us, beseeching our credulity to understand how history of any moment is written.

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—Yet, for these conceptual artists emerging from the darkness of Soviet Russia, irony—a strategy unfit for the danger that lurks in a totalitarian regime—was not necessarily a friend. One needed a double vision. Perhaps the initial desire of *The Ship of Tolerance* was to inspire the next generations to face these issues and respond from their own hands. But maybe the work is, in its own way, one of the great Kabakov installations hiding in plain sight, dressed as something we must only see as a brilliant philanthropic idea. Perhaps in actuality, it breaks through the third wall; a performance work that brings the audience into another original structure all together.

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The Chicago iteration of *The Ship of Tolerance* at Navy Pier runs through October 2019.

TITLE PAGE:

Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, *The Door I*, 2003. Watercolor and ink. 22 x 19 inches. © Ilya & Emilia Kabakov. Courtesy of Galleria Lia Rumma, Milano/Napoli.

PAGE 87:

Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, *The Door I*, 1997. Oil on canvas on wood. 90 x 41 x 6 inches. © Ilya & Emilia Kabakov. Courtesy of the artists.

PAGE 88:

Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*, 1982–84. Dimensions variable. Installation view, Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. © Ilya & Emilia Kabakov.

PAGE 89:

Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, concept drawing for *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*, 1985. Watercolor and ink on paper. © Ilya & Emilia Kabakov.

OPPOSITE, TOP:

Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, *The Toilet*, 1992. Installation view as part of Documenta IX. © Ilya & Emilia Kabakov.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM:

Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, concept drawing for *The Toilet*, 1992 in preparation for Documenta IX. Watercolor and ink. © Ilya & Emilia Kabakov.

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