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by

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Whose Fly is This? And the Beginning of Moscow Linguistic Conceptualism: Text and Image in the Early Works of Ilya Kabakov (1962-1966)

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Conceptualism: Text and Image in the Early Works of Ilya Kabakov
(1962-1966)***

by

Maia Todorova Toteva, B.A.; M.A.

Dissertation

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Dedication

To my family

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***Whose Fly is This? And the Beginning of Moscow Linguistic
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Maia Todorova Toteva, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

Supervisor: Richard Shiff

This dissertation examines the early works of the Russian artist Ilya Kabakov and traces the beginning of a linguistic trend in the development of Moscow Conceptualism. Analyzing the drawings and paintings that the artist created between 1962 and 1966, I place Kabakov's artistic style and ideas in the context of the cultural, theoretical and scientific phenomena that affected Soviet art and society in the early 1960s. Kabakov's works are shown as evolving in a process that renders the artist's techniques increasingly polysemantic, dialogic and conceptual. The dissertation then demonstrates that Kabakov's visual images and linguistic titles participated, indirectly yet actively, in the cultural debates of Moscow's artistic underground and the Soviet society. The dynamic correspondence between a fervent cultural context, growing interest in linguistic and scientific ideas, increasing conceptualization of visual means of expression and intellectualization of the artistic approach to the image led to the appropriation of language in the works of Moscow underground artists. The dissertation establishes such a development in the early works of Ilya Kabakov, proposing that his earliest "conversational" work *Whose Fly is This?* was the first conceptual painting to display text in the form of a written dialogue. The colloquial style and conversational character

of the depicted discourse are examined as an ironic gesture that takes its genesis from the polyphonic theory of Mikhail Bakhtin and reverses the official non-dialogical imperatives of Soviet *newspeak* and ideology. The main figural image of the painting—the *fly*—is seen as articulating the utopias and anti-utopias of avant-garde figures such as Kharms or Malevich and interpreted as alluding to a key contemporaneous scientific discovery—the chromosomes of the *drosophila*. In the end, the words and the image of *Whose Fly is This?* form the two mutually exclusive and mutually complementary aspects of a compound conceptual signifier. That is the signifier of the free artistic spirit, evanescent human existence and mundane, yet resilient human nature that ironically survives—against all odds and despite all absurdities—beyond the boundary of the social utopia and the limits of epistemological systems.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation took as its point of departure two initial questions: Why did conceptualists begin using language as a means of artistic expression in the 1960s and what teleology did such an artistic gesture imply. The framework of this inquiry was predicated upon two corresponding presumptions: (1) there is a firmly established conventional notion of what conceptualism, as a term, signifies and (2) there was a movement or a phenomenon in the Soviet Union in the 1960s that can be properly described by using such Western terminology. Due to the narrow scope of its pursuit, this dissertation leaves aside the issues of whether there was Russian conceptualism; what artists or genres it included; what were its major locations or centers and whether Western notions adequately translate its local characteristics and cultural specificities.

Nestled within a plethora of Western scholarly publications on conceptual art, this project borrows Henry Flynt's term in its general sense as a reference to artistic practices that emphasize the meaning or ideas of the work rather than its material or visual form.¹ What in the West was articulated as a visual rejection of formalism, the critical writing of Clement Greenberg or the aesthetic of modernist monochromatic painting, in Eastern Europe was seen as a reaction to different cultural and historic conditions.² Russian

¹ For instance, Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003); *Idea Art: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Gregory Battcock (E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc, 1973); Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer, *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975*. (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996); *Rewriting Conceptual Art*. Ed. Michael Newman and Jon Bird. (London: Reaktion Book, 1999); Ursula Meyer, *Conceptual Art*. (New York: E.P.Dutton, 1972) and Wood, Paul. *Conceptual Art*. (London: Tate, 2002).

² Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

unofficial art of the 1960s, for instance, emerged partly in response to the rigid rules of the Party nomenklatura and the Soviet Academy, as an alternative to the clichéd style of official art or propaganda and as an escape from the cultural isolationism of Stalinist politics. In contrast to Western conceptualism, the Soviet artists had neither an easy access to the venues of the Western cultural tradition or the earlier Russian avant-gardes from the 1920s-1930s, nor the freedom to purchase high-quality artistic materials, to exhibit nonconformist art or to participate in national or international markets and exchange of ideas. Throughout all chapters, this dissertation exploits familiar Western terminology that has been adopted or modified by East European and Russian scholars; e.g., conceptualism, linguistic conceptualism or Moscow Conceptualism.³ However, those notions are employed with the awareness that they discard, at least terminologically, various cultural, regional and local specificities.⁴

A third set of preconceptions that I borrow pertains to the established notion that Ilya Kabakov was as a key figure of the Russian conceptual movement, a leading member of Moscow conceptualism and a beginner of the linguistic trend in Moscow conceptual art; i.e., linguistic conceptualism. Although the examination of Russian

³ For slight modifications of the Western notion of “conceptualism” that were coined to reflect the specificity of the Moscow movement see Boris Groys’ proposition of “romantic conceptualism” or Victor Tupitsyn’s use of “Moscow communal conceptualism” and “communal postmodernism.” Boris Groys, “Moskovskii romanticheskii konseptualizm,” in *A-Ia 1* (1979): 3-11; Victor Tupitsyn, “Moscow Communal Conceptualism,” in *Parachute* 82 (April-June 1996): 24-29; and Victor Tupitsyn, “Kommunal’nyi (post)modernizm” (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 1998).

⁴ For Russian sources appropriating the Western term see Margarita Tupitsyn, “On Some Sources of Soviet Conceptualism,” in *Nonconformist Art: The Soviet Experience, 1956-1986* ed. Alla Rosenfeld and Norton T. Dodge (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995); Margarita Tupitsyn, “About Early Soviet Conceptualism,” in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), 99-108; Ekaterina A. Bobrinskaia, *Kontseptualizm*. (Moskva: Galart, 1994); and Natalia Tamruchi, *Moscow Conceptualism 1970-1990* (East Roseville: Craftsman House, 1995).

conceptualism and, particularly, the Moscow movement remains outside of my scope, the project addresses an essential aspect of that phenomenon by analyzing the conceptualization of word and image in the art of Kabakov and by tracing the genesis of Kabakov's "conversational" paintings. On the basis of the artist's early autobiographic writing and recent interviews, the dissertation examines the 1965-66 painting *Chiya eta mukha? (Whose Fly is This?)* as Kabakov's first instance of using a written dialogue in the genre of painting. Rather than ascribing such novel gesture to its methodological derivation—the episteme of conceptualism—which was yet to gain recognition in the Russian artistic consciousness in the 1960s, I seek its roots and sources in various artistic, cultural and intellectual circumstances. Following different trajectories of thinking about the problem of language in art, the dissertation intentionally employs various methodological approaches, ways of interpretation or modes of inquiry—from critical assessments and autobiographical writings, to historical overviews and formal analysis. The goal is to convey the complexity of the historical and epistemological frames within which the conceptual phenomenon took an ideational shape as well as to suggest that the issue of language and/or art could only be understood in relation to a multiplicity of planes of analysis.

Positioned as a gradual opening of the problem that is meant to introduce a predominantly Western audience to the international conceptual phenomenon and its Russian "star" Ilya Kabakov, the first chapter *Quartet 1968-2000: the Kernel, the Duo and the Voice Behind the Curtain* represents a curatorial perspective. The case in point is the exhibit *August 1968 September 2000 Baldessari, Kabakov, Kosuth, Pistoletto* curated

by Peter Pakesch at the Kunsthalle in Basel in September 2000—a carefully choreographed show in which *Whose Fly is This?*, displayed in a later version and with a fluctuating chronological marker, occupied a strategically heightened position. Giving due respect to the masterful marketing and effective rhetoric of the show, the chapter unfolds the perplexity of the painting’s conceptual strategy and charts the dazzle as well as the insufficiency of *Quartet*’s musical vision in explaining multifaceted issues. The chapter then uses Kabakov’s essay *Ukrivatel’stvo* [*Concealment*] published in *Quartet*’s catalogue as a transition to the next frame of analysis for the reason that *Concealment* discusses the artist’s dialogic consciousness as well as his linguistic and artistic premises.

The second chapter *From the “Indexical” to the “Iconic”: How the Shower Appeared in the Early 1960s* employs a different line of approach—a personal trajectory that is aligned more directly with the 1960s—and a different mode of inquiry. It concentrates on Kabakov’s earliest published autobiographic writing: his memoir *60-e—70-e... Zapiski o neofitsial’noy zhizni v Moskve* [*1960s-1970s... Notes on the Unofficial Life in Moscow*] written in the early 1980s and published in 1999 in German and in Russian. Reading closely the language and methodology used by the artist, the chapter identifies some of the key factors that affected the drastic change of Kabakov’s artistic approach to the image and led to the sudden appearance of the *Shower* series in 1962. Some of the factors are autobiographical—e.g., in 1962 Kabakov met the artists Yuri Sobolev and Ülo Sooster, the leading members of the so-called *Znanie* [Knowledge] circle. Thereby, Kabakov became closely associated with, what seemed to be by all accounts, the most “intellectual” branch of Moscow’s underground in the 1960s. Other

factors discussed are methodological—in the early 1960s Kabakov’s articulation of his visual perceptions shows an increasing awareness of the semiotic composition of the artistic image, and, after 1962, he more actively employs an apparatus associated with the structural-semiotic movement and its formalist forerunners; e.g., *sign*, *emblem*, *emblem-symbol*, *faktura* [*facture*] and *ostranenie* [*defamiliarization*]. A third set of factors demonstrates an inner development in Kabakov’s phenomenology of the visual in which the *form* becomes separated from the *content* and refers to it only symbolically by way of “shells,” “clouds,” “associations” and cognitive memories. By the same token, the authorial acts of creation and interpretation, in Kabakov’s words, become an “active investigation” or “departure” into “distant areas of culturology, philosophy, social psychology.”

The third chapter *Cybernetics, the Structural-Semiotic Movement and the Man-Machine Analogy* follows the direction projected by Kabakov’s own structural metaphors and offers a historical overview of the fervent influx of intellectual movements and ideas that affected Soviet culture and society in the early 1960s. Among those trends, the chapter devotes a special attention to the rubrics dealing with language—structuralism, semiotics, cybernetics (or cybernetic linguistics), automation, theory of information and mathematical linguistics. To signal the cultural overlap and interdependence between structuralism and semiotics in Soviet Russia, I adopt the term “structural-semiotic movement.” The chapter traces the genesis, impact and development of the international scientific and “linguistic turn” in both Eastern Europe and the West to cast particular light on the cultural responses and controversies it caused in the Soviet Union after the death

of Stalin and through the early 1960s. The analysis appropriates Slava Gerovitch's notion of *cyberspeak*—i.e., the “technical,” “precise” language of cybernetics employed in the 1960s as a counteraction against the *newspeak* or the ideological language of the communist system—and demonstrates that cybernetics was a key player not only on the rhetorical and scientific fronts, but also in cultural and artistic circles. In those spheres, the *cyberspeak* or cybernetic ideologeme served as an umbrella encompassing and protecting novel ideas, avant-garde methods and nonconformist phenomena.

The fourth chapter *The Birth of the Conceptual Image: Kabakov's Works in the Early 1960s* returns to the use of language in art and reconsiders the process of conceptualization of the visual in Kabakov's drawings and paintings created during the same period. By way of close visual and linguistic analysis, the chapter establishes that Kabakov's conceptual works indirectly participated in the cultural battle between ideological languages (*newspeak*, literary clichés and poetic metaphors) and the influx of new scientific and theoretical notions connected with semiotics, cybernetics and structuralism. Furthermore, those notions created a novel type of visual language, that Kabakov described as a “new aesthetic movement,” promulgated by the magazines *Znanie* [Knowledge] and *Znanie-Sila* [Knowledge is Power] and the magazines' artistic director Yuri Sobolev. With their polysemantic layers, Kabakov's early paintings and drawings engage key *signifiers* that point to both the *cyberspeak* and the *newspeak* of contemporaneous Soviet culture—the *pipe*, the *ball*, the *fly*, the *automaton* (*automat*), the *soul* and the *head* (as cybernetic control mechanism). In the spirit of his friends Sobolev and Sooster, Kabakov's art both embraces the new intellectual trends and, by means of

artistic absurd, play and irony, reveals the limitations of the scientific laws of logic, cause-and-effect or reason.

The conclusion *Whose Fly is This? In Wide Retrospect* returns to the conceptual work which opened the dissertation's curatorial journey and intellectual inquiry. Through the lenses of the discussed scientific developments and cultural debates, the tantalizing "conversational painting" acquires yet another semantic layer. Its main figural image, the "fly," is seen as articulating the utopias or anti-utopias of avant-garde figures, such as Kharms or Malevich, and interpreted as alluding to a key contemporaneous scientific discovery—the chromosomes of *Drosophila*. Published in *Znanie* and *Znanie-Sila* in 1965-66, the discovery was made by researchers in genetics—a most provocative nonconformist discipline which, after being banned for decades under the regime of Stalin, reemerged anew under the banner of Soviet cybernetics. Similarly, the dialogic remarks written on Kabakov's painting are read as a coded reference to the theory of polyphonic discourse proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin whose book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Kabakov read shortly after it was republished in 1963. In the retrospect of such conclusion, the words and the image of *Whose Fly is This?* form the two mutually exclusive and mutually complementary aspects of a compound conceptual signifier. That is the signifier of the free artistic spirit, evanescent human existence and mundane, yet resilient human nature that ironically survives—against all odds and despite all absurdities—beyond the boundaries of social utopias, cognitive limits and epistemological systems.

CHAPTER 1

Quartet 1968-2000: the Kernel, the Duo and the Voice

Behind the Curtain

I. Quartet and its Master Conductor

On 9 September 2000 the Kunsthalle in Basel opened a group exhibition that featured works by four contemporaneous artists—John Baldessari, Ilya Kabakov, Joseph Kosuth and Michelangelo Pistoletto.⁵ In conjunction with the joint event, the museum published a small but masterfully orchestrated catalogue that captured the ambitions of the exhibition and presented, in bold white letters, the show's cumulative title: *Quartett August 1968 September 2000 Baldessari, Kabakov, Kosuth, Pistoletto* (Fig. 1).⁶ As the detailed heading demonstrates, the number four assumes a special role in Quartet's structural and metaphoric logistics.⁷ Playing on the symmetrical overtones of the

⁵ The exhibit remained on display for two months, from September 9, 2000 until November 12, 2000.

⁶ The major textual contributions to the catalogue are published in German and in English. The title of the show coincides with the title of the catalogue and, apart from the German spelling of the first word, the rest could be seen as polylingual: *Quartett August 1968 September 2000 Baldessari, Kabakov, Kosuth, Pistoletto* (Basel: Schwabe & Co. AG, 2000), unpaginated. Rendered with white Ariel letters in the middle of the catalogue's cover, the title stands out in sharp contrast with the dark pictures of the newspaper shown in the background (Fig. 1). Thus, word and image play a key role in the catalogue's intermarriage of factual and artistic as they simultaneously compete and complement each other, utilizing devices such as color, size and spatial positioning.

⁷ Not immediately apparent, the number four figures prominently in both registers of the divided title. Marking the beginning of the upper line of text, the idea of quadruple accordance is embedded in the musical term *quartet*, while, in the lower register of the title, the same number corresponds to the family names of the four featured artists. Ibid.

quadruple genre, the catalogue essay written by the museum director Peter Pakesch nests the curatorial dilemma of geographic expansion and artistic unity into the paradoxical palindrome of similarities in dissimilars and differences in similarities.⁸ As a result, the divergent artistic phenomena appear tightly intertwined in an ensemble of musical harmonies, while the centrifugal/centripetal predicament of the show's international scope finds a balanced equivalence in the equilibrium of similar and dissimilar properties.⁹

As Pakesch's essay reveals, the "constellation" of the Quartet brings together four stars "from four different corners of the earth: Baldessari—from California, Kabakov from Russia—then the Soviet Union—Kosuth from the east coast of America, and Pistoletto from Italy, in the middle of Europe."¹⁰ The symmetrical assemblage of four artists/four stars/four terrestrial foundations furnishes with a dazzling rhetorical guise the subtle discrepancies in Quartet's systematic topography. Upon a closer examination, however, one would soon recognize that two of the four earthly zones are located in the same superpower state in North America and that a single East European astral entry may

⁸ The short four-page essay, authored by the museum director and printed in German and English, is the first text published in the catalogue under the title *20. August 1968 September 2000—ein Versuch*, translated as *20. August 1968 September 2000—an Experiment*. See Peter Pakesch, "20 August 1968 September 2000—ein Versuch" in *Quartett*, unpaginated. Although the idea of the quartet is replaced in the title with the modest denominator "experiment," the notion of the exhibition's musical unity, in fact, occupies a central place in Pakesch's essay. Thus, the text not only serves as an introduction to the show's ideas, but also assumes a leading role in Quartet's rhetorical marketing.

⁹ The search for synchronies within the discordance affects various levels of the artistic arrangement: from the apt placement of individual artworks and the symmetrical scheme of exhibiting to the ambition of uniting future, present and past in the common framework of a balanced geopolitical climate.

¹⁰ Instead of "from four different corners of the earth," the German original states "aus vier verschiedenen Weltgegenden" or literally "from four different parts [i.e., regions or zones] of the world." While the allusion to the archetypal terrestrial pillars is less prominent in the original, the use of the German equivalent of "constellation"—Konstellation—undoubtedly evokes cosmological associations. Op. cit., Pakesch.

appear at odds in the orbit of a predominantly Western governance.¹¹ Nevertheless, no subtle incongruities can diminish the show's infringement of Cold War binaries, and no geopolitical inconsistencies can weaken its ambition to expand "the horizon of our geography of art" or to "scrutinize our more recent history in general, and the development of global art in particular."¹²

Extending the quadruple accordance of the synchronous genre to the structural levels of display, the catalogue includes two sets of primary texts—four newspaper summaries and four artists' essays—which follow (and, by the same token, support) the introduction of the museum director.¹³ First, with the intent to picture a "backdrop" of historical events and to "provide even more material from this era," the book assembles the brief summaries of the front pages of four daily newspapers, "which the four artists might have read on 20 August 1968 and which also served as basic material: the *Izvestija* from Moscow, the *Corriere della Sera* from Milan, the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*."¹⁴ Second, the publication presents the four artists' essays,

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² In this case, the English translation corresponds almost literally to the original with the exception of the milder appeal of the infinitive "to consider" (zu betrachten) instead of "to scrutinize." "So bedeutet diese Konstellation die Möglichkeit, auf unterschiedlichen Wegen unsere neuere Geschichte im allgemeinen und die Entwicklung einer globalen Kunst im Speziellen zu betrachten." Ibid.

¹³ The essay of Peter Pakesch explicates the parameters of the catalogue's structure and makes evident the motivation behind such a highly organized arrangement. Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. The four newspapers summarized in the catalogue were published in the native countries and in the languages of the four artists on 20 August 1968. The importance of this date is briefly addressed by Peter Pakesch as "just one day in an uneasy time, one day before a historically far-reaching effect." Ibid. His reflection on the significance of the following day, however, is more eloquent: "The day which followed was the day on which that decade lost something of its innocence: The invasion of Prague by Warsaw Pact troops represented a further climax in the Cold War, and, as we know with hindsight, was the beginning of the end of the Iron Curtain and with it the division of the world into ideological systems." Ibid. Whether August 20th was "just one day in an uneasy time" is, in retrospect, debatable since that was the day in which the military rhetoric of the two ideological systems and the political propaganda of the Cold War reached, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, an unprecedented climax. Hardly accidental, the choice of

correspondingly, one text for each one of Quartet’s stars and their mapped geographic locations.¹⁵ The primary sources are then followed by a comparable number of reproductions, which—arranged as a “kernel” of four contemporaneous artworks—feature one masterpiece by each contributor and open the joint installation (Figs. 3, 4, 6 and 7).¹⁶ Finally, the catalogue’s small gallery provides two wide shots of the installation’s main venue—the skylight room (Figs. 2 and 8). The gallery then closes

August 20th as a “point of reference” for the exhibit puts an emphasis on the common propaganda techniques of the Cold War enemies, rather than on their historical actions.

¹⁵ Published in German and English and arranged in an alphabetical order, the artists texts are as follows: “Zehn Parabeln” (Ten Parables) by John Baldessari, “Das Verbergen” (Concealment) by Ilya Kabakov, “Kunst nach der Philosophy” (Art after Philosophy) by Joseph Kosuth and “Ein Brief” (A Letter) by Michelangelo Pistoletto. *Quartett*. Remarkably different in their genres, tone and subject matter, the essays seem to have certain commonalities. Thus, according to the director, they are “either written in that particular year [1968] or dealing of aspects of that time, so that they communicate an impression of where the artists then stood.” Op. cit., Pakesch.

¹⁶ In all fairness, this figurative designation of the foursome assemblage should be attributed to the translator Pauline Cumbers as the German original uses the more neutral “four works in the center of the skylight room installation”: “Ein gemeinsamer Aspekt ihres jeweiligen Standorts manifestiert sich mit vier Werken im Zentrum der Ausstellung im Oberlichtsaal.” Op. cit., Pakesch. Arranged alphabetically on four subsequent catalogue pages, the kernel includes the following multilingual number of titles in the way and order in which they are published: *Place a Book in a Strong Light and This is What You Will See* by John Baldessari (Fig. 6), *Wem gehört diese Fliege?* by Ilya Kabakov (Fig. 3), *Titled (A.A.I.A.I.)* by Joseph Kosuth (Fig. 4) and *Metrocubo d’infinito* by Michelangelo Pistoletto (Fig. 7). Encompassing a variety of techniques and genres, from drawing and photography, through painting and photostats, to sculpture composed of mirrors, the works are united, in Pakesch’s view, because they exhibit a “common feature of their [the artists’] respective stands” and therefore “are located in the skylight room.” Furthermore, according to Pakesch, the “four artworks—at least in the initial versions—all date from the year 1968, bring the artists into close proximity, and lead into the joint installation. All four artworks have something similar about them; that moment when the conceptual begins to ask about the content. We encounter four approaches about thinking of art as a concept. These are clearly different in origin and do not disavow the cultures they spring from, indeed, they can be conclusively explained from out of those cultures.” Ibid. Subsequently, I refer to Kabakov’s painting with its more common English title *Whose Fly is This?*, which is the literal equivalent of the Russian original *Chiya eta muha?* and is closer to it than Pauline Cumbers’ translation “*Who own this fly?*” in *Quartett*. The latter phrase changes the linguistic agency and the grammatical subject of the sentence and, through this, shifts the emphasis from the fly to its owner and the relation of the ownership. *Whose Fly is This?*, in contrast, puts the accent back on the main component—the fly—on the deictic gesture; i.e., the linguistic “pointing” performed by the pronoun (*this*), and on the act of inquiring. In the Russian title, the emphasis is evenly distributed between the relation of attribution or possession (*chia* i.e. *whose*), the grammatical act and pointing (*eta* i.e. *is* and *this*) and the subject (*mukha* i.e. *fly*) because each lexical unit receives a syntactical accent for being in the beginning, in the end or in the middle of the symmetrical composition.

with four mid shots of Quartet's smaller rooms and individual artworks (Figs. 9, 10 and 11).¹⁷

To its credit, the catalogue does not only rely on musical harmonies and cosmogonic implications to conjure up the map of a new world balance. Neither does the show simply combine micro-artistic (four artists) and macro-historic factors (four geopolitical contexts) to envision the horizons of an expanded art geography. The centrifugal rhetoric of cultural expansion implemented in the show's marketing and in the beginning of the director's essay is bound to encounter, on at minimum four occasions,

¹⁷ What seems to be a random selection of images on the last five pages suggests, in fact, a keen compositional thinking. The first long shot of the skylight room—the establishing shot—includes full or partial views of works by each one of the artists: *20 August 1968* by Kabakov, in the background, *Metrocubo d'infinito* by Pistoletto, to the left in the middle, *Per Cola et Commata* by Kosuth, installed on the skylight-roof window above, and *Five 1968 Films (new)* by Baldessari which is projected in the dark room the door to which, slightly open, is visible in the middle section to the right of Pistoletto's sculpture (Fig. 8). That such an assembly of works is not accidental becomes clear when one looks at the preceding and subsequent pages. Pistoletto's cube, rendered as a close up, emerges on the adjacent left page to echo the central positioning of the same artwork in the skylight room on the right page (Fig. 7). When the viewers turn the *recto* with the establishing shot of the skylight room, on its *verso* they would encounter a full-blown version of *20 August 1968*, Kabakov's installation from the background of the previous page (Fig. 2). Through a sharp contrast of white and black, the viewer is then transitioned to a dark room and a still from Baldessari's films projected on the large screen in the middle. Once adjusted to the change in the setting and color, the viewer discovers a slightly open door to the left through which one can see the brightness of the skylight room and a tiny portion of the Kabakov's *20 August* installation. The reversed (positive) image of the same ajar door refers to the Kabakov's work on the verso of the adjacent page and to the negative version of the same door that leads to the dark room in the establishing shot. Continuing with the ambiance of dimmed light which takes over the skylight room, the next page presents a close view of Kosuth's neon installation (Fig. 11). This work could be seen only in darkness as it is composed of neon lights-words installed on the roof window of the skylight room. After three close-ups showing works of Kabakov, Baldessari and Kosuth, the catalogue then devotes one page to Pistoletto's two installations *Outdoor* and *Office* (Fig. 10). Taking as its point of departure the dark setting of the neon work on the opposite page, the eye path moves from left to right and from the top to the bottom of the picture. The motion starts with the dim skylight room seen on the upper left, through the three sculptures echoed in both Pistoletto's installations—the green door, the globe and the car—to the show's last room *Office* and, ultimately, out of the exhibit. The symbolic departure or exit from *Outdoor* to the *Office* seems to be ironic because it leads to a darker and enclosed space the orientation of which points back to the lighter *Outdoor* and reverses the dead-end *Office* perspective. Metaphorically, this visual return to *Outdoor* reverses the trajectory of the triangular desk to point back, through the open door, to the wide world of travel (the globe and the car) and the darker historical memories (the dimmed skylight room and Kabakov's installation on the upper left). This visual circle echoes the semantic duality of the theme, utopia, which unites past and future.

the mighty counterpart of the exhibition's union. The first and most discernible instance of such an encounter takes place at the threshold established by the theory of discourse analysis as one of the two most important margins of the text—the text's title. Hence, in the heading *Quartett August 1968 September 2000 Baldessari, Kabakov, Kosuth, Pistoletto* the idea of individual and cultural diversity carried by the sequence of four proper nouns (i.e., four names of artists) is balanced by the harmonious connotations, figurative effect and compositional prominence of the musical metaphor—Quartet.¹⁸

Not immediately apparent, yet similarly important, the other demonstrations of Quartet's centrifugal/centripetal contrapposto take on the three main aspects of the exhibit's taut coherence—the thematic, the chronological and the aesthetic—to form the central impetus of Pakesch's rhetorical dialectic. By way of dynamic transpositions, once enthralled by the breath of Quartet's "new geography," the reader of the essay is then bound to comprehend the strong foundations of the constellation's union.¹⁹ The first degree of integration is time-specific because, as the director of the museum confers, all

¹⁸ In the traditional paradigm of reading as a linear progression in time, the title occupies a special place, comparable only to the text's ending. Designating the boundary between text and presupposition or text and silence, the title is the first linguistic sign that accosts the reader and often conveys the theme or the summary of the text. Placed between the text and the reader, the title has been seen as a paratext (supplementary text) or a metatext (commentary text) in relation to the work. In the context of the catalogue, the first word of the heading carries a special syntactical weight as it is the first linguistic sign to confront the text's recipient. Versed in rhetorical eloquence, the designer of Kunsthalle's Quartet has chosen an apt discursive strategy, because, with its position in the beginning of the title, the catalogue and the show, the musical metaphor asserts the show's vision of harmony and unity. (Fig 1)

¹⁹ Pakesch's essay credits the four artists with "expanding the horizon of our geography of art:" "The significance of those events has changed yet again from today's viewpoint, above all since the fall of the Berlin Wall. This has also had an impact on the geography of art, which has altered considerably in the meantime, not least due to the significant involvement and influence of the four artists united here... Whereas Kosuth and Pistoletto have always been intent on making an impact internationally, in the course of the years Baldessari and Kabakov have made decisive contributions towards expanding the geography of art." Op. cit., Pakesch.

of the works in the show are “firmly rooted in the 1960s.”²⁰ The second display of Quartet’s unison, to follow more or less promptly in the German original and in the English translation, combines the show’s chronological and thematic aspects in order to ascertain that “an important role [is] being assumed by their [the works’] specific treatment of the theme of utopia, for which that period also stands.”²¹ Semantically broad and somewhat ambivalent, Quartet’s theme, utopia, is bound to remain as non-specific as it seems feasible to encompass the variety of pieces in the exhibition.²² The show’s chronological span, instead, undergoes gradual temporal contractions from “the 1960s,” through “the year 1968,” to “the 20 August [1968] in particular,” as the latter mark becomes “the point of reference for the installation.”²³

As mentioned, the third aspect of the show’s apt coherence pertains to the aesthetic characteristics of the displayed phenomena. In this regard, the so-defined “kernel of the exhibition”—an ensemble of four artworks by the four artists arranged in

²⁰ In the original statement, which coincides with the second sentence of the Pakesch’s essay, the four artists and important parts of their works are anchored in the 1960s: “Die vier Künstler sind mit wichtigen Teilen ihres Werkes fest in den 60er Jahren verankert.” Ibid. In the English translation the same statement is combined with the following sentence to compose a compound argument: “Important works by the four artists involved are firmly rooted in the 1960s, an important role being assumed by their specific treatment of the theme of utopia, for which that period also stands.” Ibid.

²¹ In German, the argument of thematic unity stands as a separate syntactic entity—a third sentence in the text: “Dabei spielt der spezifische Umgang mit der Utopie, für den diese Zeit auch steht, eine besondere Rolle.” Ibid.

²² For example, according to the Compact Oxford Dictionary, utopia refers to: (1) an imaginary island depicted by Thomas More as enjoying a perfect social, legal and political system, (b) any imaginary, indefinitely remote region, country or locality, (2) a place, state or condition ideally perfect in respect to politics, laws, customs and conditions, (b) an impossibly ideal scheme, especially for social improvement. In other words, the term refers simultaneously to three ideas and their semantic overlaps: a perfect place, an imaginary or unknown location and impossible ideal conditions. See *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 2207.

²³ “As already mentioned, our point of reference was the year 1968, and in that year, the 20 August in particular...” and “...we decided to make the 20 August 1968 the point of reference for the installation.” Op. cit., Pakesch.

“close proximity” in the museum’s skylight room—embodies an emblem of musical synchrony because, as the catalogue essay confers, “All four works have something similar about them; that moment when the conceptual begins to ask about the content.”²⁴ Rendered rather poetically, this initial reflection on the ensemble’s homogeneity unfurls somewhat equivocal due to, among other causes, the difficulty of capturing the inception of conceptual inquisitiveness on the matter of meaning. In contrast, the second line of reasoning on the state of the quadruple union combines artistic complexity with a dialectical approach and rhetorical amplification. In brief, the seeds of the kernel “are clearly different in origin” as they demonstrate different “approaches to art as a concept” and “can be conclusively explained from out of those [their original] cultures”; yet, despite their cultural divergences, these artworks are deeply united because in “all four cases the question asked is about art, about the function of art.”²⁵ As a “major preoccupation at that time,” the question about art plays, in Pakesch’s view, a central place in Kunsthalle’s exhibit because it “lends the works an aura of self-reference, self-reflection” and establishes the featured artists as “personalities who started something new and in their capacity as innovators influenced later generations of artists.”²⁶

²⁴ Ibid. This statement immediately follows and supports the earlier claims of the kernel’s unison given in the preceding two sentences: “A common feature of their [the artists’] respective stands is manifest in four works that form the kernel of this exhibition and are located in the skylight room. These four works—at least in their initial versions—all date from the year 1968, bring the artists into close proximity, and lead into the joint installation.” Ibid.

²⁵ “We encounter four approaches to thinking of art as a concept. These are clearly different in origin and do not disavow the cultures they spring from, indeed, they can be conclusively explained from out of those cultures. In all four cases the question asked is about art, about the function of art, a question we know was a major preoccupation at that time.” Ibid.

²⁶ “This lends the works an aura of self-reference, self-reflection. Yet they also point beyond that to question the function of art, the altered meaning and contents of any future practice of art. In these four protagonists we thus recognize personalities who started something new and in their capacity as innovators

Embodying the show's synchrony, the kernel epitomizes the "aura of self-reference, self-reflection" and concentrates the question "about art, about the function of art" in the dialogue of the two artworks placed in its compositional center.

II. A Duo in the Kernel's Nexus

Convened in the installation's main venue—Kunsthalle's skylight room—the kernel comprises the visual and conceptual motto of the exhibit (Figs. 3, 4, 6 and 7). Therefore, the four heterogeneous works not only harbor the seeds of Quartet's chronological, thematic and aesthetic chromosome, but also, as the essay of the director explains, compose a harmonious and close family relationship. Positioned strategically in the skylight room, the masterworks flesh out the show's spatial dialectic because, in Pakesch's words, they "bring the artists into close proximity, and lead into the joint installation."²⁷ As aptly as such kernel performance conforms to the democratic creeds of the exhibit, the linear communication of the viewer with the illustrated catalogue establishes a different set of inner bonds and spatial relations.

influenced later generations of artists. This is particularly evident in the current part of the overall installation, which was conceived specially for the skylight room at the Kunsthalle in Basel." Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid. In fact, the original text of the essay suggests that the four works were positioned in the "center" of the skylight room, although one may still ponder whether the director refers to the physical or compositional center of the installation: "Ein gemeinsamer Aspekt ihres jeweiligen Standorts manifestiert sich mit vier Werken im Zentrum der Ausstellung im Oberlichtsaal. Die vier Werke, die alle von 1968 datieren, zumindest in ersten Versionen, bringen die Künstler in eine unmittelbare Nähe und führen in die gemeinsame Installation ein." Ibid.

The catalogue's reproductions suggest that the combination of image and text comprises the chief installation strategy of the exhibit.²⁸ In the book, the employment of the same key media follows two types of rules—a compositional progression from printed words to visual illustrations and an alphabetic sequence from Baldessari, through Kabakov and Kosuth, to Pistoletto. Placed in the beginning of the catalogue's nine-page gallery which constitutes the book's final section, the kernel representations mark the transition from text to image and implement the pre-established alphabetic sequence. The impact of the catalogue's kernel, therefore, echoes the role of the kernel-referent in the exhibit: it brings the artists into “close proximity” and leads “into the joint installation” of the illustrations.²⁹

In the context of a close correspondence between word and image or between object and representation, even small inconsistencies are likely to obtain some structural signification. Such a barely perceptible “accident” occurs in the photographic representation of the kernel; i.e., in the catalogue's iconographic analogue of the kernel's actual assembly. To make the “accident” more palpable, Quartet's final five pages of illustrations present six photographic images, all of them, long shots, mid shots and close shots of the show's installation (Figs. 2, 8, 9, 10 and 11). The first four pages of the nine-

²⁸ That was especially prominent in the skylight room in which Kabakov's *20. August 1968*, an assembly of newspaper clippings, notes, and other ephemera (Fig. 2), faces Kosuth's *Per Cola et Commata*, a grid of personal names installed as neon lights on the frame of the skylight room's roof window (Figs. 11 and 8).

²⁹ The term referent is employed here and subsequently in its semiotic meaning as “that to which a linguistic expression or symbol refers—a thing, process or state of affairs.” The referent is not part of the initial, Saussurian, model of the linguistic sign which includes only a *signifier* (form) and *signified* (content). On the basis of that, the Saussurian model has been seen as *non-referential* or purely conceptual; i.e., regarding the external reality as an unnecessary complication. Later structuralist and post-structuralist theories make that model more complex. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, ed. C. Bally and A. Sechehaye; trans. W. Baskin, *Course in General Linguistics* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977).

page gallery, instead, provide close views of the kernel members shown as individual pieces on subsequent pages, each one on a separate page, and outside of the context of the installation (Figs. 3, 4, 6 and 7). The viewers/readers of the catalogue, thereby, are not only deprived of “direct” encounters with the kernel’s assemblage; they are also left with a photographic simulacrum which may or may not reflect the architectonics (and architecture) of its physical analogue. Moreover, to be examined in the book, the simulacrum demands a sequence of time and space and eye motion. In other words, the fractured body of the simulacrum requires, at least, three subsequent glances, that put the emphasis on the individual flat images/pages, rather than on their three-dimensional spatial relationship.³⁰ By the same token, the simulacrum’s temporal progression creates another sequential effect which, although it seems like a product of the show’s marketing, could be also genre-specific to the format of the book or generated by its master designers. That is the dialogue between the only two members of the kernel that unfold in the book simultaneously—*Whose Fly is This?* by Ilya Kabakov (Fig. 3) and *Titled (A.A.I.A.I.)* by Joseph Kosuth (Fig. 4).³¹

³⁰ To put it differently, if the catalogue had presented a group image of the factual kernel’s assemblage, this would have emphasized the central position of the works within the room, their impact as a foursome three-dimensional composition and their mutual spatial relationship. By the same token, the kernel’s representation on four individual images/pages disconnects the perception of the two outer pieces from the simultaneous appeal of the two middle entries.

³¹ Even though the juxtaposition of Kabakov and Kosuth follows the pre-established alphabetic order of artists and works, a close juxtaposition is, by no means, unavoidable. The four kernel members could have been displayed as smaller images on fewer pages, or their individual pages-images could have been arranged differently within the same alphabetical order; e.g., as two visual pairs juxtaposed on two subsequent pages or sheets; for example, Baldessari and Kabakov versus Kosuth and Pistoletto.

III. The Duo's Discordant Accordance

As indicated previously, the structure of the simulacrum echoes the pre-established alphabetic sequence. In that regard, the first signature work, *Place a Book in a Strong Light and This is What You Will See* by John Baldessari, succeeds the two clusters of texts and faces a page that contains the abbreviated bios of the artists (Fig. 6). As a result, Baldessari's piece performs a gradual transition from language to pictorial representation as it combines written words, printed letters, a depicted book and a reproduction of the image and the text on the book's front cover.³² Similarly well-placed in relation to its adjacent image and page is the illustration of the last kernel work—*Metrocubo d'infinito* by Michelangelo Pistoletto (Fig. 7). Purely figural and devoid of any references to written texts, it connects with the subsequent view of the skylight room and leads into the picture installation.³³ Thus, in the constellation of signature works, the first and the last images become thresholds of the kernel's orbit as they intersect, by way

³² As natural as such an arrangement may seem, the impact of the first image that accosts the viewer after a long sequence of printed pages appears simultaneously surprising and anticipated. The picture comes without a formal introduction and faces the page in which the bio of the same artist occupies an uppermost position. At the same time, Baldessari's work facilitates the transition from printed page to photographic illustration by combining image and text and by reenacting their dual relation. The drawing appears on the top of the work, however, its image refers to language as it depicts a printed book which, in turn, points back to art, because it represents a publication of *Art Fundamentals*. In the end, Baldessari's work, placed in the beginning of the catalogue gallery, functions as an ironic and self-referential gesture, that points to the depicted art book, to itself as an image and text, to the other works in the exhibit and in the skylight room and to the catalogue as a printed medium.

³³ Pistoletto's cube is the visual connection between the last image/page of the kernel and the establishment shot of the skylight room. The repetition of the image facilitates the zooming out effect and the transition from the individual close-ups of the kernel to the long shots of the installation. However, the same close juxtaposition of the cube's pictures also makes evident the fact that the two views are shot in different places or galleries. On the left page, the work is positioned in the corner of a room (Fig. 7), while, on the right, it appears in the middle of the skylight hall, amidst other exhibition objects (Fig. 8). Most noticeably, the patterns of the hardwood floors are different.

of compositional analogy, to form a frame that remains somewhat isolated from the kernel's nexus. There, in the center or *in medias res*, as if to sculpt a homophony of incongruent cultural voices, the catalogue composes a duo of disparate works: *Whose Fly is This?* by Ilya Kabakov and *Titled (A.A.I.A.I.)* by Joseph Kosuth (Fig. 5).³⁴

Strategically placed, one next to the other, on the open recto and verso of two adjacent pages, *Whose Fly is This?* and *Titled* surmount vast cultural and geographic distances to overcome established linguistic, artistic and geopolitical barriers. The axis of the catalogue kernel, therefore, creates a symbolic Russian-American diptych which, to use the *ars poetica* of Pakesch's essay, expands "the horizon of our geography of art" and celebrates "the end of the Iron Curtain and with it the division of the world into ideological systems."³⁵ Left to "speak" for itself in the heart of the kernel's quartet, the duo seems too much in sync with the show's avid marketing to be, in any compositional or visual way, accidental.³⁶ Furthermore, upon a closer examination, it could be safely conjectured that the strategic intermarriage of Kabakov and Kosuth in the crest of the kernel's arrangement promulgates, in an iconic way, Quartet's geopolitical dream, aesthetic principle and philosophical dialectic.

The twofold diptych relation unveils an array of differences and similarities. Most evidently, the two conjoined parties differ in style, medium, color, shape, technique,

³⁴ In contrast to the other kernel works, these center pieces ought to be viewed simultaneously as a diptych that unfolds as soon as the viewer turns the first sheet of the kernel. *In medias res* originally refers to, among other sources, Horace's *Ars Poetica* and describes the opening of a story "into the middle of things" as an ancient technique of epic narration.

³⁵ Op. cit., Pakesch.

³⁶ Apart from its footnote on the dates of Kabakov's and Pistoletto's pieces, Pakesch's essay does not concentrate on any of the kernel's works, in particular.

measurements and iconography. Most unexpectedly, they converge in all of the above, in addition to their appropriation of texts and references to the genres of books and paintings. For instance, Kabakov's work is a middle-size rectangular painting rendered on wood (26 x 40 in.), framed and executed by hand with careful and lucid brushstrokes. Employing a traditional artistic technique, it features bright green, carmine red, aquamarine blue and black enamel that are symmetrically applied and superimposed on the surface of the industrial masonite.³⁷ In comparison, Kosuth's piece is larger (47 x 47 in.), square in shape and rendered with a reduced—black and white—palette. With its flatness, geometric quality and graphic countenance, it playfully recalls the traditional pictorial genres and, more particularly, the model of monochromatic modernist painting. However, unlike Kabakov's colorful work, *Titled* discards any painterly technique in favor of the mechanical reproduction of the silver gelatin print and the depersonalized printing process.³⁸

The iconographies of the two works also seem discordant. Combining discursive and figurative elements, the painted work depicts a miniscule fruit fly, rendered in detail, in the center of a vast blue background.³⁹ This tiniest, but prominently fashioned insect is

³⁷ The picture frame, painted in green, encloses the blue background, which similarly envelops the two green boxes positioned in the upper corners. The two boxes are filled with a symmetrical sequence of black and red letters.

³⁸ Kosuth has repeatedly insisted, on various occasions, that his Photostats are not paintings. Kabakov, in comparison, has repeatedly referred to *Whose Fly is This?* and his other “conversational” works as paintings, although an official painter would have fiercely disagreed with such an abuse of the traditional Soviet genre.

³⁹ The fly is, in fact, positioned slightly to the left, which reinforces the trajectory and the direction of its suggested forward motion. However, two visual factors counter the effect of such implied dynamic—the static quality of the green boxes, though they are not precisely rectangular, and the spatial indeterminacy of the aquamarine background. The monochromatic openness of this vast blue sky makes the subtle

flanked from above by the mirror presence of two rectangular boxes. Painted in the same green hue and filled with similar rows of black and red text, the boxes are symmetrically placed in the painting's upper left and right corners. Their Cyrillic letters are rendered by hand, each one executed in the same controlled, calligraphic and informal manner. Such a manner signifies personal attention and individual touch in the application of a standardized cursive style of writing. In the boxes, the function of each linguistic syntagma is marked by its color and spatial positioning, while the meaning of each lexical unit similarly corresponds to its size, placement and coloring.⁴⁰

The black words in the upper two rows give the full names of two individuals—a woman and a man—with the name and the surname placed on the top and the family name singled out in the lower black register.⁴¹ Ending with a colon, each person's name is succeeded by a direct-speech quotation: “Whose fly is this?” under the woman's name on the left and “This is the fly of Yuri,” below her companion's name in the right section. Connected by a paradigmatic relation, these two verbal remarks are clearly distinguished from the upper black letters by their larger size, carmine color, discursive function and strategic positioning. As a result, by way of linguistic conventions, the painting conjures up a two-part anecdote: on the left, Irina Mihailovna Korobova asks: “Whose fly is this?”

geometric incongruity less perceptible and heightens the optical accommodation; i.e., the impression that the miniscule fly is not only visible, but it also appears “in focus.”

⁴⁰ As a sequence of linguistic units, usually words or phonemes, the *syntagma* signifies a horizontal type of relation. Thus, the *syntagmatic axis* of each box reflects the linear combination of words, while the *paradigmatic axis* involves the relation between the two boxes.

⁴¹ Such a manner of introducing a person, although fairly common in official settings, sounds notably formal and carries a slightly ironic tone of bureaucratic preciseness. The woman's name, Irina Mihailovna Korobova, is written on the left, while, on the right, her male counterpart is listed in a similar fashion as German Ignatievich Berestezky.

On the right, German Ignatievich Berestezky answers “This is the fly of Yuri.”⁴² Since the primary subject of both dialogic remarks coincides with the little figure in the middle, the viewer of the work is prompted to recognize that Irina and German are discussing the fly in the center.⁴³

Placed next to Kabakov’s painting, *Titled* seems not only color-deprived, but also fairly homogeneous, because instead of a two-way relation between image and word it features a single text with a simple paragraph organization. Similarly to *Whose Fly is This?*, Kosuth’s piece also presents a coherent sequence of language signs arranged *syntagmatically* and *paradigmatically* in a horizontal and vertical progression. However, if a singular figural effigy marks the center of the painting, while the letters in the boxes remain fixed in its margins, the photostat places a massive body of text—shaped as a box—in the middle of the empty background.⁴⁴ Similarly to its dialogical partner, *Titled* is also concerned with the issue of linguistic communication, the process of information

⁴² Although the English translation of the painting’s title is fairly close to the Russian original, it loses some of the additional syntactic, graphic and compositional bonds between the question and the answer. For instance, all lexical units written in Cyrillic are of a similar length, each one comprising three to four letters (3-3-4 in the first case and 3-4-4 in the second), which playfully coincides with the number of body parts in the image of the fly. In addition, both sentences consist of three words, with the second and the third words of the question repeated as the first and second word in the answer; i.e., “Whose this fly [is]” and “This fly Yuri [of Yuri is].” Flanking the margins of this compositional duplication, the Russian equivalents of “Whose” and “Yuri” connect not only grammatically and syntactically by their possessive relation and mirror position, but also poetically as they rhyme in the beginning and the end of the twofold dialogic exchange. The compositional correspondence, imbedded on this level of communication, takes part in a larger scale of symmetries that link together the dialogic boxes of the painting as the boxes are completely identical in terms of the number of words depicted in each horizontal sequence: 2-1-3. (Even the spatial pattern consisting of two wider parts separated by a narrow middle section of the text in the boxes reverses the shape of the cross implemented in the miniscule form of the insect.)

⁴³ The first level of semiosis (or establishing a connection between sign and meaning in a certain context) seems fairly straightforward: the grammatical subject of both locutions is a fly, so their linguistic referent could very well coincide with the painted fruit fly in the middle. Positioned between the characters’ names and the small image, the question and the answer also point to the fly in their capacity of verbal gestures.

⁴⁴ The green boxes create the impression that the Cyrillic text is framed, enclosed and static and, therefore, fixed in the margins. The paragraph’s composition in *Titled* recalls the shape of a box; however, this shape is not framed or outlined, and, thereby, its arrangement seems more dynamic.

exchange and the role of language. Thus, the mutual preoccupation of both works, to expand on Pakesch's premise, is the act of questioning, the question about art or the function of art and the agency of the question as a tool and vehicle of analysis.⁴⁵

The linguistic synchronies between the paired works set the stage for some significant dissonance. In contrast to the painting, *Titled* does not contain any handwritten elements and its "depicted shape" (the printed paragraph) takes over—monolithic and unchallenged—the middle section of the black square. In Kabakov's work, the green boxes echo the proportions of the painting and isolate the text from its blue background. In Kosuth's piece, on the contrary, the tension between the "literal" square and the "depicted" (rectangular) shape triggers a more complex spatial and compositional dynamic. For instance, the lacy composition of the paragraph creates the simultaneous impression of a lucid rectangular block, an interrupted white space or a screen of parallel lines superimposed over the background. Thus, the lace of letters can be read simultaneously as one continuous entity-shape and as a framework of separate graphic elements.⁴⁶ Lastly, both parties of the kernel duo play, in their genre-specific ways, on the format of an open book and page. Kabakov's piece, for instance, recalls a

⁴⁵ In both pieces, the word "question" (on the left hand side of *Titled*) and the act of questioning (on the left hand side of the painting) are emphasized by their large size, bolder letters and spatial position in the beginning of the text or the communication. This heightens the importance of the question "about art, about the function of art" evoked in Pakesch's essay. The fact that the kernel's innermost works literally and metaphorically embody the director's central premise could also explain their visual pairing in the book and strategic placement in the installation.

⁴⁶ Due to the incongruity of "literal" and "depicted" shapes, if the eyes focus on the text they are likely to superimpose its dimensions upon the proportions of the outer dark space and thus to read the black square as a black rectangle. The negative image also leaves the viewer somewhat uncertain whether the letters project forward, remain still or recede in relation to the dark background. For a discussion on "literal" and "depicted" shapes see Michael Fried, "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Paintings," *Artforum* 5, no. 3, (November 1966).

children's book illustration and employs the traditional painting technique to imitate the page format. In comparison, Kosuth's photostat reproduces the negative image of a printed page, using a mechanical process and a photographic way of representation.⁴⁷

The most significant differences between the language-based works are connected with their communicative situations. In each case, there are at least two venues of linguistic exchange: the first one is internal and pertains to the depicted discourse, while the second one is of extra-pictorial nature and involves the linguistic contact between the work and the viewer. In the first regard; i.e., on the level of depicted communication, Kabakov's painting is fairly laconic and fairly dialogical. It includes the minimum number of participants required, according to speech theory and simple logic, to conduct an active verbal exchange and to perform a successful interpersonal dialogue. The two communicators (a *speaker* and a *receiver*) are arranged horizontally from left to right in accordance with their discursive roles and "chronological" succession. On the left, the *addresser* Irina Korobova initiates language contact with an actively dialogical *speech act*; that is, an *illocutionary* inquiry heightened with a *verbal deixis*.⁴⁸ On the right, German Berestezki steps in as the responsive *addressee* of her request and presents what, by all grammatical means, appears to be the question's logical answer.⁴⁹ The linguistic

⁴⁷ In the catalogue, this relationship acquires an additional layer since it presents a page (dictionary) on a page (photostat) on a page (catalogue illustration).

⁴⁸ The *deixis* and its deictic signs specify identity and spatial or temporal location from the perspective of the speaker or the hearer in the context in which the communication occurs. In this case, the deictic role is performed by "whose," "this," and "of Yuri." On linguistic *deixis* see David Crystal, *A First Dictionary Of Linguistics And Phonetics*. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1980), 103.

⁴⁹ That is, if the viewer presumes: (1) that the personages indeed utter the written remarks, (2) that they converse about the same "fly" and (3) that German reacts in response to Irina's question. Another complexity emerges when one realizes that the linguistic and the visual fly function as signs which may or may not refer to an actual insect and, thus, may or may not have the same referent.

convention, therefore, proposes a time relation in which the verbal gesture posed in the pictorial left/past evokes a right-positioned (future) answer.⁵⁰ The timelessness and static quality of the depiction, however, challenges such a temporal presumption, because the progression of time has long been connected to the second protagonist in Lessing's dichotomy of painting and poetry.⁵¹ The endless quality of the painting's temporality, therefore, creates a repetition of questions and answers that forms a locutional circle in the open time/space of extra-pictorial communication.

In regard to the semantic aspects of Kabakov's depicted dialogue, the situation seems fairly straightforward since the messages deployed are factual and informational and concerned with an insect that is present in the painting. However, from the perspective of the extra-pictorial exchange between the image and the viewer, the information provided seems absurd or, at least, insufficient, because it asserts that a certain fly belongs to somebody called Yuri.⁵² Linguistically, the pictorial event and the possessive relation exceed the provided frame of reference, because, unlike the other three protagonists, Yuri remains unfamiliar to the viewer and, figurally, "left out" of the picture. Such a gap between depicted discourse and linguistic frame of reference creates

⁵⁰ Placed in the middle, the fly ought to, in this regard, embody the painting's linguistic present.

⁵¹ Gotthold Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Edward McCormick (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962).

⁵² Linguistically, the reference to Yuri acts as an *exophora*; i.e., an expression referring to an extralinguistic (and, in this case, extrapictorial or extracontextual) referent. See R.R.K. Hartmann and F.C. Stork, *Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*. (London: Applied Science Publishers, 1972), 193 and Crystal, *Ibid.*, 137.

the unsettling impression that Irina and German may both know or may not know something that is clearly left unknown to the viewer.⁵³

Titled also takes on the speech genre of question-and-answer but exhibits quite different intentions, as it eliminates the separation of the two verbal acts and conflates their dynamic in one static, monophonic and non-dialogical utterance.⁵⁴ In Kabakov's work, the two speakers share the stage so that the discursive agency is evenly distributed, while the viewer remains excluded from their insider's perspective and outside of their frame of reference. In *Titled*, the rhetorical power belongs to the one and only agent of the communication. That is the voice of the artwork which, addressing the reader unilaterally and monologically, contains all questions and answers.⁵⁵ In the end, the main discursive feature that unites the diptych's wings is their *quotational* quality as each one of the works quotes voices or texts recorded as a written performance. In Kabakov's case, the quotational mode seems non-hierarchical and conversational, since both individuals exercise epistemological authority—one, by the ability to ask the question, the other, by knowing the answer. However, the true democratic quality of the painted citation is evoked by the absolute lack of authorial authority; that is, the lack of explicit (or implicit) omnipotent voice that can explain the absurd and clear all ambiguities.

⁵³ This impression is intensified by the ambiguity of the various explicit and implicit *deictic signs* in the dialogue: “whose,” “this,” and “of Yuri.” If, in the context of the painting, the first two signs could be seen as visual and verbal gestures pointing to the fly, the third sign, respectively, serves as a double, visual and verbal, *exophora*.

⁵⁴ To unravel the semantic overlaps of such a conflation, one ought to consider the following layers: the definition of the word “question” gives an answer to the question about the meaning of the word “question” and the act of questioning. “Speech genre” as a term originates in the discourse theory of Mikhail Bakhtin.

⁵⁵ In fact, the source of power originates outside of the frame because the text is a quotation.

Titled, in contrast, does not leave room for freedom of thought and, by the same token, for epistemological wavering since it gives stage to the voice of the social norm and, by way of its sheer size, monumentalizes the linguistic convention. As if to eliminate any questions on the meaning of the word “question” and the act of questioning, it presents the viewer with a final and definitive answer; i.e., quotes the definition of the noun—directly, formally and properly—with the erudite tone of a standardized dictionary authority. Quoted verbatim and photographically, the literary code assumes a dubious place in the diptych. Pictured on the left wing, Kabakov’s painting grants voice to the ordinary people who, cited as individuals, silence the omnipresent classical author or the omnipotent anonymous editorials. The American counterpart, seen on the right, takes all power away from everyday utterance and gives it to the official rule and depersonalized voice of the linguistic canon. Since the dictionary, as a means and form, embodies the established norm and instills the logic of the convention, the quoted ordinance can impose, with a proper educational tone, the power of authority and the *status quo* of a certain social order. Lastly, even though it is divided into two individual parts, the voice of the painting maintains its compositional unity through the common theme and continuous conversational dynamic. Presented as monolithic, monumental and monological, Kosuth’s photographic image, instead, carries in its compositional center a subtle, yet important division.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ This semantic unity within the syntactic division of Kabakov’s work is flanked by a semantic division within the compositional unity of *Titled* in a way that recalls Pakesch’s dialectic of commonalities in the differences and dissimilars in the similarities.

The first impression of *Titled*, in the close presence of its diptych partner, is that of thematic and textual coherence. Shaped as a long rectangle that demarcates the middle of the back square poised within the vertical rectangle and white frame of the catalogue page, the photostat appears as a highly organized union of parts and sequence of geometric entities. This visual unanimity is coupled with semantic uniformity, because, from the beginning to its end, the text appears devoted to one deductive theme and purpose—to present a compact, thorough and lucid definition of a word that evokes different meanings. Yet, if the viewers read the quoted text, they would discover a discrete antinomy in the omnipotent stature of the social authority. The upper half of the paragraph is thematically and compositionally devoted to the primary meaning of the term “question” as an “action of inquiring,” “stating of investigation of a problem,” “inquiry into a matter” and “discussion of some doubtful point.” The nexus uniting these variants of denotation lies in the idea of intellectual reflection, which, according to the dictionary text, takes shape in a discussion, utterance of a problem, verbal investigation, action of inquiring or, in other words, through the action, agency and application of language. As a result, even though in the diptych’s duet the photostat stands for a static, omnipotent and monological countenance, the opening part of its verbal performance carries the potentiality of discussion, doubt and linguistic action.⁵⁷

Similarly to its Russian counterpart, *Titled* contains a second voice/perspective, which appears to undercut the work’s quotational homophony with its unannounced but

⁵⁷ The notion of linguistic *potentiality* is used here not in its literal sense as the effect of grammatical conditionals, but in terms of syntactical structure. Since major parts of the definition do not contain actual verbs, the closest to the effect of action is the performative potentiality carried by gerunds and verbal nouns; e.g., “the action of inquiring.”

sizable presence. This second protagonist emerges in the center of the printed paragraph to take over and dominate the bodily half of the dictionary countenance.⁵⁸ Semantically, this bottom register pertains to the secondary designation of the word “question,” which brings a political spin to the process of cognition and interprets the noun as an “action of interrogating, or examining a person,” “the fact of being questioned” and “the application of torture as part of judicial examination.”⁵⁹ The semantic dichotomy ingrained in the word’s double *referentiality*, creates a silent ethical dilemma, which, compressed in a short middle pause, questions the paragraph’s harmony and apparent uniformity. Dividing the text’s body into two equal halves, this split reflects the antithetical nature of language and, through it, the inherent duality entrenched in our language-dependent cognition and in the structure which, according to structuralism, creates the model for all human systems—the system of language.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ The second voice is introduced with the number two (2) which marks the secondary meaning of the word. The lower bodily half refers to Nietzsche’s ill-fated theory on the origins of tragedy. According to his genealogy, tragedy was generated by the synthesis of idealized plastic arts (i.e. sculpture) as a representation of the intellectual Apollonian view of the world and the wild physical Dionysian element found in festivals and music. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). The Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin connects the ecstatic and transformative nature of the medieval carnival found in Rabelais with the same Dionysian element and wild Bacchanal forces. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press), 1968 Both theories originate in the antithetical Greek myths of the birth of Athena who sprung from the intellectual part of Zeus’ body—his head—and the birth of Dionysius/Bacchus from Zeus’ lower physical half—his leg.

⁵⁹ The fact that the photostat’s synthesis of ideas, in the philosophical sense, and the second most important boundary of its text—the end—coincides with a reference to “application of torture” conveys a certain outlook on human history and language.

⁶⁰ Whether thinking impacts language and how language impacts thinking is a long-standing dilemma, however, to add some recent evidence, forty one years after the date of Kosuth’s *Titled*, the question whether torture as a tool of interrogation is judicially questionable is still a valid question for public dispute and discussion. Articulated most notably by Barthes, the conviction that all social and cultural systems are modeled after their prototype and mother-system—the system of language—has been subsequently questioned. See Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (Hill and Wang: New York, 1968).

As much as it imitates the standardized dictionary format, *Titled* is a hybrid work that functions simultaneously as text and as image. Thus, resembling an open thesaurus page, the photostat quotes a printed paragraph, which appears—photographed, replicated and oversized—as the negative copy of the actual original. As a result, the enlarged color-stripped representation not only draws attention to the tangible quality and constructed character of the textual rendition, but it also challenges the paragraph’s conventionalized sequence in space and time and questions its established linearity.⁶¹ In such a genre overlap, the text of the image, on the one hand, leads from intellectual inquiring to the physical application of torture as a judicially sanctified practice and a factual historical reference (“the application of torture as part of a judicial examination 1583”). The image of the text, on the other hand, creates a circular relation between the antithetical aspects of the word and their respective social realms or parts of human nature. This discrete compositional cycle, which surfaces as soon as one finishes reading the text to grasp the whole of the picture, reenacts not only the innate dualism of the human genome, but also, perhaps, the dialectic of the human condition. In the end, within the context of the diptych’s duet and Pakesch’s geopolitical vision, Kabakov’s circular dynamic on the horizon of continuous dialogic exchange conveys the resilience of the people, while the cyclical vertical continuity of Kosuth’s philosophical antithesis reflects the duality of the system. The question that follows as a logical epilogue to the

⁶¹ The technique makes obvious the hidden imperfections of the graphic image, which are due to inconsistencies in the application of ink to the rough surface of the industrial paper.

kernel's duet performance is how the synchronous iconography compares to the double account of the historical evidence and the artists' voices.

IV. On the Opposite Sides of the Curtain

As mentioned, the photographic gallery of the catalogue is preceded by four newspaper summaries and four artists' essays. In addition to echoing the symmetries embedded in the rest of the book, these primary texts provide insights into the historical and cultural context of the works and support Pakesch's argument of Quartet's multifaceted unity. Positioned immediately after (and thereby supporting) the geopolitical vision of the curator's text, the summarized front pages of the four daily newspapers, *Izvestija*, *Corriere della Sera*, *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*, successfully fulfill the director's objectives. Placed between the newspaper summaries and the catalogue gallery, the quartet of four artists' essays, instead, offers primary insights into the illustrated artworks. In the end, bringing together the four stars and the "four different corners of the earth," the voices of journalists and artists demonstrate the impact of the global theme "utopia" and capture the political climate of 20 August 1968 as a chronological denominator of the catalogue and the show.⁶²

⁶² "For example we decided to make the 20 August 1968 the point of reference for the installation. The day which followed was the day on which that decade lost something of its innocence: The invasion of Prague by Warsaw Pact troops presented a further climax in the Cold War, and, as we know with hindsight, was the beginning of the end of the Iron Curtain and with it the division of the world into ideological systems." Op. cit., Pakesh.

The dialectic of similarities and dissimilars paradoxically unites the front pages of the four featured newspapers as all of them address the same political issues and key events of the day through opposite ideological lenses.⁶³ The two common themes in the antagonistic dissonance of journalistic warfare are the Vietnam War and the intense political situation in communist Czechoslovakia.⁶⁴ In response to the two coincidental military invasions—one evolving as a continuous war in Asia, the other captured on the brink of its escalation in Central Europe—the four newspapers compose their own duet of distinguishingly antiphonic voices: the Russian *Izvestija* and the American *The New York Times*.⁶⁵ It is hardly accidental that such a thematic duet within the journalistic quartet

⁶³ Interestingly, the newspaper sequence does not conform to the rule of alphabetic sequence and puts an emphasis on the first paper—the Russian *Izvestija*—which is followed by the Italian *Corriere della Sera*, the American *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*. In this arrangement, the two longest paper summaries *Izvestija* and *The New York Times* precede the two shorter ones.

⁶⁴ Although the four publications address similar issues, they arrange the events in a different way and use divergent rhetoric. For instance, *Izvestija* discusses the tensions in Czechoslovakia in its foremost paragraph under the title “Key to European Security.” *Corriere della Sera* begins with the Vietnam War and the American elections in a section that discusses the Vietnamese attacks in south of Saigon titled “New Offensive by Hanoi.” This precedes the second key section of the Italian newspaper, “An Illusory Aggressiveness: The Mistaken Strategies of Breshnev Against Prague,” which states that “The Czechoslovak crisis has revealed the deep interior weakness of the USSR, and even more showed the modest stature of the head of the Kremlin when facing the logic of the events.” In *The New York Times* the issues of the election (first paragraph) and the Vietnam War (first and second paragraph) appear before the Russian news which is mentioned in the sixth paragraph. The summary of the *Los Angeles Times* lacks any news on Russia and centers on the Vietnam War and the American elections in the opening paragraph “President Johnson rejected a complete halt to the bombing of North Vietnam and promised Monday night his Administration never will ‘move down that slippery slope’ of one-sided steps toward peace. And Mr. Johnson predicted that whoever succeeds him in the White House will take the same stand.” Similar ideological battle between text and image unfolds on the masterfully designed cover of the catalogue. On the front cover, the title of *The New York Times* is placed on the top countered by the lower but slightly larger title of *Izvestija* (Fig. 1). Then, the front page propaganda images of the Russian paper showing a factory worker and gigantic machinery, that resembles a weapon, is overlapped (and verbally echoed) by a clipping from *The New York Times*. The clipping discusses Eisenhower’s pacemaker, the attacks in South Vietnam and the presentation of the Vietnam plank to the Democratic platform committee. Similarly, on the back cover of the catalogue, a clipping from *Los Angeles Times*, with a central section titled “Rival Democrats Prepare for Test on Viet Plank,” is superimposed over the page of *Corriere della Sera*. Ibid.

⁶⁵ In the rhetoric of ideological propaganda, it is important that *Izvestija*’s first paragraph *Key to European Security* does not attack openly the liberalized regime in Prague and the legitimate calls of Czech intellectuals for human rights and freedom of speech. The Russian paper instead focuses on “the Bratislava

recalls the diptych in the gallery of the kernel. However, although it seems fairly compelling, the direct link between the four newspapers and the four artists or, by the same token, their constellation of four quartet works, seems far less experiential. Such a link is evoked by the symmetrical correspondence of similar numbers of texts and established in the essay of the director as a potentiality.⁶⁶ However, whether they were

Conference of the Communist and Workers' Parties," the results of which "continue to command the attention of the world public" as the speakers "stressed the importance of European security, because many sources of international tensions originate there." Thus, in order to preserve European security (not to merely enforce Soviet interests) an action has to be taken. The urgency of the situation is recognized, according to the paper, by all Czechoslovak workers (in reality, only by loyal Slovak officials), because "Imperialist reaction has stepped up its provocations recently." To make the threat more evident and the action clearly necessary, the third sentence pictures the global character of a conspiracy: "The revanchist forces in West Germany, helped by their American patrons, seek a revision of the European boundaries and harbor aggressive plans against the GDR, Czechoslovakia and other socialist countries." As a result, there is only one mighty force that can stop the destructive ambitions of the evil peril: "The Warsaw Treaty remains to be a mighty factor of peace and a reliable instrument to defend sovereignty and independence of the fraternal state." Thus, *Izvestija's* first paragraph answers firmly to the threat, shows readiness to defend the fraternal sanctity of the status quo and gives legitimacy to the illegal foreign invasion of Prague that would take place on the following day. The Russian coverage of the Vietnam War comes after six paragraphs on the Soviet economic accomplishments. Starting with the Vietnamese side in the conflict, the paper celebrates the calls of the "press of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam" to the Vietnamese people "to make every effort in order to defeat the American aggressors." The next paragraph praises the "offensive launched by units of the People's Liberation Army of South Vietnam" that "resulted in 600 enemy losses including 450 Americans." After this, much less than glorifying, mentioning of the American forces, *Izvestija* turns to the Vice-President Humphry's speech "in favor of continuing the bombing of North Vietnam" and to the speaker of the US Air Force who, as if in response to the Vice-President, "said that due to a 'technical failure' they lost contact to the 12 satellites launched yesterday with one Atlas rocket." The front page of *The New York Times* reverses the Russian ideological language. For instance, the Vice President Humphrey appears in the first paragraph which discusses the "Vietnam plank": "Backers of Vice President Humphrey presented to the Democratic platform committee today the outlines of a compromise Vietnam plank that that would accept, but not demand, a cessation of the bombing of North Vietnam and formation of a coalition Government in South Vietnam." This official party position is backed by the public support summarized in the second paragraph: "A Louis Harris poll has indicated that the American people, by 61 per cent to 24, oppose a cessation on the bombings of North Vietnam." Casting such bright light on the massive approval of the Vietnam war, the American front page turns to the dimmer situation in Czechoslovakia to assess the ideological propaganda of the Soviets: "The Soviet Union maintained its propaganda pressure on Czechoslovakia today, intensifying accusations that the reform leadership appeared unable or unwilling to give 'the necessary rebuff' to anti-Communist plotters." Ibid.

⁶⁶ In this sense, the potency that "the four artists might well have read" the four newspapers is left as open as long-drawn-out seems to be the argument that the 20th of August led to the Prague invasion that, in turn, led to the end of the Iron Curtain and its "division of the world into ideological systems" and all of that prompted a new geography of art, which was facilitated by the involvement of the artists in the exhibition. Op. cit., Pakesch. (The end of the world's division into ideological systems is debatable in its own right.)

read or not read by the artists, the newspapers remain a “backdrop” that illuminates the historical context of the time, but does not explain the specificity and ambiguity of the artworks.

A more direct venue into the artistic language of the works is offered by the second textual cluster—the four artists’ essays. Among them, the parables of Baldessari and the letter of Pistoletto, which open and close the alphabetic sequence of the texts, relate to one another and differ from the middle essays because both the parables and the letter feature imaginary characters in fantastic situations.⁶⁷ The two middle entries—the writings of Kabakov and Kosuth—also entertain a mutual bond of subject and language as they discuss, with a more serious tone, analogous questions of philosophical, artistic and linguistic nature.⁶⁸ Within this duet of texts, Kabakov’s essays assume the most intimate and self-revealing stature in a section that is designed to sound personal; i.e., to narrow the wide political stage of the newspaper front and to quote the voice of each one of the four individuals.⁶⁹ However, the stance of honest disclosure of one’s thoughts and emotions as a most typical feature of Kabakov’s writing contradicts the historical reality

⁶⁷ Positioned in the beginning of the artists’ texts, the *Ten Parables* by Baldessari resemble short stories or fables, in the center of which there is an art-related subject and at the end of which there is a “moral.” For example, the subject of the first fictional narrative is the fate of “a little known painting by Ingress,” which was not kept well by its owners, so it gradually faded away and disappeared to leave only the nail, on which it was displayed, and some “well-kept” provenance records. The moral, recorded at the end of the fable, presents a reflection of conceptual nature: “If you have an idea in your head, the work is as good as done.” Pistoletto’s *Letter* interprets the contemporary technology, media and methods of communication as a reality that was foreseen in the past “by men who wrote sci-fi stories.” Pistoletto, “Letter” (Ein Brief) and Baldessari, “Ten Parables” (“Zehn Parabeln) in *Quartet*.

⁶⁸ Kabakov’s text is, in fact, a sequence of three essays: “Concealment” (Das Verbergen), “The Word and Image as Equals” (Die Gleichberechtigung von Wort und Bild), and “A Bad Thing” (Das Schlechte Ding). Kosuth’s long essay “Art After Philosophy” (Kunst nach der Philosophie) appears after Kabakov’s text and consists of, similarly, three numbered section. *Ibid*.

⁶⁹ The subject of Kabakov’s three essays is the same—art and language—as phenomena affecting all aspects of his personal experience as an artist and a writer. Kabakov, “Concealment” in *Quartet*.

and the subject of his first essay and appears largely misleading. In reality, the artist's honest exposure often conceals an intense dynamic between thought and language and a complex relation between the views that become articulated and the intentions that are not (and shall not be) uttered. Therefore, it seems hardly irrelevant that Kabakov's first essayistic entry is, in fact, the text *Concealment*, which, posed as the essay's title and the artist's first word in the catalogue, carries a special significance.

V. The Voice behind the Curtain: *Concealment*

The meaning of the verbal noun *concealment* appears laid out in the first sentence of the essay.⁷⁰ In this opening statement, the *situation of concealment* is not explained, as this typically would be the case, by focusing on what is being *concealed*, the state and place of *concealment* or the verbal and physical act of *concealing*.⁷¹ Kabakov approaches the word's semantics, instead, from a perspective that is absent in the official dictionary definition—from the point of view of what is being, though deceptively, uttered:

⁷⁰ Literally, a verbal noun is a noun derived from a verb as an inflection of the verb or the verb stem (e.g., *concealment* and *conceal*). These action-nouns appear somewhat dynamic as they still carry, more or less explicitly, their etymological and semantic connection with the verb. The Russian equivalent of *concealment*, used in the essay's original text—*ukrivatel'stvo*—is constructed and functions in the same way. Ilya Kabakov, *Dialogi 1990-1994* (Moscow: Ad-Marginem, 1999), 35

⁷¹ For instance, according to the Webster's New Dictionary, *concealment* means (1) forbearance of disclosure; a keeping close or secret, (2) the act of hiding, covering or withdrawing from sight, (3) the state of being hidden or concealed; privacy, (4) a place or means of hiding; a secret place, (5) secret knowledge; a secret, (6) in law, the suppression of truth to the injury or prejudice of another; the withdrawal of knowledge which one is bound in justice to reveal. *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged*. Second edition. (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1968), 375. The latter aspect of the word's content presents the semantic antipode to the lower register of *Titled's* definition of "question." The meaning of the Russian equivalent of *concealment*, *ukrivatel'stvo*, is similar.

In principle, by this word I understand the situation whereby what is said and uttered is what one does not have in mind.⁷²

Accentuated by itself in the position of a single paragraph, this programmatic sentence initiates two important premises. First, it places the linguistic emphasis not on the thought or the thing being concealed, but on the articulated words, even if they do not express the speaker's intention. Second, it fleshes out a tension that will become instrumental throughout this essay and other Kabakov's texts—the irrevocable gap between “what is said” and what remains (and shall remain) unspoken.⁷³ The essay then turns an abstract situation into reality by comparing the repercussions of the state of concealment in “normal everyday life” and in visual art:

Of course, this situation is often encountered and pursues various goals in normal everyday life. But such a means of communication as applied to graphic art appears somewhat strange and in general unpleasant... How is this generally possible? After all, by the very concept of “art” we always imply what is visible, manifest, and not what was intended, desired, proposed, etc. How could such a formulation come to mind?⁷⁴

Placed between the opening sentence and the remaining body of the text, this paragraph-transition presents an opportunity to build rhetorical momentum and anticipation before moving from the general state of the matter to the personal life of the

⁷² Ibid. Cynthia Martin's translation of the Russian sentence here is quite literal, with the only exception of the fact that the Russian original sounds more conversational, because “one” in the generalized form of the subject “one does not” is missing, as this is common in Slavic language, and “whereby” it is substituted with “in which”: “V printsipe pod etim ya ponimayu situatsiyu, pri kotoroy govornitsya i vyskazyvaetsya to, chto ne imeetsya v vidu.” Ilya Kabakov, *Dialogi*, 35

⁷³ At this point, the potentiality that the subject has something in mind is left open.

⁷⁴ Kabakov, *Concealment*.

artist. This rhetorical goal is successfully accomplished by three discursive devices: a dichotomy, an ellipsis and a gradation of two rhetorical questions. The dichotomy juxtaposes the commonality of concealment in “everyday life” with the same means of communication in art where, in contrast, they appear strange and unpleasant. Marked graphically (“...”), the ellipsis separates the initial dichotomy, stated as a common knowledge and law, from the lower half of the passage that seems more emotional due to the rhetorical questions and the synonym accumulation.⁷⁵ As a result, the paragraph suggests in both logical and emotional terms that *concealment*, which is problematic as “a means of communication” in itself, creates an even greater complexity in the field of visual art because the latter, by definition, implies “what is visible, manifest, and not what was intended.”⁷⁶ To resolve this apparent paradox, without truly resolving it, the essay makes a second rhetorical leap. Changing the setting again, it moves to another area contiguous to visual art—the field of language—in which the phenomenon of *concealment* achieves a state-of-the-art presentation:

The thing is that this concealment exists and is ideally realized in an area that is contiguous to a graphic endeavor: in today’s language, the divergence between the word and its content is demonstrated beautifully. We are fortunate witnesses to a time of complete rupture between the word and its semantics. We encounter texts which do not mean anything. In such a situation of rupture, meaning, significance, not finding a “coupling” with the designated word, searches for an outlet in roundabout, indirect ways of expression, resorting to euphemisms,

⁷⁵ Ibid. The ellipsis indicated by the same punctuation mark in Russian and in English “...” makes the logical connection between both parts open and ambiguous. The rhetorical questions are: “How is this generally possible?” and “How could such a formulation come to mind?” The accumulated semantical analogues include: “visible, manifest” and “intended, desired, proposed.”

⁷⁶ Of course, such a definition, if accepted as valid, certainly predates conceptual art.

metaphors, but most often to a special figure of suppression, which I would call a “zone of prohibition against the utterance.”⁷⁷

Referring to, among other things, the impact of state propaganda and the workings of ideology on all levels of Soviet life and language, the passage pictures a fundamental discordance between linguistic expression and the domain of meaning. It is also in the course of this discussion that the essay raises, for a first time, a most important semiotic inquiry—the prospect of that which is being *concealed*—i.e., the aspects of “semantics,” “significance” and “meaning.”⁷⁸ Deprived of access to its “designated word,” the concealed content, unexpectedly, acquires linguistic agency and finds an outlet in a peculiar way through silence (suppression of utterance) and figurative language. Such a *semiosis* (as creation of meaning) empowers two of the three participants in the process of encoding, transmitting and decoding of linguistic information: the sign and the sign’s creator. First, the situation bestows a wider freedom upon the *addressant* of the linguistic sign, because it provides a multiplicity of *codes*—i.e., channels that encode the message and ways to evade direct expression. Second, the process gives leverage to the *signified* (the content) of the sign which, despite the lack of “coupling” with its *signifier* (“the designated word”), entertains a wider variety of “roundabout, indirect ways of expression.” The last protagonist of the semiotic triad—the viewer or the *addressee* of the linguistic message—remains left out or, more precisely, left alone in the concealment domain to wonder about and to attempt to decode the concealed *signified* and the indirect

⁷⁷ Kabakov, *Concealment*.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

code of the figurative expression.⁷⁹ Denied a key to the author's *signified*; i.e., to the speaker's intention, the receiver of empty *signifiers* acquires instead a vast supply of "texts that do not mean anything," euphemisms, metaphors and other signs of language suppression ("a special figure of suppression, which I would call a 'zone of prohibition against the utterance'").⁸⁰

After plunging into a sea of linguistic perplexity, the essay casts a rather personal glance on the ramifications of concealment in the works and the life of the artist:

Something similar to this emerged for me as soon as I began to make my large works. They immediately turned out to be in a situation of talking, being a depiction of that which is not a "direct" utterance. Between the thing and me a gap had emerged, but not at all in a sense that, well, I couldn't express myself, I wasn't clear, I couldn't find the forms, etc. Not at all.⁸¹

In contrast to the previous paragraphs, this passage changes the tone and the setting, turning to the studio of the artist and the inner voice of thoughts and emotions. In such a context, it is important that the artist steps in again, for a first time after the opening statement, to become the linguistic subject of an "I"-discourse and to present himself as the *addressee* of this text and the maker of language-based artworks ("my large works"). The situation of concealment, however, puts into question the maker's

⁷⁹ In this context, it is significant that "the speaker" of Kabakov's essay, announces himself as a linguistic subject, for a first time in the third paragraph, at the point in which the text addresses the experience of the receiver of empty signs. Thus, after the "I-subject" of the initial statement ("by this word I understand"), after the impersonal tone of the following generalized observations ("this situation is often encountered") and after joining the plural agent of the general understanding about art ("by the very concept of 'art' we always imply what is visible"), here the speaker identifies with the witnesses and addressees of the empty expression: "We are fortunate witness to a time of complete rupture... We encounter texts that do not mean anything..." Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

control of his artistic subjects. As soon as they are produced, his works become independent and start expressing not what the artist has in mind but “that which is not a ‘direct’ utterance.”⁸² As a result, the diminished agency of the *addressee*, the *addressant* and the *sign* undergoes further semiotic reductions, until there is only one agent maintaining some sense of linguistic control—the talking *sign* of the dialogic artwork (“my creation”). However, the same passage reveals that the agency of the artistic *sign* is, as a matter of fact, an illusion, because the artist’s works do not actively talk, but “turn out to be in a situation of talking”; i.e., turn into a vehicle of “that which is not a ‘direct’ utterance.” In the end, the artistic sign becomes a tool of what seems to be the only active linguistic force—the indirect anonymous utterance. In all probability, this force is related to the only real agent in the state of concealment—the “meaning, content”—that is devoid of a “coupling” with a designated word and “searches for an outlet in round-about, indirect ways of expression.”⁸³

The personal sentiments of the last passage insinuate an emotional drama suggested by the fact that the gap between creator and work does not reflect the language skills (or lack thereof) of the artist.⁸⁴ However, instead of expanding on the dramatic potential of the moment, the essay inverts the mood again to proceed in a rather unexpected direction:

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Conveyed by the parallelism of analogous syntactical constructions “I couldn’t... I wasn’t... I couldn’t...,” the emotionality of the confession culminates in the exclamation “Not at all.” Ibid.

The situation between what I do and what I have in mind I immediately perceived as normal, moreover, it seemed to me to be most interesting and fruitful. These creations began to ‘work’ at the moment when the gap became distinctly established, that is, when the thing existed separately from me, when it had been finished. But its separateness in my mind did not mean its life was independent of me. It was just the opposite. At that moment, what began was some sort of special, rather strange dialogue between the finished thing and my consciousness. A conversation similar to ‘where did it bloom, when, during which spring...’.⁸⁵

In the end, despite the rupture between artist and artistic sign, the final creation, as it turns out, is not completely independent from the mind of the creator. More precisely, as soon as the identity of the sign (the finished “thing”) becomes established as independent and self-sufficient, the artist enters a “rather strange dialogue” with the same counterpart of his creation. In fact, it is not the created thing, but the communication between sign and creator that becomes the meaning and the goal of the artwork, as it gives agency back to the *addressant* and steers up his interpretative fervor:

The terrible excitement of the consciousness at the appearance of a painting was the main meaning, the main endeavor. This was not a contemplative state, but on the contrary, an active investigation, a departure into various, often distant areas of culturology, philosophy, social psychology. All kinds of associations, connections percolated in my head.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Ibid. The translation published in *Universal System...* is less literal, but it captures the dynamic of the original: “These creations began to ‘work’ as soon as the gap became distinctly apparent, that is, as soon as the thing existed separately from me, as soon as it was finished. But its separateness in my notion of its life was not independent of me. It was just the opposite. At that moment, what began was some sort of special, rather strange dialogue between the finished thing and my consciousness, a conversation similar to ‘where did it bloom, when, in which spring...’” Ilya Kabakov, *Universalsystem zur Darstellung von allem (A universal system for depicting everything)* (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2002)

⁸⁶ Kabakov, *Concealment*.

However, the idyll of the dialogic harmony is bound to be short-lived because the essay raises doubts about the reality of the author's interpretation. Questioning whether the dialogue is part of the work and thereby conveyable to the viewer, the artist realizes, once more, that he might be alone in his dialogical journey:

Furthermore, I had this strange impression that all these connections, meanings, all the 'riches' were located in my work. But this was only an empty hope, since I didn't do anything for this, I didn't work at it, I didn't even know how to do this. All of this, I said to myself, was just a desire! It was just an intention! Wouldn't another, a viewer, discover, perceive my 'intention,' wouldn't he understand what I wanted to invest in it?⁸⁷

The intensity of the moment of self-questioning, doubt and hope is conveyed by various discursive devices, among which the syntactical parallelism, the repetition of phrases and the rhetorical question acquire a primary emotive significance.⁸⁸ However, any possibility that the work may become a conduit of the artist's intentions fades away in the following paragraph in which, by way of another paradoxical jump, the essay turns back to the state of concealment and the posture of logic and reason:

But intention, which is the most important thing according to the law of "concealment," should be torn away from the realization, it gives joy only because it is not realized and the possibility of its realization is reserved. And here is apparently the most important point, as it is the essence of the relationship between the consciousness and the finished thing. Let it not realize the intention, let it be bad, ridiculous, in general insignificant. But my consciousness is free from this thing, I did not enter into it, I can always stand on the side and discuss

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Syntactical parallelism refers to the compositional link of syntactical units that are constructed similarly: "I didn't do anything for this," "I didn't work at it" and "I didn't even know how to do this." Ibid.

it. True here arises a special ambiguity. I made this thing, but I want to and can be free from it.

I don't know how to resolve this contradiction. I like this "non-obligatoriness" of the thing for both me, and of course, for the viewer, who has always been free in relation to the thing.⁸⁹

Bringing the reader back to the state of concealment, this passage comes at an important stage in the essay's repetitive composition. First, it puts an end to the emotional tirade, the imaginary voyage of the dialogue and the "empty hope" that the "riches" of the artist's thoughts could be located in his work. Second, as soon as the readers encounter, for a first time in the essay, a glimpse of what the artist has in mind ("my consciousness"), they are taken back to the "normal" state of concealment in which true communication—the only way into the consciousness—can be "joy" and potentiality, but never a real experience.⁹⁰ The Kantinian part of the consciousness, which is "is free from the thing" and has the ability to "stand on the side and discuss it," unfolds in a rather elaborate fashion in the essay's subsequent paragraph:

But returning to the producer, it should be said that a part of himself entered into the finished work, he was 'stupefied' by it (otherwise he couldn't have made it), and yet with another part of him he looked at the thing and at himself, not entering into the process, reserving to himself the right to discuss the work and its author. It turns out that these two 'parts', the two 'I's created two types of production: from the first 'producer' came the thing itself, from the second—the judgment about this thing. But since both of these states can be objectivized, that is, become things in their own turn, then the possibility emerged to deal with the word and the image as equals.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ In other words, after the artist has discovered that his artworks are independent of him, he still hopes that his dialogue with them is somehow imbedded in his creation, only to realize that, according to the laws of concealment, his intentions are bound to remain concealed. Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

In order to address the gap between the work and its producer, the essay puts aside the “I”-tone and the linguistic identity of the artist/speaker/maker to promptly assume the more impersonal voice of a third-person discourse. This occurs at the same discursive moment in which the artist’s personality becomes divided itself into two separate identities. As the essay confers, a part of the artist is “stupefied” by his work, because it enters the artistic process and becomes integrated into the final product. However, since this occurs in the common state of concealment, the integrated “I” corresponds neither to the “consciousness” of the producer, nor to his hidden artistic “intentions.” The second “I” of the artist, in contrast, stands on the side, at a special Kantian distance, from which it observes “the thing” and the stupefied “I” and obtains “the right to discuss the work and its author.”

The abandonment of the essayistic I-discourse heightens the situation’s complexity, because the artist under consideration is simultaneously the creator of the essay as well as the subject and object of its investigation. As the creator of the essay, he is simultaneously the text’s author, narrator and speaker.⁹² As a narrator, he speaks about artists, in general, and about himself as the primary subject-speaker (I) or the objectified “he” (“producer”) of his “large works” and his essay.⁹³ To make the situation even more compound, the linguistic subject (I) splits into a creator’s intention that never enters the

⁹² The author is the real historical person writing the text; the narrator is the linguistic subject that narrates the event, usually, from a certain point of view; the speaker can coincide with the narrator or with one of the literary characters.

⁹³ Such an artist’s “I” that becomes objectified as “he” is, for instance, “the producer” in “But returning to the producer, it should be said...” Kabakov, *Concealment*.

work and an intellectual curiosity that starts a dialogue with the finished creation. The linguistic object (the objectified version of the subject; i.e., the artist as “he” or “the producer”) undergoes a more explicit transformation, on his own, as “he” becomes an objectified “I” that splits into two “I”-identities—one, that enters the work and a second one that remains in the position of observing and discussing the work and the author. In the end, whether they are “objectivized,” owned or adopted, all of these language identities—the “I” of the speaker, the “I” of the subject and the two “I-s” of the objectified subject-object—refer to the same artist and thus create a linguistic analogue-image of a multiple artistic identity and polyphony.

As the next chapter demonstrates, the dialogue between different authorial identities characterizes not only the writing of Kabakov but also the art and personality of one of his key associates from this period—the artist Yuri Sobolev. The essay *Concealment*, however, has a more immediate appeal and aesthetic goals in the rhetoric of Quartet’s arrangement. It gives a voice to Kabakov’s works displayed in the show and, in particular, to the left wing of the kernel’s diptych. The section of the essay that most closely pertains to *Whose Fly is This?* is the final sentence in the last citation:

But since both of these states can be objectivized, that is, become things in their own turn, then the possibility emerged to deal with the word and the image as equals.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Ibid. The corresponding translation in *The Text as the Basis...* reads “But since these judgments cannot be objectivized, that is become things on their part...” but the meaning conveyed here is exactly the opposite of that in the original “No oba eti sostoyaniya mogut byt’ ob”ektivirovany...” See Ilya Kabakov, *Der Text als Grundlage des Visuellen (The text as the basis of visual expression)* (Köln: Oktagon, 2000), 241; and Ilya Kabakov, *60-e—70-e: zapiski o neofitsial’noi zhizni v Moskve* (Wien: Gesellschaft zur Förderung slawistischer Studien, 1999), 37. The following sentence, which comprises the last paragraph of

This closing statement, which introduces the theme of the following essay *Word and Image as Equals*, retroactively suggests that the dialogue of Irina and German and the effigy of the fly are equally important as visual components of the painting. The little flying object may depict its corresponding physical referent or, as a visual metaphor, it may refer to the “stupefied” I of the artist that enters the finished artwork.⁹⁵ The remarks of Irina and German, in the same regard, may enact the conversation of two imaginary characters or, by the same token, they may reenact the verbal exchange of two real people or two viewers. However, the written words could be also recording the dialogue of the artist with the finished work which suddenly turns out to be in a situation of talking. The text could also be describing the “objectivized” judgment of the second “I” that stands on the side to discuss the work and its producer. In the light of such a plural logic, the viewers are likely to be encountering “texts that do not mean anything,” a significance that has lost its “coupling” with the word or an indirect visual expression. In the state of concealment, however, none of the signs that are depicted or “said” conveys what is truly intended; i.e., what is in the mind of the artist. Left with an artwork the perplexity of which matches only the twirled writing of the artist, the viewer of the catalogue can truly appreciate the premonition of the Kunsthalle’s director who admits that the four kernel works “do not disavow the cultures they spring from, indeed, they can be conclusively

the essay, presents an elaboration on the same idea: “Gradually the line drawn between the judgment and the thing itself engendered two circumstances which I would like to pause upon in detail, recalling the 1960’s. Those are ‘A Bad Thing’ and ‘The Word and Image as Equals’.” The latter two quotations render, in a reversed order, the titles of the two essays that follow after *Concealment* in Quartet’s catalogue and in the Kabakov’s memoir *60-e—70-e*.

⁹⁵ The story of an artist flying into or disappearing within a painting is part of Kabakov’s *Ten Characters*.

explained from out of those cultures.”⁹⁶ Following the path of that wise piece of advice, the next chapter leaves the geography of the Quartet to place Kabakov’s works into the context of Russian art, history and culture.

⁹⁶ Op. cit., Pakesch.

CHAPTER 2

From the “Indexical” to the “Iconic”: How the *Shower* Appeared in the Early 1960s

I. Works “For Them” versus Works “For Oneself”

Acknowledging the issue in passing, the scholarship has attributed the appropriation of language in the art of Kabakov to the “literary character” of Russian culture, the dominance of Russian literature and the overcrowded atmosphere of the Soviet communal apartment. The artist’s own reflections on the subject have often reinforced such presupposition and explanation. Though Russian literature and Soviet communal life undoubtedly impacted Kabakov’s approach and left a dialogic imprint in his so-called “conversational” artworks, the combination of written and pictorial signs in his art points to a far broader nexus of factors. Furthermore, the dialogue of linguistic and visual models also results from internal developments within the architecture of Kabakov’s thought and image. Therefore, this chapter will widen the scope of inquiry to entwine the memories of the artist with an overview of his early production, his immediate circle of friends as well as the more general intellectual circumstances in which that circle was created. As a result, such an approach ought to demonstrate that linguistic modes assumed a key role in Kabakov’s art long before written dialogues

formally entered the space of his paintings. In terms of chronology, this chapter explores the late 1950s and early 1960s to trace the process that led to the emergence of text in Kabakov's art and in, what appears to be, his first painting with words—*Whose Fly is This?*—in the mid-1960s.

Kabakov's personal account of his work and Moscow's artistic underground of the 1960s-1970s is given, in a most complete form, in the artist's early autobiography written two decades later—in the early 1980s: *60-e—70-e... Zapiski o neofitsial'noy zhizni v Moskve (1960s-1970s... Notes on the Unofficial Life in Moscow)*.⁹⁷ Although the book concentrates on the two decades mentioned retroactively in the title, the narrative commences earlier, in the late 1950s, when Kabakov's "true" artistic activities began emerging.⁹⁸ The first chapter—*Do 1961 goda (Until 1961)*—opens with a distinction between the work created "for oneself" (*dlya sebya*) and the work created "for them" (*dlya nikh*), i.e., the authorities—a division that echoes the rupture between the two "I"s of the artist in the essay *Concealment*. The same opposition, as the author of the memoir concludes, was deeply ingrained in the educational system of the Soviet art school and the art academy.⁹⁹ In the eyes of the communist leaders, the Soviet society needed artists

⁹⁷ Ilya Kabakov, *60-e—70-e... Zapiski o neofitsial'noy zhizni v Moskve*. Wiener Slavistischer Almanach. Sonderband 47 (Wien, 1999), subsequently *Zapiski*. The first sentence of the memoir, the title of which can be translated in English as *1960s-1970s...Notes on the Unofficial Life in Moscow*, indicates that it was commenced in 1982. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁹⁸ Arranged in a chronological fashion, the memoir contains two main sections, the 1960s and the 1970s. Each one of them is divided into subsections (chapters). In a preliminary sentence-motto, "Seychas 7 avgusta 1982 goda" (Today is August 7, 1982), Kabakov gives a concrete indication of when he started the text. *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Although it reflects the real conflicted status of the Soviet artist, Kabakov's vision and language is intensely dualistic in a way that points to a couple of factors. The first one is the methodological apparatus of Russian structuralism (in its two branches—one in Moscow and one in Tartu) in the context of which Soviet nonconformist artists were developing their theoretical interests in the 1960s-1980s and which

who employed the aesthetic principles of socialism to promote the propaganda of the state, therefore, the art education (similarly to education in any other discipline) followed strict sets of rules pertaining to the style, form and content of the artwork.¹⁰⁰ With a typical tone of self-irony, Kabakov admits that he quickly learned what was expected from him so, “as a trained rabbit” (“kak u dressirovanogo zaytsa”), he began producing art “for them”—his teachers, the artistic canon (Raphael and Rembrandt) and the socialist system:

Postепенно, kak u dressirovannogo zaytsa, vyrabotalas' yasnost' togo, chto “im” ot menya nuzhno, i, takim obrazom, samo risovanie, kotoroe po vidimosti delal “ya”, bylo tselikom “ikh” delom, delom pedagogov i drugikh obraztsov, vklyuchaya Rafaelya i Rembrandta.¹⁰¹

Gradually, as a trained rabbit, I realized what they needed from me, and, in such a way, the art that “I” seemed to create myself, was “their” art, in its entirety, the art of the teachers and other models, including Raphael and Rembrandt.

As a result, Kabakov explains, he felt a deep sense of alienation and estrangement from his artistic creation which was not only “work for them” but, in essence, “their work” because it remained foreign to its creator. The estrangement led Kabakov to believe that he was not a “real” artist—a motif that would long dominate his own self-perception—and a strong desire to discover and express his inner self:

operated on a set of binary oppositions; e.g., “in/out” or culture/non-culture.” Kabakov’s binary language is also related to the principal conflict between the romanticist subject and the external world—a primary motif in Russian literature (e.g., Gogol and Dostoevsky)—or the fundamental ideological dichotomies of Soviet socialist propaganda, such as “us” versus “them.”

¹⁰⁰ The state controlled all official educational and intellectual activities to make sure that they conform to its ideology. The visual arts were especially important as they had the ability to reach the uneducated masses.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

No vnutrennee zhelanie uznat', chto ya takoe, zachem ya, chto eto za zanyatie, kuda ya vtolknut' bez moego "prisustviya", vse vremya boleznenno muchilo menya, i, konechno, ono dolzhno bylo proyavit'sya prezhde vsego kak nekhudozhestvennoe delo, "neiskusstvo".

Seychas... ya stal chuvstvovat' sebya 'khudozhnikom', no togda, v te gody, ya dlya sebya byl tol'ko slepym, bespomoshchnym, zagnannym chelovekom, potomu chto professiya hudozhnika byla "dlya nikh", dlya ikh odobreniya ya delal "khudozhestvennoe".¹⁰²

But the inner desire to discover what am I, why am I, what kind of activity is that in which I am shoved without being "present," tormented me painfully all the time, and, of course, it had to manifest itself as a non-artistic activity, "non-art."

Today... I feel I am an artist, but back then, in those years, I saw myself only as a blind, helpless outsider, because the artist's occupation was "for them," I was creating "art" for their approval.

The personal outcome of this "coming of age" was Kabakov's innate resentment of any imposed authorities, dogmas or influence: from the official canon of socialist realism, through its officialized classic examples (e.g., Raphael and Rembrandt) to the unofficially extant Russian avant-grades of the 1920s and contemporary art in the West:

Eto otnoshenie otchuzhdeniya, nesliyaniya potom ostalos' navsegda, dazhe i togda, kogda ya nashel, vstretil "snaruzhi" ne tol'ko mertvye muchitel'nye pravila moikh uchiteley, pugayushchuyu, strashnuyu i neponyatnuyu produktsiyu poslednikh stalinskikh "khudorlov", no i sovremennoe nam togda zapadnoe iskusstvo i iskusstvo 20-kh, 30-kh godov u nas.¹⁰³

This attitude of alienation, detachment remained with me forever, even when I found and encountered not only the dead torturous rules of my teachers, the frightening, dreadful and confusing production of the last Stalinist artists, but also the contemporaneous Western art and the Russian art of the 1920s and the 1930s.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Statements such as this one, reiterated in numerous versions and on different occasions by Kabakov, have created a semantic gap between the dissident artist and his Western interpreters who, in tune with established art historical notions, have attempted to place (and understand) Kabakov's phenomenon through the prisms of local and international avant-gardes, modernist trends or post-modernist artistic developments.¹⁰⁴ Taking as its point of departure the artist's early writing, this chapter will shift the focus of this contentious dilemma. The problem is not whether Kabakov ever became aware of the early 20th-century avant-gardes in the 1960s (Kabakov's friends and his own memoir attest that he was cognizant, at least to some extent, of the art of Malevich and Russian constructivism as early as 1964-65, if not 1962). The question is how he perceived those visual idioms—as a liberating creative force or as the aesthetic dogma of another artistic authority. According to *Zapiski*, Kabakov approached the Russian avant-garde with the same “alienation” and “rejection” with which he treated the “tortuous rules” of the socialist educational system. From the distance of his “alienation,” he began a multifarious dialogue with the avant-garde's dictatorial voice—a dialogue that is difficult to capture in a single expression because it reflects the rupture between the “work for them” and the “works for oneself” and echoes the dynamic between the two “I”s of the artist.

¹⁰⁴ To the one-sided attempts to attribute his early art to the interrupted tradition of Russian avant-garde and the art of Suprematism, Constructivism and Malevich, Kabakov has often responded with a similarly extreme answer that in the 1960s he was unaware of Malevich and the constructivists, and when he discovered them in the late 1970s, they were “already dead” for him. Kabakov's early resistance to interpretative models that saw his art as a continuation of or a result of a local or a global modernist tradition was due, in part, to the special significance that artistic originality acquired in a society in which one had to blindly and incessantly follow the “dead torturous rules” of official aesthetic dogmas and teachers in order to retain the ability to survive and work in the context of the totalitarian bureaucratic machine.

In his words, Kabakov created the first works “for himself” between 1953 and 1956 during the winter vacations spent away from the repressive officialdom of the Surikov institute:

Eto byli gody 53, 54, 55, 56, delal ya eto tol’ko zimoy, pridya domoy posle instituta;...¹⁰⁵

This happened in 1953, 54, 55, 56, I did that only in the winters, after coming home from the Institute.

At home, the student felt liberated from the expectations of the socialist system and the stylistic demands of his art teachers. There, led by an “unconscious impulse” (“bessoznatel’nogo impul’sa”), Kabakov created between 600 and 700 non-representational drawings that he describes as “creations” which are “organic,” ‘unpremeditated,’ ‘uncontrolled,’ ‘mine’” (“Eti ‘izdeliya’ byli ‘organichny’, ‘nepredusmotrenny’, ‘nekontroliruemy’, ‘moi’”).¹⁰⁶ Although *Zapiski* notes the similarity of these works to the style of Abstract Expressionism, the author quickly repudiates the idea that they were a result of such influence:

... konechno, potom ya uzna, chto kak stil’ eto imelo nazvanie “abstractny ekspressionizm” i svoikh klassikov—Soulages, Mathieu, Kline i dr.¹⁰⁷

Of course, later on I found out that, as a style, this had a name “abstract expressionism” and classical representatives—Soulages, Mathieu, Kline and so on.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 10.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 9-10. As the memoir reveals the drawings were saved and later were incorporated in Kabakov’s “Gray Albums” and “Four Albums.” Ibid., 10. See also Ilya Kabakov, *Viisi Albumia, Five Albums*. (Helsinki: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994) and *Five Albums. Second Book*. (Helsinki: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998)

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 10.

Reflecting the artist's "unconscious impulse" and the inner desire to understand "who am I," these expressionist drawings signified everything that the official works (the "works for them") could not—they were "free," "uncontrolled," non-representational, "organic" and, therefore, liberated from any language and ideology; i.e., from any ordered systems of rules about style, form, content and meaning.¹⁰⁸ While Kabakov's official works were language-bound in the sense that they conformed to the visual and verbal cliché of the regime, the drawings "for himself" were "entropic" and full of "chaos," giving outlet to the pre-linguistic impulses of the artist's subconscious. This free, non-linguistic quality predisposed their allure as well as their "huge disadvantage:"

No y nikh byl krupny nedostatok—vernee, u menya po otnosheniyu k nim—v nikh ne bylo "refleksii", chem nadelen ya byl sverkh mery vseгда, no togda v osobennosti, i, delaya eti risunochki, ya videl, chto osnovnaya chast' menya samogo kakby ne prisutstvovala v etom protsesse, a otkazat'sya of "soznaniya", refleksii ya ne zhelal, u menya nikogda ne bylo radosti osvobodit'sya i stat' "estestvennym" idiotom, pust' dazhe i "khudozhnikom".¹⁰⁹

But there was a huge disadvantage in them—or, to be precise, in my attitude towards them—they lacked the "reflectivity" that has always been overabundant in me but was especially [overabundant] then. Making these drawings, I realized that an essential part of me did not participate in this process, however, I did not want to abandon my "consciousness" and reflectivity. I have never enjoyed being liberated as a "natural" idiot, even if such [liberation] meant being "an artist."

¹⁰⁸ Socialist realist art represented subjects approved by the party in a way established as appropriate because the goal of art was to convey the beauty and power of the socialist ideas to the masses. Works that did not conform to such expectations and reflected the individual style or intentions of their authors were deemed "formalistic," unworthy and self-serving.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 10.

Thus, the short-lived liberation of this “expressionist” enterprise and its excursion into the world of the subconscious triggered counterpoising effects. It caused Kabakov to go back to what, according to his new realization, was the artist’s self-defining characteristic—“my consciousness, reflectivity.” In the essay *Concealment*, the reflective identity of the artist was embodied by the second “I” which, never entering his work, remained on the side to judge both the work and its creator. In *Zapiski*, born out of the failed “expressionist” experiment, the same most “essential part” of the artist reunites with his reflective identity to become intermarried with the utmost expression of consciousness—writing and language. In the words of the author, his inner side found its first outlet in the “endless notes in the albums” which Kabakov, as any other student at the art institute, was supposed to fill with figural drawings and sketches:

Eta reflektivnaya chast’ menya nakhodila svoe vyrazhenie v beskonechnykh zapisyakh v al’bomchikakh, kotorye my, ucheniki, dolzhny byli zapolnyat’ nabroskami i eskizami. Moi (vse al’bomchiki eti sokhranilis’) byli napolovinu zapolneny myslyami ob iskusstve i zhizni, inogda ambitsioznymi, inogda robskimi, zhalkimi. Seychas vse oni kazhutsya neinteresnymi, no eto uroven’ vnutrennego soznaniya 21-25-letnego molodogo cheloveka, uchivshegosya v zakrytoy khudozhestvennoy burse v poslednie gody stalinskoy epokhi.¹¹⁰

My reflective part found its expression in the endless notes in the albums which we, the students, were required to fill with drawings and sketches. My albums (all of them have survived) were half filled with thoughts about art and life, at times ambitious, at times shy, pitiful. Now all of them seem uninteresting, but that was the level of the inner consciousness of a 21-25 year-old young person, studying at the isolated art seminary in the last years of the Stalinist era.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

Although Kabakov dismisses those early notes as the scribbles of a student being educated at the wane of Stalin's cultural isolationism, he admonishes that his inner self found an adequate form of expression not in the "abstract pictures" drawn in that period, but in his "endless texts in albums."¹¹¹ Pictures, or at least pictures alone, were incapable of conveying the author's "reflective" intentions so, as the memoir goes on to further suggest, Kabakov's prodigal "wandering" into the realm of linguistic expression might have led him to the future use of language in pictorial context or the equality of image and word in subsequent artworks:

Vozmozhno, chto eto "tekstobludie" privelo potom k idee vvedeniya teksta v izobrazhenie, uchastiyu v kartine "na ravnykh" izobrazheniya i teksta.¹¹²

It is possible, that this *textobludie* led in result to the idea of including text in the representation and resulted in pictures in which image and text were equal.

As we will see later, the appropriation of language or the unity of linguistic and visual signs are too complex to be fully explained by a single source of inspiration, but the albums of the young student may well have been one of the contributing factors. Another artistic circumstance that drove the student away from the traditional genre of painting was the state of painting itself and the hierarchical implications of its "fetishized" genre. In the same section of *Zapiski* in which Kabakov describes the emergence of his "works for himself," the author gives an assessment of the situation of

¹¹¹ "Ya opisal dva vida 'produksii' togo vremeni: 1. Abstraktnye kartinki i 2. Beskonechnye teksty v al'bomchikakh." ("I described two types of 'production' during that time: 1. Abstract pictures and 2. Endless texts in albums.") Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid. "Tekstobludie" is a neologism that has a dual meaning: *wandering* away into the realm of text and, at the same time, textual *fornication* because the root of the word, the Russian verb "bludit'," means both "to wander" and "to fornicate."

Soviet painting in the late 1950s when “fetish etogo slova v vozdukhke togo vremeni byl ochen’ silen, beskonechno obsuzhdalos’, chto takoe zhivopis’, podlinnaya, nepodlinnaya, kakovo ee otnoshenie s ‘naturoy’, s pravdoy zhizni v nature i t.d.”¹¹³ For Kabakov, who at the time neither entertained the idea (“eto voobshche ne prikhodilo v golovu”) nor had the courage to reject this fetishized genre (“otbrosit’ voobshche eto risovanie ya ne reshalsya”), the questions had a deeply personal resonance:

No chto v etom risovanii sushchestvuet deystvitel’no dlya menya, kak vossoedinit’sya s naturoy cherez “zhivopis’”, nayti s ney kontakt, to est’ nayti i “naturu” i “zhivopis’” podlinno dlya sebya? I voobshte, chto takoe “zhivopis’”?¹¹⁴

Does painting contain anything that is real for me, how to connect with nature through “painting,” how to find contact with it; i.e., to find both “nature” and “painting” that are real for me?

Kabakov sought answers to these questions in the art of his contemporaries which, according to *Zapiski*, offered two extreme solutions: (1) painting dedicated to formal problems (texture, color, harmony, etc) and (2) painting representing the “truth of life” (“pravdy zhizni”) “to est’ izobrazheniya togo, chto pered nami, pered kholstom, so vsem vozdukhom, prostranstvom, svetoten’yu...”¹¹⁵ The two trends conjectured two diametrically opposite views of “nature” (“natura”). In the first case, nature existed only as a “background” (“fon”) which “although it is present, there is no point to talk about

¹¹³ “...the fetish of this word [painting] was very strong in the climate of that time. There were endless discussions about what painting was, original or unoriginal, what was its relation to ‘nature,’ to the reality of life in nature and so on.” Ibid., 11.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ “...i.e., painting of what is in front of us, in front of the brush, with all its atmosphere, space, chiaroscuro...” Ibid.

it.”¹¹⁶ In the second case, the background—which seems “inevitable, though annoying” (“neizbezhnym, hotya i dosadnym”)—turns out to be painting itself, so that the whole attention is devoted to how one represents “life” (“zhizni”)—with details, psychological depth or in any other way.¹¹⁷ Causing furious battles in the 1930s, the conflict, in Kabakov’s estimation, subsided in the 1950s bringing a “complete victory” to the second faction and granting a “complete defeat” to the first one which had to retrieve, broken and humiliated, to the margins of the Soviet society.¹¹⁸ Kabakov attributes the painting concerned with formal problems to the art of Vrubel and Impressionism, which, as he admits, he barely knew in the late 1950s because they were banned by the regime. Thus, for him the “classical representative” of the formalist type of painting became the unofficial artist Robert Fal’k whom Kabakov met in 1957 after graduating from the Surikov.¹¹⁹ The painting devoted to the “truth of life,” in contrast, was represented everywhere, shown in exhibits and rendered in all genres by the mighty fleet (“moshchnoy armadoy”) of Soviet official artists.¹²⁰ Not identifying with any one of these two approaches, the young Kabakov decided to unite them in two different “types” (“v dvukh vida”) of combinations—in a set of “drawings from nature” (“v pisanii s

¹¹⁶ “... o kotorom, khotya on i est, no i govorit’ sobstvenno ne stoit.” Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Kabakov and his friends—Erik Bulatov, Oleg Vasiliev and Mikhail Mezhaninov—visited Fal’k twice a week and these visits became for them “revelations and contact with Great Painting.” Kabakov admits that he was deeply affected by the “mighty, mysterious canvas painting” because, before that, he had thought (“mne togda kazalos”) that objects, people and, in general, nature were poorly represented on the canvas and their presence was unimportant. Ibid.

¹²⁰ Among the numerous examples of socialist realist art, Kabakov mentions, without expressing particular opinion, the “solemn paintings” of Gerasimov and Ioganson, the portraits of Efanov and Kotova, the landscapes of Brodsky and Romadin, the genre paintings of Gavrilov and Reshetnikov as well as the still-life of Konchalovsky. Ibid., 12.

nature”) and in a peculiar endeavor that he began in 1957 and subsequently characterized as his “picture-masterpiece” (“kartina-shedevr”).¹²¹ Although both the drawings and the “masterpiece” proved unsatisfactory to the artist, they prompted him to realize that neither the stylistic concerns of modernist art nor the “truth”-driven and content-oriented forms of realism (be it as classical realist art or its oxymoronic distortion—“socialist realism”) would adequately articulate his intentions.¹²²

II. The Allegory of the “Masterpiece”

Preoccupying Kabakov from 1957 until 1961, the “masterpiece” was a particularly hard-felt experience.¹²³ In contrast to the drawings “from nature,” it did not result from any direct observations.¹²⁴ Instead, as *Zapiski* reveals, the artist intended to

¹²¹ The irony results from the heart-felt ambition of the “masterpiece” to “shock the world”—a goal that Kabakov attributes to his “state of mind” at the time—and the impossibility of the task which led to “a multiplicity of problems and complexities.” Later, he learned that another generation of Russian artists, older than him, was attempting to do the same thing—i.e., to unite “good painting” and “true reality.” Those were the so-called “semerki.” Andronov, Nikonov and Egorshin. Ibid.

¹²² The drawings “from nature” included early pastel landscapes and small oil paintings made at the *dacha* of Bulatov’s family between 1957 and 1961 when Kabakov became increasingly aware that this type of painting was “an unnecessary and distracting activity.” Ibid., 14. His interest in painting “from nature” died in 1966 when the last works of this kind—a still-life with a black bottle and a self-portrait—were painted as if to illustrate, as Kabakov concludes, Bulatov’s statement “This is on the side. It is not my work.” Ibid.

¹²³ The masterpiece, a large oil on canvas (140 x 200 cm), has not survived. It exists only in the author’s description in *Zapiski*, in later restorations from memory and in the preliminary version of one of Kabakov’s preparatory pencil drawings. See Matthew Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 30, fig. 13; and *Kabakov: Paintings/Gemälde 1957-2008*. Catalogue raisonné, ed. Renate Petzinger and Emilia Kabakov (Bielefeld, Germany: Museum Wiesbaden/Kerber Verlag, 2008), 46.

¹²⁴ “... the whole plot came out of my head.” *Zapiski*, 13.

combine Fal'k's painterly style with a subject matter of "profound depth and significance."¹²⁵ Announced for a first time in Kabakov's memoir, even simply to describe a student leaving his "infantile age," the motif of "profound depth" signifies a shift in the artist's aesthetic.¹²⁶ The "masterpiece" neither attempts to express the subconscious impulses of its creator, nor represents, even in an indexical, modernist way, the external "truth of nature." Its inspiration is rooted in the realm of mental processes because, in Kabakov's words, the goal of the work is "to unite the fragmented and disconnected experiences happening in different spheres of one's consciousness."¹²⁷ The cerebral shift is related to the new source of artistic inspiration—instead of presenting one's "subconscious" or "nature," the "masterpiece" invokes the artist's consciousness and cognition—and reflects the new way in which this source is approached. The work does not "express" impulses or "represent" true life but "connects" and "unites" one's "experiences" [the Russian word for "experience" ("opyt") also means "expertise."]¹²⁸ Based on cognitive strategies, the "masterpiece" is moving a step closer to the paintings that would provoke "all kinds of associations, connections" in the mind of the author of *Concealment*.¹²⁹ However, the piece's visual aesthetic is still far away from the "active investigation, a departure into various, often distant areas of culturology, philosophy, social psychology" prompted by the works that would combine image and language.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 12.

¹²⁶ In the words of the author, the "masterpiece" offered a personal transition from the "infantile age" to the next stage by "bringing together of a number of problems and complexes, mostly psychological. That was the decision to unite in one whole all fragmented and disconnected experiences from different spheres located in your consciousness." Ibid.

¹²⁷ "Eto reshenie sobrat' voedino ves' kroshechny i razroznenny opyt iz mnogikh oblastey, stoyashchikh v tvoem soznanii." Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Chapter 1.

The subject of the “masterpiece” is meticulously described in Kabakov’s memoir.¹³⁰ Situated in the abandoned outskirts of a city, the scene showed “an old blue circus wagon” that was surrounded by various figures: a clown sitting in the wagon, a second clown waiving his hands outside, a ballerina with her leg stretched up, an acrobat standing on his hands and two groups of spectators: old women from the city, on the left, and a couple from the village, on the right. In the background, one could see “narrow streets,” some “houses” and the “last rays” of the setting sun brightening the sky. Avidly described by the artist, the carefully structured and detailed composition was not accidental. In Kabakov’s words, everything was imbued with “dead sense and metaphysical meaning”—“the old women signified old age in general; the clown—self-deprecation; the ballerina—‘eternal femininity’”—and the “Fal’kian” twilight of the setting sun contributed to the overall atmosphere.¹³¹ The “most important thing,” according to the author, was that “the deep sense and high significance were demonstrated and intergraded into the very, so to say, flesh of the painting.”¹³²

After a long trial of enveloping abstract ideas into clichéd visual allegories, the outcome failed to meet the artist’s own expectations. Painted with numerous interruptions in basement studios and crowded community apartments, the “masterpiece”

¹³⁰ The novelty of the subject is also related to the “chief” ambition of the young artist—to announce his “extraordinary, amazing qualities which will startle and shock everybody” (“ob’yavlenie svoey neobyknovennosti, izumitel’nosti, otchego vse vnezapno povernut’sya, budut potryaseny”). The irony of the mature Kabakov picks up full speed in the following sentence “All of your power, subtlety, depth and omnipotence will be manifested in the masterpiece, and it will shine, like a new star among the shining stars; from now on, your masterpiece will enter the catalogue of established masterpieces, it will strengthen and settle your place in the world, which had been so problematic up until that point.” Ibid.

¹³¹ “Everything was submersed in the gleaming ‘Fal’kian’ twilight. (Obviously, it is assumed, that Fal’k’s painting is the illumination between day and night when twilight occurs.)” Zapiski, 14.

¹³² Ibid., 13.

remained “grayish, undefined and helpless.”¹³³ As unsatisfactory as it turned out to be, the work brought a new realization about the origin of the artistic image. According to Kabakov, the subject of the painting did not represent “nature” or the “subconscious,” but originated in the “head” of the artist:

... ves' syuzhet vyshel iz golovy, iz voobrazheniya i snabzhen byl tozhe golovnymi perezhivaniyami i vpechatleniyami... Dlya ego izgotovleniya ya ne pol'zoval'sya nikakimi naturnymi etyudami i materialami, vse vyplylo “iz golovy” (ya ne sdelał dazhe eskiza, a stal pisat' srazu).¹³⁴

...the whole scene came out of my head, out of my imagination, and it became supplemented with experiences and impressions that also originated in my head... I did not use any materials or sketches “from nature,” everything sprung “from the head” (I did not even prepare a sketch, I began drawing directly).

However, even though it originated in the thoughts of its author, the scene was not a product of the artist’s imagination—such an outcome would have been foreign to Kabakov’s sensibility and intention. The image preserves its inner connection with the external reality and the presence of “nature” (“natura”). The connection with “nature,” as described in *Zapiski*, is rather roundabout because it is transmitted through the processes of the artist’s memory:

Natura zdes' byla skoree kak pamyat' o nature, uzhe pererabotannaya i okruzhennaya vsemi kul'turnymi i psikhologicheskimi obolochkami, kuda, v eto “oblako”, nechuvstvitel'no bylo podsoedineno i “misticheskoe” i “metafizicheskoe”...¹³⁵

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

Nature was present here as memory of nature, already processed and covered by a whole range of cultural and psychological shells. In this “cloud,” “mystical” and “metaphysical” inconspicuously came together.

Thus, in the course of creating his “masterpiece” and, as it seems, independently of any aesthetic credos and theoretical platforms, in the late 1950s Kabakov arrived at another important realization—the *secondary* nature of the artistic image.¹³⁶ As *Zapiski*’s introspection reveals, the image of the masterpiece is removed twice from the external reality-nature—once, through the process of artistic manipulation and, a second time, via the mental procedures (memory) of the artist. It is in the stage of this latter encoding-processing, that the visual impression of “nature” becomes a complex mental construction (“memory of nature”). That memory is, in the view of its author, so opaque and compound that Kabakov employs a range of metaphors to reveal and conceal its facture: it is “covered by a whole range of cultural and psychological shells” and appears like a “cloud” in which “mystical” and “metaphysical” come together. The masterpiece seems to predate any contact with the theoretical rubric that would soon explain the semiotic nature of the artist’s intellectual inquiries.¹³⁷ In the light of Kabakov’s own artistic trajectory, however, the allegoric “masterpiece” moved away from the “iconic” bonds of the works “from nature” and the “indexical” limitations of the “expressionist”

¹³⁶ “Secondary” is a term borrowed from the terminological arsenal of Russian structuralism, according to which, language is a primary modeling system, i.e., system of signs. Literature, art and all other similar modeling systems are based on the model of language, and therefore they are “secondary” modeling systems. See Yuri Lotman, *Struktura Khudozhestvennogo Teksta. Structure of the Artistic Text*. Transl. from the Russian by Gail Lenhoff and Ronald Vroon. (Michigan Slavic Contributions 7. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, 1977).

¹³⁷ However, the ideas of Russian semiotics with its Tartu predilection toward culturology (“cultural shells”) certainly informed *Zapiski*’s language in the 1980s when Kabakov was writing his memoir.

drawings to bring about the sudden arrival of, what would become, Kabakov's signature image.¹³⁸

III. The Roundabout Language of Symbols

Kabakov attributes the emergence of his first “independent” works—i.e., the creations that were his “own,” “original” and satisfying—to the winter of 1961-1962, the year in which, as his memoir recalls, Yuri Gagarin flew into space.¹³⁹ Remembering the “sudden” appearance of these pieces and the “unusual, true joy” that he felt upon seeing them, the artist describes the event in unusually dramatic and emotional terms. The new creation emerged at a point when both the “masterpiece” and the “works from nature” had run their course:

K etomy vremeni vse prishlo k ischerpannosti i “shedevr”, i risovanie s natury. Vnezapno kak budto ozarenie, poyavilas', narisovalas' seriya s dushem, listkov 15-20 (na parshivoy bumazhke, 20/13, karandashom). Kak-to vo vsem eta seriya menya ustraivala: i vnezapno, “bez moego uchastiya”, i “original'no” (nigde takogo ya ne videl), a glavnoe—uverennoe, likuyushchee chuvstvo, chto “moe!”, ne ch'e-to, a moe, i ya deystvitel'no iznutri svyazan s rezul'tatom, kakaya-to nerazryvnaya nit' idet k etim risunochkam iz glubiny menya, i takoe chuvstvo, chto svyaz' eta ne prervetsya, a budet dal'she i dal'she razmatyvat'sya, nado tol'ko bez ustali vytyagivat' i vytyagivat'. Tak s togo vremeni eto i ustanovilos' navsegda: eta nit' iz menya, iz temnoy, neizvestnoy glubiny naruzhu, naverh.

¹³⁸ For a thoughtful in-depth reflection on the “indexical” and the “iconic” properties of the artwork see Richard Shiff, “*Performing an Appearance: On the Surface of Abstract Expressionism*,” in Michael Auping, ed., *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments*. (Harry N. Abrams, 1987): 97-98.

¹³⁹ “Gagarin had just flown into space, that’s why it is possible to confirm the date.” *Ibid.*, 15.

Kak, pochemu eto poluchilos'—ne znayu, no khorosho pomnyu i vnezapnost', i radost' kakuyu-to osobuyu, podlinnuyu. I kriteriy etoy radosti, ee podlinnosti tozhe sokhranilsya kak osoby kriteriy s etoy zhe minuty.¹⁴⁰

At that time, everything became exhausted—both the “masterpiece” and the drawing from nature. Suddenly, as if it was a revelation, there appeared, materialized itself the “shower series,” drawn in pencil on 15-20 sheets of mangy paper (20 x 13 cm). Somehow, everything about this series worked for me: it appeared “suddenly,” “without my participation,” and it was “original” (I had not seen anything like that before), but the most important thing was the exultant conviction that it was “mine!,” not anybody else’s, but mine. I was truly and deeply connected with the result; some kind of unbreakable threat run toward these drawings from deep inside of me, and I had the feeling that this connection would not break but it would stretch further and further; one had to just keep pulling and pulling. From then on, this continued forever: this threat from inside of me, from the dark, unknown depth running outward and upward. How and why did that happen—I do not know, but I remember well the suddenness and the strange, genuine joy. And, from that point on, the authenticity of this joy became an important criterion for me.

Kabakov’s excitement about his first “independent” creation can be partially attributed to the visual novelty and aesthetic impact of the “Shower series.” In contrast to the “masterpiece,” each “Shower” drawing employs a very limited arsenal of formal components to evoke a powerful, immediate effect. Unified by a recurrent theme-image, all drawings in the series depict an identical subject matter from a repetitive point of view: a stocky, roughly drawn man stands—frontal, still and naked—under the nozzle of a shower (Fig. 12).¹⁴¹ With hands folded in front of his bare chest in a manner that distances him from the scene and the viewer, the man faces the observer with a blank and indeterminate expression. The only element that seems to fluctuate within the

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ The sexuality of the bather, however, does not appear to be a focal issue in the series because his genitalia is missing in some drawings, or it is loosely sketched in others.

monotonous rhyme of the drawings is the presence, the consistency and the flow of the murky substance which drips, pours out or, at times, meanders away from the shower's nozzle.¹⁴² The series' rhythmic repetition is heightened by the consistent pictorial framing, while its slight variation is articulated by a flux in the close-up view of the two images.¹⁴³

The figure's presence also illustrates the contradiction between spatial closeness and spatial distance as its rendition increases the tension between physical openness and emotional detachment. The burly body is fully exposed in its frontal complete nakedness, and, yet, it remains a-sexual, schematic and sketched in a loosely generalized manner that leaves little room for physical and psychological detail.¹⁴⁴ In the end, the drawings do not allow the viewer to determine whether they depict a conceptual rendition of an imaginary situation, a quick study of "nature," a stylized representation or a psychological self-portrait. Thus, the image seems simultaneously simple and complex, incomprehensible and self-contained, enclosed and open to endless semantic possibilities. In comparison with the "masterpiece," the *Shower's* representation retains the presence of "nature" ("natura") and conveys the "mystical" and the "mysterious" as a "cloud" of

¹⁴² In some of the later drawings, the substance comes down as an opaque mandorla that partially or fully envelops the bather without changing his appearance or position. In other drawings, the water swirls away, runs to the side or stops at a mid-point right above the head of the male figure. In some of the drawings, the water is missing altogether; yet, the body seems never affected by its presence or absence.

¹⁴³ Both the bather and the shower are always pushed close to the foreground with a slight gradation in the rendition of that "closeness." By the same token, their extremities—the legs of the man and the arm of the shower—are also consistently cut by the frame—sometimes more evidently, sometimes less drastically.

¹⁴⁴ For instance, the rough shading gives a sense of the volume of the body but does not reflect a source of light. There is little emphasis on anatomical details; the facial features are visible but they do not convey the sense of emotion or individuality. A comparison between early and later additions to this series demonstrates that, over time, the image becomes more conventionalized and stylized.

“cultural and psychological shells.” In the language of the essay *Concealment*, the series also prompts “an active investigation, departure into various, often distant areas of culturology, philosophy, social psychology.”¹⁴⁵ The reductionist aesthetic and semantic density of the image seem to have abandoned the “iconic” limitations, “indexical” bounds and “allegorical” preconditions of Kabakov’s earlier stages. However, in order to grasp the implications of this new figural permutation one needs to examine the context in which it became possible and meaningful.¹⁴⁶ Although *Zapiski* does not discuss the meaning of the *Shower* series, the memoir shares ample observations on the art and ideas of Kabakov’s new acquaintances.

¹⁴⁵ Chapter 1. The “shower series” have been the subject of a great variety of interpretations. The series have been seen as an embodiment of “Kabakov’s first conscious meditation of loss and lack,” as “a self-perpetuating aesthetic-scientific experiment in series,” a transition from “the unitary, significant art object toward a fragmented seriality more consonant with the investigation of *langue* than the mobilization of *parole*” and an example of “semantic density.” They have been also connected with “the enduring anxieties over bodily cleanliness among the Jewish community of Eastern Europe,” with Malevich’s pursuit of aesthetic purity, Stalin’s *chistki* (political purges) and Gogol’s *Dead Souls*. See M. Jackson, *Ibid.*, 41-43. The subject has been further related to “the cyberneticist and structuralist’s own idealized ‘norm’ of language” and presented as a demonstration of the idea that “one does not simply *use* a language; rather it is always language that “uses” its user. *Ibid.* 39-40. The series readily accommodates all of these interpretations and leaves room for endless other possibilities. In the context of Soviet visuality, Kabakov’s bather embodies the daily existence of “Homo Sovietikus.” Wallach, *Ibid.*, 41-43. Standing indifferently under a high, mechanized and unpredictable dispenser of goods which, at times, remains dry or, at times, releases a murky substance that never reaches the body, the bather exemplifies the Soviet everyman in the most typical state of the Soviet everyman’s daily existence—the state of perpetual waiting and wondering. With his fate and wellbeing in the hands of higher forces and authorities, the Homo Sovietikus patiently awaits everything—from simple material goods to the promised bright future of communism—and perpetually pondered the “big questions” of the universe.

¹⁴⁶ This dissertation utilizes the term “context” which is largely used in art history and linguistics, although, from a philosophical point of view, “frame” would be a more accurate reference point for any inquiries in the humanities. The later term acknowledges the subjectivity of any language reality, scheme of interpretation and intellectual construct. Contemporary writings on frame analysis are loosely rooted in Erving Goffman’s theory. See Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) and Dietram A. Scheufele, “Framing as a Theory of Media Effects,” in *Journal of Communication* 49 no. 4 (1999): 103-22.

IV. The “Emblem-Symbols” of Sooster and Sobolev

The *Shower* not only marks a critical stage in Kabakov’s “coming of age” as an artist, but it also coincides with important new developments in his intellectual and artistic environment.¹⁴⁷ In 1962, he met the Estonian Ülo Sooster at the state publishing house Detgiz where both of them worked as illustrators of Soviet children’s books.¹⁴⁸ Already established as an important figure in Moscow’s underground circles, Sooster introduced Kabakov to the lead artist of one of the largest and most progressive Soviet publishing houses *Znanie* (Knowledge)—Yuri Sobolev.¹⁴⁹ Sobolev and Sooster, in turn,

¹⁴⁷ According to Kabakov, two important individuals approved the *Shower* drawings. The first person to see them was Leonard Danil’ tsev whose opinion, according to Kabakov, never pleased or misled anybody. Danil’ tsev praised the series as “authentic, original.” The second person was Antonello Trombadori, a leader of the Italian socialist party, who took some of the drawings to include them in the show that became one of the first exhibits of Moscow unofficial art. Held in L’Aquila, that was also the first international exhibit of Kabakov’s work (“Actual alternative - 2”, Castello Spaniolo, L’Aquila, Italy). See *Zapiski*, 15.

¹⁴⁸ At that time, in the summer of 1962, both Kabakov and Sooster needed studios so they decided to look together and soon moved into a “horrible dirty basement”—the first one of the three studios they shared in the following years. *Ibid.*, 16. An Estonian who had spent eight years in the Soviet camps, Sooster, according to Wallach, was “already recognized in unofficial artistic circles” and had influence on Kabakov. Thus, although Kabakov maintained that there were no “school-ofs,” Wallach suggests that Kabakov’s first drawings in this new studio “appear to be in a manner of an aesthetic and intellectual argument with Sooster; a comic response to the comic seriousness of Sooster’s art.” See Amey Wallach, *Ilya Kabakov. The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*. (New York: Harry N. Adams, Inc., 1996), 37.

¹⁴⁹ *Zapiski*, 16. Founded in 1951 in Moscow, *Znanie* (Knowledge) was the publishing house of the All-Union “Znanie” Society of the USSR. The Society was “a voluntary public organization responsible for the dissemination of political and scientific knowledge and for the communist education of the working masses.” It was founded in 1947 as the All-Union Society for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge and has been known as *Znanie* since 1963. The All-Union Society united the fifteen separate *Znanie* societies of the Union republics. The Society worked in all branches of knowledge: scientific establishments, educational institutions and business enterprises. It organized public lectures, scientific addresses and conferences, seminars, topical evenings, oral journals, popular readings, reports of the creative activity of scholars in production groups, discussions and scientific consultations. *Znanie* also participated in radio and television programs and in the creation of scientific and popular science films.

soon welcomed Kabakov into the most intellectual formation of unofficial art in Moscow—the so-called Znanie circle—which, in addition to both of them, also included the artists Popov and Lavrov.¹⁵⁰ According to his autobiography, Kabakov’s friendship with other prominent representatives of Moscow’s underground—Neizvestni, Yankilevsky, Grobman and the Lianozovo group—also dates to the same period.¹⁵¹ As a result, in the words of the artist, the winter of 1962 opened the beginning of “new artistic life” for him.¹⁵²

In his essay *Apologiya personalizma v iskvustve 60-kh godov (Apologia of Personalization in the Art of the 1960s)* Kabakov assesses the role of these artists in his life and in the underground scene of the 1960s.¹⁵³ According to *Apologia*, the two most significant (and, in many ways, mutually contradicting) developments in the unofficial art of the 1960s were the Lianozovo group and Sobolev’s circle. Led by the powerful charisma of Oskar Ryabin, the Lianozovo group seemingly dominated the artistic

The *Znanie* Publishing House was an important component of the Society as printed propaganda played a key role in its activities. *Znanie* published popular science literature in various fields, including the subscription series: *New Developments in Life, Science, and Technology* (24 series) and the *People’s University* (seven departments), the series of instructions and guides for lectures *Help for Lecturers*, the mass series *Read This, Comrade* and the international popular science annuals *Science and Mankind* (since 1962) and *The Future of Science* (since 1967). In Moscow, the Society published the magazines: *International Life* (In Russian, French and English editions), *Science and Life*, *Knowledge-Power*, *Science and Religion* and so on. See *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*. (Moscow: Soviet Encyclopedia, 1969-1978), 3rd Edition (1970-1979), V 9, 555: 1652-53.

¹⁵⁰ Both Popov and Lavrov worked at illustrators at *Zanie-Sila* which regularly published their illustrations in the 1960s. Lavrov also served as technical director of many of the magazine’s editions while Sobolev became *Znanie*’s lead artistic director (leading artist) in 1967.

¹⁵¹ Subsequently, Yankilevsky and Neizvestny also joined the *Znanie* circle.

¹⁵² *Zapiski*, 16.

¹⁵³ Recorded on a dictaphone on June 23, 1986, this essay, subtitled “passionate monologue” (“strastny monolog”), comprises the last section of the Russian *Zapiski*. In it, the Lianozovo group and the other new acquaintances are discussed as part of, what Kabakov defines as, the “corner” mentality of the 1960s—i.e., people who inhabited, physically, artistically and psychologically, the invisible margins of Moscow culture. *Ibid.*, 152-3.

landscape of Moscow's underground.¹⁵⁴ Ryabin who embraced all artistic novelties with a kind of generous "paternal" acceptance, was, as Kabakov puts it, indifferent to any "formalist" concerns and "aesthetic trends."¹⁵⁵ According to *Apologia*, the attention of this "father" of Moscow underground was centered, instead, on the "general strategy of artistic life as a type of activity" and on the "functioning of the artistic sphere itself."¹⁵⁶ Thus, Ryabin impacted Kabakov not so much with his dark depictions of austere life and somber poverty on thickly painted canvases but rather with his predisposition to conceptual inquiries that probed the function and meaning, not the formal qualities of art. At the same time, Ryabin and the Lianozovo group, as a whole, rejected "any intellectualization or reflection in their works" ("otvergali vsyakuyu intellektualizatsiyu i refleksiyyu v svoey rabote") and based their art on the principles of the "natural, unpremeditated and instinctive" ("estestvennost', neproizvol'nost' i instinktivnost").¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ The name of the group took after the name of the poor worker's district in which Ryabin's apartment and studio were located—Lianozovo. According to Kabakov, Ryabin's stoicism and determination were instrumental in establishing the idea of "our world"—the self-sufficient and developed underground world which later, in the 1970s, came to be known as "unofficial" and "nonconformist" culture. Ibid., 154. Centered in Ryabin's studio, from which all contacts with the authorities, with alternative artists in other cities or buyers of unofficial art were methodically coordinated, the underground world did not lack any of the "attributes and characteristics" of the "other, external, 'overground world.'" Pronounced ironically as the "ideal minister of culture," Ryabin was the main "strategist" of the group which included Sapgir, Kholin, Masterkova, Nemukhin, Tsyferov and Kropivnitski's son and daughter. Ibid., 153

¹⁵⁵ "On ne byl 'formalistom,' ego interes k spetsial'nym esteticheskimi kontseptsiam i khudozhestvennym 'priemam', ya by skazal, byl minimal'nym. On prikhodil ko mne v masterskuyu, i ya porazhalsya ego glubokomu ravnodushiyu k samomu khudozhestvennomu izdeliyu... on ne interesovalsya esteticheskimi tendentsiyami..." ("He was not a formalist, and I would say that his interest in specific aesthetic concepts and artistic 'devices' was minimal. Each time he came to my studio, I was struck by his deep indifference to the artwork itself... he was not interested in any aesthetic trends...") Ibid., 155.

¹⁵⁶ "Ya by skazal, chto on interesovalsya obshchey strategiyey khydozhestvennoy zhizni kak deyatel'nosti... vse vnimanie obrashchal na funktsionirovanie samoy khudozhestvennoy sredy." Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ The *Apologia* discusses in greater detail the art of the other members of the Lyanozovo group. Related to Russian Expressionism or Tachism, their work, in contrast to Ryabin's paintings, is much more clearly devoted to resolving aesthetic problems, such as combining "factura" and "textura" with painterly techniques and attention to the surface of the canvas (Masterkova, Nemukhin and Plavinski), developing a new symbolist language on the basis of the same painterly experiments (Kropivnitski, son) and so on.

Any rational and analytical approach to the work of art seemed to them inappropriate and inartistic:

Obsuzhdat', raskladyvat', analizirovat' khudozhestvenny protsess, kholodnym skal'pelem vskryvat' khudozhestvennoe proizvedenie predstavlyalos' chem-to prestupnym i privodyashchim k omertvleniyu samogo zanyatiya.¹⁵⁸

To discuss, deconstruct, analyze the artistic process, to dissect the work of art with a cold scalpel appeared as something criminal, leading to the death of the artistic activity itself.

The ideational glue that bounded the Lianozovo artists together was the ideal of the “natural” and “instinctive” qualities of the artistic process on the basis of which they firmly rejected the “cold” (i.e., analytical) “dissection” of the work of art.¹⁵⁹

In the early 1960s, however, Moscow’s underground witnessed the rise of other artistic predilections, among them, a trend that offered a diametrical opposite to

Zapiski, 156-7. Kabakov’s *Apologia* sees another underground artistic alliance, the “Black Bohemians,” as closely connected to the Lianozovo group. The Bohemians produced art of the so-called “home-made” type that depicted objects and people as a direct will or expression of the artist “without any restraint or reflection upon the result.” Ibid. Known for its affinity for uncompromising, suicidal and dramatic gestures, this group included Voroshilov, Pyatnitskiy, Kurochkin, Stesin, Grobman and, to some extent, Zverev and Yakovlev. Among the “Black Bohemians,” Kabakov especially liked the art of Voroshilov who was “extremely talented, subtle, smart person, but in everyday circumstances and interaction, he was a creature from hell.” Ibid., 158. In his personal encounters with the oil painting, gouaches and aquarelles of Voroshilov, Kabakov thought they could be assembled in an “exhibit of an artist of a very high rank.” Ibid., 159.

¹⁵⁸ *Zapiski*, 160.

¹⁵⁹ The scientific language and surgical metaphors employed by Kabakov to describe the artistic mentality of the Lianozovo group quotes, in fact, some of the arguments and accusations used by the opponents in a contemporaneous culture-wide debate. Affecting the fields of literature, science, cultural studies and visual art, the debate was concerned, most broadly, with the nature of the aesthetic process, the appropriate form of approach to the literary work or the work of art and with the methods of their investigation. Official Soviet culture was dominated by the view that the work of art and the literary text can only be seen “as a whole”; i.e., their meaning can only be admired aesthetically or comprehended with the tools of socialist realism, Marxism and Leninism. Any other approach studying the “formal properties of the aesthetic object” received the dangerous label of “formalism” and its proponents were accused of “dissecting,” “deforming” or “killing” the work of art.

Lianozovo's anti-intellectual fervor. That was the *Znanie* (Sobolev's) circle which, according to Kabakov, fostered a different "understanding of art," different "worldview," "different "movement" and even "a different type of person."¹⁶⁰ Kabakov had already experienced the debacle of his "expressionist" period, the "works from nature" and the failed "masterpiece" that left him searching for an outlet for his "reflective" consciousness when, in 1962, he encountered the physical embodiment of this new "type of person"—the lead artist of *Znanie* Yuri Sobolev.¹⁶¹ In the light of Kabakov's own artistic transgressions and "coming of age," it is hardly surprising that Sobolev had an immediate impact upon his imagination. In fact, the "complex and multifaceted" charisma of Sobolev, in the way in which it is described in Kabakov's *Apologia*, epitomizes the contention between the two "I's of the artist pictured in the essay *Concealment*.¹⁶² In Kabakov's words, the defining characteristic of Sobolev and his associates was the "special relationship between the artist and the person, namely the distance between them":

¹⁶⁰ *Zapiski*, 160. In the "cultural arsenal" of the group Kabakov includes "Neizvestny, to a certain extent Yankilevsky, Sooster, Kolya Popov and, to a certain extent, me (Kabakov)." The three artists, Yankilevsky, Sooster and Popov, according to Kabakov, "formed a distinct circle that was immensely active and had strong influence." *Ibid.*, 161

¹⁶¹ "I vot' ves' obraz iskusstva i napravleniya, mirochuvstviya, kotoroe svyazano s imenem Soboleva i blizkikh k nemu khudozhnikov, kak raz opiraetsya na sovershenno drugie opory i neset v sebe drugie cherty. I prezhdde vsego eto drugoy chelovecheskiy tip." ("And this whole understanding of art, movement, worldview, which was connected with Sobolev and the artists close to him, was based on a different foundation and had different characteristics. Most importantly, that was a different type of person." *Zapiski*, 160. Kabakov was introduced to both the Sobolev circle and the Lianozovo group in 1962 by Ülo Sooster.

¹⁶² See Chapter 1. In 1970s, this compound relationship would evolve into ever more complex system of personages and mechanisms that would distance the author from his artistic creation and lead to Kabakov's first series of albums *Ten Personages*. See Kabakov, *Viisi Albumia*.

Slozhnye i ochen' napryazhennye otnosheniya mezhdu chelovekom-ne-khudozhnikom i chelovekom-khudozhnikom (ve nem samom) rassmatrivayutsya i otchetlivo reflektiruyutsya.

What was examined and carefully reflected upon [in Sobolev's circle] was the complex and very intense relationship between the person-not-artist and the person-artist (both within the same person).¹⁶³

Occupying a paramount place in the art scene of the 1960s, Sobolev receives the greatest amount of attention in Kabakov's *Apologia*.¹⁶⁴ According to its retrospective narrative, Sobolev's approach reflects not only the intellectual distance of the person from his artistic self and his own artistic creation. It also involves an intense dialogic relation between the two sides of the artist's personality. In the words of Kabakov, Sobolev not only embodies the "complex" divide between creator and intellectual; he also personifies the ironic dialogue and incessant "state of disagreement" between them:

Odna iz chert, kotoraya lezhit v osnove obraza Soboleva, eto razdelenie kholodnogo, spokojnogo, postoyanno reflektiruyushchego soznaniya intellektuala or proizvodnyashchego postoyanno, tvorcheskogo cheloveka, kotory izgotovlyayet kartiny. Eto kak by dva raznykh personazha: odin deystvuet, drugoy otsenivaet. Odin dolzhen vse sdelat' iz podsoznaniya, drugoy—otsenit' iz soznaniya, odin dolzhen sozdavat' bessmertnye proizvedeniya, drugoy somnevaetsya i v bessmertii, i v tom, nuzhno li chto-libo sozdavat' voobshche. Eto, vprochem, dve raznye storony lyubogo cheloveka, no v rassmatrivaemom sluchae dovedennye do chrezvychnoy otchetlivosti, do podlinnogo napryazheniya i konflikta. Nichego udivitel'nogo, dve storony etogo soznaniya nakhodyatsya postoyanno v dialogicheskikh otnosheniyakh... Oni nakhodyatsya v sostoyanii spora i v postoyannom disbalanse, esli govorit odin, vtoroy v etot moment s ironiey smotrit na pervogo.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ *Zapiski*, 160.

¹⁶⁴ Kabakov devotes roughly nine pages to the analysis of "the artistic" and "the philosophical" aspects of Sobolev's thinking. *Ibid.*, 160-9.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.

One of the primary features characterizing the image of Sobolev is the distinction between the cold, composed consciousness of the intellectual who constantly reflects on things and the creative person who constantly makes art and paints pictures. It appears as if those are two separate characters: the first one acts, the second one evaluates. The first one has to create out of his subconscious; the second one—to judge with his consciousness. The first one has to create immortal artworks; the second one—to question both immortality and the need to create anything at all. In general, any person has such opposite sides, but in this particular case, those sides acquire unusual distinction, deep intensity and conflict. There is nothing extraordinary; the two aspects of our consciousness are in a constant dialogic relation... They are in a state of disagreement and constant unbalance: if one of them speaks, the other one looks at the first one with irony.

The inner dialogism of Sobolev embodies the psychological rupture described in the essay *Concealment*. Kabakov himself would soon encounter a cogent theoretical writing on the theme and would develop the notion of dialogism into a palpable signature art form.¹⁶⁶ In the early 60s, however, the behavioral example of Sobolev must have engaged the young Kabakov with the sudden intensity of its import and the exactitude of its timing.¹⁶⁷ In 1962, harboring the energy coming “from deep inside” of the artist, the *Shower* had just presented to its creator the right form of visual expression. Now, the intellectual Kabakov sought ways to engage it and understand it, so the “chorus of the witnesses-commentators” in Sobolev’s approach must have offered a suitable

¹⁶⁶ This notion is exemplified by Kabakov’s conversational paintings, e.g., *Chiya eta mukha? (Whose Fly is This?)*, and his fictional albums (*Ten Characters*).

¹⁶⁷ According to Kabakov, Sobolev was not only dialogical in himself, but he also had a dialogic impact on his surroundings. That was facilitated by the fact that he was “‘open,’ not self-contained, and he drew into participation a certain number of participants” who not only witnessed the “gladiator fight” between the “artist” and the “intellectual” in Sobolev but also took part in it. Thus, the dialogue of Sobolev was not limited to the “fight between the two; it also included a chorus of commentators.” It was even “very difficult to hear Yuri, because one always felt the presence of this conglomerate, the chorus of the witnesses-commentators.” *Zapiski*, 161. Recorded in Kabakov’s painting *Whose Fly is This?* which, incidentally, also mentions a Yuri, this “chorus” would also become a major device in Kabakov’s albums in the 1970s.

psychological matrix. The role of the *Znanie* artist was further enhanced by the fact that outside of Sobolev's oasis there was a sea of apathy and "ignorance:"

Bo-pervykh, nado srazu skazat' o meste Soboleva v situatsii 60-kh godov. 60-e gody—eto gody nevezhestva v samom tochnom smysle etogo slova, gody tyazhelogo, tomitel'nogo sna v strane, otrezannoy ot vsyakoy kul'turnoy traditsii. I kak neizbezhnoe sledstvie atmosfera tikhogo, pocti idioticheskogo nevedeniya byla vozvedena v 60-e gody chut' li ne v dostoinstvo.¹⁶⁸

First of all, in regard to Sobolev's place in the situation of the 1960s, one needs to point out that the 1960s were a time of ignorance in the most exact sense of the word, time of heavy, painful sleep in country that was cut off from any cultural tradition. And, inevitably, the atmosphere of a quiet, almost idiotic lack of knowledge rose, in the 1960s, to the level of a virtue.

The best antidote to the "heavy, painful" sleep—a condition that is certainly endowed with negative connotations in Kabakov's autobiographical writing—is provided by language, dialogue and knowledge, all of them inherent traits of Sobolev:

Sobolev rezko vypadaet iz etoy situatsii. Eto chelovek, znania kotorogo osnovany na glubokom khudozhestvennom obrazovanii, i ne tol'ko v mertvom, shkol'nom, akademicheskom, smysle, no i v chrezvychayno shirokom, zhivom, dostatocho sovremennom.¹⁶⁹

Sobolev clearly differentiated himself from that situation. He was a person whose knowledge was based on art education that was deep not only in the dead, schooled, academic sense, but also in a particularly expansive, alive, contemporary sense.

¹⁶⁸ As a result, a majority of artists who did not "know, read or see" anything came to the fore of the artistic scene. This "lack of knowledge of anything" became a "condition for their creativity," while the stance of "non-engagement" turned into the main principle of their art. The most evocative example of such an artist, according to Kabakov, is Oleg Tselkov who "is a cosmos in himself, and everything that is outside of him, does not exist." *Zapiski*, 162.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 162.

Sobolev extensive knowledge of traditional and contemporary art history was complemented by a strong belief that every artwork was part of the larger “cultural situation” (“obshchekulturnoy situatsiey”) and the general “field of art” (“izobrazitel’noy oblasti”).¹⁷⁰ This contextual view affected not only the way in which Sobolev interpreted visual phenomena as an art historian.¹⁷¹ It also impacted his own artistic production, resulting in, what by all author’s accounts appears to be, the most compelling quality that drew Kabakov to the aesthetic philosophy of the *Znanie* circle. That was Sobolev’s unique ability to create (and “manipulate”) images as signs which, in his hands, became “images-signs” (“obrazami-znakami”).¹⁷² This semiotic process started with a clear, compact and well-defined visual form:

Kogda ya v pervy raz stolknulsya s mneniem Yury i s ego iskusstvom, eto bylo pryamo protivopozhno vsemu, chto delaetsya v moskovskom khudozhestvennom, etakom spontannom, polnom ognya, dyma, neyasnykh vykrikov, mire. U nego vse chrezvychayno chetko, zhestko i imelo khorosho proverennye, kak by obvedennye kraya. Nachinaya s izobrazheniya, kotoroe ne razmyvalos’ i ne plavalo, rastvoryayas’ v fone, a vseгда bylo kak by tverdo zakrepleno: esli eto zhenshchina, to ona imela prezhde vsego kontur, a potom vse ostal’noe, esli eto derevo, to ono imelo nachalo, seredinu i konets, takzhe yaytso, kuby i t.d.¹⁷³

When I encountered for a first time the opinion of Sobolev and his art, they appeared diametrically opposite to everything that was typical of the art scene of Moscow which was then full of fire, smoke and confusing screams. In the art of

¹⁷⁰ *Zapiski*. It was Sobolev’s conviction that every artwork creates a ripple in the “giant network of the massive cultural panorama.” Ibid. Kabakov attributed such beliefs to Sobolev’s knowledge of art history and the wider cultural processes as well as to his unique ability to communicate with the “cultural noosphere (Vernadsky)”; that is, the vast deposits of cultural information around us. As it will be established later, the examination of the text/artwork as part of the larger system of culture is also characteristic of Russian structuralism.

¹⁷¹ According to Kabakov, Sobolev saw each work of art as a vector and, thus, he was able to trace its development from the initial creative impulse to its final “program.” *Zapiski*, 163

¹⁷² Ibid. 165.

¹⁷³ Ibid. 164.

Sobolev, everything was precise, firm, and it had well validated and outlined edges. Beginning with the representation, it was never washed out and never floated dissolving in the background; it always seemed firmly affixed. If there was a woman, she had, most importantly, a contour, and then everything else. If there was a tree, it had a beginning, a middle part and an end, similarly, the egg, the cubes and so on.

A comparable visual clarity defines the loose contour in Kabakov's *Shower* which, even when it outlines the flow of the water, never seems "washed out," diluted or "dissolved in the background." In that sense, even the murky liquid seems to lose its deliquescent and aqueous properties. As a result, instead of the "fire, smoke and confusing screams" which, in Kabakov's words, characterized Moscow's art scene in the 1960s, the *Shower* chooses to follow *Znanie's* approach and to depict, figuratively and literally, a cool, silent and detached everyday subject. Echoing Sobolev's firm outlines, Kabakov's image, however, also seems odd, incomplete and disproportionally interrupted by the frame of the drawing.

The visual completeness and clarity of Sobolev's "signs" is a prerequisite for their broad semantics. Using linguistic analogies, Kabakov explains that Sobolev's images do not signify singular entities or objects but rather denote groups (or "concepts") of objects. In this referential capacity, they have a "signature" ("name") and resemble nouns which, with the exception of proper nouns, all refer to classes of objects by way of tradition and linguistic convention:

To est' vse eti obrazy imeli sovershenno opredelennuyu "podpis", imya. To est, prezhde, chem guby byly ch'i-to, oni uzhe byli guby kak ponyatie, eto bylo kakoe-to osoboe vzaimodeystvie s izoponyatiem. U Soboleva, mne kazhetsya, vse predmety, ves' gigantskiy izobrazitel'ny nabor szhimalsya do kakikh-to

sgushchennykh press-sharov, chto-li, takikh ponyatiy, vse bylo zapolneno takimi vot “predstavatelyami.” Seksual’ny mir obladal svoimi predstavatelyami, mir kosmicheskiy—svoimi..., to est’, vse eti miry imeli svoikh “representantov”.¹⁷⁴

I.e., all of those images had a completely defined “signature,” name. In other words, before the lips were somebody’s [lips], they were already lips as a concept; there was some kind of strange relation to the iso-concept.¹⁷⁵ It seems to me that, in Sobolev’s art, all objects, the whole gigantic arsenal was reduced to some kind of condensed images of these concepts; everything was filled with such “representatives.” The sexual sphere had its own representatives, the cosmic sphere—its own... in other words, every sphere had its “representamena.”¹⁷⁶

In terms of semantics and referentiality, Sobolev’s “images-signs” possess a generic disposition, linguistic definitiveness and high conventionality. They refer to the general notion of each object—as a linguistic and mental “concept”—not to the particular “thing” and, therefore, they convey semantic density (they are “condensed images of... concepts”) and generative function (“some kind of strange relation to the iso-concept”). In addition, Sobolev’s “images-signs” are so recognizable and conventional (i.e., rely on linguistic and visual conventions) that each one of them has a “defined name” and signifies (serves as a “representative”) of a particular sphere—cosmic, sexual and so on.

It is exactly those semantic and referential qualities of the “condensed images” of “iso-concepts” that the *Shower* series appears to problematize. Similarly to Sobolev’s images-signs, Kabakov’s drawings have “a completely defined ‘signature,’ name”—*Dush*. As mundane and descriptive as its English equivalent “shower,” the Russian word

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ With its prefix derived from the Greek word “isos” (“equal”), the iso-concept here signifies the relation of the painted image to its equivalent proto-concept—be it linguistic, visual or mental.

¹⁷⁶ *Zapiski*, 164. The actual word that Kabakov uses in the second case is “representant.” Since its meaning in this context corresponds to the meaning of “sign,” I have used Pierce’s early term for sign “representamen” to preserve the technical sound, foreign origin and the specific meaning of Kabakov’s Latinism “representant.”

“dush” signifies exactly what says—the overhead implement, the place and the activity of “taking a shower.”¹⁷⁷ The problem with Kabakov’s title, however, arises when one fathoms that, as name-signature, it is far from being “completely defined.” On a phonetic level, it evokes a number of homophonic and etymologically related, yet, contradictory words: from *dyshat’* (to breathe, exude, radiate), *dushit’* (to strangle, suppress) and *dukh* (spirit, mood) to *dumat’* (to think) and *duma* (thought, meditation). On a semantic level, the signification of Kabakov’s title becomes even more problematic because most of the inflected forms of the Russian noun *dush* (*shower*) coincide with the declension of its homophone and, in some grammatical cases, homonym *dusha* (*soul*).¹⁷⁸

Such a semantic ambivalence is bound to bring complications in, what Kabakov alludes to as, the plane of the sign’s reference. If Sobolev reduces the “gigantic arsenal” of objects to a number of “condensed images of... concepts” in which every sphere has its own “representatives,” then Kabakov’s undefined title and image fail to be clear “representamena.” As the great variety of interpretations of the drawings has demonstrated, the series simultaneously evokes, among other things, domestic, literary,

¹⁷⁷ As a noun, “*dush*” refers to (1) the overhead perforated nozzle (showerhead) from which water is sprayed on the body (“*prispobleniye dlya obmivaniya tela vody*”), (2) the stream of water sprayed from the nozzle (“*tonkie struyki vody, kotorye l’yutsya iz otverstviy takogo prispobleniya*”) and (3) a kind of bath in which a person stands upright and is sprayed with water from a nozzle (“*pomeshcheniye gde nakhoditsya odno ili neskol’ko prispobleniy dlya myt’ya*”). As verbs, both *shower* and *dush* mean to take a shower bath (“*prinimat’ dush*”). See *Tolkovy slovar’ ruskogo yazyka*. Ed. D. Dmitrieva. (Moscow: Astrel’, Act, 2003), 310.

¹⁷⁸ Noting that the plural forms of both nouns are identical—*dushi*—which means simultaneously “showers” as well as “souls” or “serfs,” Matthew Jackson convincingly relates Kabakov’s drawings to Gogol’s *Dead Souls* (*Mertvye Dushi* which also means *Dead Serfs*) and the Gogolian “laughing-through-tears” aesthetics. See Matthew Jesse Jackson, *Ibid.*, 38 and 43-44. In fact, most of the inflected plural forms, all but Genitive, and two of the inflected singular forms of the two nouns are identical, although the accents may vary. Thus, often when the author refers to a particular feature or characteristic of his series he uses a homonym that could refer to both soul and shower.

historical, linguistic, structuralist and philosophical ideas. Thus, the two-partite composition appears, as a structuralist would say, at once divided in its unity and united in its division. Recalling the duality between matter/being (*bitie*) and consciousness (*soznanie*) in the philosophy of dialectical materialism, it juxtaposes the two ultimate spheres of human existence: animate and inorganic, matter and soul, automatism and mental cognition. The stream of water in the drawings cascades as unfathomable as complex is the composition's binary dialectic. So, in the context of the *Shower's* two-way dynamic, it seems only ironic that the inanimate liquid descends far more alive than the passive, indifferent human.¹⁷⁹

The last feature that characterizes Sobolev's "manipulation of famous images" ("manipulatsia izvestnymi obrazami") and transforms them into "images-signs," in the eyes of Kabakov, involves the plane of their *pragmatic* content, i.e., the associations they evoke in the mind of the viewer. The ideas of Sobolev's common images appeared so grand in their simple disguise that, to his contemporaries in the 1960s, the *Znanie* artist seemed as "a representative of mannerist tendencies, an enthusiast in pursuit of

¹⁷⁹ As a philosophical approach, dialectical materialism was developed in the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Expanded later by Georgy Plekhanov, Vladimir Ilich Lenin and Joseph Stalin, it became the official philosophy of communism. Its central tenet, borrowed from Hegelianism, states that all historical growth, change and development results from the struggle of opposites. (In philosophical terms, a thesis is opposed by its antithesis which leads to a synthesis.) Thus, the Marxian interpretation of reality proposed that matter was the sole subject of change, and all change was the product of a constant conflict between opposites arising from the internal contradictions inherent in all events, ideas and movements. The *Shower* in this sense makes an ironic comment on the main "premise of dialectical materialism" which was articulated by Marx, paraphrased by Lukács and well known to every socialist citizen. In Marx' words, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness." According to Lukács' version, "It is not men's consciousness that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness." See György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 18; and Karl Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. R. C. Tucker. 2d ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), 4.

mannerism” (“byl takim ‘predstavitelem’ man’eristskikh ustremлений, entuziastom issledovaniy man’erizma”):

Man’erism v etom kontekste vystupal prezhdе vsego kak manipulyatsiya izvestnyimi obrazami, dazhe emblemami. Eto ne kakaya-to opredelennaya zhenshchina, a prosto Zhenshchina, eto ne voobshche koleasa, a Koleso. To est mir napolnen slozhnym, no vpolne opredelennym naborom elementov. Upotrebyaya eti elementy-znaki, eti emblemы, mozhno bylo nazvat opredelennoe kolichestvo kakikh-to predstavleniy, assotsiatsiy, sil’nodeystvuyushchikh ukolov. Fakticheski to iskusstvo, kotoroe ya togda videl u Soboleva, eto bylo operirovanie na belom pole lista sil’nodeystvuyushchimi sgushchennymi obrazami-znakami, kotorye stalkivayutsya i vzaimodeystvuyut.¹⁸⁰

In this context, mannerism appeared mostly as manipulation of well known images, even emblems. That is not some particular woman, but simply Woman; that is not wheels in general, but Wheel. In other words, the world is full of complex, but completely defined number of elements. By using these elements-signs, these emblems, one could evoke a certain number of representations, associations, powerful injections. In fact, the art of Sobolev, as I saw it back then, operated with powerful condensed images-signs, which collided and interacted on the white plane of the paper.

To leave aside all mannerist associations, the semantic grandness was an important component of Sobolev’s semiotic procedure. Combining plastic reductionism and conceptual grandeur, Sobolev’s “elements-signs” appear simultaneously shocking (as “powerful injections”) and familiar (“well known,” “famous”), “complex” and “completely defined,” “firmly affixed” yet constantly colliding and interacting. Kabakov explains that Sobolev’s manipulation begins with a common (conventional) image—“emblem.” As a rhetorical figure, the emblem carries a relatively open plane of content but it is also limited in its signification because it always refers to the same meaning/idea

¹⁸⁰ *Zapiski*, 164.

by way of convention, tradition or habit. Next, Sobolev expands the reference/meaning of the emblem to reach beyond the particular object (referent) to a more general or fundamental iso-concept—Idea (e.g., “Woman,” “Wheel”). As the contextual overview in the subsequent chapters demonstrates, such semiotic manipulation remained, by no means, an isolated or unique phenomenon. However, Kabakov’s artistic insight captures the strong visual impact, complex appeal and artistic significance of Sobolev’s manipulative images-signs-emblems.¹⁸¹ Similarly to symbols, they are semantically dense (“condensed”) and thus evoke a number of “representations, associations.” At the same time, in their capacity of “emblems,” they remain relatively “defined” (and confined), and each one of them refers to a single grand Idea or “iso-concept.”¹⁸² Invested with unity and contradictions, Sobolev’s images collide on the sheet to conjure up compressed compositions of cosmic magnitude:

Sobolev sdelał ochen’ interesnuyu veshch’—blagodarya ego daru, chto li,--kakim-to obrazom on smog svesti k neskol’kim (ya mog by perechislit’, ikh vsego 15-20) emblemam-simvolam ves’ ogromny repertuar, ves’ kosmos samykh raznorodnykh ponyatij.¹⁸³

Thanks to either his talent or something else, Sobolev created a very interesting thing—in some way he managed to reduce the whole huge repertoire, the whole cosmos of most contradictory terms to several (I counted up to 15-20) emblems-symbols.

¹⁸¹ To convey the strong physical effect of Sobolev’s emblems, Kabakov refers to them as “painful centers” and “chakras” in which the “chief rays, impulses of the whole cultural world” converge. The white sheet of Sobolev’s works is also compared with an “enormous dance floor” on which Mrs. Beauty, Mr. Terror and Mrs. Sex dance. *Zapiski*, 164.

¹⁸² Kabakov addresses these contradictions while asking rhetorical questions about the best way to approach and understand Sobolev’s images: “But what is this? How are we to perceive this particular tree, this woman...? Perhaps, one has to realize that—as in knots, in painful points of a body, in chakras—these personages concentrate the most important beams and impulses that are projected by the whole cultural world.” *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

Kabakov alludes to the structural side of Sobolev's semiotic procedure that pertains not to how the artistic image represents (and refers to) the external reality, but how it composes a model of that reality, i.e., serves as a cognitive modeling structure. Though it can be understood here literally as "order" and "range," the word "cosmos" is not accidental. Thanks to the grandness of dense emblems ("emblems-symbols"), Sobolev's signs, even though they are limited to 15-20, are capable of conjuring up a whole universe (cosmos) of contradictory terms and binary oppositions. Furthermore, evoking fundamental Ideas and "iso-concepts," these "emblems-symbols" are able to create a model of the world that is "total" and "complete" (the Russian word "zavershenny" also means "self-contained" and "self-sufficient," though not yet "self-referential"):

...Krome togo, Yure prinadlezhit mysl', chto na liste dolzhen byt' ves' kosmos. On predstavlyaet soboy kosmologicheskoe nachalo v nashem risovanii. To est' ne fragment mira, a ves' mir. Opyat' my poluchaem srednevekovuyu strukturu: na odnom liste vse sootnosheniya, vse dvizheniya, ves' zavershenny v sebe mir.¹⁸⁴

...Besides that, Yuri maintained that the whole cosmos had to be on the sheet. He embodied the cosmological trend in our art. In other words, not the fragment, but the whole world. Again, the result is a medieval structure: all relations, all movements, the whole self-contained world is on one sheet of paper.

¹⁸⁴ *Zapiski*, 165. "Again" refers to Kabakov's earlier discussion of the "emblematic quality" (emblematicnost') of the "heavenly" personages of Bosch such as his "semi-human—semi-egg which enters himself." "Many of these objects are impossible to decode, because we do not know whether Bosch invented them himself—in such a condensed form—or whether they were well-known in the medieval hierarchy of images-signs. But this is all unimportant, because it is impossible to solve this rebus..." Ibid., 164. Kabakov's semiotic take on Bosch reflects the cultural semiotics of the Russian structuralist school as well as the interests of the *Znanie* circle. In fact, reproductions of Bosch' paintings and an essay on their enigmatic semantics were published in *Znanie-Sila* during the 1960s when Sobolev was the magazine's lead artist. The Russian citation uses the noun *rebus* which means *puzzle* as well as *heraldic emblem*.

Reflecting larger tendencies in Russian culture, the aesthetic credo of universalism (“the cosmological trend”) has a special import in the art and legacy of Sobolev. It allows him to build a picture of the “whole world” which, by means of semiotic manipulation, refers to both, to the external non-artistic reality, on the one hand, and the “self-contained” realm of iso-concepts/Ideas and their inner structure of “relations” and “movements,” on the other. As a versatile system of names (signatures) and ideas, Sobolev’s art offers new, coded ways of connecting the plane of content with the plane of artistic expression. The complex structure of Sobolev’s language of sign, as it will be demonstrated later, is related to novel currents in Russian (and international) science and theory. As a multi-faceted phenomenon, however, the artistic “emblems-symbols” also have the potential to show the limitations of scientific thinking and its full reliance on causality, logic and reason.

Sobolev’s attitude toward science reflects his views on the unity between artistic and non-artistic elements in the artwork.¹⁸⁵ According to Kabakov, the *Znanie* artist eliminated the conventional distinction between “art” and “non-art,” proposing that the

¹⁸⁵ In this regard, another important contribution of the *Znanie* artist to Moscow underground was Sobolev’s vast knowledge of contemporary art in the West. According to Kabakov, he always judged the local phenomena in the context of global artistic trends and brought world “energies” to the “kettle” of Moscow’s artistic scene. Sobolev was familiar with ancient and modern art not only in the West, but also in the East. His knowledge was facilitated by his good command of two foreign languages—German and English—something rare in Soviet Russia. *Zapiski*, 166. As a chief artist of the magazine *Znanie-Sila* (*Knowledge—Power*), Sobolev was responsible for reproducing a lot of masterpieces of contemporary Western art under the guise of technical illustrations. *Ibid.*, 166. Kabakov also suggests that, in his understanding of the world as a sphere of the “cosmic Eros,” Sobolev was close to Duchamp. *Ibid.*, 168.

work of art does not need any specially selected “artistic material.”¹⁸⁶ For Sobolev every object could become part of the “aesthetic system,” provided that the artist could find the “right” place for such an object.¹⁸⁷ Supporting the inclusion of “non-artistic” components in the work of art, Sobolev encouraged the close interaction of art and science.¹⁸⁸ In the early 1960s, this also meant taking an active stand on the role of these two human activities and their respective places in the larger context of Soviet society. In respect to scientific knowledge in art, however, Sobolev took a “professional” position, insisting that science could be present in artworks only as “intuition, joke and play”:

...Okazyvaetsya, možhno vse proschitat', to est' vozmozhna naukoobraznost' v iskusstve—vot chto on pokazal, khotya ponyatno, chto tut bol'she intuitsii, shutki i igry i chto nikakoy nauki v iskusstve net, est' igra, i Yura ponimal eto luchshe drugikh. I vse zhe on, Ernst i Sooster veli razgovory o tom, kak by nayti, dopustim, “obraz mira” ili kak na odnom risunke “prosverlit” chetvertoe prostranstvo i t.d. Nadvigayushchayasya komp'yuterizatsiya mira kak by eshche bol'she stimulirovala ili simulirovala naukoobrazie, podschet, vychislenie. Eto pokhozhe na alkhimicheskoe vychislenie: chto s chem soedinit', chtoby poluchit' novoe, nebyvaloe...¹⁸⁹

...It became apparent that everything could be calculated and that scientism was possible in art—this was what he [Sobolev] demonstrated, although of course, it was rather intuition, joke and play; there was no science in art, only play, and Yura understood that better than anybody else. Despite all of that, he, Ernst [Neizvestny] and Sooster had conversations about how to find, to say, an “image

¹⁸⁶ Kabakov also attests that Sobolev was interested in psychology and, specifically, the psychology of art and therefore examined works of art as product of the psychological motifs (the sublimation and subconscious complexes) of their authors. Sobolev was also involved in phenomenology, Freudism and psychoanalysis. He was trained as a therapist and had students and patients. *Zapiski*, 167.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 167. Kabakov adds that, while Sobolev was very critical about the relationship of the elements constituting the artwork, he was indifferent to the choice of these elements. Defining such an approach as “anti-aesthetic”, Kabakov describes it as, rather, conceptual: the “artistic impulse” (idea) was more important for Sobolev than the “product itself.” *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ As a chief artist of *Znanie*, Sobolev had the freedom to hire artists and to allow them to choose their own subjects. Thus, in Kabakov’s words, he initiated a “new movement in Soviet illustration.” *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ *Zapiski*, 165.

of the world” or how to “probe into” the fourth dimension on the sheet of paper, and so on. The increasing computerization of the world seemed to further stimulate and simulate scientism, calculation and computing. This resembled alchemic calculation: what to combine with what in order to achieve something new, nonexistent...

According to Kabakov, Sobolev and his circle ardently appropriated scientific notions and ideas but rejected scientism with its absolute belief in calculation and computing. As a result, science constitutes only one of the coded languages in their artworks—a language that is typically employed with a tone of irony within a playful context—in addition to contrasting references to what is unexplainable, mythological or beyond the logic of reason. Kabakov observes that Sobolev’s followers also appropriated science and “cosmological structures” in their works: Neizvestny—in the literal sense, Sooster—“through ambivalent forces.”¹⁹⁰ However, semiotic games—as play with the meaning and form of signs and their conventional modes of reference—characterized mostly the art of Sobolev and Sooster:

Nado skazat', chto sistema Yuri vklyuchaet v sebya nekuyu ambivalentnost', i my vidim na mnogikh ego risunkakh “obmanku”, kogda zhenshchina stanovitsya derevom, a derevo—zhenshchinoy. Eto vpolne simvolicheskaya igra, na literaturnom urovne. Soosterom eta igra byla ponyata v plasticheskom smysle, i my vidim u nego “shar”, a na samom dele dyra. Glavnye ego tri simvola: kustarnik, yaytso i ryba—oni dayutsya ambivalentno, i nikogda nel'zya skazat' tochno, yaytso li eto ili ogromnoe okno v mikromir, kuda my provalivaemsa. Faktura kartiny, po vidimosti stol' blizkaya i oshchutimaya, chto možhno rukoy

¹⁹⁰ “Following Yuri, Ernst Neizvestny also made an attempt to understand his drawing as a cosmologic structure in the literal sense of the word, for instance, he created a tree that included in itself the whole history of humanity. He seemed to be developing the thinking of Sobolev further, moving in that same direction in his drawing and in his sculpture. Similarly, Sooster also attempted to create a cosmic structure through ‘ambivalent forces’.” *Zapiski*, 165.

ee potrogat', u nego stanovitsya ogromnym prostranstvom, v zavisimosti ot akkomodatsii nashogo vzglyada.¹⁹¹

It has to be said that the system of Yuri included some ambivalence, so we see a “deception” in many of his drawings—when a woman becomes a tree and the tree—a woman. That is an entirely symbolic game, on a literary level. This game was understood by Sooster in plastic terms and when we see a “sphere” in his art, it is, in fact, a hole. His three main symbols—bush, egg and fish—are presented ambivalently, and one can never say with accuracy whether this is an egg or an enormous window into the micro-world in which we fall. The facture of the picture—which seems so close and tangible that one can touch it with hand—in his case becomes an enormous space depending on the accommodation of our eyes.

In regard to semiotic procedures, Kabakov gauges two types of play in the art of his two closest associates. In Sobolev’s “system,” the game is “entirely symbolic” and unfolds on a “literary level” because it involves the abstract (symbolic) side of the emblem-sign—its plane of content and meaning.¹⁹² In comparison, Sooster’s semiosis is more playful “in plastic terms” because it incorporates the visual aspect of the sign—the plane of artistic expression. Sooster renders his dense images (“symbols”) “ambivalently;” i.e., they work in a multi-referential way so that they simultaneously engage different realms of meaning and denotation (the “sphere” is also “a hole,” and the “egg” is a “window” into “the micro-world”).¹⁹³ The two types of playful semiosis require two different types of response (“accommodation”) from the viewer:

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² For instance, in an illustration published in *Znanie-Sila* Sobolev’s follower and friend Lavrov drew a lonely image of a woman depicted among the trees of a wood as a visual echo of their slim vertical figures. Such implicit visual comparisons correspond to the literary devices of syntactical or psychological parallelism.

¹⁹³ Many of these “ambivalent” symbols will become Kabakov’s playful point of reference in his later paintings, albums and installations.

To, chto u Soboleva est' intellektual'naya akkomodatsiya (to est' my "dumaem" chto eto zhenshchina, a mozhem "dumat'" chto eto derevo), to est' eto vseгда umozrenie, u Soostera stanovitsya model'yu na urovne opticheskoy (my mozhem videt' poverkhnost' rel'efnogo shara, no, nastroiv glaz, my vidim, kak skvoz' okulyar mikroskopa, gigantskoe kolichestvo mel'chayshikh sushchestv za nim). Eto takaya modelirovka mira, kogda odno i to zhe okazyvaetsya to v beskonechnoy dali, to vblizi. My vidim ulitsu, no vdrug obnaruzhivaem, chto eto ugol kirpicha pod samym nashim nosom. Eta obmanka, kazhimost' blizka Sobolevu, eto ego mysl': nichto ne est' to, chem kazhetsya...¹⁹⁴

There is intellectual accommodation in Sobolev's art (i.e., we "think" that this is a woman, but we could also "think" that it is a tree; it is always a matter of speculation). The same model functions on an optical level in Sooster's art (we could see the surface, the relief of the sphere, but, when we adjust our eyes, we see, as if through the lenses of a microscope, a giant number of microscopic creatures behind it). In this model of the world, the same object seems to be one thing in the infinite distance and another—up close. We may see a street, but then we immediately discover that it is the corner of a brick right under our noses. This deception, duplicity is close to Sobolev and his belief that nothing is what it appears to be...

In the works created after the late 1960s, Kabakov would avidly play with both referential strategies—the "intellectual accommodation" of Sobolev and the "optical" models of Sooster. As a "fanatic of the unofficial art of the 1960s" who felt indifferent toward some aspects of this art, Kabakov, in his words, always "enormously appreciated people such as Sobolev, Ryabin, Voroshilov."¹⁹⁵ However, although it evokes the dense, compact and ambivalent language of his *Znanie* friends, the *Shower* can also be seen as pointedly literal and "unpretentious."¹⁹⁶ Open to (and openly accommodating) any

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 166.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 169. On Voroshilov see note 157.

¹⁹⁶ In this regard, the *Shower* is diametrically opposed to the "eccentric, brutally-accentuated and 'materialistic'" "gigantomania," "seriousness" and "eroticism" of Ernst Neizvestny: "...I do not know any other artist who had such pretensions... He appealed not to the single individual or organization or city, no, his cohort was the Earth, Sirius, Jupiter... The saying "from all trees of the world to make one tree" was all about him. ... he created one woman from all women and his sculpture spoke of this "collectivity"... This

number of interpretations, Kabakov's image remains plain in its banal theme, conventional in subject matter and standard in its pictorial depiction. Thus, in order to understand its uncanny strategy and hidden reference, one needs to explore the wider frame of Kabakov's contemporaneous intellectual circumstance.

special totality was typical of Ernst. He also had another trait—the tension of forces... This was his attitude towards sculpture—it had to contain in itself as much as possible... It is interesting that these things [his sculptures] did not allow any alternative, irony, humor towards themselves, all that was very serious... All that one knew and felt—relativity, irony, balance and so on—all lost its meaning. ‘I do not need to be compared—said the art of Ernst—I am unique, incomparable, singular...’” Ibid. 166-67. In contrast, Kabakov's bather is not so much Man but an average, every man that remains remarkably unemotional, ordinary and de-sexualized.

CHAPTER 3

Cybernetics, the Structural-Semiotic Movement and the Man-Machine Analogy

V. The Structural-Semiotic Movement: Progenitors and Forerunners

The period in which the *Showers* manifested a sudden change in Kabakov's artistic thought and expression was, according to the period's own authors, a time of "an extraordinary ferment" in the intellectual and cultural life of the Soviet Union.¹⁹⁷ In the field of the humanities, the "ferment" engendered an important intellectual movement—a culturally-entrenched and internationally recognized phenomenon that is known today as "the Soviet variant of the international structural-semiotic trend."¹⁹⁸ Some sources find the beginning of the Soviet structural-semiotic formation in the 1950s; others date its emergence to the early 1960s. However, no matter what point of genesis they propose, most scholars agree that, soon after its appearance, the movement reached a "wide recognition as a powerful phenomenon at the very forefront of world thought."¹⁹⁹ It has

¹⁹⁷ L. Matejka, S. Shishkoff, M. E. Suino and I. R. Titunik, "Forward" in *Readings in Soviet Semiotics (Russian Texts)*. Ed. with forward and commentaries by L. Matejka, S. Shishkoff, M. E. Suino and I. R. Titunik. *Michigan Slavic Materials* 15 (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1977), ix.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.* Emphasizing the high accomplishments, rather than the inner contradictions of the "movement," the same authors continue "Engendered during a period of precipitate 'catching up' with Western scientific and technological advances, the Soviet structural-semiotic movement developed with amazing speed and force thanks not only to the fortunate conjunction of scientific and political circumstances but also to the availability of a cadre of exceptionally qualified and talented scholars to serve as its originators." *Ibid.*

also been established that the new theoretical trend emerged and gained a momentum in result of a variety of factors, local as well as international.

In terms of local sources, the movement was deeply rooted in the preceding national tradition of formal and structural studies. Some of the earliest examples of such studies included the nineteenth-century writings of Potebnia examining the relationship between literature, myth and folklore; the study of textual reconstruction by Shakmatov written in the turn of the century as well as the interests in stylistics and poetics in the work of non-formalists, such as V. Vinogradov, V. Zhirmusky, L. Shcherba and S. Bernshtein.²⁰⁰ Other prominent scholars—M. Bakhtin, V. Propp and P. Bogatyrev among them—provided a “unique continuity” to the Soviet structural-semiotic movement through their writings and personal contacts with both the early Russian progenitors and their structuralist descendants.²⁰¹

The most influential antecedents that defined the premises and the direction of the Soviet movement, however, were Western structural linguistics in its various manifestations (from Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale* to Zellig Harris’ descriptive method) and Russian and Czech formalism and structuralism of the 1920s and the 1930s.²⁰² Replacing the organic model of Romanticism and the ontology of nineteenth-century scientific thinking which relied on the concept of the organism as

²⁰⁰ See Henryk Baran, “Introduction” in *Semiotics and Structuralism*. Ed. H. Baran. (New York: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1974), ix-x.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Daniel Lucid, “Introduction” in *Soviet Semiotics*. Trans. and ed. D. Lucid. (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1977), 2. See also Baran, “Introduction,” viii-ix.

prototype, structuralism offered a new foundational model—the model of Language.²⁰³ This transition from ontological to epistemological schemes of inquiry led to a profound change in the way in which cultural phenomena were understood and perceived. *Cours de linguistique générale* became emblematic for such types of study not so much because of Saussure’s influence upon his contemporaries but largely due to the lasting impact of his theory long after his death.²⁰⁴

In Russia, Saussure’s structural linguistics was first appropriated and developed by Russian formalism—a movement that flourished between 1916 and 1928. Having no unified doctrine, the movement was characterized by scrutinizing the formal aspects of the work through analytical methods propounded by noted scholars such as R. Jakobson and N. S. Trubetskoy.²⁰⁵ The latter two academics played a critical role in the establishment of the two distinct factions of the movement—*Opojaz* [Society for the Study of Poetic Language] founded in 1916 in Petrograd (subsequently Leningrad, currently St. Petersburg) and the Moscow Linguistic Circle founded in 1915 in Moscow. Those factions included the famous critics V. Shkolovsky, B. Eikhenbaum, J. Tynyanov and B. Tomashevsky, among others. *Opojaz* and the Moscow Circle based their theoretical notions on Saussure’s fundamental division of the linguistic sign into form

²⁰³ Fredrik Jameson, “Introduction,” in *The Prison-House of Language. A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), vi-vii.

²⁰⁴ Jameson juxtaposes the two main directions in philosophy at the time of Saussure’s publication—meaning and language, logic or linguistics—represented by Saussure’s *Cours* and Ogden and Richards’ *The Meaning of Meaning*. According to Jameson, both French structuralism and Russian formalism derived from Saussure’s foundational distinction between *langue* and *parole*. See Jameson, *Ibid.*, 3 and 101; Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris, 1916) and C. K. Ogden and I.A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (London, 1922).

²⁰⁵ For a historical account of the development of Russian formalism see Victor Erlikh, *Russian Formalism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1955).

(*signifier*) and content (*signified*) and methodically applied the major dichotomies resulting from such a division—“synchrony-diachrony,” “syntagmatics-paradigmatics” and “langue-parole”—to the language of literature.²⁰⁶ The goal was to define *literariness* in terms of internal organization of the literary object and to build a specialized classification of literary devices.

In their earlier studies, the Formalists pursued two main questions: how the author “made” the work and how literary devices affected the reader.²⁰⁷ The exploration of these problems defined each device and each work in relation to two frames—literary tradition and innovation—and ultimately led to a focus on literary evolution which became one of the main subjects of Russian formalism.²⁰⁸ As a result, the formalists examined how linguistic facts were transformed into literary facts through the application of specifically artistic strategies.²⁰⁹ The main contribution and limitation of Russian formalism, according to the historians and the critics of the movement, was the discovery of the “richness of the literary artifact as a self-referential object irreducible to external sociological and ideological impulses.”²¹⁰ However, in the end of the 1920s, when the formalist school was terminated by the authorities due to the establishment of Marxism as

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ On the first question see B. Eikhenbaum, “Kak sdelana ‘Shinel’ Gogolya?” (1918), Engl. Trans. in R. A. Maguire, ed. *Gogol from the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 1974), 269-91. On the second issue see V. Shkolovsky, “Iskustvo, kak priem (1916), Engl. Trans. in L. T. Lemon and M. J. Reis, eds., *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lincoln, 1965), 5-24.

²⁰⁸ J. Striedter, “Introduction” in *Literary Structure, Evolution and Value. Russian Formalism and Czech Structuralism Reconsidered*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), 2. On the basis of such statements, the same author argues that the accusations treating the method of the school as “ahistorical” are groundless. Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Ibid. See also the foundational study of Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism*, 3d ed. (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1969).

the official doctrine of the Soviet regime, many of the formalists were already seeking ways to broaden the scope of their critical inquiry. For example, M. Bakhtin extended the structuralist approach to medieval literature, culture and folklore, while V. Propp widened his sphere of research to examine characters, plots and motifs as *functions* of the literary structure.²¹¹

It was Czech structuralism of the 1930s that amplified and refined the methods of the Russian formalist school, becoming its direct chronological, biographical and methodological continuation.²¹² The Czech and Russian participants in the Prague Linguistic Circle, heralded by R. Jakobson, N. Trubetzkoy, P. Bogatyrev and J. Mukarovsky, elaborated on formalism's findings in poetics and folkloristics and "laid the groundwork" for the later Soviet structural-semiotic studies.²¹³ Through his work, emigration and subsequent travels, R. Jakobson acted as "a universal translator" and critical player in all of these movements, connecting Russian formalism, first, with the Prague Linguistic Circle and, then, with the Czech, Russian and international structural-semiotic trends of the 1960s.²¹⁴ Assuming a key role in the tri-partite relationship of

²¹¹ Ibid. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1968); *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. R. W. Rotsel (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1973); and V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. L. Scott, 2d rev. ed. (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1975).

²¹² Lucid, *Ibid*, 2. The beginning of Czech structuralism dates to 1926. Jakobson and the prominent linguist Prince Nikolai Trubetskoi emigrated from the Soviet Union to Czechoslovakia where they became the leading members of the Prague Circle that lasted to the 1940s. In addition to the noted Russian émigrés, the group included the Czech scholars Vilem Mathesius, Jan Mukarovsky and Rene Wellek.

²¹³ Baran, *Ibid.*, ix.

²¹⁴ Maxim Waldstein, *The Soviet Empire of Signs: A History of the Tartu School of Semiotics*. (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2008), 85. The role of R. Jakobson was "unique and multifaceted: as an American linguist..., as a leading representative of the Prague Linguistic Circle; via personal contact as a visitor to the Soviet Union beginning in 1958..." See *Readings in Soviet Semiotics*, xvi. Playing a leading role in the phonological innovations of the Prague Circle, Jakobson extended these ideas to other fields and propagated structuralism in the West after he emigrated to the U.S. in the 1940s. At the same

continuity, the Prague Linguistic Circle developed a unified basis for all divergent theoretical approaches by proposing a new encompassing method of investigation—semiotics.

This foundational method was put forward in the writings of Jan Mukarovsky who explicitly stated that the study of signs (semiotics) was the preeminent mode of analysis of art and literature.²¹⁵ Czech semiotic structuralism saw the work as a “sign made up of signs,” all of them performing an “aesthetic function.”²¹⁶ In the light of this approach, literature was perceived as a verbal act that could create and communicate meaning only through literary and aesthetic codes that were shared by the social collective.²¹⁷ The individual author could modify or reject these norms but she or he was, nonetheless, dependent on the aesthetic codes and on the social and cultural conditions that produced them.²¹⁸ The two-way dynamic between work and society was, therefore, bound to affect both elements of the equation. On the one hand, the author created the work’s structure by organizing the elements of the work in accordance to their function and the social conditions that produced them. On the other hand, reflecting the aesthetic coordination of its components, the structure changed the function that the elements performed in their non-aesthetic contexts and opened up the collective to pluralism and

time, he was raising similar suspicions on both sides of the Curtain that accused him of being Marxist in U.S. and of being exactly the opposite—anti-Communist—in USSR. See Slava Gerovitch, *From Newspeak to Cyberspeak*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 38-39.

²¹⁵ See *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions*, ed. L. Matejka and I. Titunik (Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T. Press, 1976); R. Wellek, “The Literary Theory and Aesthetic of the Prague School,” in Wellek, *Discriminations* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), 275-303; Jan Mukarovsky, *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts*, trans. Mark E. Suino (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970); Striedter, *Ibid.*, 4; Lucid, *Ibid.*, 2.

²¹⁶ Striedter, *Ibid.*, 4.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

change.²¹⁹ In the end, although Czech structuralism took on the study of structures, functions and devices initiated by Russian formalism earlier, it also broadened its inquiry to pursue the interaction of literature and society. Thus, the Prague Linguistic Circle emphasized the human values of the aesthetic norms and dedicated a considerable amount of attention to the historical process encompassing the literary evolution and its change of codes.²²⁰ In doing so, the Czech movement became the first school to formulate a “comprehensive theory and methodology of literary perception based on a semiotic concept of literature” long before the reader-response criticism or the aesthetic of perception (*Rezeptionsästhetik*) of the Konstanz school.²²¹

The Soviet structural-semiotic movement that sprung in the late 1950s-early 1960s was made possible, to a large extent, by the antecedent formalist and structuralist traditions as its research was bolstered by their theoretical legacy. However, the new spur of semiotic and structuralist ideas did not resurface as simple revival of Formalism, in part, because it emerged in a different social and intellectual climate. Most broadly, the new movement reflected the discoveries and methods associated with the age of automation, the arms race and the information explosion that began in the 1950s. It further benefited from the rising stature and political capital of Soviet academics and the thaw after the death of Stalin which provided opportunities to investigate concepts and theories which had been previously considered ideologically unsuitable and left

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid., 5.

unexplored.²²² The most immediate impact upon the new intermarriage of structuralism and semiotics, however, came from within, from a dramatic shift in the direction of Soviet linguistics and in the study of its main object of investigation—the study of language.

During the 1950s, Soviet linguists made numerous efforts to free their discipline from the encumbering effects of Marrism (the ideas of the Academician Nikolai Marr) and to bring it up to the levels reached in the West.²²³ Ironically, it was Stalin himself who deposed the, what he deemed as, “formalism” of Marr’s theory and put an end to its domination in Soviet linguistics through a series of three articles that culminated in his notorious 1950 essay “Marxism and the Question of Linguistics.”²²⁴ Due to Stalin’s political essay which initiated a groundbreaking overhaul in the discipline, the study of language not only became a more modern, desirable and encouraged specialty, but the field itself opened for discussion.²²⁵ Soviet linguists reacted to Stalin’s intervention with a special collection of articles and a series of events and publications that gave voice to

²²² Lucid, *Ibid.*, 2; Baran, *Ibid.*, x.

²²³ Baran, *Ibid.* Academician Nikolai Marr was a founder of a “new theory of language” which was accepted as the basis of “Marxist linguistics” in the 1930s-1940s and supported by the authorities.

²²⁴ The articles addressed the controversy between the Marrists and the historical comparativists. Stalin intervened in the summer of 1950, just as the official newspaper Pravda was hosting a public debate between the fractions. He accused the supporters of Marr of inventing “formalism” to “facilitate their struggle against their opponents in linguistics.” Iosif Stalin, *Otnositel’no marksizma vazykoznanii* [On Marxism in Linguistics]. (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1950). Stalin proclaimed that language was not part of the superstructure, that it was not determined by the economic basis and that it manifested stability over time. According to Waldstein, he therefore “legitimized” the formalist idea of the autonomy of language and opened up the field of linguistics for academic debate. Waldstein, *Ibid.*, 18-19. For a full analysis of the debate and Stalin’s intervention see Peter Seyffert, *Soviet Literary Structuralism Background, Debate, Issues*. (Columbus: Slavica Publ. Inc., 1985).

²²⁵ Vladimir Toporov, 2002 interview cited in Waldstein, *Ibid.*, 18-19.

the open proponents of the regime as well as to scholars formerly associated with formalism.²²⁶

Further impetus for change emerged in 1958, when the sociological perspectives of the Soviet literary scholarship encountered the more specialized methods of Western philologists at the International Congress of Slavists in Moscow, and the event unequivocally exposed the widening gap between the two approaches.²²⁷ In addition to this external impulse for improvement, the inner structure of the field had already been impacted by the gradual transformations that took place in the Soviet Academy of Science during the last decade of Stalin's regime.²²⁸ Due to the government's support and special interest in the role of Soviet education and Academy, the social distinction and prestige of Soviet academics was growing in proportion to their increasing irritation with the state's constant infringement upon the academy's autonomy.²²⁹ The academics responded to the pressure with constant vigilance, attempts to translate their scholarly agendas into the official lingo of the Party and efforts to enter patronage relationships

²²⁶ The collection consisted of papers read in May of 1951 and was published the same year under the title *Problems of Literary Scholarship in the Light of the Works of Stalin on Linguistics*. It featured near-formalists such as Viktor Vinogradov and moderate formalists such as Boris Tomashevsky. See Seyffert, *Ibid.*, 23-56.

²²⁷ Seyffert, *Ibid.*, 56-57. Jakobson, who had already immigrated to the West, attended the congress and took an active part in its linguistic section, defining its strong emphasis on formal issues.

²²⁸ "Under the conditions of the Cold War, scientists, especially physicists and mathematicians, accumulated sufficient political capital and social status to push for a major reform in organization and management of science." Waldstein, *Ibid.*, 17

²²⁹ Waldstein, *Ibid.* Stalinist science provided scholars the security of tenure irrespective to the demands of the public or the students and provided enormous funding opportunities, including long-term projects. By the late 1950s, "the Soviet Academy of Science was a corporation as close to a state within the state as one can be, with its own share of 'socialist property,' its own labs, plants, planes..." *Ibid.* See also Alexander Vucinich, *Empire of Knowledge: The Academy of Sciences of the USSR (1917-1970)*. (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1984.

with the members of the Central Committee.²³⁰ In this process, the sciences enjoyed greater freedom, economic support and independence thanks to the more specialized nature of their research which remained less understandable to the political apparatchiks. The field also benefited from the world-wide recognition of Soviet scientists. In the sphere of humanities, which appeared much more transparent to the authorities and, therefore, was prone to ideological muddling and manipulation, the Party had a greater influence and control. This partly explains why the earliest internal attempts at academic reform began in the domain of Soviet sciences; yet, those attempts had a quick ripple effect in other fields. As part of the same efforts, in the 1950s Soviet academics concentrated on reforming the language of science and focused their attention on the question “Who controls language?”²³¹ Such inquiries greatly facilitated the emergence of linguistics and semiotics as major concerns in the following decade.

VI. Cybernetics, Theories of Communication and “Self-Reproducing Automata” in the U.S.

The most important factor that led to the overhaul of Soviet philology (linguistics and literary studies) and prompted the formation of a new structural-semiotic movement, originated outside of the field of linguistics and outside of the Soviet Union. In the

²³⁰ Walstein, *Ibid.*

²³¹ *Ibid.*

broadest sense, it reflected the widespread fascination with science and technology brought about by the newly opened Space Age. More particularly, it resulted from the far-reaching effect of a newly discovered theory that was quickly perceived as a revolutionary discipline—cybernetics. The close dependence of the expanding Soviet structuralist thinking upon this new theoretical rubric was acknowledged by notable scholars as early as the 1970s:

In the Soviet Union, as elsewhere, it was the science of linguistics that served as the matrix for the development of the structuralist approach, and it was the conception of language as a system of signs that led to expanded semiotic dimension of study. However, not linguistics in or of itself alone was responsible for this development but rather linguistic thought under the impact of powerful new scientific interests that took delayed, but decisive, effect in the Soviet Union in the late fifties and early sixties. This was paramountly the impact of cybernetics... Indeed such was its fascination for the Soviet scholars that the idea of cybernetics instantly brought forth virtually a whole new intellectual era infused with an extreme degree of “scientific optimism.”²³²

As a term derived from the Greek word for “steering” and “government” (*kybernetes* means steersman), cybernetics is the interdisciplinary study of complex systems, especially communication processes, as well as the mechanisms of control and feedback.²³³ The idea was proposed in the late 1940s by the American prodigy and mathematician Norbert Wiener who formalized much of the thinking up to that point and suggested new areas for cybernetic implementation in his foundational book *Cybernetics*

²³² L. Matejka, S. Shishkoff, M. E. Suino and I. R. Titunik, “Forward” in *Readings in Soviet Semiotics*, xi-xii.

²³³ Waldstein, *Ibid*, 18 and Charles R. Dechert, “The Development of Cybernetics” in *The Social Impact of Cybernetics* (Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 11.

or *Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* in 1948.²³⁴ The notion of cybernetics grew out of Wiener's earlier work on a theory of prediction that would lead to the construction of machines embodying such theory.²³⁵ The task of the study underlined the importance of *feed-back* in the work of control engineers. The actual output of the system is compared to the desired input (the *goal*) so that information about the "mismatch" is fed back to the controller (*command generator*) in order to modify subsequent inputs. If the *feedback* is negative, the command signals make adjustments and drive the input closer to the *goal*. On the basis of such matrix, Wiener and his colleagues established that just as improper *feedback* could cause "hunting" or instability in automatic control systems, so human control mechanisms managing motor activities could be impeded by improper *feedback*. A case in point was the pathological condition known as "purpose tremor" in which an injury to the cerebellum impacted the voluntary acts:

We thus found a most significant confirmation of our hypothesis concerning the nature of at least some voluntary activity. It will be noted that our point of view considerably transcended that current among neurophysiologists. The central nervous system no longer appears as a self-contained organ, receiving input from the senses and discharging into the muscles. On the contrary, some of its most characteristic activities are explicable only as circular processes, emerging from the nervous system into the muscles, and reentering the nervous system through the sense organs... This seemed to us to mark a new step in the study of that part

²³⁴ Dechert, *Ibid.*, 17. Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1948)

²³⁵ In the beginning of WWII, Wiener was working on a project connected with designing an automatic system that would allow scientists to track the course of an aircraft by enabling the aircraft-tracking data to be fed to a computer which could predict the future course of the aircraft. Thus, Wiener and his collaborator at the time, the mathematician Julian Bigelow, were involved in a study of the theory of prediction and became aware of the importance of the term "feedback." See Wiener, *Cybernetics*, 13

of neurophysiology which concerns not solely the elementary processes of nerves and synapses but the performance of the nervous system as an integrated whole.²³⁶

Wiener's retrospection demonstrates that, from the onset of its inception, cybernetics—initially conceived as mere reading of scientific data and technological processes—began exploring relations between fields by drawing analogies with physiology, the nervous system or the neurological processes in the human body. Leaving aside Wiener's claims of a new systematic approach to neurophysiology which "considerably transcended" the current state in that field, one has to admit that his early vision of unity between technological and physiological processes contributed to the interdisciplinary success of cybernetics. The introduction of Wiener's book demonstrates that, from the beginning of his research, he was not only able to find proof, application and resonance of his theory outside of the scope of inorganic matter and mechanized technology. He was also instrumental in drawing a direct correspondence between information and control processes in artificial systems and similar processes taking place in biological and human environments and, particularly, in the human body. Thus, in addition to widening the interdisciplinary application of his invention, Wiener engendered, at least conceptually, the most powerful (and problematic) rhetorical device of his new science—the cybernetic analogy of man and machine.

The study of the processes in human and artificial systems led to the recognition that the analysis of control problems should involve analysis of the underlying

²³⁶ Ibid., 15.

communication problems. The latter, in turn, made more apparent the fundamental importance of the message—be it distributed mechanically or transferred electronically and electrically—in the workings of all biological and artificial systems. The consideration of the message and, vice versa, of its disruption (*noise*) prompted a close look at the statistical profile of the transmitted information and ultimately contributed to a statistical theory of information—another branch that would greatly affect, among other fields, the development of linguistics, communication theory and structuralism:

Just as the amount of information in a system is a measure of its degree of organization, so the entropy of a system is a measure of its degree of disorganization...²³⁷

Providing quantification of signal transmission and formalization of control system theory, Wiener's introduction acknowledges the wide gap left by all other, narrowly defined, disciplines dealing with issues of information, communication and control. To fill this gap, he established a new, broadly applicable, study—an interdisciplinary theory of communication and control. The novelty of Wiener's proposal was strategically heightened by an effective terminological coinage—a “neo-Greek expression”—that came to name the new theory and to bridge the gap between ancient and modern even on a lexical level—cybernetics:

Thus as far as four years ago, the group of scientists about Dr. Rosenblueth and myself had already become aware of the essential unity of the set of problems

²³⁷ Ibid., 18.

centering about communication, control, and statistical mechanics, whether in the machine or in living tissue. On the other hand, we were seriously hampered by the lack of unity of the literature concerning these problems, and by the absence of any common terminology, or even of a single name for the field. After much consideration, we have come to the conclusion that all the existing terminology has too heavy of a bias... and as happens too often to scientists, we have been forced to coin at least one artificial neo-Greek expression to fill the gap. We have decided to call the entire field of control and communication theory, whether in the machine or in the animal, by the name Cybernetics...²³⁸

Wiener's introduction goes on to define the interdisciplinary character of cybernetics and its relation to other fields dealing with similar problems; e.g., neurophysiology and information processing in the cerebral cortex, mathematical logic and its application to the analysis of neural switching circuits or computers and their use in constructing models of brain mechanisms.²³⁹ Thanks to its broadly defined subject, Wiener's theory becomes "the groundwork and beginnings of a broad interdisciplinary study of all phases of information processing and control systems and of the implications and ramifications of this for such subjects as the psychology of perception, psychiatry and memory disorders, linguistics and sociology."²⁴⁰ The reception of the new science, however, even among scholars, was as diverse as the variety of fields that it affected, ranging from an overly enthusiastic pronouncements predicting that cybernetics would change the world, to similarly fervent disapproval, scientific skepticism and open

²³⁸ N. Wiener, "Introduction" in *Cybernetics*, 19.

²³⁹ Wiener notes that the ideas of cybernetics grew out of his participation in a seminar on the methodology of science. The other participants in the seminar were from diverse fields, but they had a common belief in "new and exciting areas for scientific exploration." Hence, the interdisciplinary character of cybernetics was inherent from the point of its conception, as well as it resulted from the multidisciplinary nature of the problems that it addressed.

²⁴⁰ Roger Levien and M. E. Maron, *Cybernetics and Its Development in the Soviet Union* (Memorandum RM-4156-PR, Prepared for United States Air Force project Rand) (Santa Monica: The Rand Corporation, 1964), 5

rejection.²⁴¹ Wiener's supporters framed his ideas as "a second industrial revolution" which was at least as significant as, if not more powerful than, the first industrial revolution.²⁴² During the first industrial revolution the "prime movers largely replaced human energy, while men performed a control function." In comparison, cybernetics was a new type of revolutionary process because "under automation, process and production *control* is relegated to servomechanisms while the human operator programs, monitors, and maintains the automated system."²⁴³

More measured but pragmatic responses to Wiener's theory put his ideas into practice by applying cybernetics to other complex systems of communication and control. The so-called theory of information, a widely appropriated term for what began as mathematical theory of communication, played a central role in those further developments. The foundation for such theory appeared in 1948-49 in two articles published by one of Wiener's students—Claude Shannon—who brought together communication engineering (the accurate and efficient transmission of signals) and cryptology (the accurate and efficient encoding and decoding of information).²⁴⁴ Shannon's papers gave, for a first time in the history of the field, a precise quantitative

²⁴¹ "Cybernetics denotes many things to many people, and, even among experts, there is no complete and precise agreement as to its subject content." *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁴² Dechert, "The Development of Cybernetics," 17

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁴⁴ Claude E. Shannon, "A Mathematical Theory of Communication," *Bell System Technical Journal* 27, no. 3 (1948): 379-423, 623-656 and Shannon, "Communication Theory of Secrecy Systems," in *Bell System Technical Journal* 28, no. 4 (1949): 656-715. The first article was reprinted in C. E. Shannon and W. Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949). See Dechert, *Ibid.*, 17; R. Levien and M. Maron, *Ibid.*, 6; and Slava Gerovitch, *From Newspeak to Cyberspeak*, 69-73

explication for “one measure of the amount of information contained in a message.”²⁴⁵ Such an explanation made it possible to compare the amount of information conveyed over different communication systems, to define the capacity of a “communication link” and a “communication store” and to determine the amount of information generated by an information source. Shannon’s theory also advanced the notion of the *code* as a sequence of symbols for presenting a message in a way that allowed one to talk about the efficiency of the coding system and to decide whether a particular coding system best represented a given information source. Finally, Shannon clarified the key notions of *noise*, *redundancy*, *channel capacity* and error-free *transmission of messages*, showing how *redundancy* could be introduced in coding schemes in order to prevent the destructive effects of *noise* on information.²⁴⁶ Thus, an important aspect of Shannon’s contribution involves the language in which scientific processes are described. In other words, Wiener’s student provided “a precise language and a set of concepts tailored for the analysis of information systems” that became essential in the engineering of communication systems.²⁴⁷ Shannon’s second article translated the engineering scheme into cryptological language in which the transmitter became an *encoder* and the receiver became a *decoder*, and the author examined human communication as an exchange of encoded messages. Approaching human beings as “information source,” Shannon took

²⁴⁵ R. Levien and M. Maron, *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁴⁶ Shannon’s universal scheme of a general communication system included generic terms for both human and machine components: *information source* (it produces the message), *transmitter* (operates on the message and produces the signal), *channel* (medium used for transmission), *receiver* (reconstructs the message from the signal), *signal* (sequence of discrete symbols), *message* (transmitted information) and *destination* (person or thing for which the message is intended).

²⁴⁷ R. Levien and M. Maron, *Ibid.*, 7.

on the man-machine analogy of his teacher and extended its application to the study of human language and communication. The ramifications of Shannon's theory affected a range of fields—from psychology and neurophysiology to genetics and, especially, linguistics—all of which embarked on defining the various aspects, conditions and factors involved in the complex process of transmission and processing of information. Subsequent developments to the theory would offer more adequate measures for the properties of message such as “complexity, accuracy, precision and, most important of all, semantic-pragmatic information content.”²⁴⁸ The latter property would become a prime concern for linguists, among which the most important contribution belongs to Roman Jakobson.

As contemporaneous assessments of cybernetics attest, the two areas in which the “new science” and its companion, the theory of information, found immediate application were computer and digital technology as well as neuropsychology and artificial intelligence. In particular, after their initial publication, the theories of Wiener and Shannon “started an almost explosive growth in the development of digital computer technology”—an outcome that seemed only natural since digital computers were the most powerful mechanisms for electronic and logical processing of information.²⁴⁹ In the West, the first digital computers were generated during WWII in secrecy, yet, as soon as the information about their application and capabilities became available, it led to a race

²⁴⁸ R. Levien and M. Maron, *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

in developing new computer designs, theories and technologies.²⁵⁰ In the Soviet Union, the military-related development of computers was also kept a secret until the death of Stalin in 1953 when the discussion of the subject entered the public realm. Produced in 1953, probably as an improvement of the 1951 MESM, the BESM was followed by a number of models such as the TESM-1, M-2, M-3 and STRELA. Boosting the support for a programming theory, the digital race greatly facilitated another aspect of the analysis of communication—the development of artificial (computer and encoded) languages and the study of algorithms.²⁵¹

The explosion of new artificial and computer technologies in the late 1950s-early 1960s also rested on the ideas of John Von Neumann. In the late 1940s, he began working on a general theory of “self-reproducing automata,” a term that he applied to both living organisms and complex logical-mathematical machines. His work prescribed additional capacities to the proficient man-machine analogy. Whether the brain functioned as a computer was not even a question for Neumann. He insisted that both the human brain and the computer were logical-mathematical automata and, as such, they could be quantitatively compared and defined analogously. To describe their operations he used the scientific language of “self-reproducing automata” that eliminated the

²⁵⁰ In the late 1950s-early 1960s, the West developed “very-high-speed circuits and switching components,” perfected “large capacity, rapid-access data storage media,” and achieved “sophisticated input-output and conversation equipments to aid the task of communicating with computers.” This corresponded to specific advancements in the theory of information machines and automata such as: generating a “theory of reliability” that would enable the organization of a number of unreliable computer components into a highly reliable system and thus, through the “efficient use of redundant codes, components and circuits,” to improve the overall reliability of the complex system. R. Levien and M. Maron, *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁵¹ R. Levien and M. Maron provide a thorough definition of algorithm in the way in which it was understood in the early 1960s as “a complete, explicit, detailed, and unambiguous description of a procedure for going from a given problem to its solution (it might be thought of as a detailed recipe.)” *Ibid.*

distinction between impulse and stimulus, neutron and relay organ and, ultimately, between the human brain and the thinking machine.²⁵² Cyberneticists began referring to humans simply as “control devices,” while computers were seen in anthropomorphic terms as artificial brains.

Another field that received a boost after Wiener’s work on the similarity between the brain and the digital computer as comparable information processing systems was the renewed collaboration between neurophysiology and artificial intelligence. The basis for such collaboration was Wiener’s broad approach to the mechanisms of control, information and communication which made them applicable to a variety of areas—from engineering to human behavior. The main terms of the process—*message*, *memory* and, what seemed to be a cybernetic nod to Ivan Pavlov, *conditioned reflex*—pertained to the technical lingo of digital computers as well as to the description of the nervous system. For instance, neurons feed *messages* into other neurons, while both the computer and the brain are designed for “storing information” and therefore they can “hold a message.”²⁵³ The construction of artificial intelligent machines that stored information in the way in which the human brain retains it is not only possible, but it seems like the next logical step:

... In the nervous computing machine it is highly probable that information is stored largely as changes in the permeability of the synapses, and it is perfectly possible to construct artificial machines where information is stored in that way...

²⁵² See S. Gerovitch, *Ibid.*, 81-83. In the work of Von Neumann, the “powerful dual metaphor—the brain as a computer and the computer as a brain—became an essential component of the emerging universal language for men and machines.” *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁵³ Wiener, *Cybernetics*, 120-123.

there is nothing in the nature of the computing machine which forbids it to show conditioned reflexes.²⁵⁴

In the 1960s, scientists moved beyond the analogies between natural devices (e.g., neurons) and digital phenomena (e.g., the switching devices of the computer) to a more complex understanding of the circuitry of the brain as a highly redundant information system which exhibits parallel information processing. Demonstrating that the cybernetic principles of *feedback* and *control* were beneficial in analyzing purposeful motor activity on a physiological level, scientists went on to apply them to the study of “higher mental functions” (e.g., complex problem solving) and artificial intelligence.²⁵⁵ After the 1960s, the *cybertalk* in the West became more and more dominated by the subfields of artificial intelligence and machine-biological interfaces (*cyborgs*) which led to a less favorable attitude towards cybernetics as a whole once this kind of research became less popular. In the Soviet Union, however, the development of cybernetics followed a completely different trajectory.

VII. Cybernetics as Soviet Panacea: Reception, Growth and Controversies

If in the West Wiener’s ideas saw initial enthusiasm that quickly mutated into a diverse range of mixed, often negative, responses, in the Soviet Union cybernetics and

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 130.

²⁵⁵ M. Maron, *On Cybernetics, Information Processing, and Thinking* (The RAND Corporation, P-2879, March, 1964), cited in R. Levien and M. Maron, Ibid., 11.

the theory of information triggered a diametrically opposite course of events. Engendered by a non-Communist author in the heart of the capitalist enemy, cybernetics was bound to encounter initial ignorance and hostility among the loyalist circles in Stalinist Russia. The literature on the subject disagrees on the length of the initial silence and the extent of the anti-cybernetic rhetoric among Soviet scholars and officials in the early 1950s.²⁵⁶ What Western authors agree on is that the first significant diatribe on cybernetics appeared in 1953 in the prestigious ideological journal *Voprosy filosofii* [Philosophical Inquiry] under the title “Whom Does Cybernetics Serve?” and published in the section devoted to critiques of bourgeois ideology.²⁵⁷ Writing under the pseudonym “Materialist,” the author defined cybernetics as a “misanthropic pseudotheory” and “one of those pseudosciences that are generated by contemporary imperialism and are doomed to failure even before the downfall of imperialism.”²⁵⁸ The anonymous author, of course, paid all due tribute to the clichéd lingo of the Party by reinforcing the “obvious” idea that cybernetics served “the war god” (i.e., the capitalist military and industrial interest) in developing weapons guiding systems and robotic labor

²⁵⁶ R. Levien and M. Maron, for instance, state that “the history of Soviet cybernetics begins in 1953” when Stalin died, the BESM was completed and *Voprosy filosofii* published its first anonymous attack on Wiener’s theory. R. Levien and M. Maron, *Ibid.*, 17. According to Maxim Mikulak, between 1950 and 1953, “at least three pieces that encouraged Soviet antagonism respecting cybernetic theory were published.” M. Mikulak, “Cybernetics and Marxism-Leninism” in Dechert, *Ibid.*, 131-132. Loren Graham has indicated that the opposition was less extensive than Western sources had led to believe and determined the number of hostile articles as “three to four.” Graham also casts light on the first openly critical article by Mikhail Yaroshevsky published in *Literaturnaya gazeta* on April 5, 1952. L. Graham, *Science and Philosophy in the Soviet Union* (New York: Random House, 1974), 336. More recently, Slava Gerovitch has demonstrated that soon after the same publication in *Literaturnaya gazeta* a “flood of anti-cybernetics articles filled newspapers, scholarly journals, and popular magazines.” Slava Gerovitch, *From Newspeak to Cyberspeak*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 119.

²⁵⁷ “Komu sluzhit kibernetika,” *Voprosy filosofii*, no. 5 (October 1953): 210-219.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, cited in R. Levien and M. Maron, *Ibid.*, 18.

force.²⁵⁹ Aside from the typical ideological jabber, however, the “Materialist” put a finger on a problem that would resurface again in subsequent disputes on the function of cybernetics, in particular, and on the overreaching role of science in society, in general. Thus, the primary flaw of cybernetics, according to the concerned “Materialist,” was its “untenable universalism” based on inadmissible analogies between living or social organisms, on the one hand, and technological creations, on the other:

The theory of cybernetics, attempting to extend the principles of operation of the most recently constructed computers to quite distinct natural and social phenomena without regard for their quantitative uniqueness, is mechanisticism transformed into idealism.²⁶⁰

The “Materialist’s” proposition contends that, while the advances in the study of computer and control systems are useful as long as their application remains within the realm of technology, any attempts to blur the differences between man and machine are “doomed to failure.” Though relying on shortsighted ideological prognoses, the author’s invective was effective in attacking the heart of Wiener’s theory—its intention to combine human and technological subjects of inquiry into one interdisciplinary investigation. Thus, the “Materialist” predicted the future rhetoric of anti-cybernetic diatribes by defining Wiener’s theory as a “fallacious new science” that “ignores the quantitative differences between the live organism and machines” and “discards

²⁵⁹ On the difference between Wiener and von Neumann in regard to participation in U.S. government projects see Gerovitch, *Ibid.*, 79.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

consciousness” in its flawed attempt to prove that machines can replace human labor force.²⁶¹ Discarding cybernetics as nothing more than a modern version of La Mettrie’s eighteenth-century mechanicism, the “Materialist” found a superior Russian counterpoint to Wiener’s “idealism,” “universalism” and inadequate use of neurophysiology—the work of Ivan Pavlov.²⁶²

The “Materialist’s” condemnation of cybernetics was followed by mixed results. In 1954, the prestigious Soviet *Philosophical Dictionary* repeated, almost verbatim, his judgment.²⁶³ The title of his article (“Whom Does Cybernetics Serve?”) became the emblematic “statement of the opposition” and common target after 1954 when the defenders of the new science began voicing their opinion.²⁶⁴ The first major public approval of cybernetics was delivered at the Academy of Social Sciences in 1954 by Ernst Kolman, a Czech-born mathematician, ideologist and philosopher of science who resided in Moscow.²⁶⁵ His argument was printed a year later in *Voprosy filosofii*, the same journal that published the diatribe of the “Materialist.” Answering the “Materialist’s” inquisitive title with a different, and more substantial, question, Kolman’s text “What is Cybernetics?” was printed next to another favorable evaluation of Wiener’s

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936) was a Russian physiologist known mainly for his development of the concept of the *conditioned reflex* (translated also as the *conditional reflex*). In a now classic experiment, he trained a hungry dog to salivate at the sound of a bell which the dog had begun associating with the sight and the arrival of food. Emphasizing the importance of conditioning, Pavlov developed his conceptual approach further and related human behavior to the nervous system. As an acknowledgement of his pioneering work on digestive secretions, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physiology and Medicine in 1904.

²⁶³ M. Mikulak, Ibid., 133-134.

²⁶⁴ Graham, *Science and Philosophy*, 337.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 338; Seyffert, Ibid., 121; Mikulak, 136.

theory titled “Basic Traits of Cybernetics”²⁶⁶ This favorable and insightful evaluation was written by three high-profile scientists and professors at Moscow University: the Academician S. L. Sobolev (a distinguished mathematician and engineer), the economist A. I. Kitov (a computer specialist) and the programming theorist A. A. Lyapunov who was soon to become a prominent specialist in machine translation. As a “careful and conservative” assessment of its subject, the article avoided drawing any inferences about a cybernetic influence in other fields, such as psychology, sociology or economics.²⁶⁷ In contrast, Kolman, who was critical of the “one-sided approach” of Wiener’s opponents, defended both the practical value of cybernetics in the fields of computer technology, information theory and symbolic logic as well as its broader application in other areas of knowledge.²⁶⁸ Making the ironic remark that “our enemies” would not spend so much time and energy “merely to discredit Pavlov and force idealism and metaphysics into psychology and sociology,” Kolman returned to the heart of the issue of interdisciplinarity and “firmly endorsed” the use of the analogy “brain : computer” as a valuable method of cognition that only a “neovitalist” would deny.²⁶⁹

The high-profile scientific defense of cybernetics coincided with (and likely influenced) the new Party line promulgated for Soviet philosophy and science in 1954.²⁷⁰ The shift was first announced in the Party publication *Komunist* [*Communist*], which

²⁶⁶ Graham. *Ibid.*, Seyffert, *Ibid.*, R. Levien and M. Maron, *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁶⁷ Sobolev, Kitov and Lyapunov, “Osnovnye cherty kibernetiki,” *VF*, no. 4 (1955): 136-148; R. Levien and M. Maron, *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁶⁸ Kolman, “Chto takoe kibernetika?” *VF*, no. 4 (1955): 148; Graham, *Ibid.*, 338; Seyffert, *Ibid.*, 121.

²⁶⁹ Kolman, *Ibid.* “Cybernetics was seen to be the beginning of a new era where computers took over mental drudgery, brought a more efficient initialization of resources, and provided a springboard for new scientific breakthroughs.” Seyffert, *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ Mikulak, *Ibid.*, 134-35.

proclaimed that practice must serve as the highest criterion for evaluating the truth of scientific propositions and inquiries. This new line guided the plenary sessions of February and March 1954 in which the Party Central Committee criticized the dogmatism of agricultural sciences.²⁷¹ Thus, the old ideological policy associated with Zhdanov and the resulting dogmatism in the sciences began to fall out of favor. At its 1955 plenary session, the Central Committee declared the necessity of utilizing automation and cybernetic technology, even though the immediate response of Soviet intellectuals to the tenets of Wiener's theory was far less than enthusiastic.²⁷² The initial antagonism against cybernetics had subsided, but there was still reluctance among scientists to grant it the status of autonomous science, partly due to its overlap with automation and partly because of its profile of an interdisciplinary amalgamation of ideas. The reluctance, however, soon dissipated, replaced by a wide-spread professional approval, as it could be seen in the evocative case of the Russian Academician Andrei Nikolaevich Kolmogorov, an internationally renowned mathematician and perennial recipient of state honors. After his initial rejection of the new theory as "interdisciplinary hodgepodge," he became its most important public face and Soviet supporter.²⁷³

²⁷¹ Ibid., 135.

²⁷² Ibid., 136-37.

²⁷³ After completely discarding the idea of cybernetics as "new" and "autonomous" science, Kolmogorov became its leading Soviet theoretician. In October 1956, he gave a critical speech on the subject, but by the following year, he diametrically changed his opinion. In 1957, he announced that he reversed his previous stand against cybernetics to which he was misled by the "irresponsible claims of the Western press." His support was an important victory for the new science because he was the Dean of the Faculty of Mathematics and Mechanics at Moscow University and had great influence at the Academy of Sciences. R. Levien and M. Maron, *Ibid.*, 20. He himself made significant contributions to the mathematical foundations (probability theory) of the theory of information—a key aspect of cybernetics. As a Chair of Probability Theory at Moscow State University, he also developed interest in verse statistic—another aspect of cybernetic research. See Seyffert, *Ibid.*, 67 and 121-22.

Within the short course of four years—i.e., between the first public defense of cybernetics in 1954 and the official appearance of the technical journal *Problemy kibernetiki* [*Problems of Cybernetics*] under the editorship of Lyapunov in the beginning of 1958 or the establishment of the Scientific Council of Cybernetics by the Soviet Academy of Sciences the following year—cybernetics became fully accepted as a discipline of its own and an important area of scientific knowledge in USSR.²⁷⁴ The process was facilitated and celebrated by a number of events: in the academic 1955-56, Moscow University held its first annual seminar on cybernetics; in 1956 the Lenin Library (the Soviet equivalent to the American Library of Congress) published a 23-page survey of recommended literature on cybernetics and its implications; later the same year Soviet delegates attended the first UNESCO-sponsored conference on cybernetics in Namur, Belgium; in 1957 the Laboratory of Electromodeling of the Academy of Science held a scientific-technical conference that was attended by 500 scientists from 90 different countries and, finally, later that year, the first Sputnik was launched with the assistance of cybernetics and computers.²⁷⁵ In the course of this process, cybernetic research gradually extended beyond mathematical principles and formulas to include larger subjects, among them scientific aspects of language, communication and thinking, such as information storage or retrieval and machine translation.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁴ Syffert, *Ibid.*, 122 and Mikulak, *Ibid.*, 137.

²⁷⁵ R. Levien and M. Maron, *Ibid.*, 20-21.

²⁷⁶ Thus, if the first seminar on cybernetics was dominated by mathematicians (Sobolev and Lyapunov) and the mathematical faculty of Moscow University—at the time “one of the two or three best groups of mathematicians in the world” (R. Levien and M. Maron)—the 1957 Laboratory concentrated on computer information storage and machine translation. *Ibid.*

The symptomatic 1958 also witnessed an influx of serious Soviet literature on cybernetics in both domestic publications and translations of foreign authors. In addition to the launching of the official Soviet cybernetic journal *Problemy kibernetiki*—a hard-bound irregularly published collection of articles on all aspects of cybernetics and automation—the readers saw the Soviet publication of Wiener’s two books, the first popular domestic study on the subject—the acclaimed Poletaev’s book *Signal*—and Komolgorov’s article for the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*.²⁷⁷ This initial boom of Soviet writings on cybernetics unleashed a real “publication explosion” of numerous articles, papers, journals, books and conference proceedings in the following years.²⁷⁸ The victory of cybernetics, however, was not only academic. Scientists, bureaucrats and politicians marched hand in hand under the cybernetic banner of a new technological, economic and intellectual progress. The new science was granted the highest stamp of approval and a long-term plan for the future from the government in the twenty-year “Program of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union” that was adopted by the 22nd Party Congress in 1961.²⁷⁹ In addition to its political sanctification, the program seemed to put an end to the polemic between pro-cybernetists and conservative scientists or Party-dogmatists who were interested in preserving the “academic separation” of fields:²⁸⁰

²⁷⁷ Igor’ Poletaev, *Signal* (Moscow: Sovetskoe radio, 1958); N. Wiener, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1948) and N. Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings* (New York: Houghton, 1950).

²⁷⁸ R. Levien and M. Maron, *Ibid.*, 22-24.

²⁷⁹ R. Levien and M. Maron, *Ibid.* 23

²⁸⁰ J. Ford, “Soviet Cybernetics and International Development” in *The Social Impact of Cybernetics*, 163.

The introduction of highly perfected systems of automatic control will be accelerated. It is *imperative* to organize wider application of cybernetics, electronic decision-making computer devices and control installations in production, research work, drafting and designing, planning, accounting, statistics and state management.²⁸¹

Among other benefits, the new communist *blueprint* gave an official governmental endorsement to the long-condemned interdisciplinarity of Wiener's theory and *prescribed* as *imperative* (or, in Soviet terms, *ordered* as *obligatory*) its wide implementation in other relevant social spheres and areas of knowledge. From that point on, Soviet scientific events and collective publications included a wide variety of scholars and fields—from electrical systems, biology and medicine, to dialectical materialism, law, linguistics and economy. Cybernetics spread its web as a wide cross-disciplinary project that challenged, among other things, the rigid boundaries of the Stalinist academia which were designed to serve the political and ideological *status quo*.²⁸² The complex double-sided symbiosis between cybernetics and the Marxist-Leninist propaganda also began taking a more pronounced shape to create a new type of political ideologue—a kind of cybernetic ideology or cybernetics for ideological purposes.

As demonstrated in the Twenty-Year Plan for the Transition to Communism and the contemporaneous publication of the Academic Council of Cybernetics, *Cybernetics*—

²⁸¹ "Draft Program of the CPSU, 1961," *FBIS* (August 11, 1961): 47, cited in J. Ford, "Soviet Cybernetics," 163-64. *The Communist Blueprint* gives a slightly different version: "The production of highly efficient automatic control systems must be introduced on a large scale in industry, research, designing, planning, accounting, statistics, and management." *The Communist Blueprint for the Future: Communist Manifestoes, 1848-1961*, introd. and comp. Thomas Whitney (New York: Dutton, 1962), 167; Seyffert, *Ibid.*, 122.

²⁸² Gerovitch, *Ibid.*, 200.

to the Service of Communism, the new science was assigned a highest ideological mission. It was supposed to improve the Soviet society and economy in a rational way and, thereby, to achieve the communist ideal—a centralized “rational control” of the economy. Rationality and centralized control were the leading ideological concepts that contributed to the political sanctification of cybernetics in the Soviet Union. First, as an heir of the “optimism of the French Enlightenment and the Scientism of the nineteenth century,” the intellectual scheme of Marxism-Leninism believed that the “problems of society could be solved by man.”²⁸³ Second, the ideal of centralized planning of the economy was, of course, at the very heart of the Soviet system and its ideology. Based on the notions of “control,” “system” and “feedback,” cybernetics and automation, at least in the eyes of Party officials and the head of the Academic Council of Cybernetics Aksel’ Berg, offered a scientific matrix for achieving the goal of a massive planned and controlled economy:

...As distinct from the capitalist countries, where the various firms create, each for itself, separate automated systems of control, under socialism it is perfectly possible to organize a single complex, automated system of control of the country’s national economy. Obviously, the effect of such automation will be much greater than that of automating control of individual enterprises.²⁸⁴

Lastly, in the late 1950s the need to find a way to consolidate a massive structure that was disintegrating and growing out of hand loomed more imperative than ever

²⁸³ Graham, *Ibid.*, 325.

²⁸⁴ *Komunist*, Vol. 37, No. 9 (June 1960): 23, cited in C. Olgin, “Soviet Ideology and Cybernetics,” *Bulletin of the Institute for the Study of the USSR* (February 1962) and R. Levien and M. Maron, *Ibid.* 26.

before. Soviet authorities faced the necessity to stabilize an economy that was becoming more complex and difficult to control, while the Party apparatchiks were seeking means to rationalize the huge managerial bureaucracy necessary to direct a large planned economy.²⁸⁵ Cybernetics emerged at the right place and the right moment as a panacea that offered a multifaceted solution to a circular problem. Jumping on the loaded ideological wagon, the new science revived the old ideals of centralization, provided tools for macromanagement and, most importantly, restored faith in the failing system. The vision of an all-purpose remedy led to an “explosion” of cybernetic references, utopias, images and ideas which has been poeticized as “promise of modernity” and “triumph of rationality” and seen as “intoxication”:

Cybernetics revitalized, at least temporarily, the Soviet leaders’ confidence that the Soviet system could control the economy rationally. This renewal came exactly at the moment when the possibility seemed to be irretrievably vanishing. The rebirth of hope was the explanation of the intoxication with cybernetics in the Soviet Union in the late fifties; in the period after 1958 thousands of articles, pamphlets, and books on cybernetics appeared... One can find no other moment in Soviet history when a particular development caught the imagination of Soviet writers to a degree to which cybernetics did.²⁸⁶

Not only did cybernetics promise modernity and a better future, it also held out the prospect of the triumph of rationality in the man-made brain, and, with it, proof of the omnipotence of human reason; there was talk of poetry by computer,

²⁸⁵ Loren Graham gives keen insights into this process: “After the 1930s, however, the goal of a rationally directed society became more remote. The fact most disheartening to the Soviet planners was that the more the early difficulties of industrial development were overcome, the more distant seemed the goal of rational, centralized control. By the time of Stalin’s death in 1953 the economy had become so complex that it seemed to defy man’s ability to master and plan it...the decentralization of industry that occurred in 1957 was again a defeat for rationality... There were serious grounds for the belief that a complex modern industrial economy could simply not be centrally directed.” Graham, *Ibid.*, 325-26.

²⁸⁶ Graham, *Ibid.*, 329.

of the “formalization of human intuition”... It seems that all fields of human activity would at last be opened to rational inquiry, and this with the approval of the authorities.²⁸⁷

Not surprisingly and according to all accounts, cybernetics reached its “widest possible scope” and universality as a discipline in the Soviet Union where it enjoyed more prestige than anywhere else in the world.²⁸⁸ Whether the new science in fact delivered on any of its promises for a better future, “advent of communism” or “fulfillment of the Revolution” is a question that will remain outside of the scope of this dissertation.²⁸⁹ Already in the 1960s, critics acknowledged that cybernetics presented to the Soviet regime as many ideological problems as the numerous solutions it promised to provide.²⁹⁰ Even though Soviet cybernetics never rose to the level of a “rival philosophy” capable of endangering the status quo of dialectical and historical materialism (partly, because it was gradually integrated in the status quo and, partly,

²⁸⁷ Ann Shukman, *Literature and Semiotics (A Study of the Writings of Yuri Lotman)*, (Amsterdam, New York, Oxford: North- Holland Publishing Co., 1977), 10.

²⁸⁸ Graham, *Ibid.*, 324 and R. Levien and M. Maron, *Ibid.* 14.

²⁸⁹ By the late 1960s, for instance, cybernetics was defined again as a pseudoscience or used as mere fashion, while in the 1990s it took much of the blame for the decline of Soviet science.

²⁹⁰ For instance, according to Roger Levien, the main problem of Soviet cybernetics lays in the heart of Wiener’s original interdisciplinary analogy: “The basic problem is that cybernetics emphasizes the qualitative similarity of the phases of control and communication in man, machine, and society and suggests that those processes may be quantified. In its potentially universal applicability, cybernetics challenges Marxism-Leninism and the omniscience which the Communist Party leaders, as sole interpreters, claim. Marxism-Leninism, the Soviet ideologists contend, comprises the most general laws governing the evolution of the material world and human society.” Levien based his prognosis on the prediction of C. Olgin, “a recent émigré student of the Soviet Union,” who envisaged in 1962: “cybernetics ... might easily result in the rise of a rival philosophy and, at the very least, encourage the devotees of cybernetics to query, first the of laws of Dialectical, then those of Historical Materialism, and finally the omniscience of the Central Committee, not in the natural sciences, which Krushchev’s administration had already virtually liberated from Party tutelage, but in economics, sociology and possibly even politics, where this tutelage must be preserved at all cost.” See R. Levien and M. Maron, *Ibid.*, 26 and C. Olgin, *Ibid.*, 7.

because its own promises were as utopian as the “omniscience” of the regime), it nonetheless played an integral role in the reform movement of the 1960s. In fact, cybernetics became a critical player in that movement because it provided, if not an ideology, at least something equally important—a new language—to the agents of change.²⁹¹

Sociological studies have shown that the reform attempts began in the Soviet Academia in the early 1950s when, as mentioned earlier, the question “Who controls language?” came to the forefront of major intellectual inquiries. After the death of Stalin, scientists, especially mathematicians and physicists, accumulated social status, academic prestige and political capital that was sufficient to push for a change in the management of science.²⁹² The reform was partly successful, at least in the domain of the natural sciences, where the interventions of the Party nomenklatura became more limited, and new terms for the translation of science into practice were established.²⁹³ However, the real gain for the reformers came with the arrival of a new set of expressions in the field of scientific and intellectual inquiry—a new type of speech that employed objective notions and precise terminology which were capable of replacing the empty words or “floating signifiers” (*newspeak*) of the political apparatchiks.²⁹⁴ This new universal grammar and

²⁹¹ On the question of cybernetic language and its role in Soviet society see Slava Gerovitch, *From Newspeak to Cyberspeak*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002)

²⁹² See Waldstein, *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁹⁴ In his widely acclaimed book on the subject, Slava Gerovitch referred to the ideological language of empty signifiers—such as *cosmopolitanism*, *idealism*, *mechanicism* and *formalism*—as *newspeak*. Dominating the political and intellectual discourse before the death of Stalin, in the 1950s-1960s, those signifiers were still floating around, able to absorb varied content and to still remain meaningless, in order to wage political, scientific and cultural battles against any developments threatening the status quo of the system. See Gerovitch, *Ibid.*

vocabulary belonged to cybernetics. It offered a new language—effectively studied and defined by Slava Gerovitch as *cyberspeak*—which unified “diverse mathematical models, explanatory frameworks, and appealing metaphors from various disciplines:”

Cyberneticians combined concepts from physiology (*homeostasis* and *reflex*), psychology (*behavior* and *goal*), control engineering (*control* and *feedback*), thermodynamics (*entropy* and *order*), and communication engineering (*information*, *signal*, and *noise*) and generalized each one of them to be equally applicable to living organisms, self-regulating machines (such as servomechanisms and computers), and human society. In their view, humans and machines were two kinds of *control systems*, which *operating* in certain *environment*, pursued their *goals* (hitting a target, increasing *order*, achieving better *organization*, or reaching the same state of *equilibrium*) by *communicating* with the environment, that is, sending and receiving *information* about the result of their actions through *feedback*.²⁹⁵

Contrasting with the vague and manipulative *newspeak* of the Stalinist ideological discourse, the *cyberspeak* became the main vehicle of de-Stalinization of Soviet science, culture and language in the late 1950s-early 1960s. The battle of languages took place on both fronts: in the social arena, as competition between the scientific community and the nomenklatura and, within the scientific communities themselves, as a dispute between traditionalists and the proponents of new *cyberideas*. Cybernetics quickly left the technical field to become the universal language of a new relation between men, machines and society, and that novel language soon acquired the aura of rationality, progress and social change.²⁹⁶ *Cyberspeak* appealed to the supporters of the reform in

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 87. The first sentence, slightly simplified, is repeated on page 2 of the same book.

²⁹⁶ By the early 1970s, however, cybernetics was transformed from a vehicle of reform into a pillar of the status quo, while the language of cyberneticians became fully absorbed into the official doctrine to turn into

science with both of its aspects—its universality and its “exact” terminology—which, at least in the 1960s, made evident the vagueness of the *newspeak* and, at the same time, managed to translate abstract or allusive references into the precise terms of *control*, *information* and *entropy*.²⁹⁷ As a result, cybernetics became an “institutional umbrella” for the most progressive, controversial and underground branches of Soviet knowledge which gained outlets thanks to their ability to translate unacceptable terms and methodologies into the versatile *cyberspeak* of the new science. Such controversial branches that modified even their names to fit into the new ideologeme were: non-Pavlovian psychology (“psychological cybernetics”), structural linguistics (“cybernetic linguistics”), genetics (“cybernetic biology”), new approaches in experiment planning (“chemical cybernetics”) and legal studies (“legal cybernetics”).²⁹⁸ In psychology, the cybernetics’ supporters were able to move beyond the dogmatic interpretation of the Pavlovian theory and to explore aspects of the human nervous system that were previously left outside of psychology. Such a shift was enabled largely by Wiener’s pervasive analogy of man and machine. Some of the new psychological aspects that drew cybernetic attention, for instance, were purposeful behavior and human thinking both of which became described in machine terms as *information*, *programming*,

another devoid of meaning idiom and an inverted version of the *newspeak*—*CyberNewspseak*. Gerovitch, *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁹⁷ For instance, cybernetics appealed to Kolmogorov as a method of “diminishing the entropy in the scientific community” by reformulating the scientific knowledge in such “exact” terminology. See Waldstein, *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁹⁸ Gerovitch, *Ibid.*, 210. Forbidden under Stalin and remaining underground during the time of Krushchev, genetics was able to survive as a discipline thanks to the ability of Soviet geneticists to translate their research and findings into the language of cybernetics. For instance, genetic systems were described as “control systems” that involved “memory mechanisms,” “information flow” and “coding methods.” *Ibid.*, 218.

feedback, calculating and computing. Being of little importance to the followers of Pavlov, the concept of “purposeful behavior” became central for the Soviet physiologist Nikolai Berhnstein who proposed a new branch of physiology—“psychology of activity”—which acquired progressive scientific as well as political implications. According to his cybernetic approach, the human organism is a “self-regulating machine” which first receives information from the external world, then encodes and stores that information in a model and finally, on the basis of the same model, programs its actions and behavior.²⁹⁹ Bernshtein’s theory, however, went on further. The purposeful activity of the organism, according to the Soviet physiologist, was not simple adaptation, as Wiener would have it, but constructive movement or even change of the environment. Although Bernshtein insisted that his goal was plain liberation of the organism from the Pavlovian dogmatic notion of a passive entity (“reactive automaton”), his discreet allusion to the adaptive behavior of Soviet conformists, likely intended, prompted his critics to accuse him in alleged “mechanicism” and “teleologism.”³⁰⁰

Bernshtein’s ideas created a new movement in Soviet cybernetic research that quickly overthrew the dominant psychological paradigms which ignored the mechanisms of physiology. The engineers Artobolevskii and Kobrinskii insisted on overcoming the limited theories of human thinking; the mathematician Mikhail Bongard (a leading specialist in pattern recognition) rejected the Pavlovian reflex theory as incapable of addressing more complex nervous activity; Liapunov created a stochastic algorithm that

²⁹⁹ Nikolai Bernshtein, “Methods for Developing Psychology as Related to the Problems of Cybernetics” (1962), in *A handbook of Contemporary Soviet Psychology*, ed. M. Cole and I. Maltzman (Basic Books, 1969), 448, cited in Gerovitch, *Ibid.*, 220.

³⁰⁰ Gerovitch, *Ibid.*, 221-22.

modeled the acquisition of a conditional reflex and the control engineer Gal'perin proclaimed that the automatic control devices of the latest machines function as nervous systems because they were capable of unconditional reflexes.³⁰¹ Gal'perin then focused on another project the goal of which was to prove that modern control devices could, in principle, demonstrate conditional reflexes—a development which called for “reevaluation of physiological values” and moved a step closer to approaching the control device as a human brain. In 1963, Komolgorov was heard reinforcing the same line of thought: “Artificial thinking beings are possible. It is not worth arguing whether it is possible to create them in principle.”³⁰²

Buttressed by Bernshtein's ideas, Soviet “physiological cybernetics” made significant contributions to the fields of artificial intelligence and the man-machine analogy. In contrast to Western cyberneticians, who, according to Bernshtein, concentrated on devices that simulated individual physiological acts, Soviet research pursued a comprehensive cybernetic model of all human physiological mechanisms—i.e., nothing short of an artificial human organism. Wiener's analogy extended both ways. Cyberneticians aimed at a complete makeover of physiological methods and terminology until control systems simulated the complexity of the most compound living organism—the human organism—while human beings became equated with the most perfect cybernetic machines. One of the earliest proponents of the new science in USSR summed the process most effectively:

³⁰¹ Ibid., 222-23.

³⁰² Cited in V. Gukov, “Thinking Machines and Man,” *USSR*, No 5 (80), (May 1963): 50 and R. Levien and M. Maron, *Ibid.*, 20.

In cybernetics, a machine is defined as a system capable of accomplishing actions that lead to a certain goal. Therefore, all living organisms, and human beings in particular, are in this sense machines. Man is the most perfect of all known cybernetic machines...³⁰³

Even the last argument of the Pavlovian opponents of such analogies—the argument that thinking is reserved for humans who are the only ones who can make sense of their environment—seemed to be easily overtaken by cybernetic terminology and technical concepts such as “feedback.”³⁰⁴ Cyberneticians then took on another activity typically connected with specifically human behavior: game.

Soviet cybernetic research on games was rooted in Bernshtein’s study of adaptive physiological activities which occur in “dynamically variable” situations. In order to survive or succeed in such situations the organism has to exhibit something more than simple receiving of feedback or decoding of information. It has to perform something closer to cognitive function or as Bernshtein puts it—to make a “probabilistic forecast”:

To use a metaphor, we might say that the organism is constantly playing a game with its environment, a game where the rules are not defined and the moves planned by the opponents are not known.³⁰⁵

³⁰³ Sobolev cited in Gerovitch, *Ibid.*, 224.

³⁰⁴ See Gerovitch, *Ibid.*, 224.

³⁰⁵ Bernshtein quoted in Gerovitch, *Ibid.*, 225.

There was only a short distance from the idea of “probabilistic forecast” to a cybernetic game theory, and Bernshtein’s friend, the mathematician Mikhail Tsetlin, masterfully bridged that gap by applying the new mathematical study of finite automata to neurophysiology. Tsetlin tested Berneshtein’s idea in his analysis of a particular type of game in which stochastic automata had no information about the outcome of the game and had to develop their tactics in the course of the game.³⁰⁶ The Soviet mathematician explicitly compared the strategies of the simple automaton dealing with a complex environment with the situation of “a little animal in the big world” but the implicit references to human behavior were hard to ignore.³⁰⁷ Building on Von Neumann’s research on automata and Bernshtein’s complex approach, Tsetlin then turned to the “collective behavior” of mathematical objects. In such a way, he expanded his game model to include the behavior of the whole system the actions of which resulted from the combined actions of the primitive automata. Moreover, Tsetlin argued that he found the key principle of coordination between the elements of the system—the “principle of least interaction”—i.e., all parts in the system “strove” to minimize their interaction with the rest of the components in the system and with the system as a whole.³⁰⁸ This conclusion simplified the mechanisms of control in the system in which the elements were less dependent on a direct connection to the center and, if provided feedback information, the simple automata can develop their own strategies of coordination with the system. Such

³⁰⁶ Gerovitch, *Ibid.*, 225.

³⁰⁷ Tsatlin quoted in *Ibid.*

³⁰⁸ Gerovitch, *Ibid.*

a model was much more suitable to study complex system processes such as the coordination between the nervous centers in the brain.³⁰⁹

VIII. Cybernetics and the New Science of Language: Structural Linguistics

The “objective” terminology and “exact” methods of cybernetics had a radical impact on the development of Soviet linguistics in which, as stated earlier, the question “Who controls language?” came to the forefront of academic thought after the death of Stalin. In the 1950s, Soviet linguists, such as Viacheslav Ivanov and Isaak Revzin, became increasingly resentful of the shifting political phraseology of the *newspeak* and sought more objective language and exact methods of scientific investigation.³¹⁰ One of the earliest signs of the need of new methodology was the renewed interest in Saussure’s ideas. In the summer of 1952, the young linguist Sebast’ian Shaumian gave the first indication that Saussure’s structural linguistics had planted a fruitful seed in the new generation of Soviet academics.³¹¹ Shaumian’s article “The Study of the Phoneme” published by the official organ of the Soviet Academy (*Izvestiya Akademii nauk*) draws its subject, as Seyffert rightly points out, from the very source of structural linguistics—

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 226.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 227.

³¹¹ Shaumian’s piece could have been provoked by the first of two articles by Aksmanova who, although acknowledging the importance of Saussure, reaffirmed the older stronghold of Soviet “antiformalism.” See Seyffert, *Ibid.*, 83-86.

phonology.³¹² By arguing that phonology is superior to “traditional historical phonetics,” Shaumian indirectly defended the synchronic study of the formal characteristics of language and introduced a whole arsenal of structuralist notions and devices without mentioning the dangerous name “structuralism.” The official outcry following his “The Study of the Phoneme” was a testimony to the rising impact of structuralist thinking. Thus, although Shaumian played the traditional game, i.e., he used the appropriate political jargon, supplied novel ideas with ample quotations by Stalin, Zhdanov, Lenin and Engels and phrased the argument as a “vital part of the official campaign against ‘bourgeois idealism,’” the traditionalists responded with a “somewhat incompetent” discussion that abased structuralist thinking on the pages of *Izvestiya Akademii nauk* in 1952-53.³¹³

Shaumian’s case further demonstrated that the desire to combat the control and ideologization of communication was connected to the need to achieve a precise and “ideologically neutral” way of expression. This belief was shared by both linguists and cyberneticians who discovered its foundation in the language philosophy of the logical positivist Rudolf Carnap and the linguist Louis Hjelmslev. As Carnap and Hjelmslev suggest in their writings, one can decide whether a certain problem can be resolved scientifically only after trying to “formulate this problem clearly in some strict terms, for example, to pose it as a mathematical problem.”³¹⁴ If the problem cannot survive such translation, it ought to be considered unscientific. The language of cybernetics,

³¹² Seyffert, *Ibid.*, 86; Shaumian, “Problema fonemy,” *IAN*, 11 (1952), 324.

³¹³ See Seyffert, *Ibid.*, 88-91; D. M. Segal, *Aspects of Structuralism in the Soviet Union* (Tel-Aviv University, 1974), p. 3 and Seyffert’s correction of Segal’s argument in Seyffert, *Ibid.*, p. 115, n. 7.

³¹⁴ See Waldstein, *Ibid.*

Shannon's mathematical model of "a general communication system" and Komolgorov's contributions to the "theory of information" made such a process of reformulating the scientific language of linguistic inquiry possible. The opportunity was promptly seized by the proponents of a new branch that came to transform the former Marrian linguistics into new, more scientific, study of language. That was structural linguistics (or "cybernetic linguistics") which emerged as a combination of American descriptive linguistics, transformational-generative grammar, Saussure's ideas and Jakobson's key contributions to phonology, communication and poetics.

In the 1940s, Roman Jakobson, who had already acted as a founder of the Linguistic Circles in Moscow and in Prague and had briefly become associated with the Copenhagen Linguistic Circle and Hjelmslev, immigrated to the U.S. and moved to Harvard. There, he joined the cybernetic proponents and quickly established contacts with Wiener and Shannon. In his letter to Wiener written in 1949, he pointed out the ground-breaking potential of cybernetics and insisted on close "parallelism" between modern linguistics and the new science.³¹⁵ Drawn to the unambiguous terminology of cybernetics and information theory, Jakobson used both Wiener's man/machine analogy and Shannon's mathematical model to construct a generalized scheme of linguistic communication.³¹⁶ In his scheme, he blended new terms coined by himself with the terminology of Wiener and Shannon in order to replace Saussure's traditional dichotomies, such as *langue* and *parole*, with Shannon's scientific approach, now

³¹⁵ Gerovitch, *Ibid*, 92.

³¹⁶ See Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics" (1960), in Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, ed. K. Pomorska and S. Rudy (Belknap, 1987), 66-71.

supplemented with a new “psychological” dimension of communication (*contact*).³¹⁷ The result was a new model of linguistic communication that changed the old perception of language as the mere expression of one’s thoughts. In Jakobson’s terms, language became rather a circular relation between acts of encoding, transmitting and decoding of information. His model incorporated the main components of Shannon’s diagram, such as *message*, *signal*, *source*, *channel* and *receiver*; however, it also changed certain aspects in order to convey the specificity of the linguistic process. Thus, the new scheme included six constituent notions: *addresser* (that is a speaker or encoder), *addressee* (listener or decoder), *context* (e.g., “referent” or an area in which we understand what the message is about), *message* (information sent by addresser to the addressee), *code* (way of formulation that is “fully, or at least partially, common” to them) and *contact* (“physical or psychological connection between them”).³¹⁸ Jakobson also proposed that each one of the factors in his scheme corresponded to one of the six functions of language (shown below in parentheses).³¹⁹

³¹⁷ Gerovitch, *Ibid*, 92.

³¹⁸ Adapted from Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics,” 66-71.

³¹⁹ The *emotive* function expresses “the speaker’s attitude towards what he is speaking about.” The *conative* function, best shown in the vocative and the imperative, brings attention to the addressee. The *referential* function connects the message with the context. The *poetic* function puts “focus on the message for its own sake.” The *phatic* function serves to facilitate the contact—“to establish, prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works.” The *metalingual* function refers to the process in which both the addresser and the addressee “check up on whether they use the same code; i.e., the same language or the same meaning when certain words are used. For instance, in the latter case, figures of speech and metaphors in particular, are not irregular deviations of the process, but they present examples of “code variability”—i.e., “certain stylistic varieties, which are subcodes of an overall code.” See Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics,” 71; and Jakobson, “Linguistics and Communication Theory” (1960), in Jakobson, *On Language*, ed. Linda Waugh and Monique Monville-Burston (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 494.

CONTEXT (REFERENTIAL)

MESSAGE (POETIC)

ADDRESSER (EMOTIVE)-----ADDRESSEE (CONATIVE)

CONTACT (PHATIC)

CODE (METALINGUAL)

As a whole, Jakobson's model suggests that, a successful act of communication, i.e., an act that does not fail due to *noise* or *entropy*, involves at least two stages: (1) the transmission of a *message* from an *addresser* to an *addressee* through a *contact* (physical or psychological) and (2) the reception (decoding or understanding) of this *message* which needs to be framed in a *code* and to refer to a familiar *context*. Though the cybernetic idea of a circuit and the notion of *feedback* are not explicitly stated, they exist implicitly in the second phase of reception (*understanding*) which is necessary in order to make linguistic communication possible. Resting on his formalist work in Moscow and on the semiotic ideas of the Prague circle, Jakobson's model proposes a structuralist-cybernetic approach to language as communication that is very different from the Saussure's division of *langue* and *parole*. The new approach accounts for the various factors involved into the process of linguistic transmission of messages, each one of which could determine, change, obstruct or facilitate the amount of information delivered or received. Jakobson's scheme also demonstrates the analogous character of

communication in human and in engineering circuits, proving thus the applicability of Wiener's ideas in the field of modern linguistics and paving the way to new developments in machine translation and the creation of artificial languages.³²⁰

Jakobson's model was instrumental in the development of Soviet structural linguistics, and it was namely Roman Jakobson who brought the cybernetic innovations in the study of communication to USSR. In 1956, Jakobson visited Moscow for a first time after his emigration more than a decade before, and during that visit he met with a group of progressive Soviet scholars. Soon thereafter, one of those scholars—Viacheslav Ivanov—and his friend the mathematician Vladimir Uspenskii (a student of Komolgorov) organized a seminar on mathematical linguistics. The projected topics included mathematical logic, machine translation, information theory, the mathematical definition of grammatical categories and the “mathematization of language.”³²¹ The course of a new development in the study of language was set and its trajectory became firmly and tightly aligned with the exact sciences, preeminently mathematics. Groups and seminars in machine translation emerged at the Applied Mathematics Division, at the Institute of Precise Mechanics and Computer Technology as well as at the Institute of Foreign Languages.³²² With its interdisciplinarity, systematic approach and precise terminology, cybernetics presented the next logical step of linguistic inquiry in the 1950s. This step was also motivated by political reasons because as soon as the Academy's Council of Cybernetics was established in 1959 it set up a linguistic section that provided “safe

³²⁰ Wiener himself embraced Jakobson's theory as an implementation of the general framework of cybernetics. See Gerovitch, *Ibid.*, 94.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 228.

³²² *Ibid.*, 232.

haven for innovative research” by marginalized Soviet linguists.³²³ As a result, structural linguistics sprung and grew in the second half of the 1950s in the field of machine translation under the institutional protection of cybernetics.³²⁴ This political refuge led not only to close cooperation between linguistics, cybernetics and computing, but also resulted in further innovative developments and theoretical models in the field of language.

One of the first official indications of a cybernetic turn in the field of linguistics emerged in 1961 when V. Ivanov and, not surprisingly, S. Shaumian published a co-authored article on the “linguistic problems of cybernetics.” The article reinforced Wiener’s analogy because it compared the way in which the human brain performed linguistic activities with the ways in which specialized computing machines conducted linguistic analyses.³²⁵ Expanding on the cybernetic idea of machine translation, the two authors called for “a new discipline of structural linguistics” that would study the “construction of formal models of language” and would become an “exact science”:

In the transmission of information, it is often necessary to convert information from one sign system into another, that is, from one code into another. This type of conversion is called coding. Any code is a language, and coding is nothing else but translation from one language into another. Therefore, studying codes and coding is a linguistic problem, and the theory of codes and coding is a

³²³ Gerovitch, *Ibid.*, 226. This lasted shortly for many of the nonconformist structural linguists who soon faced problems with the authorities. *Ibid.*, 234.

³²⁴ The field of machine translation attracted the special attention and pragmatic support of KGB. *Ibid.*, 233-35.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 229.

linguistic theory... It is precisely the concept of code and coding that serve as a bridge between structural linguistics and cybernetics.³²⁶

As Gerovitch rightly points out, this approach clearly separates the ideas of Ivanov and Shaumian from the source of their initial inspiration—Roman Jakobson. If Jakobson treated natural language as one of various possible codes and classified linguistics as one of the disciplines under the umbrella of information theory, Ivanov and Shaumian did the opposite. They regarded every code as language and considered information theory as part of linguistics.³²⁷ Under the powerful agensis of cybernetics, the new science of language was ready to claim its leading and overarching place among all disciplines dealing with signs and codes and thus to become the foundational model and basis of the new structural-semiotic movement.

Not all parts of the Soviet academic and non-academic community, however, embraced the new “scientific-technological revolution” and its brainchild—cybernetics—as enthusiastically or, at least, uncritically. A wide group of artists, writers and intellectuals openly voiced their opposition to the overemphasis on science and technology and expressed concerns that rationality would gradually replace artistic imagination, non-utilitarian creative thinking and aesthetic ideals. The debate, which in 1962 would ultimately fuel the dispute on the issue of “man versus machine,” broke out in the fall of 1959 and became known as “the quarrel of the physicists and the

³²⁶ Cited in Gerovitch, *Ibid.*, 229-230. This call for “exact science” was echoed by Komolgorov who proposed using computer modeling to sort out speculative theories and language. *Ibid.*, 232.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 230.

lyricists.”³²⁸ In addition to articles by leading literary specialists such as Zelinskij and Ermilov, the controversy involved a large number of letters sent by ordinary, often anonymous, readers of *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, the Communist Youth League organ on the pages of which the quarrel began.

The debate started with an article by Ilya Erenburg who, as the article's introduction explained, was responding to an alleged letter from “Nina,” a student in the humanities.³²⁹ In her letter, Nina complained of having arguments with Yuri, a young engineer and sports fan, who ruined their relationships with his lack of appreciation for art. In the end of her complaint, Nina raised the question whether art still had any role or meaning in the Soviet society. Erenburg responded with a long tirade of thoughts and observations on the importance of art for maintaining one's spiritual values “in the age of narrow specialization and monotonous labor.”³³⁰ The public reacted to his article with an avalanche of written reader's responses, and the paper published many of them. The majority of readers supported Erenburg's notion of the importance of artistic imagination and the complementary roles of art and science in society. However, a small group of scientists took the position of Yuri, defending the vast superiority of technology and the rising dominance of science. One of the most evocative laudations on the power of science was presented in the letter of Igor Poletaev—the young engineer who had

³²⁸ Seyffert, *Ibid.*, 60.

³²⁹ Ilya Erenburg, “Otvét na edno pis'mo,” *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* (2 September 1959): 2.

³³⁰ *Ibid.* Seyffert presents a more extensive overview of the debate. For a shorter synopsis see M. Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group*, 35. For a wider historical overview of the issue of science and avant-garde art see Peter Nisbet, “The Response to Science and Technology in the Visual Arts” in *Science and the Soviet Social Order*, ed. L. Graham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 341-57.

published the first Soviet book on cybernetics just a year earlier.³³¹ In his response to Erenburg, Poletaev stated:

Science and technology determine the face of this epoch, influence ever more the taste, the mores, the conduct of man. We live by the creative work of the mind, not of feeling, by the poetry of ideas, theories, experiments, construction.

...

Whether we like it or not, the poets rule our souls and teach us ever less. Today science and technology, precise, bold, merciless reason offer us the most absorbing stories.³³²

With its binary oppositions, Poletaev's diatribe reveals the vast territory that, once chartered by the powerful man-machine analogy, was now used as a rhetorical battle ground. Thus, the young cybernetician divides and juxtaposes two different worlds: mind versus feeling, poetry versus "poetry of ideas, theories, experiments, construction," the poets that "rule our souls" versus the "absorbing stories" of "precise, bold, merciless reason." Voicing an extreme part of the spectrum, Poletaev triggered numerous responses among which nearly fifty objected to his opinion and only six supported his view. One of his most passionate opponents, a certain Minaev, pointed out the narrow ways of "philistinism" and evoked the harmonious ideal of "Soviet man:"

The people of the communist society, Comrade Poletaev, will never be walking computers, even if such an "ideal" occurred to you.³³³

³³¹ I. Poletaev, *Signal (O nekotorykh ponyatiyakh kibernetiki)* (Moscow: Sovetskoe radio, 1958); Poletaev, "V zashchitu Yuriya," *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* (18 October 1959): 4.

³³² Poletaev, "V zashchitu Yuriya," cited in Seyffert, *Ibid*, 60.

³³³ "O Bloke, kosmose i 'delovom Yuri,'" *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, (18 October 1959): 4, cited in Seyffert, *Ibid*, 61.

By the end of the year, *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* received thousands of responses which broadened the scope of the discussion to include the general state of education in schools, the role of artists in society, the difference between socialism and communism and the lack of meaningful integration between science and art.³³⁴ Reverberating in the Soviet press for years, this heated, though “utterly unsophisticated” (Seyffert), debate articulated the conflicting public reaction to the rapidly spreading new science and “cybertalk.” In fact, although it took a different shape in the academic circles, the problem of how to integrate art and literature with science and technology as well as the question of whether such integration would ever be possible had already begun to preoccupy leading scholars and would soon become an impetus for new developments in the Soviet humanities. As to the opponents of “walking computers,” they found themselves pushed to a corner when most innate human characteristics, such as thinking and play, were successfully claimed by the spreading man-machine analogy, smart automatons and cybernetic euphoria. Yet, although they seemed defeated to the young engineer Poletaev, the “poets” still had one last “safe haven,” one last human quality that no computer or automaton could gain. Frequently employed by a range of discourses—from classical Russian literature to pompous Soviet *newspeak*—the most elusive and powerful Russian signifier for that quality appears, though ironically, even in the heart of Poletaev’s diatribe. There it stands alone next to “the poets” who, in Poletaev’s view, are losing the battle against the “precise, bold, merciless reason” of science and technology.

³³⁴ According to Seyffert’s summary, some letters complained of the “uninspiring” teaching of art in school, the lack of “good new literature” and the remoteness of artists from modern life and from the “spirit of the space age.” See *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* (25 October 1959): 3 and (22 November 1959): 3, cited in Seyffert, *Ibid.*, 61.

That untouchable, vague, evasive yet powerful signifier of the last human quality to remain inaccessible to the “walking computers” was the *Soul (Dusha)*.

CHAPTER 4

The Birth of the Conceptual Image: Kabakov's Works in the Early 1960s

VII. Soul or *Shower*

When Kabakov began his *Shower* drawings in 1962, cybernetics had already been established and institutionalized as a field in USSR, and the debates between poets and scientists fueled various journals and publications. Some of those debates resonated on the pages of *Znanie (Knowledge)* and *Znanie-Sila (Knowledge-Power)*, the two journals that brought together progressive underground artists in the 1960s. As Kabakov mentions in his memoir, Sobolev held the position of artistic director at the publishing house *Znanie* and as such he oversaw the graphic and artistic design of, first, the journal *Knowledge* and, then, the journal *Knowledge-Power*.³³⁵ As an artistic director, Sobolev had the freedom to hire artists of his own choosing to illustrate both magazines, and he determined the aesthetic outlook of particular issues. He also allowed artists to select their own subjects and thus, according to Kabakov, created a “new movement in Soviet illustration.”³³⁶ For that reason, the issues published under Sobolev’s “supervision” show both Sobolev’s vision as well as the stylistic individuality and creative approach of the

³³⁵ See Chapter 2.

³³⁶ Ibid.

artists that illustrated them; e.g., Sooster, Popov, Lavrov, Neizvestnii, Yankilevsky and Grobman. As a whole, those issues also exhibit a much more pronounced affinity towards using emblems, signs and symbols, such as human *heads* to allude to intellectual activity or cybernetic control mechanisms (Fig. 21), *balls* to connote physical activities and intellectual games (Fig. 24), realistic depictions (e.g., a picture of a *fly*) or pictograms (chromosome of *drosophila*) to signify scientific discoveries (Figs. 22, 25 and 26) as well as *construction* elements (e.g., *pipelines/pipes*) to suggest technological advancements and scientific progress (Fig. 23). Shown next to articles discussing cybernetics, genetics or recent developments in machine translation and linguistics, those emblem-symbols actively participated in the larger cultural dialogue. In tune with Kabakov's psychological profile of Sobolev, the visual aesthetic of *Znanie's* symbolic language demonstrates a dual attitude towards the new scientific developments and their impact on all aspects of Soviet life and society. The "new aesthetic movement" generally supported the prevailing *cyberspeak*, treated the anti-cybernetic sentiments and the man-machine analogy with a dose of irony and showed professional appreciation for the high accomplishments in the arts and the humanities.

As Kabakov's memoir confirms, he was certainly closely associated with the *Znanie* circle and its visual aesthetics; however, at the same time, he was not officially participating in it. The name "Kabakov" appears only once among the names of the artists illustrating one of the issues of *Znanie*, however, the initial next to it—"A."—made the connection with the author of the *Shower* uncertain. In 1967, a miniscule humorous drawing, signed "I. Kabakov," indicated more unambiguously Kabakov's

association with *Znanie*, while a color reproduction of one of his paintings—*Ride on a Bicycle*—published in January’s issue of *Znanie-Sila* the same year suggests that his dual stance of “participating while not openly participating” was most probably intentional.

With its semantic openness and visual simplicity, the paired-down style of Kabakov’s early *Shower* drawings (Figs. 12 and 13) plays upon the signature vocabulary of the *Znanie* journals—vocabulary consisting of crudely drawn “emblems-symbols” such as human head, human profile, pointing hand, sphere or globe. The juxtaposition of inanimate technology (shower) and living being (the bather) also evokes the new scientific developments and the heated controversy that they caused in the Soviet society in the beginning of the 1960s. By 1962, the debate has already reached its final stage and battleground—the battle over the human *soul*, that last evanescent, yet, innately human facet which, in the words of Poletaev, had long been ruled “by poets” but “today” is absorbed by the stories of the “precise, bold, merciless reason” of science and technology.³³⁷ In Kabakov’s pictorial treatment, however, the visual story is far from being so clear-cut and decisive as Poletaev would have it. It is true that the vertical dualism of the drawings conveys the separation between animate and inanimate, human and technology, person and shower, as well as it is evident that the frivolous stream of water seems to flee away from this charged environment as if refusing to connect the circle of *communication*, *connection* or *feedback* between the polar opposites. What is much less obvious in Kabakov’s drawings is where the *soul* actually resides or, to put it in the language of semiotics, what its signifier actually refers to. All of the elements in

³³⁷ See Chapter 3.

this disconnected circle can make a claim for it—the *shower* linguistically (as mentioned previously the Russian *dush/a* can refer to both *shower* and *soul* depending on the context), the *water* stylistically (as it is the only dynamic element that seems alive in the drawing) and, lastly, the *bather* (by way of habit and convention since his passivity and detachment recall an *automaton* rather than a person). In the end, with its linguistic and visual ambiguity Kabakov's symbol-emblem pokes fun at both sides involved in the public dispute and at their respective officialized discourses. The fashionable signifiers of the pervasive *cyberspeak*, e.g., *automaton*, *information*, *circuit*, *feedback*, etc., lack a true meaning and seem incapable to deliver on their promises to change and improve the world. Similarly, one of the most evasive and vague symbols of the *newspeak* and Russian culture in general—the *soul*—unfolds as a constantly shifting, elusive and empty signifier that is devoid of any content and meaning. As Kabakov's discussion on the novelty and personal value of the *Shower* in his memoir suggests, he has indeed found his artistic voice and image. That is the voice of the probing, polysemantic and ironically charged conceptual expression and the ambiguity of the image-symbol.

VIII. Drawings and Paintings

Kabakov divides the works he created after the first *Shower* pieces into two separate “groups: drawings and paintings.”³³⁸ The two genre categories, in fact, often overlapped as they used similar images and motifs and, being more versatile, informal and intimate in scale, the drawings often served as a testing ground for new painting strategies and ideas.³³⁹ Most of the drawings that the artist made in the first studio he shared with Sooster have been given away and destroyed.³⁴⁰ However, Kabakov’s memoir contains a short authorial assessment of the subject, style and composition of those early drawings coming into his head “one after the other” while he was sitting at the drawing table:

Eto varianty “Dusha”, no glavnym obrazom kompozitsii, svyazannye s simmetrichnoy geometriey i figurkami lyudey, kak-to uvyazannymi s etoy geometriey, podklyuchennymi k ney. Nekotorye risunki obrazovyvali nebol’shie serii. Po nekotorym ya sdelał neskol’ko nebol’shikh kartin (50/60) na fanere ot yashchikov, kotorye nashel voze masterskoy.³⁴¹

Those [drawings] were variants of the *Shower*, but in terms of their general composition, they had a symmetrical geometry and figures of people which were, in a way, coordinated with this geometry, integrated in it.

³³⁸ *Zapiski*, 16. This “new life” began in the fall of 1962 when Kabakov moved into the first one of the three studios he shared with Ülo Sooster. Noting the “huge amount of works” (“ogromnoe kolichestvo rabot”) and “thousands of drawings” that Sooster had already produced and stored in a pile of boxes and folders, Kabakov admonishes, in contrast, that he spent most of his time in “sitting at the table and making small drawings that, one after the other, came into my head.” For instance, in 1962-63, he produced “a great number” of drawings showing “spheres on a grid,” only few of which have survived. *Ibid.*, 17. For images of two of those drawings see Wallach, *Ilya Kabakov*, 98 and Jackson, *The Experimental Group*, 61, Fig. 27.

³³⁹ Kabakov admits that he produced series of drawings which he subsequently turned into paintings. Speaking about the way he arranged his studio, the artist also reveals that the drawings and the paintings were created on two tables which were positioned one next to the other. *Zapiski*, 16.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Some of the drawings formed series. Some of them I turned into middle-sized paintings (50/60) using the plywood of boxes that I found near the studio.

Despite that the majority of the early drawings are lost and the authorial passage on them consists of only few sentences, a couple of key ideas emerge. Most importantly, Kabakov continued experimenting with the image that would turn into one of his signature idioms—the generic and depersonalized human form—after it transpired in the first *Shower* drawings and came to signify artistic originality, personal style and open symbolic potential. Second, the idiom is now seen as an element of a larger system of representation and organization, or more precisely as a component that is *locked* in the system’s spatial (symmetry, composition) and formal (geometry) relations.³⁴² The propensity to systematization can be seen in the internal progression of the *Shower* series: the pattern of the water, for instance, becomes less spontaneous, more regularly shaped and rather stylized. In the first drawing, the erratic flow of the murky substance is cut off by the frame but, but by the same token, it continues to gush forth in the perpetual and unlimited time/space outside. In the second drawing, the stream is suspended in midair and ends inside but its symmetrical curvaceous body flows freely in and out of the picture. In the latest *Shower* drawing, however, the erratic stream and free flow are substituted with numerical values, mathematical calculations and multiple frames within the frames (Fig. 14). “Water” is still present in the drawing, yet its presence is ambiguous and codified. Enclosed within the smallest frame of the piece, it looks like a

³⁴² Derived from the word for key (klyuch), the Russian equivalent of “plugged in,” “integrated,” or “connected” (“podklyuchennymi”) also carries the nuance of “locked in.”

sample of a liquid substance that is disconnected from the shower nozzle. This iconic and indexical reading of the substance's figural sign, however, is further complicated by the molecular formula of oxygen O₂ written to the right of the sample's middle section. Retroactively, this molecular formula suggests that the figural metonymy sketched on the left can be seen as a stand-in for the molecular formula of water (H₂O).³⁴³ The dangers of the scientific approach become apparent when the viewer decodes the chemical brainchild of this mathematical solution and discovers that the molecular sequence of water and oxygen composes the formula of hydrogen peroxide (2 H₂O₂)—a pale blue liquid, slightly more viscous than water, characterized by bleaching and oxidizing capacity.³⁴⁴ To increase the ominous (and playful) associations, hydrogen peroxide, which has already been produced instead of being in the process of making, hovers framed right next to the head of the bather which appears slightly darker than his body.³⁴⁵ In comparison with the earlier *Shower* drawings dated to 1962, the image of the bather also undergoes transformations. Surrounded by various measuring and framing devices, the man's figure is fully integrated (or locked) into the drawing's composition while his

³⁴³ Representing the ironic and “reflective” I of the artist, the plumbing calculations surrounding the image were a response to the increasing obsession with science and mathematical approaches to cultural phenomena that peaked in Russian society in the early 1960s.

³⁴⁴ Having strong oxidizing properties, hydrogen peroxide is used as a disinfectant, antiseptic, oxidizer and a powerful bleaching agent. With its qualities of a bleaching substance and a weak acid, it supports the drawings' references to the Jewish “enduring anxieties over bodily cleanliness” or Stalin's political retributions *Chistki* (See M. Jackson, *Ibid.*, 41-42). Used as a propellant in rocketry, the *Shower's* hydrogen peroxide could also be an ironic play on Yuri Gagarin's 1961 flight into space—the first human flight to orbit the earth—and, in this capacity, Kabakov's drawing foreshadows his numerous future characters flying into outer space or into the space of the picture.

³⁴⁵ Exothermically, hydrogen peroxide decomposes, disproportionately and spontaneously, into water and oxygen gas [$2 \text{H}_2\text{O}_2 \rightarrow 2 \text{H}_2\text{O} + \text{O}_2$]. However, the reverse formula does not represent the way in which hydrogen peroxide is made as it is produced through the Riedl-Pfleiderer process. See W. T. Hess, *Hydrogen Peroxide*, in *Kirk-Othmer Encyclopedia of Chemical Technology*, 4th edition (New York: Wiley, 1995), Vol.13, 961-995. A literal reading of the scene, would suggest that escaping the *chistka* or ominous retribution (the sign of which flows in the other direction) is on the mind of the bather.

presence more purposefully coincides with the composition's vertical axis. The use of linocut technique comes to further underline the increased stylization, impersonal character and rounded quality of his body and facial features. Reduced to basic depersonalized lines, the linocut bather will remain a consistent motif in all future additions to the *Shower* series. Severing most links with the earlier works "from nature," it moves a step closer to the later "emblem-symbols."³⁴⁶

IX. *Boy and Head with a Sphere*

Next to the drawing table, between 1962 and 1965 Kabakov began creating three "large paintings:" *Hand with a Broken Mirror*, *Head with a Sphere* (Fig. 15) and *Boy* (Fig. 16).³⁴⁷ Conceived in chorus with the drawings that Kabakov saw as "variants of the *Shower*," they express similar concerns related to "symmetrical geometry" and the compositional ways in which "figures of people" are "coordinated with" or "integrated in" this geometry. In addition, the large paintings have a direct iconographic link with the *Shower* series, reducing further the depersonalized male body to its basic outlines, geometric shapes and metonymic components—head, shoulders and hand. Characterized as a "monstrous" painting, *Boy* brings the relation between figure and frame, body and

³⁴⁶ Kabakov paints his last work "from nature," a self-portrait with a ski hat, and completely loses interest in that activity in 1966. *Zapiski*, 15.

³⁴⁷ *Zapiski*, 16. Today, the two latter paintings are dated to 1965. See *Kabakov: Paintings/Gemälde 1957-2008*. Catalogue raisonné, ed. Renate Petzinger and Emilia Kabakov (Bielefeld, Germany: Museum Wiesbaden/Kerber Verlag, 2008; Wallach, *Ilya Kabakov*, 149 and Jackson, *The Experimental Group*, 81. In *Zapiski*, Kabakov states that he began making them in 1962, but recently Ilya and Emilia Kabakov have confirmed that the paintings were painted in 1965. Email correspondence with author, August, 2010.

composition or integration and disintegration to an ironic extreme. The body is condensed down to its most general parts and shapes, and yet, despite the clearly marked diagonals and measurements, it seems too large to fit into the center of the painting.³⁴⁸ Recalling the graphic signs of the third *Shower* drawing, the charts act not only as a meta-comment on the irregularities and the aspirations of the painting, but further reduce its actual size through an echo of minimizing frames within the frames. The impact of overwhelming centrality (which appears even more overwhelming due the fact that it is off-center and too large to contain) evokes two cultural models—Orthodox icons, a connection further supported by the encaustic medium, and the official portraits of Soviet party leaders.³⁴⁹ *Boy* can also be read as an autobiographical mockery of Leonardo’s diagram of ideal human proportions and the artistic tradition of representing the perfect body.³⁵⁰ A more immediate contextual reference even leads to the relationship between the universal macrocosm and the human microcosm in the art of Sooster, Sobolev and Neizvestny.³⁵¹ However, *Boy*’s individual microcosm, as center of all things, is blown out of proportion to such an extent that it threatens to consume the macrocosm of the artwork. The most explicit linguistic sign—the title of the painting—heightens this ironic subtext as the Russian equivalent of *boy* (*mal’chik*) originates in the word *small* (*maly*) and phonetically evokes this meaning.

³⁴⁸ In fact, the head is positioned slightly off-center, moving an inch to the right and breaking the lower rectangular border.

³⁴⁹ Both of these models are mocked by the pink color that alludes to the *Shower*’s beige countenance and its autobiographic idiom.

³⁵⁰ See Wallach, *Ilya Kabakov*, 43-45.

³⁵¹ See Chapter 2.

Head with a Sphere is similarly concerned with the interplay of figure, geometry, composition and language. Yet, it devotes a lesser importance to the autobiographical references and physiognomy of *Boy* and the *Shower*. Instead, *Head with a Sphere* makes a more tangible pun on the emblem-symbols and cosmic metaphors of Kabakov's friends-nonconformists and art's old conventions. The increased comprehension of art as a system of signs; i.e., as a visual language, gains impetus, hand in hand, with a growing proficiency in the use of linguistic means to express the reflexive "I" of the author. Minimizing the self-referential quality of the familiar autobiographic idiom, *Head with a Sphere* substitutes the frontal exposure, cramped space and centralized compositions of *Boy* and the *Shower* with a profile view, a classical sculpted head and a bipartite composition. This shift from looking at oneself to looking at the artistic other (a fellow-artist, a new artistic trend or the classical tradition), forges an array of oppositional binaries between left and right, high and low, animate and inanimate, male and female or foreground and background.³⁵² The dualistic structure combines, among other references, the coded "emblem-symbols" of Sobolev, the microcosm/macrocosm mythology of Sooster and the female/male cosmogony of Yankilevsky and, through them, visual allusions to surrealism, Magritte, classical art and even the heroic hyperbolae of monumental Soviet sculpture. Characteristic of Sooster and Sobolev, the ambivalence of the spatial relations makes it unclear whether the head *appears* enormous because it has been pushed to the extreme foreground or whether it *is*, indeed, of

³⁵² The empty center of the painting is filled with the tension of a curious drama of "not being looked at" and yet "being seen" since the eye level of the head does not meet the blue trajectory of the sphere, while the unconventionally rounded eye ball of the head mimics the shape of the inanimate object.

magnanimous proportions and size and thus presents a hypertrophic microcosm.³⁵³ Similarly dualistic in its syntactic composition, the title comes to heighten the semantic tensions and to underline the ironic component. Thus, the Russian word for “head” (*golova*) signifies, as does its English equivalent, the most intellectual part of the body associated with leading, brain activity, main center and bravery; yet, the Russian noun can also refer to absentmindedness, empty-headedness, mental conundrums and lack of reason or control.³⁵⁴ Used in its Instrumental form, the second noun in the title, “sphere” (*shar*), also has a dual meaning referring simultaneously to the “Earth” (*zemnoy shar* earthly sphere) and, in its diminutive version, to “balloon” (*vozdushny sharik* or, literally, small sphere of air) while evoking phonetically or homophonically the words “comedy” (*sharada*) and “caricature” (*sharzh*).³⁵⁵ As a result, the ambivalent title not only echoes the painting’s two-partite composition, but also heightens its cosmological ambiguity and ironic play on the idea of universal balance.³⁵⁶

³⁵³ This instability recalls the ambiguity that Kabakov saw in Sooster’s work depending on whether the eyes concentrated on the foreground or the background.

³⁵⁴ In Russian, the words “main” (“*golovnoy*”) and “puzzle” (“*golovka*”) as well as the idioms for a “brave person,” e.g., a person with brains (“*chelovek s golovoi*”), “to answer for somebody with one’s life” (“*golovoy ruchat’sya za kogo-libo*”), “to remember something” (“*derzhit v golove chto-libo*”) or “bold spirit” (“*smelaya golova*”) are directly derived from and contain the root “head.” At the same time, “head” is the main component in expressions such as “empty-headed” (“*v golovy nichego ne pridet*”), “to forget about something” (“*chto-libo vyletelo iz golovy*” literally “to slip out of somebody’s mind”), “absent-minded” (“*sovsem bez golovy*”), “self-sufficient” (“*ya sam sebe golova*”), to act “over somebody’s head,” e.g., without somebody’s knowledge (“*deystvovat’ cherez golovu chego-libo*”) and “to lose one’s head” (“*poteryat’ golovu*”).

³⁵⁵ The sphere is a polyvalent symbol alluding to the macrocosm of the earth, the universe or the technical proficiency of the artist able to draw a perfect full sphere. Kabakov’s sphere/balloon also refers to Sooster’s signature image—the egg—as a symbolic unity of micro and macrocosm that contains individual life and recalls the eternal endless circle of the universe. However, the instrumental case accentuates the *Head* as the main image and the *sphere* as an addition—a tool or an accompanying object.

³⁵⁶ Thus, the human microcosm could be blown out of proportion, lost its mind (or in Russian “lost its head”), puzzled or simply pushed close to the surface (the later effect is heightened by the plaster relief of the head). The sphere could be a comically minute macrocosm, a caricature of the universe, a

In his diary, Kabakov's friend Mikhail Grobman recalls that on April 13, 1965 he, Kabakov, Sooster, Juri Rogov and Volodya Fedorov (i.e., the physician Vladimir Fedorov) had a long discussion about "the brain, memory, images, egg and circle, n-metric dimension, etc., etc, etc."³⁵⁷ The previous year, Sobolev had completed a drawing representing his contemplation on the ideas of memory, brain processes, scientific knowledge and visual imagination—*Cybernetic Fantasy* (Fig. 17).³⁵⁸ Combining the cubist technique of Picasso with the visual language of Miro and Klee, he addresses a question particularly pertinent to the cultural and scientific debates of Soviet society at the time of advent of cybernetics in the early 1960s. In addition to promoting the advancement of science and technology, the chief artist of *Knowledge* and, later, *Knowledge-Power*, in the words of Kabakov, had an avid interest in phenomenology, Freudism and psychoanalysis.³⁵⁹ In its fantastic vision, Sobolev's drawing brings together, in one ideally balanced head-universe, the microcosm (human head-brain) and the macrocosm (the small sphere-globe in the jaw of the head), the conscious and the subconscious (or the collective subconscious indicated in the repetition of heads within

mathematical emblem (a full-sphere *sharik*), an airborne balloon or a large object diminished by the distance. To reinforce the latter respect, the painting's composition is vaguely reminiscent of the official poster of Tarkovski's first masterpiece *Ivan's Childhood*. Released in 1962, it earned enthusiastic acclaim in Russia and abroad and won the Golden Lion award at the Venice Film Festival the same year. Kabakov himself has shared on a few occasion his personal resentment to the symbolism and seriousness of Tarkovski's cinematographic mythology.

³⁵⁷ Mikhail Grobman, *Leviathan. Dnevniky 1963-1971 godov* (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2002), 64. In the next sentence, Grobman adds that, on the way home, he and Kabakov ruminated about the "scientific and mystical approach to knowledge, about drinking and so on." Ibid.

³⁵⁸ The drawing was published in Konečný's article that also discusses the art of Sooster and Kabakov. See Dušan Konečný, "Problém Techniky A Mladé Moskevské Experimentující," *Praha-Moskva* 2 (1966): 30

³⁵⁹ See Chapter 2.

the heads), imagination and science, dream and technology, vision and inner vision.³⁶⁰ Devoting a central attention to this “collage”-like drawing, Konečný sees in it “an imaginary work in which the overwhelming cybernetic realism dissipates in a brittle poetic dream.”³⁶¹ The “cybernetic realism” would have not been regarded without a sense of irony on the part of the *Znanie* artist, for whom, as Kabakov’s memoir attests, science can be present in art only in the guise of jokes or intuition.³⁶² Similarly to Kabakov’s *Head with a Sphere*, the key to the drawing’s irony is encoded in its ambivalent title, glancing at which, one begins to wonder whether a human is envisioning a perfect balance of thinking and universe in the n-dimensional cognitive world of *cyborgs* or, vice versa, whether a *cyborg* is charting the complex connection between mental, visual, subconscious and psychological processes in the imperfect head of a human.³⁶³ While the *cyborg* in “cybernetic” is divided between subject or object, “dream” removes each one of those options from the world of reality.

Next to the *cyborg head* by Sobolev, Konečný places a representation of another object-symbol discussed, as Grobman’s diary testifies, by Sooster, Kabakov and their friends on April 13, 1965 and another one of the images with which Kabakov was surrounded while working on *Head with a Sphere*. That is Sooster’s drawing *Egg* dated

³⁶⁰ The heads within the head could refer to the symbols in Freud’s interpretation of dreams, the darker profiles could signify vision versus cognition, while the repetition of images indicates memory.

³⁶¹ See D. Konečný, “Problém Techniky..”, 30

³⁶² See Chapter 2.

³⁶³ Similar ideas convey the massive *cyborg*-like heads painted in the same period by Yankilevski and Brusilovski as well as Bulatov’s 1966 visual metaphor in which thinking and memory are envisioned as an echo of heads within the head of a nightly wonderer. See J. Padrta, “Neue Kunst in Moskau”, 8, 9 and 13; Konečný, “Problém Techniky..”, 35; and E. Bulatov, *Moscow* (London: Parkett Publishers, 1989), 18. According to Konečný, Brusilovsky’s work exposes the “psychological problems of an extreme form of alienation, the destructive intervention of technology in human life.” Ibid.

to 1965 in the same article (Fig. 18).³⁶⁴ Konečný, who paid numerous visits to the Moscow artists and spent a fair amount of time talking to them, defines Sooster as “one of the most original and most mature representatives of the young structural and imaginative painting in Moscow.”³⁶⁵ Although, in Konečný’s view, Sooster’s works appear at first “decorative,” below their “ornaments, spheres, ellipses, ovoids, cylinders, pyramidal and amorphous formations one can discern the imaginary world of proto-forms [archetypes].” Konečný continues:

These proto-forms—always have the breath of live organisms although sometimes they evoke a rock formation or a cobblestone made by a human hand. Sooster’s images require a contemplative attention, despite the fact that they appear at first clear, uncomplicated. The participation of contemplative apperception is deeply embedded in the images, in them the symbolist shapes are interwoven into the complex net of the imaginative narration.³⁶⁶

What Kabakov perceived as a “structural instability” or “optical accommodation” in Sooster similar to the “intellectual accommodation” in Sobolev, in Konečný’s article becomes an image charged with hidden complexity. What Kabakov defined as “emblem-symbols,” Konečný sees as archaic prototype-forms connected into an imaginative narrative. Both Kabakov and Konečný, however, interpret the structural symbolism (and

³⁶⁴ Konečný, “Problém Techniky...,” 29. In fact, Sooster painted various versions of the same symbol in 1963, 1964 and later. In Konečný’s article, Sooster’s egg appears at the end of the page that precedes the page that is headed by the work of Sobolev. According to the Russian art historian Yuri Gerchuk, the egg is “the ideal form and favorite symbol of Sooster” and “a capsule of the life, proto-embryo of the Universe-to-be (prazarodysh eshche ne voznikshey Vselennoy).” The egg’s “porous, rough surface resembles a weathered rock or a layered shell,” while its layered center, as a Russian *matryoshka*, contains a row of eggs “nested within each other.” See Yuri Gerchuk, “Drugaya realnost Ůlo Soostera” in *Iskustvo* 6 (2004)

³⁶⁵ Konečný, “Problém Techniky...,” 29. The structural quality, in Konečný’s view, is enhanced by the complex texture of Sooster’s painting, resulting by the fact that the artist was adding resin to oil paint. On Konečný’s visits to Russia and his communication with Russian artists see Grobman, *Leviathan*, 59, 133, 229-32, 254, 277 and 389.

³⁶⁶ Konečný, “Problém Techniky..,” 29-30.

unstable structures) of the Estonian artist in a similar way—i.e., Sooster’s archetypes simultaneously recall natural forms and man-made formations and, therefore, unite the human microcosm and the universal macrocosm. Sooster’s *Egg*, for instance, alludes to a variety of oval, feminine and symbolic proto-forms: from a rock, dune or hill to the naked belly of a pregnant woman.³⁶⁷ Kabakov’s sphere combines Sooster’s “structural instability” and “optical accommodation” with Sobolev’s ironic take and “intellectual accommodation,” adding to them the artistic conventionality, tactile matter and heightened referential quality of the realistically depicted tridimensional object. Thus, in the context of an ambivalent pictorial situation in which Kabakov’s plastered *sphere* simultaneously hovers in the bright sky/ether/space and rests on a blue thread/line/horizon it recalls not only Sobolev’s sphere and Sooster’s egg but also the referential objects of Pop Art and Russian avant-garde’s visual language. Kabakov’s familiarity with the latter two movements in the early 1960s is a contentious subject because, in the artist’s eyes, it translates into interpreting his works as influenced by such movements. Furthermore, Kabakov maintains that even when he became introduced to Malevich’s work and the avant-garde of the 1920s, which according to his personal testimony happened in the 1970s, this art was already dead for him. Historical accounts and recent research have suggested that he probably visited Costakis’ collection, as early as, 1962 and perhaps saw some of the avant-garde exhibits at the Mayakovski museum in

³⁶⁷ The latter association is reinforced by the Russian title which refers simultaneously to egg (*yaytso*) and ovum (*yaytse*).

the early 1960s.³⁶⁸ Mikhail Grobman also remembers in his diary entry for October 30, 1964—the first time he mentions Kabakov in his book—that on the same day he and “Ilya [Kabakov]... talked about Pop Art and *ostranenie*” while Kabakov was pointing to his new works in the studio he had just rented with Ülo Sooster.³⁶⁹ Bringing a keen insight into the aesthetics of Pop Art, the Russian term coined by Victor Shklovsky *ostranenie* (“defamiliarization”) provides another key into Kabakov’s meta-referentiality.³⁷⁰ Used by Russian formalism to distinguish “poetic language” from “practical language” or the “ordinary speech” of prose, *ostranenie* alludes to the ways in which art turns familiar objects into strange and unfamiliar entities.³⁷¹ Thus, art enhances the perception of the familiar and makes its discernment less automatic. The process was also interpreted in psychological terms, because, according to Shklovsky, it prevented the “over-automatization” of individuals which causes them to function as though they “followed a formula.” Similarly to Pop Art, Kabakov’s *sphere* or *balloon* depicts a

³⁶⁸ George Costakis was born in Russia of affluent Greek parents and worked at the Greek and the Canadian Embassies in Moscow. In 1946, he discovered by chance a number of constructivist paintings left in a Moscow studio and began searching for and collecting other examples of Russian constructivist art. Thus, he was able to preserve many works that would have been otherwise lost for the world, and his collection served as a historical link between the first and the second Russian avant-gardes.

³⁶⁹ “Ilya pokazal novye raboty, my govorili s nim o Pop Arte i ostranenii.” This happened in the studio located across the street from Mayakovski’s museum. Grobman, *Leviathan*, 34.

³⁷⁰ Shklovsky coined the term in 1917 in his article *Iskusstvo kak priem* (*Art as Device/Technique*) published in *Sborniki*, II (1917) and translated in English as “Art as Technique.” See Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique” in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, eds. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reiss. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Publishing, 1965), 3-24. In his essay, Shklovsky states that when “we see an object several times, we begin to recognize it. The object is in front of us and we know about it, but we do not see it.” Art “removes objects from the automatism of perception in several ways.” Tolstoy, for example, “makes the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object” but by describing an “object as if he were seeing it for the first time, an event as if it were happening for the first time. In describing something, he avoids the accepted names of its parts and instead names corresponding parts of other objects...” Ibid., 13.

³⁷¹ Initially, Shklovsky invented the term as a means to “distinguish poetic from practical language on the basis of the former’s perceptibility.” See Lawrence Crawford, “Victor Shklovskij: Différance in Defamiliarization.” *Comparative Literature* 36 (1984): 209.

common object and makes it *unfamiliar* by placing it in a new artistic context. The ironic wink to formalism, however, is hidden in the fact that the common object is *defamiliarized* twice—once by being used in the context of art, and a second time, quite literally, by entering a strange and semantically unstable environment.³⁷² At the same time, Kabakov’s “sphere” (*shar*) could be defamiliarizing any of the constructivist abstract spherical images in the avant-garde sculptures and paintings in Costakis’ collection. In this case, the process acquires an additional meta-layer since the constructivists had defamiliarized the prosaic sphere once to turn it into an abstract indication of flight into space or a symbol of technical prowess or freedom. Kabakov’s painting would defamiliarize (or rather refamiliarize) the symbol again bringing it back to the blue horizon of the earth, to the prosaic referentiality of the sign and the everyday, though ambivalent, language. As if to make a visual pun on the psychological aspect of *ostranenie*, the sphere is physically distanced from the head which, depicted in profile, is distanced from both the viewer and the autobiographical idiom of *Boy* and the *Shower*. The artist has arrived at the picture that is simultaneously part of him and remains at a distance as a separate, independent entity. As such, the image can now participate in the dialogue with its author, evoking various culturological and psychological associations.

X. The Fragment, the Flight and the Body: Cybernetics or Fiction

³⁷² Suspended in mid-air and touching the blue line, the object seems simultaneously flying and grounded, connected to and disconnected from the *head* and equally tangible and illogical. It may be or may not be a balloon or it may be or may not be an object at all, just a vision springing out of the imagination of the head and disappearing into the sky of the painting.

In parallel with its growing semantic ambivalence, the fragmented human idiom undergoes another important transition—it becomes liberated from the symmetrical compositional structure. As mentioned previously *Zapiski* defined the “symmetrical composition” and the “figures of people... coordinated with this geometry, integrated in it” as a common characteristic of the early drawings. In fact, if we look at the earliest surviving drawings and consider the language that Kabakov uses to describe them we would see that these figures—both spheres and body parts—are not only “coordinated with” but rather locked or trapped in the multiple grids and frames of the painted structure. After the *Shower* and *Spheres in a Grid* (“sharikami na setke”)—the two earliest Kabakov’s series that most fully demonstrated the interdependence of figure and composition—the artist began another set of drawings that *Zapiski* describes as “series with flying body parts” (“seriya s letayushchimi chastyami tela”).³⁷³ A good reproduction of one of these drawings—perhaps the only surviving example—can be seen in a 1969 article by Dušan Konečný (Fig. 19).³⁷⁴ A system of concentric, radiating and crossing lines marks and reinforces the structure of the composition. However, despite that the complex network of lines ties each body part to the hills of the landscape and perhaps even ironically measures the figures’ velocity and size, the idea of flying away or freeing oneself from the bounds of the earth (and from its measuring system) dominates the upper half of Kabakov’s binary composition. The tension between high and low, astral and terrestrial, dynamic and static is concentrated in this intermediary

³⁷³ *Zapiski*, 17-18.

³⁷⁴ Dušan Konečný, “Ilja Kabakov,” in *Výtvarné umění* 1 (1969): 27-33.

linear middle that seems simultaneously geometrically precise and pseudo-scientific. Like *Boy* and *Head with a Sphere*, the drawing of the flying body parts makes an ironic comment on the system of rationalism and Leonardo's man as a measure of all things. Similarly to the contemporaneous 1964 *Shower*, the flight drawing also alludes to Sobolev's idea that science can exist in art only as "intuition or joke" and refers to cybernetics. In 1965, after the same conversation in which Kabakov, Rogov and Grobman discussed "the brain, memory, images, the egg and circle, n-metric dimension and so on, and so on" Kabakov would share with Grobman that he "felt intimidated by such sciences as cybernetics..."³⁷⁵ In fact, when examined in relation to the "circular casual" relationship of the closed circuit systems studied by cybernetics, the drawing's inner tension seems playful rather than timid. In the closed signal loop of cybernetics, the relationship between the action in the system and the environment is reciprocal—the action leads to a change in the environment which manifests this change back to the system via information or feedback. As a result, the system changes its behavior and adapts to the new conditions. Although Kabakov's drawing plays on the idea of a closed circuit with its semicircular curves and concentric radii, the relationship between the flight of the fragmented body and the static environment is, in fact, an entwined one-way affair with two contradictory corollaries.³⁷⁶ Either the disembodied extremities are unable to break free and cause a sizable physical action, or the curvaceous horizon, upon receiving the chaotic signals of the limbs, converts their velocity into geometrical values,

³⁷⁵ Literally, the artist "felt shyness in front of such sciences as cybernetics..." ("Ilya skazal, chto on ispytyvaet robost' pered takimi naukami, kak kibernetika...") Grobman, *Leviathan*, 64.

³⁷⁶ The closed circuit is typically represented as a clockwise or counterclockwise transmission of energy or information along a circle that is often encoded as a two-way arrow.

but does not change and does not transmit any informational feedback. At any rate, the very idea of a free flight, mutual reciprocity, system change and universal balance becomes undermined by the illogical appearance of mathematical logic and the non-scientific depiction of science, as they fill the open space between the absurdity of the human flight and the serenity of the bare macrocosm.

In 1964, in the same conversation in which Kabakov shared with Grobman his “shyness” when it came to “sciences such as cybernetics,” he added next to cybernetics its linguistic branch—“mathematical linguistics.”³⁷⁷ Using mathematical formulas, complex calculations and numerous references to Western publications, mathematical linguistics was indeed designed to instill “shyness” and intimidation in the mind of the uninitiated. As in other contemporaneous scientific branches, the goal of mathematical linguistics was to prove that such complex societal phenomena as human language can be reduced to and studied as mathematical processes. In contrast to “traditional descriptive grammars,” which “register the structure of the most standard and commonly used phrases of language” but are not capable of “generating” them, structural linguistics takes on the ultimate challenge—to *automatically* recreate or replicate the mystery of human language:

³⁷⁷ “Ilya said that he felt shyness when it came to such sciences as cybernetics or mathematical linguistics” (“Ilya skazal, chto on ispytyvaet robost’ pered takimi naukami, kak kibernetika ili matematicheskaya lingvistika.”) Grobman, *Leviathan*, 64. The interdependence of cybernetics and mathematical linguistics is well explained in the 1962 book of V. I. Sviderskii on the subject: “The research of structural linguistics—an abstract theoretical discipline dedicated to constructing of formal models of language—is widely used in cybernetics. As a matter of fact, without the formal modeling of the structure of language it would be impossible to convert automatically the language information and without such conversion the processes of management as the main subject of cybernetics would be also impossible... The main contribution of structural linguistic is the investigation of the general structure of language.” Sviderskii, *O dialectike elementov i structurey* (Moscow, 1962), 264.

Sami po sebe traditsionnye grammatiki ne pozvolyayut porozhdat' avtomaticheski frazy yazyka. Formalizatsiya traditsionnykh grammatik privodit k razlichnym avtomaticheskym sposobam porozhdeniya i analiza predlozheniy i, v chasnosti, privodit k matematicheskomu ponyatiyu porozhdayushchey grammatiki kak ischisleniya.³⁷⁸

The traditional grammars in themselves are not capable of generating automatically phrases of language. The formalization of traditional grammars will lead to various automatic means of generating and analyzing sentences and, in particular, it will lead to mathematical understanding of generative grammar as calculation.

In context of such scientific optimism which partially would reach its objective in the encoded languages of computer programs, Kabakov's drawing captures the general aspiration of mathematical linguistics, if not its complex diagrams and computations. In the process, the image turns into visual puns some of the fundamental principles of structural linguistics employed in early, more computational and descriptive, writings on mathematical logic and in later, more abstract and theoretical, analyses of structural linguistics—the principles of “*isomorphism* of objective structures,” the notion of “class

³⁷⁸ E. D. Stotskiy, “Obobshchennye grammatiki i ikh svoistva” (“Generalized Grammars and Their Characteristics”) in Bochvara and Shreider, eds., *Isledovaniya no matematicheskoy lingvistike, matematicheskoy logike i informatsionnym yazykam (Investigations in Mathematical Linguistics, Mathematical Logic and Informational Languages)* (Moscow: Nauka, 1972), 7. Although Stoitsii's article was written in 1969; i.e., after Kabakov's drawing, it summarizes the ambitions of the early proponents of mathematical linguistics and their conviction that science would lead to the invention of artificial languages generated by machines and automatic systems. In this, mathematical linguistics aspired to replace or go beyond the generative grammar of Chomski which reached the Soviet scientific circles through Russian translations published in the cybernetic periodical *Kiberneticheskii sbornik* in 1962, 1965 and 1966. Describing language as “a great number of phrases,” Chomski's generative grammar, according to Stotskiy, allows the generation of grammatically correct phrases. Yet, in Stotskiy's view, it is incapable of formalizing the process of speech and unable to understand or translate texts from one language to another since it is applicable only to the grammatically correct phrases that are produced in correlation with a “programmatic conclusion” located in the mind of the speaker or in the memory of the machine. In other words, the “program” is not constant; it changes depending on the situation or the context of the speech act, and it is defined by the semantics of the phrases. In contrast, mathematical linguistics concentrates on the grammatical structure of the phrases and considers their semantics only in so far as it is manifested in formal grammatical terms. *Ibid.*, 7-8.

as a whole” and the opposition of “system versus text.”³⁷⁹ The rule of *isomorphism* of objective structures characterizes both structural linguistics and cybernetics, while the latter as a discipline was generated by this principle.³⁸⁰ *Isomorphism* ensured the compatibility between systems and made possible the essential processes of communication, feedback, change and control.³⁸¹ A firm believer in *isomorphism* of objective structures, Wiener developed various methods of enhancing the informational feedback of systems, such as the *Wiener filter* produced in the 1940s and published in 1949, in order to reduce the amount of *noise* present in a signal and thus to improve the communication.

The principle of “system versus text,” as defined by Evdoshenko, unites an even greater number of theories related to cybernetics, mathematical linguistics and

³⁷⁹ Though their definitions and descriptions vary, these general rules were imbedded in any serious application of mathematical/structural linguistics even when they were not named explicitly.

³⁸⁰ See A. Evdoshenko, *Problema structure yazyka (Problems of the Structure of Language)* (Kishinev, 1967), 7. An earlier shorter version of Evdoshenko’s text was published in *Kurs de gramatike istorike a limbii moldovenesht’* in Kishinev in 1964. Devoting attention to all three branches—mathematical logic/linguistics, cybernetics and structuralism—this study of language defines in lay terms the basic postulates of all these disciplines. In regard to the isomorphic principle, Evdoshenko states “As N. Wiener had noted, the main thought that served as the beginning stage in the establishing the basis of cybernetics was the hypothesis of isomorphism of the calculative and problem-solving mechanisms, the processes of the neurological system, the sphere of social processes and so on.” *Ibid.*, 7-8. Evdoshenko’s passage is referring to Norbert Wiener and the Russian translation of his programmatic study *Kibernetika ili upravlenie i svyaz v zhitvotnom i mashine (Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine)* published in 1948 and translated in Russian in 1958. See Graham, *Science, Philosophy, and Human Behavior*, 280. Wiener stirred additional interest in cybernetics during his visit to Russia in 1960. Evdoshenko traces the isomorphic principle back to Wiener’s teacher Bertran Russell and his idea of *identical structures* (“tozhdestvenosti struktur”) which played “a huge role in resolving a great number of problems.” Evdoshenko bases his assessment on a passage from Russell’s book *Chelovecheskoe poznanie. Ego sfera i granitsy (Human Consciousness. Its Sphere and Boundaries)* quoted in Sviderskii’s *O dialektike elementov i struktury (On the Dialectic of Elements and Structures)* (Moscow, 1962), 119, 146-7, 243-44.

³⁸¹ Evdoshenko illustrates the importance of the principle through the mathematical theory of resonance (“teoriya kolebaniy”): a general theory enabled by the *isomorphism* of mechanical, acoustic, electromagnetic and other resonances. Evdoshenko, *Problema structure yazyka*, 8.

structuralism.³⁸² In his generalized overview of this postulate, the author traces it back to a number of key stages in the development of structural linguistics, all united under the umbrella of the principle of philosophical dialectics:

The factors that facilitate the study of language, in the most general sense, have been discovered, consciously or subconsciously, in response to the main principle of dialectics, according to which, the whole is divided into parts for the purpose of studying its contradictory aspects. The first most significant partition of the unity of language is—language (*langue*) and speech (*parole*), or, what is essentially the same—of form and substance.³⁸³

Form, in itself, splits into signified (plane of meaning) and signifier (plane of expression). Language also manifests itself as text (process), on the one hand, and system, on the other. Text becomes a subject of syntagmatic analysis, while the system—[a subject] of paradigmatic [analysis]. In addition to that, language can be examined in synchronic and diachronic ways. Indebted to F. de Saussure, all of these aspects are sides of the same whole and comprise the basis of structural linguistics.³⁸⁴

In this general and synthesized overview of structural linguistics, Evdoshenko makes implicit and explicit references to a range of key philosophical and linguistic

³⁸² The importance of this principle is also rooted in the centrality of the system of language for the study of all other structures. Characterized subsequently as linguistic fascism by post-structuralist scholar, the centrality of language, in Evdoshenko's view, is well argued by Karl Bühler, according to whom, simple systems can be developed on the basis of more complex ones, such as language, while the opposite process would be illogical. See Bühler, *Das Strukturmodell der Sprache* translated in Russian as "Strukturная модель языка" in Zvegintsev, *Istoriya yazykoznaniya XIX i XX veka v ocherkah I izvlecheniyakh*, chast' II, (Moscow, 1960), 36. Evdoshenko connects the idea of centrality of language with the general grammar of Hjelmslev, according to which, language holds a "key position in human knowledge." See Hjelmslev, *Principles de grammaire générale* (Copenhagen, 1928). Russian translations of Hjelmslev's writings on the method of structural analysis in linguistics and on the relationship of language and speech were published in the same volume of Zvegintsev's book, while Hjelmslev's *Prolegomena to the Theory of Language* and the essay "Can We Say that the Semantics of Words Form a Structure?" appear in Russian in the periodical *Novoe v lingvistike* (*New in Linguistics*) in 1960 and 1962. Admitting that *Prolegomena* presents the desirable as a reality, Evdoshenko devotes a special attention to the Hjelmslev's idea of the key role of language in human knowledge: "The semiotic structure serves as a model with which all scientific subjects can be examined." *Prolegomena* quoted in Evdoshenko, *Problema structure yazyka*, 9.

³⁸³ My translation preserves the original syntax of Evdoshenko's sentence, but in the author's intention "substance" corresponds to "language" and "form"—to "speech." Ibid., 10-11.

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

theories—from Hegel’s dialectics and Marx’ dialectical materialism, through the groundbreaking studies of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson, to, what Soviet linguistics had disapprovingly deemed as, “American descriptivism.”³⁸⁵ Such an amalgamation of historical opinions was not uncommon in Soviet literature, and, as a result, even if the authors did not specify the original source of a postulate or the details of a theory, the general public was familiar with the theory’s thrust and ideas.³⁸⁶ In a few sentences, the Russian author summarizes the key contributions of Ferdinand de Saussure whose influential treatise *Cours de linguistique générale* (1915) formed the basis of 20th c. linguistics.³⁸⁷ Evdoshenko begins with Saussure’s main concept—the notion of language as a sign system or structure which ought to be studied by approaching the structure’s individual components—however he appropriately translates the concept into the binary paradigm of dialectical materialism, stripping it of the most contentious standpoints.³⁸⁸ The passage continues with Saussure’s distinction between *langue*—

³⁸⁵ Later in the book, he adds that American descriptivists, such as Chomsky or Trager, concentrate on the text, the syntagmatic axis and the plane of expression. The author also quotes Revsin, according to whom, the American school “does not acknowledge at all the place of content.” See I. Revsin, “Editorial” in Volotskaya, Moloshnaya and Nikolaeva, *Opyt opisaniya ruskogo yazyka v ego pismennoy forme* (Moscow, 1964).

³⁸⁶ Besides reflecting real commonalities and trends and having a popular appeal, the Soviet theoretical amalgamation had ideological reasons. The linking of an argument to the all-encompassing umbrella of dialectical materialism ensured its political correctness, while juxtaposing it to the “formalism” of the West made innovations appear less extreme and ideologically appropriate. In other words, even if the separation of form and content or the attention to the formal characteristics of the text evoked the criticism of conservative circles, such criticism could have been easily redirected to the real problem—the extreme formalism of Western descriptive linguistics. The same strategy allows even unfitting scholars such as Saussure to be seen as “subconsciously” applying Marxist dialectics.

³⁸⁷ The book was translated into Russian as *Kurs obshchey lingvistiki* in 1933 and became part of common knowledge with the rise of mathematical and structural linguistics.

³⁸⁸ Thus, Saussure’s postulate that the individual components of the system can be differentiated only in relation to each other and understood in relation to the system as a whole becomes reduced to a dialectical procedure which divides the whole into parts “for the purpose of studying its contradictory aspects.” The subsequent part of Saussure’s argument that the individual components of the system can be understood

language as a system (e.g., Russian or English)—and the way in which it functions; i.e., *parole* referring to speech, utterance and the particular use of the individual units of language. Evdoshenko then moves to the structure of Saussure’s linguistic sign comprised of form (signifier) and meaning (signified). Next, he evokes the differentiation between language as an abstract set of rules (system) and the language’s realization (text). Lastly, the passage describes the two aspects of language study—*diachronic* denoting the development of language in “historical time” and *synchronic* examining language as a system at any given moment of its development; i.e., in “actual time.”³⁸⁹ In the course of his overview of Saussure, the author alludes to the structuralist theory of Roman Jakobson and the study of the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes.

Originating in Hjelmslev’s *Prolegomena*, the third structuralist principle evoked by Kabakov’s drawing, “class as a whole,” belongs to the axis that Hjelmslev and Evdoshenko associate with the system, paradigmatics and content.³⁹⁰ “Class as a whole” denotes groups of linguistic objects united by a semantic characteristic or a grammatical category—e.g., gender or person (first, second, etc.). In mathematical linguistics, the “tree” of this “class” appears as a pyramid composed of concentric lines radiating

only in relation to each other and the system as a whole *not* to the external reality is left out of Evdoshenko’s passage as it puts into question the important Marxist-Leninist dogma of culture and language as reflections of reality.

³⁸⁹ Evdoshenko, *Problema struktury yazyka*, 10. Using Hjelmslev’s definition of text as “syntagmatics the endless chain of which manifests itself in each material,” Evdoshenko elaborates on B. Uspenskiy’s equation of the relation system-text with the relation langue-parole and adds to them the relation substance-form, plane of content and plane of expression. *Ibid.*, 12. See Boris Uspenski, *Nekotorye voprosy strukturnoy tipologii* (Moscow, 1963), expanded and published as B. Uspenski, *Strukturnaya tipologiya yazykov* (Moscow, 1965).

³⁹⁰ Evdoshenko sees those terms as synonymous in Hjelmslev. Evdoshenko, *Problema struktury yazyka*, 11. Hjelmslev divides the linguistic notion of “class” into “class as a whole,” allowing “virtual analysis;” i.e., analysis of linguistic potentiality and “class as assembly” that refers to individual analysis.

downward from the pyramid's center.³⁹¹ In the light of Russian mathematical and structural linguistics gaining a strong momentum in 1964, Kabakov's dualistic juxtaposition of high—low, sky—earth, fractured body—geometric composition acquires an additional semantic dimension. Like structuralist writing, the drawing creates a binary opposition between the syntagmatic axis of text/process (form) taking a plunge above versus the paradigmatic axis of the system (content) below trying to replicate the plunge through geometric figures and abstract linear compositions. Whether the spatial dichotomy would achieve the balanced synthesis of philosophical dialectics depends entirely on the sophistication of the system below and its ability to decipher, analyze and encode the illogical logic of the disembodied human action. Absurd and unpredictable, the flight of the fractured extremities itself poses a number of challenges to the mathematics of the paradigmatic approaches. First, it puts a hand next to a hand and a foot next to a foot, breaking thus the primary postulate of Jakobson's axis of syntagmatics.³⁹² Then, as soon as the viewer discovers that the two hands and two feet stand for (or rather, fly for) a person as literal metonymies of a human body, the drawing depicts next to these two pairs an extra (third) right hand to cancel any easy readings and

³⁹¹ For example see Stotskiy's theorems 15 and 16: "There are non-contextual grammars with endless index." Lemma 5 provides a diagram of such a "class"—a tree "D" forming a pyramid the top of which is marked with the letter "O"—and an unlimited number of radii "branches" (1, 2...K) extending downwards from the top "O" to the bottom of the pyramid. That tree is then replicated into an unlimited number of other "trees" (O1, O2, O3...OK-1) with their own unlimited number of "branches" (1, 2, 3... K-1, K). See E. D. Stotskiy, "Obobshchennye grammatiki i ikh svoistva," 21.

³⁹² In order to compose a meaningful syntagma, the elements of the horizontal register have to be differentiated and differential; i.e., to signify through their difference—e.g., syllabi are composed of different sound or phonemes, sentences—of different words, texts—of different sentences. Sequences of syntagmas made of the same elements would make communication impossible. Kabakov's visual syntax not only features a hand next to a hand, but it also conveys the possibility that all three hands depicted on the drawing are, in fact, the right hand/hands (or plaster casts of hand/s) of a person or persons.

associations. So, if the viewer is intentionally confused and left semantically disoriented, what is science to do with such an impossible riddle of most erratic human behavior? Judging by the compound construction of crossing lines, concentric radii, tilted pyramids and inverted cones/rhomboids/semi-curves, linguistic science takes on the challenge full force to create a masterful paradigm-metaphor of the body's irrational trajectory of airborne disarticulation. Tilted in the opposite direction, the two "pyramids/tries" O1 and O2 can be read each as a "class as a whole" corresponding either to the hand flying forward or to the foot turned backward. The jagged, entangled and somewhat chaotic lines seem to successfully decode the syntactic and semantic esotery of the human form before transliterating its dislocated flight into the pyramid that leans more forcefully forward. In this mid-point (O1) of, what appears to be, the center of the dialectical composition, the philosophical balance of sky and earth, poetry and science or *liriki* and *phisiki* seems almost achieved or, at least, virtually attainable.³⁹³

The conceptual instability of the drawing's spatial dialectics becomes apparent when one considers the *metaphor* of the *metonymy* or the *content* of the *form*; i.e., the semantic dimension of the disembodied figural sequence. The illogical sentence of severed feet and hands carries a wide number of linguistic connotations: from loosing/gaining ground, associated with one's legs, through being/not being in control, connected with one's hands, to physical balance/imbalance depending on one's hand-leg coordination. For instance, not to "stand on one's feet" ("na nogakh ne stoit," "nogi ne

³⁹³ When one looks carefully, it becomes clear that the apex of pyramid O1 falls below and to the right of the actual center of the drawing in a way that may also recall geometric renditions of depth and linear perspective.

derzhat”) in Russian indicates to be weak, tired or drunk, while to tell someone “Legs in hands!” (“Nogi v ruki!”) means to cause them to run away.³⁹⁴ The idea of instability evoked by the severed legs is combined with a hint of a threatening cause of action. Thus, the imperative “No hands!” [“(Tol’ko) Bez Ruk!”] denotes an appeal to avoid aggressive physical acts; “(not) to take something in one’s hands” [“(ne) берет’ chto-libo v svoi ruki”] connotes (not) being in control while to “remove yourself with hands and legs from something” [“rukami i nogami otbivat’sya ot chego-libo”] signifies “to absolutely refuse to do something.”³⁹⁵ The vast range of potential scenarios suggested by the disjointed feet next to the severed hands; e.g., running away from a physical threat or not controlling oneself due to being drunk, becomes even more complicated when one considers the whole composition.³⁹⁶ Thus, to be “with your legs up” (“vverh nogami”) means to be, physically or conceptually, off beam; i.e., “upside down,” while “to tie your hands and feet” (“svyazat’ sebya po rukam i nogam”) suggests to be unable to act or think. In the end, the carnivalesque anecdote does not provide a visual key to the enigma of the mysterious human condition: does science “tie up one’s hands and feet,” does knowledge (or drunkenness) set one’s mind free or is mathematics unable to comprehend the illogical aspects of human nature? After all, the almighty Soviet science and

³⁹⁴ Similarly, to have “one leg here one leg there” (“odna noga zdes’, drugaya tam”) means to make somebody escape.

³⁹⁵ Accordingly, to “give freedom to your hands” (“dat’ volyu rukami”) means to start beating somebody; to “have one’s hand in something” (“prilozhit’ ruku v chemu-libo”) indicates to participate in some suspicious deal while “to tell something to somebody under one’s hand” (“govorit’ chto-libo komu-libo pod ruku”) signifies making obstructing remarks. The Russian idiom “brat’ sebya v ruki” (“to take yourself in your hands”) corresponds to the English “to pull oneself together.”

³⁹⁶ In the same conversation, right after discussing the “brain, memory, images, egg and circle, n-metric dimension, etc.” and right before Kabakov shared his “shyness” in regard to mathematical linguistics and cybernetics,” he and Grobman talked “about the scientific and mystical approach to knowledge, about drunkenness and so on.” Grobman, *Leviathan*, 64.

Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, a major subject of official art, had just sent Yuri Gagarin—the first man into space—to orbit the earth two years prior to the date of Kabakov’s drawing. Floating horizontally, Kabakov’s sequence of conjoined and disjointed body parts, however, does not seem to glorify this unprecedented technical accomplishment.

Another key to the drawing’s non-dialectical dialectics could be found in the rise of a new and poignantly dynamic development on the artistic horizon of Moscow’s underground in the early 1960s. That was the kinetic group *Dvizheniye* (Movement) founded in 1962-1964 by Lev Nusberg and a few young artists, mostly students at the art school affiliated with the Surikov Institute in Moscow.³⁹⁷ The artists shared interest in geometric forms and employed kinetic constructions to represent motion and infinity which they saw as the essence of human experience. The aesthetic credo of the group, described in a series of treatises and manifestos, rested on three main principles—movement, synthesis and symmetry:

Underlying the activities of the kinetists are three basic principles. The first of these is movement...: the movement of constructions, the movement of human bodies and their shadows; written texts, music; the ideas of authors of grandiose spectacles, sending color music up into the clouds and seeking for a permanent equilibrium of all the constituent elements in a kinetic representation. The second

³⁹⁷ According to Vyacheslav Koleychuk—an architect, theoretician and artist who was part of the group—the members of *Dvizheniye* “made their first attempts to unite on the basis of their common interests in art” in 1962. The name of the group appeared in 1964. Koleychuk connects the emergence of the alliance with the “thaw” of the 1960s which led to an “urgent creative atmosphere that encouraged the exchange of information among various spheres and led to the destruction of boundaries between traditional art forms.” As the author testifies, “It was a time in which such matters as physics, lyrical poetry, cybernetics and communities of the future influenced artists.” Initially, the members of *Dvizheniye* were: L. Nusberg, F. Infante, A. Krivchikov, V. Akulinin, V. Shcherbakov, R. Zanevskaya, M. Dorokhov and G. Bitt. In 1966, the group split, and the new *Dvizheniye* included: Nusberg, Infante, Kuznetsov, Buterlin, Koleychuk, Zanevskaya, Orlova, Glinchikov, Muraveva, Bitt, Dubovskaya and Stepanov. The group disintegrated in 1974 when its “ideologist” Nusberg moved to the US. See Koleychuk, “The *Dvizheniye* Group: Toward a Synthetic Kinetic Art,” *Leonardo* 27, no. 5 (1994): 433-36.

of these principles is synthesis, the synthesis of all materials, all aesthetic and technical means... And lastly, [there] comes symmetry-balance, as a principle for the production of a work of art and its internal structure, with all the separate parts and elements creating the inner, organic, harmonious structure of what constitutes a single whole, even though it is compounded of the most widely diverse component parts.³⁹⁸

In their general philosophical sense, none of the three principle propositions featured new discoveries in the early 1960s. Movement (typically seen as evolution), synthesis (as a resolution of the tension between thesis and antithesis) and balance (as a dialectical unity of opposites) was an essential part of dialectical materialism in its primary forte of a reworked Hegelian dialectics. However, upon the foundation of old philosophical ideas, *Dvizheniye* developed a new approach to the aesthetic image and its composition.

Amongst us are artists and engineers, musicians and psychologists, mimes and architects and technicians. We seek new means of artistic expression (whilst at the same time, of course, preserving and using the old, so-called "classical" ones), new symbols capable of conveying a profounder reflection of the philosophy of modern man who has penetrated the mysteries of the micro- and the macro-universe, and new ways of solving the artistic problem of urban spaces.³⁹⁹

³⁹⁸ See "Russian 'Movement' Group," *CMeHa*, no. 1 (January, 1968); reprinted in *Leonardo* 1, no. 3 (July, 1968): 319. Nusberg wrote a similar treatise that is quoted in Koleychuk's article and, according to the same article, remains "located in the author's personal archives." In this treatise, the "ideologist of the group" elaborated on the three principles: "Movement is the main principle for us! By this word I mean change, transference, mutual penetration, development, struggle, condition, etc. In other words, it is the condition of all that lives, fights and moves (of course, not in a biological but in an aesthetic sense)." In regard to symmetry, Nusberg adds: "By 'symmetry,' I mean balance and the mutual dependence of the separate parts of a whole. Everything that is material, internally correct and organic is symmetrical. This is the idea of natural (cosmic) harmony; this is the world of necessity." See Koleychuk, "The Dvizheniye Group," 433-34 and 436, n. 2.

³⁹⁹ A "declaration" made in one of the group's earlier exhibitions. Quoted in "Russian 'Movement' Group," *CMeHa*, no. 1 (January, 1968), *Leonardo* 1, no. 3 (July, 1968): 319.

As a result, *Dvizheniye*'s synthesis of "technical and aesthetic means"—brought the latest technological developments, such as cybernetics, to the field of art and sought to incorporate:

...all known forms of art (including television and cinema techniques, optical effects, use of chemical and physical phenomena—changes of scent and temperature, movement of wind, flow of gases and liquids).⁴⁰⁰

The kinetic works that implemented *Dvizheniye*'s program combined technical innovations with "the seemingly long-forgotten ideas" and geometric constructions of the "national avant-garde of the 1920s."⁴⁰¹ Yet, although *Dvizheniye* was the first Russian movement to openly revive the historical Soviet avant-garde and the first artistic alliance to readily incorporate cybernetics, Nusberg and his friends developed an ambivalent relationship with the aesthetics of the machines, the "one-sided" geometry of constructivism and the "individualism" of Western kinetic art.⁴⁰² *Dvizheniye* emphasized the "elegant form" and "prophetic overtones" of the *cyborg* without glorifying its

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ V. Koleyuchuk with V. Polyakoff, "The Evolution of My Kinetic Work," *Leonardo* 27, no. 5 (1994): 395. The authors continue, "It was not just the ideas themselves that were revived, but the spirit of a search that had been a natural expression of the first postrevolutionary years in the Soviet Union—an all-embracing urge to discover new ways in both art and life." Ibid. According to Koleyuchuk and Polyakoff, the group *Dvizheniye* materialized, for a first time, the kinetic potential of the constructivist form manifested in such projects as the 1919-1920 *Monument to the Third International* (Tatlin's Tower) and the 1929 *Monument to Christopher Columbus* by K. Melnikov (both of which were never built). Ibid.

⁴⁰² For example, in his essay "Cybertheater" written in conjunction with the large-scale performance/installation conceived in 1966 and realized, under the same name, in 1967 in Leningrad Nusberg explains: "The 'Cybertheater' is intended to be yet another reminder to Man of the fantastic possibilities of technology and of the need for developing it further; but, at the same time, it is intended to serve as a warning of the dangers inherent in highly developed machines... Here Man clashes with Machine in the most non-utilitarian and aesthetic sense, with the Machine expressed in elegant form. But even in this form, the Machine remains only a machine. I do not believe that the Machine will ever (no matter how developed it becomes) be capable of becoming a Creator..." Lev Nusberg, "Cybertheater," *Leonardo* 2, no. 1 (January, 1969): 62.

technological superiority. The artists played with the sensual and sensational aspects of the geometric form by directing its appeal to all possible human senses, and, eventually, the group's spectacles turned the painted or sculpted kinetic construction into a theatrical performance open for ecstatic viewing and public participation.⁴⁰³ Those were the group's principle goals, at least, according to its members, manifestos and organizers. In reality, *Dvizhenie* remained as idealistic and utopian as the "dry" constructivist tradition it hoped to revive and the formidable cybernetic machine that it aspired to present as aesthetic and "elegant."⁴⁰⁴ After all, neither had the modern man truly "penetrated the mysteries of the micro- and the macro-universe," nor was "the permanent equilibrium of all the constituent elements in a kinetic representation" realistically achievable.⁴⁰⁵

Kabakov had a firsthand experience of the early, so-called pre-kinetic, works of *Dvizheniye*—paintings, sculptures and drawings in which the artists began experimenting with geometric constructions, sense of motion and cybernetic ideas.⁴⁰⁶ Grobman's diary

⁴⁰³ The activities of the group went through a couple of stages ranging from the early paintings and sculptures, in which they tested constructivist principles, sense of motion and vibration and optical effects, to later large-scale kinetic constructions, performances, installations and projects related to urban planning. According to Koleychuk, "The first, prekinetic period of the group's artistic activity was based on the assimilation of geometric and structural form." The first kinetic exhibit of *Dvizheniye*, as he attests, was held in 1965 in Leningrad, and it "showcased the group's experience in creating kinetic works, as it presented a wide spectrum of kinetic expression." The works of the group, however, were shown as early as in 1964, at the exhibit "Toward a Synthesis of the Arts," held at the Prospect Miza Club in Moscow. See Koleychuk, "The *Dvizheniye* Group," 433 and 434.

⁴⁰⁴ It was thanks to this optimistic utopianism, that the group was tolerated, if not encouraged, by the Soviet government. In regard to the idealism of the artists in the early 1960s, Koleychuk avows: "One could call them Romantics, which of course they were, because only Romantics would recklessly rush into the unknown, burning bridges behind them without any thought of looking back." *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁵ "Russian 'Movement' Group," 319.

⁴⁰⁶ Koleychuk gives a detailed account of those early works: "Among the works characteristic of this [the prekinetic] period are Nusberg's *Cross* (1963) and *Programmed Picture* (1963), which are notable for their quasi-computerized symmetry, similar in style to 'cold'-or extremely regular-structuralism. In the works of Zanevskaya, the geometric theme became a method for achieving optical effects. Her compositions combine an illusive sense of movement, vibrations and the transformation of subjective images.

attests that in 1964 Grobman and Kabakov attended an exhibition presenting “Lev Nusberg’s group—the Moscow constructivists” and that the exhibition was “a very important event in Moscow.”⁴⁰⁷ Grobman’s diary refers to “Toward a Synthesis of the Arts,” held at the Prospect Miza Club in Moscow, in which he and Kabakov saw the early geometric constructions of Nusberg’s group. According to Grobman, Kabakov would attend at least one more exhibit of Dvizheniye—a “very captivating spectacle” performed in 1966 in Moscow—and share his “fascination with Nusberg’s ideas and kinetic performances” on at least one occasion.⁴⁰⁸ In 1964—the year in which Kabakov commenced his series of flying body fragments—he must have had a more complex response to what Koleychuk defines as a “pre-kinetic” mix of Nusberg’s “quasi-computerized symmetry” or “cold structuralism,” Zanevskaya’s “optical effects” and

Shcherbakov's linear graphics, which share characteristics with the spatial works of N. Gabo, are limpid, elegant compositions that appear to be woven from bunches of thick lines. Infante at first developed a style of design that was notable for its multistep structure, involving the color nuancing of infinitely repeating ornamentation. He then turned to methods of ornamental and compositional construction, which he used in a number of his spatial compositions in a manner similar to the fitting of *matrshka* dolls one into another.” See Koleychuk, “The Dvizheniye Group,” 434.

⁴⁰⁷ “1 dekabrya 1964. Segodnya otkrytie vystavki gruppy Lebki Nusberga—moskovskie konstruktivisty. Po puti ya zaekhal k Il’e Kabakovu i vzyal ego s soboy... Na Bol. Mariinskoy mnogo lyudey. Razrezanie tselluidnoy lentochki. Rebyata mnogo potrudilis’ i vse ochen’ zdorovo sdelali. Levka khodit, ob’yasnyaet chto k chemu. Eta vystavka—ochen’ vazhnoe sobytie v Moskve.” (“December 1, 1964. Today is the opening of the exhibition of Lev Nusberg’s group—the Moscow constructivists. On my way, I stopped at Ilya Kabakov’s and took him with me... There were a lot of people on Mariinska Avenue. Cutting of the celluloid tape. The guys have worked a lot, and everything is well done. Lev walks around and explains something to somebody. This exhibit is a very important event in Moscow.”) Grobman, *Leviathan*, 39. Grobman (and Kabakov) had already met Nusberg earlier. Grobman, for instance, mentions him in the beginning of his diary, describing a meeting between the two of them in which Grobman read to Nusberg a short story written by himself. In response, Nusberg “made efficient observations.” *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁰⁸ See *Ibid.*, 175. Grobman refers here to the “Exhibition as Performance of Kinetic Art” held at the House of Culture at the Kurchatov Institute of Atomic Energy in 1966. Among the work of two other artists, the exhibit included six kinetic performances—part of Nusberg’s *Metamorphoses*—by the Dvizheniye group. In conjunction with that event, the group wrote and distributed “The Manifesto of the Russian Kineticists.” See Koleychuk, “The Dvizheniye Group,” 435. After seeing these “fragments of... kinetic performance,” Kabakov shared with Grobman his “admiration for Nusberg’s ideas and kinetic performances” (“Kabakov v vostorge or Nusbergovskikh idey i predstavleniya (kineticheskogo).”) Grobman, *Leviathan*, 175.

“illusive sense of movement,” Shcherbakov’s “linear graphics” and Infante’s “ornamental and compositional construction.”⁴⁰⁹ He must have sensed the tension between the compound “structuralist” geometry and the free poetic imagination, or he might have seen a gap between the complex scientific computations and the metaphysics of the flying human spirit. Depending on the ways in which Nusberg explained *Dvizheniye*’s motto in 1964, Kabakov’s drawing may also reflect the scientific/artistic attempt to capture the “movement of human bodies and their shadows,” “the movement of wind” or “the ideas of authors of grandiose spectacles, sending color music up into the clouds and seeking for a permanent equilibrium of all the constituent elements in a kinetic representation.” The drawing could also be presenting “the philosophy of modern man” who, allegedly, “has penetrated the mysteries of the micro- and the macro-universe” or it could be reflecting on *Dvizheniye*’s synthesis of art and science, on its “idea of natural (cosmic) harmony,” or its perfect “symmetry-balance” of separate constituting components. Whatever ideological apparatus Nusberg used to explain his “pre-kinetic” utopia in 1964, it engendered ironic overtones in Kabakov’s de-centered, imbalanced, esoterically scientific and, at the same time, overtly *absurd* interpretation.

XI. The Flight and the Fractured Body: OBERIU

If the artistic idioms of “flight” and “motion” pointed to *Dvizhenye* and Suprematism and if “system,” “feedback” and “information” reflected the scientific

⁴⁰⁹ See note 406.

models of cybernetics, the notion of *absurdity* evoked by Kabakov's drawing was no less referential and significant. The artist uses the key term ("absurdny," i.e., *absurd*) himself in the same paragraph in which he describes his "series with flying body parts" ("seriya letyashchimi chastyami tela") in *Zapiski*. Linking those works with another series of drawings that was chronologically and thematically related to it—the "drawings with a pipe and a stick, with sticks, lines and spheres flying above the hills"—he concludes:

V izvetsnom smysle ikh možno bylo by opredelit' kak "metafiziku" predmetov v absurdnykh svyazakh—v etom i byla vsya ikh metafizika.⁴¹⁰

In some sense, their meaning can be defined as "metaphysics" of objects in absurd relations [literally, connections]—in this was their whole metaphysics.

In 1964, Kabakov's take on "metaphysics" had a coded dual significance. On the one hand, it referred to the religious, mystical and metaphysical aspects which, ever present in Russian literary and philosophical thought, became particularly fervent in Moscow's artistic underground in the 1960s. On the other hand, the artist's interpretation of the metaphysical "Al-Unity" as fragmented corporeality that consists of a limited and irregular number of body parts rendered in a place typically associated with the heavens and the divine (the sky) is already an ironic wink to the very idea of *meta-physics*.⁴¹¹ Combined with a reference to "objects in absurd relations," however, Kabakov's

⁴¹⁰ Ilya Kabakov, *60-e—70-e*, 18. In this memoir, Kabakov examines the two series as contemporaneous. However, the dates of the few survived drawings "with a pipe, stick, lines and spheres flying above the hills" ("pisunki s truboy i palkoi, palki, linii i shariki, letyashchie nad kholmami") suggest that this series is later.

⁴¹¹ The idea of going "beyond" the "physical," as defined by Aristotle, i.e., beyond body, form and substance, is imbedded in the etymology of the term combining *μετά* ("beyond" or "after") and *φυσικά* (referring to "physical").

metaphysical image engenders an additional dimension that points to an important literary development, or rather, a revival of a long-forgotten avant-garde movement which had just begun reemerging on the horizon of Soviet underground in the early 1960s. That was the literature of the “absurd” associated with OBERIU (abbreviated for Ob’edinenie real’nogo iskusstva, i.e., An Association of Real Art)—a short-lived avant-garde grouping of Russian poets founded by Daniil Kharms and Alexander Vvedensky in 1927 in Leningrad.⁴¹² Uniting Futurist aesthetics and Formalist approaches, the *Oberiuty* (the members of OBERIU) considered themselves a “left flank” of the literary avant-garde.⁴¹³ The so-called “OBERIU manifesto” announced the group’s involvement in

⁴¹² Along with other pseudonyms, such as “Daniil Dandan” and “Kharms-Shardam,” Daniil Kharms was the main, and eventually the sole, pen-name of Daniil Ivanovich Yuvachov. It is generally thought to derive from the tension between the English words for “charms” and “harms” (also the German *Charme*) although it may have also alluded to the name of Sherlock Holmes, one of Kharms’ fascinations. See Neil Cornwell, “Introduction: Daniil Kharms, Black Minituarists” in *Incidences: Daniil Kharms*, ed. and transl. Neil Cornwell (New York: Serpent’s Tail, 1993), 2. Kharms began appearing at avant-garde activities in 1925, and in 1927 he joined forces with like-minded writers, mainly Aleksandr Vvedensky, Igor Bakhterev and Nikolay Zabolotsky to form OBERIU. Other writers, such as Nikolay Zabolotsky, were at first “loose associates.” See N. Cornwell, “Introduction: Daniil Kharms, Black Minituarist” in *Daniil Kharms and the Poetics of the Absurd*, ed. by Cornwell (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), 3-22. The group was a continuation of the earlier grouping “School of Chinari” (“Shkola chinarei”) created by Kharms and Vvedensky in 1926. Due to the loose character and short-lived life of OBERIU, the name *chinari* (coined by Vvedensky from the word *chin* “rank”) is often used in reference to all OBERIU activities. The group was disbanded by 1930, following hostile publicity backed by the rising Stalinist terror, and the OBERIU poetics was denounced as reactionary. Kharms and Vvedensky were arrested and then released, but subsequently, were able to find work only occasionally as writers of children’s literature. In the 1930s, Kharms and Vvedensky became more closely involved with a group of friends that met for, what they called, “conversations.” They included the writer-mathematician Leonid Lipavsky and the Christian philosopher Yakov Druskin. Lipavsky wrote down a number of the “conversations.” The outbreak of the war brought new purges, and Kharms and Vvedensky were arrested again. Vvedensky died in 1941, while Kharms, who was deemed psychiatrically unfit, died during the occupation of Leningrad in 1942, allegedly, from starvation or enforced psychiatric treatment in a prison hospital. *Ibid.*, 9; Anatoliy Aleksandrov, “A Kharms Chronology” in *Daniil Kharms and the Poetics of the Absurd*, 46.

⁴¹³ For instance, they had direct relations with Malevich, Shkolovsky and his student Khardziev as well as with the Zaum poet Khlebnikov. See Aleksandrov, *Ibid.*, 46. On the connection between Khlebnikov and Kharms and their mutual fascination with Egypt see Biacheslav Ivanov, “Egipet armanskogo perioda u Kharmsa i Khlebnikova: “Lapa” i “Ka” in *Stoletie Daniila Kharmsa*, ed. Alexandr Kubrinskiy (St. Petersburg: CPGUTD, 2005), 80-91. Kharms attended meetings of the Bakhtin circle as well as lectures of the Formalists. See Matvei Yankelevich, “Introduction: the Real Kharms,” in *Today I Wrote Nothing:*

literature, fine art, theatre and cinema, promising to broaden the meaning of the poetic word (without destroying it in the way in which *zaum* poets did) as well as to abandon the plot in theatre and cinema.⁴¹⁴ The OBERIU approach was seen as both “revolutionary and universal”—it “invigorated” objects, words and acts through “collisions of verbal meanings” and challenged common logic and appearance by proposing a new relationship between art and life.⁴¹⁵ The aesthetic program translated into a new type of literature that destroyed all protocols of formal organization, semantic coherence and linguistic realism.⁴¹⁶ Traditional figurative devices, such as metaphor and simile, were often literalized, denounced and destroyed causing what Vvedensky defined as

Selected Writings of Daniil Kharm's, ed. and trans. M. Yankelevich (New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2007), 23. Both Malevich and Schkolovski made remarks to Kharm's and his peers which have become anecdotal aphorism. See Eugene Ostashevsky, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *OBERIU: An Apologia of Russian Absurdism*, ed. E. Ostashevsky (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006), xvi-xvii. On Malevich and Kharm's see Jean-Philippe Jaccard, “Polet bez poleta,” in *Ruskaya mysl'* 3781 (23 June, 1989; Literary Supplement 8): xi. Kharm's read and took notes on Schkolovski’s articles. See Yulia Vasileva, “Daniil Kharm's: voprosy pragmatiki” in *Stoletie Daniila Kharm'sa*, 24.

⁴¹⁴ Written mostly, as it is generally accepted, by Zabolotsky, the *Manifesto* was published simply as “OBERIU” in the second number of the Leningrad “Posters of the House of Print” (“Afishi doma pečati”) in January 1928. See N. Cornwell, “Introduction: Daniil Kharm's, Black Minituarist,” 6; and Anatoliy Aleksandrov, “A Kharm's Chronology,” 37.

⁴¹⁵ N. Cornwell, “Introduction: Daniil Kharm's, Black Minituarist,” 6. The literary and artistic provocations of the group translated into a close, almost “one-to-one” relationship between art and life, and the “semi-scandalous public performances became, for a brief period, a highlight of Leningrad artistic life.” Ibid. For instance, Kharm's became a literal incorporation of his catch-phrase “art is like a cupboard” as he often kneeled in or stood on the top of a black, varnished cupboard while reading “phonetic verses” for his bemused audience. See Ibid., 7; Igor Bekhterev, “Kogda my byli molodymi (Nevydumannyi rasskaz)” in *Vospominaniya o N. Zabolotskom*, ed. A. V. Zabolotskaya et al. (Moscow, 1984), 57-91; and Oleg Ris (Olegri), “Literaturnye penalty na fontanke,” in *Neva* 3 (Moscow, 1982), 199-200.

⁴¹⁶ See Eugene Ostashevsky, “Editor’s Introduction,” xv. The author suggests that the *chinars'* breaking of the narrative and the group’s plans to collaborate with Russian formalist critics point to an artistic realization of formalist analysis. For such collaboration plans see Kharm's, *Zapisnye knizhki*. Ed. V.N. Sazhin and J.-Ph. Jaccard. (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2002), vol. 1, 287. Some of the devices that Kharm's and Vvedensky used were: changing the names of the characters in the course of the story, treating parts of the narrative as independent and unrelated to whole, interrupting the story unexpectedly without indicating its ending and so on. Yulia Vasileva relates Kharm's narrative techniques to the folktale model constructed by Vladimir Propp in his fundamental *Morphology of the Folktale* published in 1928. Since Kharm's breaks all of Propp’s functions and their sequence, she proposes that Kharm's creates an anti-genre (“anti-folktale”) and combines it with other forms of folk theatre or clown reprise. Yulia Vasileva, “Daniil Kharm's: voprosy pragmatiki” in *Stoletie Daniila Kharm'sa*, 23.

“nonsense” (*bessmyslitsa*) and Zabolotsky deemed as “alogical” joining of words.⁴¹⁷ As a result of such techniques, the OBERIU activities and body of literature has traditionally been referred to as “Russian absurdism,” despite the problematic connotations of the latter term.⁴¹⁸

OBERIU’s use of “alogism” and *absurd* grew out of previous trends in Russian literature and echoed the social turmoil of the 1920s-1930s.⁴¹⁹ It also reflected the concern for the (in)adequacy of language as a means of communication characteristic for the Druskin “school of philosophy” in which Kharms participated.⁴²⁰ Expressing doubt that language can represent a reality external to itself and thus to transmit knowledge, this concern runs from Plato, through the romantics, to the “extreme language relativism” of twentieth-century exponents of “linguistic nihilism” such as Nietzsche and Mauthner.⁴²¹ According to Donald Crosby, “linguistic nihilism” asserts that different cultures, times periods, groups and individuals are locked into different conceptual schemes the

⁴¹⁷ Ostashevsky, “Editor’s Introduction,” xvi. The author connects Zabolotsky’s alogism with the use of “unexpected metaphors,” while Vvedensky’s “materialization” of such metaphors is seen as the end of poetic utterance, not as means to convey content more effectively.

⁴¹⁸ Such a term emphasizes OBERIU’s similarity to Western trends; e.g. the literature of the absurd in postwar Europe, at the expense of its direct relation to previous developments in Russian avant-garde literature. See *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁴¹⁹ For instance, according to Neil Cornwell, Kharms belongs to the Russian tradition of double-edged humor which extends from Gogol and Dostoevsky to Siniavsky and Voinovich. See N. Cornwell, “Introduction: Daniil Kharms, Black Minituarist,” 11-12. According to Matvei Yankelevich, Kharms embraced Futurism and its outgrowth as laid out by his “idols:” Malevich, Khlebnikov and Terentiev, among others. Matvei Yankelevich, “Introduction: the Real Kharms,” 10.

⁴²⁰ A key member of the group and friend of Kharms, Yakov Druskin was a Christian philosopher and music-theorist who wrote on Bach, Schoenberg and Webern. Cornwell relates his views to the linguistic nihilism of Nietzsche and Mauthner. See N. Cornwell, “Introduction: Daniil Kharms, Black Minituarist,” 14.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*

meanings of which are fundamentally different.⁴²² Due to the incommensurability of concepts, the claims of different schemes cannot be understood comparatively or assessed for their comparative truth value.⁴²³ In the end, what we have left is the chaos of our accidental senses which seem ordered by arbitrary linguistic concepts, and there is no way of knowing the world or of knowing whether such a world exists in and of itself.⁴²⁴

OBERIU's interpretation of the relationship between world, language and logic also plays upon a second thread of philosophical ideas running from Plato's *Cratylus* and Aristotle's *Categories* or *Metaphysics*, through Humboldt's ideas of the "internal form of the word," to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis known as the "theory of linguistic relativity."⁴²⁵

⁴²² Donald A. Crosby, *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticism of Modern Nihilism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 22.

⁴²³ According to Danto, the world, in Nietzsche's view, cannot be a sum of perspectives, because they are "incongruent." Arthur Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1965), 78, cited in Crosby. Similar kind of nihilism stressing the relativity of meaning was advanced by Nietzsche's contemporary Mauthner whose principal book, *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* (*Contributions to a Critic of Language*) became first published in three volumes in 1901-02 and underwent three editions between 1902 and 1923. Mauthner's point of departure was *nominalism*; i.e., the belief that essences, universals and general concepts do not exist objectively as independent reality but only as collective designations for particulars. Thus, for Mauthner, such designations are not substantial entities like physical objects but only fleeting, momentary data of personal sensory experience. No such data are alike, however, we are used to associating certain terms with certain groupings of data and thus create concepts. Each different person has different experiences and therefore gives different meanings to the same linguistic terms. As Crosby puts it, "we each live in our own world, with our own conceptual scheme or distinctive set of meanings and association built out of our unique experiences and uses of language. No two individuals share the same funds of meaning, even in respect to the simplest concept." Similarly, large communities, according to Mauthner, are closed off and separated by self-contained worldviews and inherent canons of truth. He further states that language is completely incapable of expressing knowledge of the world, despite that we can communicate because it still provides stimuli for actions and cooperative activity. Being necessarily ambiguous, linguistic terms function as metaphors. Thus, "any claim to objective meaning or truth is based on a delusion, for all such questions will inevitably be decided in terms of the established patters of thought of a particular linguistic tradition." A. Crosby, *The Specter of the Absurd*, 22-24.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴²⁵ For example, see *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture, and Personality*. Ed David G. Mandelbaum (University of California Press, 1983); *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. Ed John B. Carroll (MIT: MIT Press, 1956) and Korneliya Ichin, "Logico-filosofskiy traktat' po Kharmsu" in *Stoletie Daniila Kharmsa*, 91-100. According to Ichin, Druskin, who was educated in the long philosophical tradition rooted in the classical antiquity, uses the form of

In the early 20th century, the equivalence between language and reality became a central issue in the logical empiricism of the Vienna Circle and preoccupied one of its most famous proponents—Ludwig Wittgenstein and his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.⁴²⁶ According to Ichin, Wittgenstein’s ideas impacted the philosophy of Druskin and, through him, the logical-philosophical exercises of Kharms.⁴²⁷ The main point of convergence became the importance of language in relation to thinking. Language, in Wittgenstein’s view, is not simply “a vehicle of thought” in the traditional linguistic sense (“Die Sprache ist das Medium des Denkens”), but it is thought itself since thoughts are linguistic propositions.⁴²⁸ Based on such understanding, Wittgenstein defines “all philosophy” as a “Critique of language” not as a sequence of logical processes and operations.⁴²⁹

“analogical ‘dialogues’” to present his ideas on *being*, which is defined by the *spoken*, the *unspoken* and the boundary between them. For instance, his treatise *Eto i to (This and That)* takes as its point of departure Aristotle’s *Physics*. Similarly, Kharms’ treatise *O sushchestvovanii, o vremeni, o prostranstve (On Being, on Time, on Space)* uses syllogisms that play on the idea of the importance of the present moment as a condensation of the process of time in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (VI 3, 30, 1027b) Korneliya Ichin, “Logico-filosofskiy traktat,” 92. Analogous views on time emerge in Wittgenstein’s treatise discussed below.

⁴²⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung” in *Annalen der Natur- und Kulturphilosophie* 14 (Leipzig, 1921), 184-262, transl. C. Ogden *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London, 1922, rev. ed. 1933, repr. London: Routledge, 1983, New York: Dover Publications, 1999)

⁴²⁷ Korneliya Ichin, “Logico-filosofskiy traktat,” 92-93.

⁴²⁸ See L. Wittgenstein, “Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung,” 3.5 “Das angewandte, gedachte Satzzeichen ist der Gedanke.” (“The applied thought, propositional sign is the thought”); 4. “Der Gedanke ist der sinnvolle Satz.” (“The thought is the significant proposition.”) and 4.01 “Der Satz stellt das Bestehen und Nichtbestehen der Sachverhalte dar.” (“The proposition is a picture of reality. The proposition is a model of the reality as we think of it.”) All English quotations are taken from Dover’s 1999 edition of Ogden’s translation which takes into account the semantic variations of the German original. This translation is also chosen and accepted as a standard here due to Ogden’s personal relationship with Wittgenstein.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.0031. Accordingly, all previous “questions and propositions that have been written about philosophical matters,” according to Wittgenstein, “are not false, but senseless,” because they “do not understand the logic of our language.” *Ibid.*, 4.003.

Another aspect in which the Austrian philosopher and the Russian *Oberiuty* unite and diverge is the relation between language and logic (or language and reality).⁴³⁰ For Wittgenstein, the boundary is clearly defined, and it marks the distinction between “what can be said” (6.53), i.e., what represents knowledge of the world in a clear form, on the one hand, and that of which “we cannot speak” (6.423), e.g., the “ethical” (6.423), “inexpressible” (6.522) or “mystical” (6.522), on the other.⁴³¹ Language as knowledge and the methods of philosophy reach their limits as soon as the possibility of clear articulation disappears:

Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent. (Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen).⁴³²

What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent. (Was sich überhaupt sagen läßt, läßt sich klar sagen; und wovon man nicht reden kann, darüber muß man schweigen.)⁴³³

Positioning itself in the relative space between Mauthner’s “linguistic nihilism” and Wittgenstein’s language-based philosophy, Druskin’s treatise *Razgovory vestnikov* opens with a related question:

Neskazannoe i skazannoe odno i to zhe ili ne odno i to zhe?⁴³⁴

⁴³⁰ Ichin sees that as a common concern uniting Wittgenstein, Druskin and Kharmis. K. Ichin, “Logico-filosofskiy traktat,” 93-94.

⁴³¹ L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 106-107.

⁴³² Ibid., 7, also “Of the will as the subject of the ethical we cannot speak” (6.423). The most extensively discussed example, in this regard, is death (6.431-6.432), e.g., “As in death, too, the world does not change, but ceases.” (6.431).

⁴³³ Ibid., Preface, 27.

⁴³⁴ Quoted in K. Ichin, “Logico-filosofskiy traktat,” 93. The Russian words for “uttered” and “unuttered” (“skazannoe” and “neskazannoe”) correspond to Wittgenstein’s “what is said” and “what is not said.” In the late 1920s—early 1930s, Druskin created a series of treatises in which, instead of the traditional

Nazyvaem li neskazannoe i kak odnositsya k nemu nazvanie, ch'e ono, togo li, kotoroe nazvano, ili drugogo? Chto nazyvaem i skol'ko nazvaniy? Gde nazvanie? V neskazannom ili skazannom?⁴³⁵

Are the uttered [what is said] and the unuttered [what is not said] different things or the same thing?

Do we name what is unuttered and how does the name relate to it, whom does it belong to, to that which is named or to something else? What is named and how many names are there? Where is the name: in the unuttered or in the uttered?

By articulating the problems of naming, Druskin puts into question one of the most stable notions in Wittgenstein—the boundary between “what can be said” and the “inexpressible” (what is beyond thought, logic and language). By the same token, Druskin opens the possibility that there might be no boundary at all and that the logical and the illogical might be the “same thing.”

On such grounds, Druskin raises a second set of problems connected with naming: does the name belong to the *designated* (*k skazannomu*, i.e., “to what is said”) or to the *designator* (*k nazyvayushchemu*); where is the name (in the designated object or in the designator); how to designate the *unsaid* (“what is not said” or “that”) in the process of investigating the possibilities of its naming. He then continues with a paradox that destabilizes another long-established philosophical correlation—the relation between part and whole:

terminology of Western philosophy, he utilizes common everyday language to create his “unsystematic system” (Meilakh). The series “Vestniki” consists of “Razgovory vestnikov” (divided into three parts: “O nekotom volnenii i nekotom spokoystvii,” “Priznaki,” “O derevyah”) and the 1933 treatise “Vestniki i ikh razgovory.”

⁴³⁵ Sazhin, V., L. Druskina and A. Mashevskii, eds. “*Sborishche družei, ostavlennykh sud'boiu.*” A. Vvedensky, L. Lipavskii, Ia. Druskin, D. Kharms, N. Oleinikov: *Cinari v tekstakh, dokumentakh i issledovaniyakh*. 2 vols. (Moscow: privately printed, 1998); I: 758.

Chto chast' i chto tseloe, i est' li chto ni chast' i ni tseloe? Chast'—eto ili to, tseloe—tol'ko eto ili tol'ko to. No vsyakoe eto ili to est' tol'ko eto ili tol'ko to—i chast' i tseloe. Vse—ogranichenie v sposobe sushchestvovaniya.⁴³⁶

What is part and what is whole and is there something that is neither a part nor a whole? Part—is it this or that, whole—only this or only that. However, every this or that is only this and only that—both part and whole. Everything is a limitation in its way of existence.

Clearly differentiated in the beginning of the passage, *part* and *whole* (or *this* and *that*) gradually collapse into an interchangeable pair (“both part and whole”), just as *limitation*, stretched to the ubiquitous parameters of “everything... in its way of existence,” either ceases to exist or becomes equal to all “existence” (those are categorically one and the same).⁴³⁷ Beyond the limitations of our world (i.e., beyond our level of comprehension which, for Wittgenstein, is also the limitation of our logic, philosophy and language) lies another realm defined by Druskin as “what is not for us.” That is the world of *vestniki*—an ambiguously appropriated polysemantic Russian term “the first meaning” of which, according to the author’s supplementary commentaries, refers to “newspaper” and the “last meaning” of which corresponds to the English noun “angel” (or messenger).⁴³⁸ Druskin’s series of treatises on the subject of *vestniki*

⁴³⁶ Ibid., I: 761; Ichin, Ibid., 93-94.

⁴³⁷ If everything is a *limitation*, then the very notion of *limiting* as a category becomes pointless. Bypassing Druskin’s strategies of paradoxical destabilization, Ichin rightly notes that even this “everything” that he sees as “limitation” will, at some point, be divided. It will produce an “infinite part,” then, “an infinite part of the infinite part” and infinitely so on. Ichin, Ibid., 100, n. 10.

⁴³⁸ The root of the noun *vestniki* is derived from the Russian word *vest'* (message, news and information) which is phonetically and etymologically related to the verb *vesti*—to lead, manage or conduct. According to Druskin’s explanation of the term recorded by Meilakh, the author uses the word to designate a “parallel world,” “parallel existence,” and *vesntiki* “are part of the word of creation, but they belong to a state that is ‘beyond sin,’ to the ‘holiness to which the humans are called.” (“Zdes' eto slovo upotrebyaetsya v znachenii: ‘sosedniy mir,’ ‘sosednee sushchestvovanie’. Vestniki prinadlezhat k sotvorennomu miru, no prisushchi k ‘sostoyaniyu za grekhom,’ k ‘svyatosti, k kotoroy chelovek prizvan.’”) This commentary was

composes a lengthy and complex refutation of Wittgenstein's firm postulate that one ought to remain silent on subjects, such as "the ethical" or the "mystical," because they fall outside of the boundaries of knowledge, language and philosophy. Discussing the life, conversations and timelessness of *vestniki*, Druskin not only speaks at length on such subjects, especially on topics particularly designated by Wittgenstein as "inexpressible"—"the problems of life," "death" or the supernatural.⁴³⁹ Furthermore, Druskin appropriates the same logical operations used by Wittgenstein to prove that those subjects are irreducible to the terms of language and philosophy in the first place.⁴⁴⁰ The OBERIU philosopher, however, employs the same philosophical strategies in order to demonstrate the "logic" of *vestniki*'s illogical existence and, in the course of such *absurd*

supplemented by the author in the mid-1960s when he was writing mostly on philosophical-theological subjects and when Mikhail Meilakh visited his home to work on the archives of Vvedensky and Kharms. In the process, Meilakh became interested in Druskin's early philosophical writings which the author read to him in person. Providing extensive personal commentaries, Druskin suggested that the treatises were a lot more complex than they seem to be at first and added that his comments were only a supplement and not part of the text. In the original text and in the OBERIU context of the 1920s-1930s, Druskin, in fact, never canceled the first meaning of the word (newspaper), and the text plays on its parallel existence and interpretation. Such a double reading and affinity to ambiguity would not be unusual for the *Oberiuity* in the 1930s, when led by a fascination with orders and societies, Kharms created the "Order of Relative Mistakeability" (a rough translation of the playful Russian "Orden nebol'shoy pogreshnosti") toying with one of Druskin's ambivalent philosophical phrases "equilibrium with some (relative or, literally, not large) mistakeability" ("nekotoroe ravnovesie s nebol'shoy pogreshnost'yu"). According to Meilakh, the *oberiuity* sung this "formula" translated into Latin ("quaedam aequilibras cum peccato parvo") in an upbeat polka rhythm. Druskin also reports that, after reading his treatises, Kharms stated "Ya vestnik" ("I am a *vestnik*"). M. Meilakh, "Yakov Druskin: 'Vestniki i ikh razgovory'" ("Yakov Druski: *Vestniki* and their Conversations"). Unpublished manuscript.

⁴³⁹ The main concerns of the treatise *Vestniki and Their Conversations*, for instance, are listed as a sequence of questions in the beginning: "O chem razgovarivayut vestniki? Byvayut li v ikh zhizni sobytiya? Kak oni provodyat den'?" ("What do *vestniki* talk about? Are there any events in their life? How do they spend their day?") Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ According to Ostashevsky, Russian philosophers sometimes debunked Kant with Kant's own procedures. See Ostashevsky, "Editor's Introduction," xxi. In fact, Druskin wrote extensively on Pavel Florensky—a famous Russian philosopher, theologian, mathematician and inventor, who employed such strategies in his approach to Kant. See *Pamyati Pavla Florenskogo: filosofiya, muzyka: sbornik statey k 120-letiyu so dnya rozhdeniya o. Pavla (1882-2002)*. Ed. S.M. Sigitov (St. Petersburg: DB), 2002; and P. Florensky, "Kosmologicheskie antinomii Immanuila Kanta" in P. Florensky, *Sochineniia*, 4 vols. (Moscow: Mysl', 1994-98), 2: 3-33 (cited in Ostashevsky, "Editor's Introduction").

demonstration, to de-automatize the common terms of our logic (and our terminological and logical language).⁴⁴¹ The end of *Vestniki and their Conversations* reverses the order established in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. The world of the mystical is not only “expressible.” It has an internal logic to it; while the apparent logic of our language and knowledge, when applied to the mystical, becomes, in itself, illogical. It is again the world of *vestniki* that offers an alternative to our limited means of expression:

Vestnikam izvestno obratnoe napravlenie. Oni znayut to, chto nakhoditsya za veshchami.

Vestniki nablyudayut, kak pochki raskryvayutsya na derev'yah

.....

Vestniki znayut yazyk kamney. Oni dostigli ravnovesiya s nebol'shoy pogreshnost'yu. Oni govoryat ob etom i tom.⁴⁴²

Vestniki know the opposite direction. They know what exists beyond the objects. *Vestniki* observe how the buds of the trees are opening.

.....

Vestniki know the language of stones. They have reached equilibrium with some mistakability. They speak of this and that.

According to Druskin’s commentary on the passage, the “opposite direction” known to *vestniki* replaces our “direct way” which is the way of “automatism.” In the

⁴⁴¹ For instance, Druskin uses familiar notions of time and eternity to demonstrate that *vestniki* have “time” (though not in the traditional sense of the word) and “life” that is different from our understanding of life as existence. Their life evolves in stillness (“nepodvizhnosti”) that begins with one event, but then nothing else happens (“nichego ne proiskhodit”) since “what happens” (the Russian word for the latter, “proiskhozhdenie,” also means *genesis*) belongs to time, and time is the section “between two moments” (“mezhdvu dvumya mgnoveniyami”). For us, this means “void and absence” since we forget the end of the first moment and spend the time anticipating the next moment which is the “unknown” and comes as “new.” In the world of *vestniki* there are no two moment, no “void and absence” between them, no fear in anticipation of the second moment and no “emptiness and boredom” since the latter “result from time.” The “life” of *vestniki* described in such a way plays on the notions of time and death in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (6.431), 106-107.

⁴⁴² “Sborishche druzei, ostavlennykh sud'boiu,” I: 774

context of Druskin's philosophy and in the milieu of Russian OPOYAZ, *automatism* refers to traditionalized ("normative") means of cognition, representation and communication, which, due to their repetitive use, have lost connection with the essence of things.⁴⁴³ In contrast to the *automatized* human language and knowledge, *vestniki* know the essence of things ("what exists beyond the objects") because they perceive the things-in-themselves.⁴⁴⁴ Such a Kantinian reference is not accidental, and in fact it indicates one of the trademarks of OBERIU and Russian modernist trends, in general.⁴⁴⁵

Commenting on the ability of *vestniki* to see "how the buds of the trees are opening,"

Druskin explains:

⁴⁴³ In this sense, the *Oberiuty* employed various strategies of *de-atomization*. For instance, the group's manifesto propounds the *de-automatized* object and *ostranenie* as the goal of art: "The concrete object, cleaned from all literary and everyday layers—that's the property of art." See M. Yankelevich, "Daniil Kharms i Marcel Duchamp" in *Stoletie Daniila Kharmsa*, 244. Especially notable in terms of *de-atomization* was the writing and behavior of Kharm who, according to Vvedenski, created not just art, but life itself because he did not separate his life from his art. In Druskin's view, Kharms "rebelled against the automatism of existence" by living as an embodiment of the device of "opposite direction." For instance, the unusual clothes of Kharms were neither fashionable, nor out of fashion (either case would have been an example of automatism); they were always strange, new and belonging to the "opposite way." Arguing that miracles presented another manifestation of the "opposite direction," Druskin recalls a story written by Kharms in which a man decided to stand in front of a closet every day for two hours until he saw a miracle. At the end, he did not notice that he was able to see a picture that was hidden behind the closet, and he would have been able to see only if he levitated two inches above the ground. On the basis of this, Druskin concludes "we live in miracles but do not notice them." Kharms signature image of the closet and the motif of flying would resonate in various ways in Kabakov's albums and installations, most notably in the album "Sitting-in-the-closet Primakov."

⁴⁴⁴ In his notes, Druskin reveals that such knowledge presents a transition from "existence" to the "way of existence," and *Vestniki* have an insight into "the way of existence."

⁴⁴⁵ According to Ostashevsky, "in turn-of-the-century Russia, even academic neo-Kantians resented Kant's claim that the thing-in-itself cannot be known." The philosophers found an alternative in the Bergsonian intuition brothering on the sixth sense that is different from the Kantinian intuition of time and space. A product of "perception above the senses" and "reason above reason," art served as a primary field for such intuition, while the artwork became a "window into the true structure of the world" for all Russian modernist movements—from symbolism to suprematism. These movements regarded themselves as philosophical and scientific experiments in finding superior ways of knowledge. See Ostashevsky, "Editor's Introduction," xxi. This trend was especially pronounced in the art of Mikhail Matiushin. On Matiushin see Linda Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidian Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 238-99.

... yavlenie, vydelennoe iz obshchey svyazi, stanovitsya "veshch'yu v sebe", potomu chto poryadok sozdaetsya razumom. Zdes'—primer estestvennogo fakta, za kotorym stoit sverkh"estestvennoe, cely mir (konechno, esli k etomu faktu ne podkhodit' tol'ko nauchno). Lopaetsya pochka—eto "nachalo mgnoveniya", tvorenie mira. Snova: "my zhivem v chude, no ne zamechaem etogo".⁴⁴⁶

... a phenomenon that is isolated from the general sequence becomes “a thing in itself,” because the order is created by reason (thinking). Here, this is an example of a natural event behind which stands the transcendental, the whole world (of course, if one does not approach the event only scientifically.) The bud opens—this is “the beginning of a moment,” creation of the world. Again, “we live in a miracle, but do not notice it.”

On the basis of Kant's own procedure of using “reason to reign in reason,” Druskin demonstrates that the “thing-in-itself” is not part of the order created by our logical thinking. It belongs to the world of the supernatural which, for Druskin and the long tradition of Russian theological philosophy, has Christian form and connotations. As such, the “thing-in-itself” cannot be approached and understood with the limited tools of our “normative” logic and language.⁴⁴⁷ In contrast, *vestniki* know the true language of things and relations (described here as the language of the most silent inanimate objects—“the language of stones”) and, according to Druskin's notes, this is the “silent, pre-reflective language that is different from our reflective language.”⁴⁴⁸ The knowledge

⁴⁴⁶ “*Sborishche družei, ostavlennykh sud'boiu,*” I: 774

⁴⁴⁷ As Ostashevsky notes, OBERIU's “concept of normative language was far broader than Kant's concept of reason which includes logic and a priori categories such as causality, quantity, succession, and so forth.” In the context of Russian formalism and its interest into the structure of linguistic expression, “normative language” refers also to established grammatical and metaphoric constructions as well as to standard rules for classification of concepts. All of these elements constituted a single system of cognition and representation by which we “(mis)cognize the world” because we mistake cognitive relations for real relations among objects and take the properties of language for properties of the world. See Ostashevsky, “Editor's Introduction,” xxi-xxii.

⁴⁴⁸ This comment is supplied by Druskin as an equivalent and explanation of “the language of stones,” as it reads: “t. e. molchalivy, doreflektivny yazyk, otlichny ot nashego, reflektivnogo.” M. Meilakh, “Yakov Druskin: ‘Vestniki i ikh razgovory’” (“Yakov Druski: *Vestniki* and their Conversations”). The idea of the

of the essence of things allows *vestniki* to reach “equilibrium with some mistakability” or to attain the pre-reflective balance of real and mental, of natural and transcendental or of word and meaning.⁴⁴⁹ In such a way, *vestniki* bridge the gap between “this” and “that”—two of Druskin’s central categories, which, to quote his comments on the same sentence, belong to the “post-reflective language” and signify “the immanent and the transcendental.”⁴⁵⁰

According to OBERIU, the humans have lost their pre-reflective language and the ability to recognize the miracles in life, therefore, in order to see the world as it really is the *Oberiuty* set off to destabilize the normative concepts and forms of expression. Vvedensky, for instance, regarded his poetry as an experimental inquiry into the relationship between the normative language and the world.⁴⁵¹ Druskin uses the language of logic and sequence only to undermine it, while his own philosophical categories “this” and “that” become “refutations of science, philosophy and, in general, any

ancient, indiscreet and undivided language of mythological consciousness reemerges also in Kabakov’s take on Yuri Lotman’s structuralist theory. See Ilya Kabakov, “Kultura, “Ia,” “Ono” I Favorskii Svet” in *Beseda 2* (1984): 171-172.

⁴⁴⁹ This is one of Druskin’s uses of the idiom that the *Oberiuty* sung, translated into Latin, in an upbeat polka rhythm. In his treatise *Classification of Points (Classifikatsiya tochek)* the author explains that *correlation (sootvetstvie)* with some mistakeability belongs to *correlation*. Rejecting the rigidity of some logical constructions, Druskin’s ironic idiom allows a flexible approach and wider applicability open to the great variety and hidden “miracles” in life.

⁴⁵⁰ “eto i to—osnovnye terminy dannogo kruga proizvedeniy, otnosyashchiesya kak by uzhe k yazyku poslereflektivnomu i oboznachayushchie, uslovno govorya, immanentnoe i transcendentnoe.” (“this and that—the main terms of this series of writings—seem to belong to the post-reflective language and signify, to put it in a conventional way, the immanent and the transcendental.”) M. Meilakh, “Yakov Druskin: ‘Vestniki i ikh razgovory’” (“Yakov Druskin: *Vestniki* and their Conversations”)

⁴⁵¹ In the 1930s, Vvedensky wrote: “I raised my hand against concepts, against initial generalizations that no one previously had touched. Thereby I performed, you might say, a poetic critique of reason—more fundamental than that other, abstract [critique of Kant]. I doubted that, for instance, house, cottage, and tower come together under the concept of building. Perhaps, the shoulder must be linked to number four. I did it practically, in my poems, as a kind of proof. And I convinced myself that the old relations are false, but I don’t know what the new ones must be like. I don’t even know whether they should form one system or many.” *Sborishche družei, ostavlennykh sud’boiu*,” I: 186.

knowledge.”⁴⁵² Druskin’s treatises offer a glimpse into the world of the “immanent and the transcendental” that is accessible only to intuition which proceeds in leaps and bounds in contrast to logical reasoning which rests on order and continuity.⁴⁵³ Kharm’s *alogist* language takes the properties of intuition to their “logical extreme” by using statements that are discontinuous semantically, syntactically and situationally.⁴⁵⁴ Fragmentation and breaking of all established notions of sequence and ordering, respectively, are the signature features of Kharm’s writing—from his “comic-philosophical sketches and pseudo-tracts” to his poetry and prose.⁴⁵⁵ Fragmentation

⁴⁵² The most evocative example is his treatise “This and That” (“Eto i to”) in which he uses his central categories to refute, as he explains in the first chapter of the text, “science, philosophy and, in general, any knowledge:”

Vo-pervykh, esli ya khochu skazat' chto-libo, ya ukazhu i skazhu eto. Vo-vtorykh, skazav eto, ya otdeleyu ot togo, sledovatel'no skazhu eto i to ili eto v otlichie ot togo, pervoe budet razdeleniem, vtoroe otde-leniem. V-tret'ikh, skazav eto i to ili eto v otlichie ot togo, ya skazhu ne to, no to, potomu chto eto dolzhno byt' ne bol'she chego-libo, no to bol'she. Skazav chto-libo, ya skazal eto. Eto tozhe bol'she, no chto by ya o nem ni skazal, budet to. V-chetvertykh, skazav eto i to ili eto v otlichie ot togo, ya skazhu odno i ne bol'she chego-libo, do togo kak ono bylo skazano. Takim obrazom vyskazyvanie nichego ne dalo po dvum prichinam...

(First, if I want to say something, I will point and say this. Second, having said this, I will separate it from that, so it means, I will say this and that or this in contrast to that—the first case will be distinction, the second—separation. Third, having said this or that or this in contrast to that, I will say not that, but that, because this cannot be bigger than that (this cannot be that anymore), but that is bigger. Having said something, I have said this. This is also bigger, but if I do not say that about it, it would be that. Fourth, having said this and that or this in contrast to that, I will say one thing and no more than one thing, before it has been said. In such a way, the utterance has not provided anything for two reasons...)

Sborishche družei, ostavlennykh sud'boiu, I: 811-812

⁴⁵³ See Ostashevsky, “Editor’s Introduction,” xxiii.

⁴⁵⁴ Ostashevsky provides examples for each type of discontinuation: syntactical (“when Kharm’s writes about ripping lace ‘from maid from oak’”), semantic (“when Kharm’s writes about ‘white elephants of fear’”—an image painted by Kabakov) or situational (“when Kharm’s writes about the four-legged crow hobbling home on its five legs”). Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ According to Yankelevich, in “many of his comic-philosophical sketches and pseudo-tracts” Kharm’s seeks an answer of the question what is between “this” and “that.” M. Yankelevich, “Introduction: the Real Kharm’s,” in *Today I Wrote Nothing*, 16. In his 1930 comic-philosophical poem, for instance, Kharm’s discusses Druskin’s categories, addressing their relationship (difference and part-whole relations) and properties (space, time or the transcendental):

This is This. / That is That. / This is not That. / This is not This. / What is left is either this, or not this. / It’s either that, or not that. / What is not that and not this, that is not this and not that. / What

(often leading to disarrangement) characterizes not only Kharms' narratives, situations, time lines and locales, but also a major part of the literary characters of OBERIU's most eccentric writer:

Fed'ka got Sen'ka out from under the chest of drawers with a poker and tore off his right year.

Sen'ka slipped through Fed'ka's hands and holding his torn-off ear, ran off to the neighbors.

.....
Fed'ka got Nikolay out with a poker from under the cupboard and ripped open his mouth.

Nikolay ran off with his ripped mouth to the neighbors...⁴⁵⁶

Lacerated children raced after me and, falling behind, broke their thin legs in their awful haste.⁴⁵⁷

OKNOV Not content with just having smashed you over the skull with this stone, I'll rip your leg off as well.

.....
OKNOV (*Ripping away at Kozlov's leg*) I'm right here.

KOZLOV Oh, my gosh! He-elp!

STRYUCHKOV Seems he's ripped the leg off him!

AND MOTYLKOV

OKNOV Ripped it off and thrown it over there!

STRYUCHKOV That's atrocious!

is this and also that, that is itself Itself. / What is itself Itself, that might be that but not this, or else this but not that. This went into that, and that went into this. We say: God has puffed.

.....
But now both this and that are there. / But now this and that are here, too. / We long and mope and ponder. / But where is now? Now is here, and now there, and now here, and now here and there. / This be that. / Here be there. / This, that, here, there, be, I, We, God. (Ibid., 146-47)

Playing on traditional logical operations and language, the pseudo-tract defines categories in order to destabilize their definitions, established relations in order to reject them and, in the end, pictures a world in which things and entities are disjointed, indefinable and unrelated. Even basic categories of similarity, identity and difference collapse into each other through the constant recourse to tautology and disintegrate into the dislocated use of temporal and spatial markers (e.g., "here" and "now"). As a result, the reader is left with the sense that the world is an unknowable chaos, that our orderly systems misrecognize and misrepresent it, and that our language is incapable of conveying its essences and complexities.

⁴⁵⁶ D. Kharms, "A Nasty Character" in *Incidences: Daniil Kharms*, 132.

⁴⁵⁷ D. Kharms, "[I Had Raised Dust]," *Ibid.*, 137.

OKNOV	Wha-at?
STRYUCHKOV	N-n...nothing.
KOZLOV	How am I going to get home? ⁴⁵⁸

Blue Notebook #10

There was a redheaded man who had no eyes or ears. He didn't have hair either, so he was called a redhead arbitrarily.
 He couldn't talk because he had no mouth. He didn't have a nose either.
 He didn't even have arms or legs.

.....
 There was nothing! So, we don't even know who we're talking about.
 We'd better not talk about him anymore.⁴⁵⁹

A “distinctive feature of the OBERIU universe,” the corporal synecdoche—i.e. the atomization of the body *part* and using it as a substitute for the *whole*—has been attributed to the “model of infantile thinking” and interpreted in social, cultural and literary terms.⁴⁶⁰ OBERIU's excess of violence which often results in mutilation of the

⁴⁵⁸ D. Kharms, “The Hunters,” *Ibid.*, 74-45. For similar examples of severed and disjointed body parts due to violence, absurd circumstances or disease see Kharms' texts: “A Sonnet,” 51; “The Plummeting of Old Women,” 50 and “the Story of the Fighting Men,” 57; Vvedensky's “Conversation About Various Actions” and “The Penultimate Conversation, Entitled: One Man and War” in *OBERIU: An Apologia of Russian Absurdism*, 41-42 and 46-48. See also Vvedensky's poems “Znachen'e morya,” “Krugom vozmozhno Bog” and “Chetyre opisaniya,” his play “Elka u Ivanovykh” and his short anecdote “Zabolevanie sifilisom, otrezannaya noga, vydernuty zub” in “*Sborishche druzei, ostavlennykh sud'boiu*,” I: 407-10, 418-48, 459-69, 512-533, 548.

⁴⁵⁹ D. Kharms, “Blue Notebook #10,” in *Today I Wrote Nothing*, 45.

⁴⁶⁰ N. Cornwell interprets the recurrence of Kharms' extreme obsessions with falling, accidents, victimization, mindless violence and sudden death, as a feature that points to the author's “tireless quest for means to undermine his own narratives, or to enable them to self-destruct.” See N. Cornwell, “Introduction: Daniil Kharms, Black Minituarist,” 15. He also refers to psychoanalytic criticism, according to which, such motifs indicate the struggle between the body and the society upon which it depends, as well as he mentions the theory of the absurd, according to which, the infliction of pain and indignity on the human body is a standard feature of traditional farce. See E. Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism A Reappraisal* (New York: Routledge, 1998) and J. Palmer, *The Logic of the Absurd: On Film and Television Comedy* (London: BFI Publishing, 1987). J. P. Jaccard connects Kharms' motif of “punishment without a crime” with the writer's rejection of Dostoevsky's cause-and-effect logical sequence. In such regard, Kharms' story *Old Woman* is more than a parody of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*: it combines the elements of grotesque and metaphysical doubt with question-and-answer on the subject of faith, redemption, miracle and immortality. See J.P. Jaccard, “Nakazanie bez prestupleniya: Kharms i

characters and reducing them to single body parts or to bodies without certain parts, undoubtedly, points to the social turmoil of Russia in the 1930s and to the group's ambivalent attitude to conventions of plot development and image formation.⁴⁶¹ However, it also reflects OBERIU's distrust of philosophical systems, logical relations and casual sequences in which *part* and *whole* represent different hierarchical levels.⁴⁶²

In addition to undermining the hierarchy of *part* and *whole*, Kharms' texts destabilize another type of relation which is essential for any communication, writing and system of knowledge. That is the connection between the *sign* and what the sign stands for—an image, an object or an idea.⁴⁶³ Addressing that type of relation, Mikhail

Dostoevsky" in *Stoletie Daniila Kharmsa*, 49-64. Al. Kobrinskiy, who defines the synecdoche as a "distinct feature of the OBERIU universe," interprets the violated body, death and lack of funeral as a "stop-signal" breaking the line of narration or as a "minus-device" creating the effect of deceived expectation. In addition to the traditional reference to Gogol's story *The Nose*, Kobrinskiy connects Kharms' severed body parts (e.g., Aleksei Alekseevich's ripped off nostril) with Dostoevsky's narratives, the stories of XVIII-c. prisoners as well as with the ancient Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris, arguing that both Kharms and Khlebnikov were fascinated with Ancient Egypt. See Al. Kobrinskiy, "Pokhorony u Kharmsa," in *Stoletie Daniila Kharmsa*, 101-106.

⁴⁶¹ For example, in Kharms' story "Father and Daughter," the globalized synecdoche is stripped off any psychological aspects and becomes equivalent to a literalized metaphor. Since the entrance to the graveyard is guarded, the father buries Natasha on the street, and then Natasha buries on the street the paper that documents her father's death. As Kobrinskiy puts it, this becomes a "realization of the popular metonymy 'person = paper'" born at a time when the document of identification becomes more important than the person. See Kobrinskiy, "Pokhorony u Kharmsa," 103-104. Similar concerns would preoccupy Kabakov and his reflections on Soviet bureaucracy in the 1960-1980.

⁴⁶² Kharms' signature story "Old Woman" ("Starukha") offers a complex interplay of destabilized and globalized synecdoches: the narrator-character chooses to bury the dead old woman, after misplacing her dentures, in the swamp in the woods in Lis'em Nosu (the Nose of the Fox). This evokes a chain of associations—from the myth of St. Petersburg as a city built in a swamp, to the writing of Gogol and Block. See *ibid.*, 105.

⁴⁶³ The general approach proposed here unites Saussure's and Peirce's semiotic models; i.e., it refers to the relation between the *signifier* and the *signified* as well as to the relation between the *sign* ("representamen" or "representation"), the *interpretant* (not an interpreter but rather the sense made of the sign or the equivalent sign made in the mind of the interpreter) and the *object* (the the object or the idea that the sign stands for in the mind of the interpreter.) See Saussure, Ferdinand de *Course in General Linguistics*. Trans. Wade Baskin. (London: Fontana/Collins, [1916] 1974), 67 and Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Writings* (8 Vols.). Ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss & Arthur W Burks. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-58), 2: 228.

Iampolsky has noted that Kharms and the OBERIU writers reoriented the emphasis of the avant-garde “from the social reality to a semiotic reality,” the reality of signs:

Everything that the earlier avant-garde employed for the magical transformation of reality is used by Kharms for the “deconstruction” of the very concept of reality or for the criticism of the mimetic functions of literature.⁴⁶⁴

Story # 10 in Kharm’s *Blue Notebook* demonstrates one of the most evocative examples of destabilizing the literary sign and rejecting all conventions and concepts of reality that it represents.⁴⁶⁵ The main character is gradually deprived of all parts of his physicality—eyes, ears, hair, mouth and so on. First, completely fractured in the process of writing, the body steadily disintegrates and dissipates into literary and literal nothingness (“There was nothing!”) which undermines the very norm of having a character, story and subject of narration. Second, all signs of identity; e.g., name, personality or presence, lose their purpose, function and significance. Appropriated as a personal name, the namesake of the nonexistent character, “redheaded,” turns into an empty designation since there is no real referent (red hair) and no character, in the first place.⁴⁶⁶ So, the act of narration (or *talking*) problematizes itself as a communicative

⁴⁶⁴ Mikhail Iampolsky, *Bespamiatstvo kak istok [Oblivion as Source]* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 1998), 370-71, cited in Matvei Yankelevich, “Introduction: the Real Kharms,” 14.

⁴⁶⁵ See note 458.

⁴⁶⁶ Accordingly, the very purpose of using a personal name; i.e., of pointing to somebody in particular, and learning something about them through such designated communication becomes senseless (“we don’t even know who we’re talking about”). Ibid. The character here is an empty function—an absence of a character.

situation and, eventually, cancels itself out when it becomes clear that the “speech” has no actual *message, code or context* (“We’d better not talk about him anymore.”)⁴⁶⁷

Once the connections between the elements of language are destroyed, and the relation between the linguistic sign and the object that it represents becomes unstable, the world turns into a “set of discrete, unconnected objects—or so it seems.”⁴⁶⁸ According to Ostashevsky, in Kharms’ early works the physical discreteness generates “ontological autonomy”; i.e., the object’s independence from any relations allows it to be its “full self.”⁴⁶⁹ Kharms refers to this state of the object as the fifth state or the essential meaning of the object and portrays it through Chagall-like images of flight. Written in 1930, Kharms’ poem *To Ring—To Fly (Third Cisfinite Logic)* engenders a world of flying and disjointed ontological objects, corporal synecdoches and metonymies:

And now the house flew.
And now the dog flew.
And now the dream flew.
.....
.....
The balloon flew.

⁴⁶⁷ According to Roman Jakobson’s model of communication, typically applied to spoken language, the communicative situation includes the following basic components (each fulfilling a different function): sender (emotive), receiver (conative), context (referential), message (aesthetic), channel (phatic) and code (metalingual). See also Chapter 3. Earlier paradigms, such as the Saussurean model, proposed a “speech circuit” in which the comprehension of the listener mirrored the speaker’s expression of a thought. Drawing on the work of Karl Bühler that dated to the 1930s, Jakobson’s theory takes into account the role of various additional aspects and components, which subsequently underwent further moderation. In this sense, it is significant that Kharm defines his text as “talking;” something that is beyond the literary character of writing and its convention. Destabilizing the message, context, channel/contact and code of communication, his narrative undermines all speech acts and of language, in general. See R. Jakobson, “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics” in *Style in Language*. Ed. Thomas Sebeok (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), 350-77 and F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 11-13.

⁴⁶⁸ Ostashevsky, “Editor’s Introduction,” xxiv.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

.....

 Now the circle starts to flying.
 A house flies.

 A clock to fly.
 A hand to fly.

 A forehead flies.
 A chest flies.
 A stomach flies.
 Oh-no, catch it—the ear is flying.
 Oh-no, look—the nose is flying.
 Oh-no, my monks—the mouth is flying.⁴⁷⁰

The autonomy of flying entities is conveyed not only by the lack of any relationship between them, but also by the broken grammar or syntax (“starts to flying”), the shifting grammatical tense as well as the contradiction between the temporal deixis (“now”) and the past tense of the verb (“flew”). As a result, the objects become liberated in both the physical and the linguistic sense by overcoming logical boundaries, cause-and-effect regulations, grammatical rules and hierarchical norms. Loaded with non-Euclidian, Supremacist and metaphysical connotations, the flight signifies simultaneously the cause and the result of the object’s ontological condition in the 1930s.⁴⁷¹

⁴⁷⁰ *OBERIU: An Apologia*, 93-94. For earlier variations on the motif of absurd flight see Kharm’s poem *The Aviation of Transformations* in *Today I Wrote Nothing*, 129-131.

⁴⁷¹ In the 1930s, both avant-garde artists, such as Malevich, and avant-garde writers, such as Kharm’s, became interested in the non-Euclidian geometry of Lobachevsky who was seen as a creator of an alternative reality and “the first liberated person” who rejected the “absolutism of the traditional space.” According to Lobachevsky, motion and the tangency or contact of concrete objects constituted the foundation of geometric space. He questioned whether traditional geometric language and notions, such as line, point, surface, truly corresponded to the material body of nature. Motion and tangency give form to the space that, in such a way, ceases being absolute, in contrast to Kant’s absolute space built upon the Euclidian system. Kharm’s was not only aware of Lobachevsky’s inductive method, but he also based his

According to Ostashevsky, even the exhilarating, disjunctive world of Kharms' flying entities becomes a victim of dissolution because when all relations are eliminated the object vanishes.⁴⁷² In 1930, Kharms stated "Objects have disappeared," while in 1937 in a poem dedicated to the death of Kazimir Malevich he declared "Your life is only a fly..." reducing thus the idea of the free supremacist flight to a banal everyday reality ("a fly").⁴⁷³ Such a transition reflects changes in the philosophy of the *chinars* which, after the dissolution of OBERIU, became more concerned with alternative realities, relativism and phenomenological description rather than with absolute reality.⁴⁷⁴

Until 1959, only a few friends and close associates of OBERIU, such as the philosopher Jakov Druskin and the artist Pavel Filonov, remembered the work of the *chinars* which was suppressed and deemed unpublishable during the time of Stalin. After Kharms' arrest, his archive, or at least a significant part of it, was saved and preserved by Druskin who, up until the 1950s, was hoping that his friend would return from a prison, labor camp or asylum.⁴⁷⁵ In the 1950s, when it became clear that Kharms was not

venture into parallel realities on the mathematician's model of the "imaginary world." In 1937, Kharms wrote in his notebook "I want to become in life what Lobachevsky was in geometry." See D. Lukarelli, "Neskol'ko slov o neevklidovoi geometrii i filosofii chinarei" in *Stoletie Daniila Kharmsa*, 125-131. In Kharms' late prose, the state of being motionless signifies death. See *Death of a Little Old Man* in *Oberiu: An Apologia*, 123.

⁴⁷² Ostashevsky, "Editor's Introduction," xxiii.

⁴⁷³ "On the Death of Kazimir Malevich" in *OBERIU: An Apologia*, 120.

⁴⁷⁴ See Ostashevsky, "Editor's Introduction," xxv, Jean-Philippe Jaccard, "Daniil Kharms et la fin de l'avant-garde russe" in *Slavica Helvetica* 39 (Bern: Peter Lang, 1991) and Mikhail Iambol'skii, *Bespamyatstvo kak istok: Chitaya Kharmsa* (Moscow: NLO, 1998). The *chinari* included members of OBERIU and other writers loosely associated with its aesthetic.

⁴⁷⁵ During the siege of Leningrad and after the arrest of Kharms in 1941, Druskin, at the time seriously ill himself, walked from one end of the city to the other to meet with Kharms' wife Marina Malich and rescue his friend's papers. Druskin retrieved a suitcase full with the writings of Kharms and Vvedensky which miraculously survived Kharms' last arrest as well as the search and bombing of his apartment. Druskin's account of the story is presented in Mikhail Meilakh "Vokrug Kharmsa" in *Stoletie Daniila Kharmsa*, 132-45. See also Ostashevsky, "Editor's Introduction," xx. The archive, however, contains the manuscripts

coming back, Druskin began sorting through the rescued archive which contained the majority of Kharms' writing and only a small portion of Vvedensky's texts, the rest of which is now lost.⁴⁷⁶ In the beginning of the 1960s, Mikhail Meilakh was introduced to Druskin and became a disciple of the exclusive philosopher who began reading to him the manuscripts of Kharms and Vvedensky, adding personal accounts and commentaries.⁴⁷⁷ After Druskin's death in 1980, the archive was lodged in the Leningrad Public (Saltykov-Schedrin) Library, however, Meilakh managed to publish Russian-language editions of Kharms and Vvedensky in West Germany and the United States, two volumes in 1978 and a third one in 1984.⁴⁷⁸

Occasional scholarly works, unofficial manuscripts and *samizdat* publications related to OBERIU appeared underground and began circulating long before that, as early as 1959. According to Rosanna Dzakuinta, the "first article" mentioning the "*chinars*" and their performance *Tri levye chasy* (*Three Left Hours*) was written by Z. Shteinman and published in the important Leningrad journal *Zvezda* (*Star*) in 1956.⁴⁷⁹ Describing

that Kharms and Vvedensky wrote between 1929 and 1931, while earlier works written during their *zaum* period are lost. According to Meilakh, those earlier papers were confiscated during Kharms' arrest and used against him since *zaum* was considered "way of encoding anti-Soviet propaganda." Meilakh, *ibid.*, 134-135.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁷ According to Meilakh, this was the beginning of the systematic work on the archive which contained writings by Kharms, Vvedensky, Lipavsky and Oleinikov as well as the "remarkable drawings of Kharms." Mikhail Meilakh, "Vokrug Kharmsa," 133.

⁴⁷⁸ The third volume was delayed by Meilakh's own arrest due, in part, to OBERIU's publishing program and other alleged anti-Soviet activities. See Ostashevsky, "Editor's Introduction," xx and Cornwell, "Introduction: Daniil Kharms, Black Minituarist," 10.

⁴⁷⁹ That was the essay *Stikhi i vstrechi* (*Verses and Encounters*), partly dedicated to the Russian poet Evgeni Panfilov. It began with an ironic recollection of the performance which was held in the Leningrad House of Print on January 24, 1928. Steinman described the three poets that participated in it and quoted the absurdist verses that they recited. Although the article does not mention names, as Giaquinta concludes, it certainly referred to Kharms, Vvedensky and Tufanov. See Rosanna Giaquinta, "O marginal'nosti. 'Skromnoe predlozhenie' prostranstvennogo vzgliada na poetiku Daniila Kharmsa" in

the same event, in 1962 A. Dymshits published an essay on Mayakovsky in which he used the term *oberiuty*, listed the names of three of the performers (Kharms, Vvedensky and Tufanov) and quoted the “wildest” verses they recited.⁴⁸⁰ Isolated first publications of Kharms’ short humorous pieces for adults followed slowly thereafter.⁴⁸¹ It has been accepted, however, that the true literary rehabilitation of the *chinari* began in the field of children’s literature.⁴⁸² In the early 1960s, three different authors published articles on OBERIU’s stories for children.⁴⁸³ From 1962, the children’s books of Kharms began to be reprinted in the Soviet Union.⁴⁸⁴ The names of Kharms and Vvedensky were listed in the bibliographical dictionary *Sovetskie detskie pisateli (Soviet Children’s Writers)* which

Stoletie Daniila Kharmisa, 39-48 and Z. Steinman, “Stikhi i vstrechi” in *Zvezda*, 7 (St. Petersburg, 1959): 185. As a witness, Bekhterev gives a more thorough and somewhat different account of the same event in A. V. Zabolotskaia et al (eds) *Vospominaniia o N. Zabolotskom*. 2nd ed. (Moscow, 1984), 89-90. See Anatolii Aleksandrov, “A Kharms Chronology” in *Daniil Kharms and the Poetics of the Absurd*, 37.

⁴⁸⁰ A. Dymshits, “S Mayakovskym” in *Oktyabr’* (October) 4 (Moscow, 1962) and R. Giaquinta, “O marginal’nosti,” 39. Neil Cornwell also states that from the 1960s onwards Kharms began to be mentioned in memoirs and appeared in an “odd scholarly paper.” N. Cornwell, “Introduction: Daniil Kharms, Black Minituarist,” 10.

⁴⁸¹ See Neil Cornwell, “Introduction: Daniil Kharms,” 5.

⁴⁸² See R. Giaquinta, “O marginal’nosti,” 39-40 and N. Cornwell, “Introduction: Daniil Kharms, Black Minituarist,” 10.

⁴⁸³ See R. Giaquinta, *Ibid.*, 39-40; K. Chukovsky, *Ot dvukh do piati* (Moscow, 1960), 354-55; L. Chukovskaya, “Marshak redactor” in *V laboratorii redaktora* (Moscow, 1960), 219-233, 2nd edition (Moscow, 1963), 268-275 and I. Rakhtanov, “‘Ezh’ and ‘Chizh’” in *Detskaya literatura*, 2 (1962) and in I. Rakhtanov, *Raskazy po pamiati* (Moscow, 1966): 137-82.

⁴⁸⁴ N. Cornwell, “Introduction: Daniil Kharms, Black Minituarist,” 10. Kharms was among the most active contributors to the children’s magazine *Ezh* (the *Hedgehog*), Organ of the Central Bureau of Young Pioneers, after the publication of its first issue in Leningrad in February 1928. Over the period of a year, Kharms—who was invited to participate in *Ezh* by Oleinikov, the magazine’s editor—published in it ten works, including the poem “*Ivan Ivanich Samovar*,” the story “The Mischievous Plug” and the “Story of how Kol’ka Pankin flew to Brazil and Pet’ka Ershov didn’t believe any of it.” That coincided with the campaign against the “lack of message in children’s literature” started in 1928 and led to Kharms arrest. See Ostashevsky, “Editor’s Introduction,” xviii. Recent evidence unearthed by Meilakh also suggests that Kharms’ incarceration in 1931 may have been caused by the publication of the latter story which was cited in the report as an example of “dissemination of harmful, anti-Soviet literature in the children’s sphere.” See N. Cornwell, “Introduction: Daniil Kharms, Black Minituarist,” 9. Kharms also contributed regularly to a second children’s magazine, *Chizh* (*The Siskin*), which began in 1930 in Leningrad and which was thought up as a supplement to *Ezh*. During the 1930, Kharms published four books for children, all of them illustrated. See Aleksandrov, “A Kharms Chronology,” 37-40.

was published in 1961 in Moscow and provided a relatively full bibliographic account of their writings for children.⁴⁸⁵ Dzakuinta attributes the first scholarly mentioning of OBERIU in the West to the essay of the Italian scholar Vittorio Strada who defined the poetics of the group as “Russian surrealism.”⁴⁸⁶ However, the first steps of OBERIU scholarship have been connected with the publications of Aleksandrov and Meilakh in the 1967 Tartu proceedings “Materials from the XXII student academic conference.”⁴⁸⁷

It was Aleksandrov and Meilakh who established that writings of Kharms and Vvedensky were preserved (and often circulated) in places other than Druskin’s collection, even in state archives; e.g., the archives of the Union of Poets, the Institute of Art History and the Institute of World Literature. Aleksandrov discovered *chinars’* texts in the manuscript section of the Pushkin House, including Kharms’ poems from the archive of the Union of Poets and poems by Kharms and Vvedensky published in the two volumes of collective writings of the Union: *Koster* and *Sobranye stikhotvoreniya (Collective Poems)*.⁴⁸⁸ Other OBERIU manuscripts were preserved by friends and intellectuals who were close to the group, such as the art historian Vsevolod Nikolaevich Petrov, the collector and scholar Nikolai Khardziev as well as the artist Vladimir Vasilievich Sterligov and his wife Tat’yana Nikolaevna Glebova.⁴⁸⁹ It is only logical to

⁴⁸⁵ R. Giaquinta, “O marginal’nosti,” 39-40.

⁴⁸⁶ V. Strada, “Oberiu”: l’ultimo movimento d’avanguardia russo” in *Miscellanea per le nozze di Enrico Castelnuovo e Delia Frigessi* (Torino, 1962), 62-69. See R. Giaquinta, “O marginal’nosti,” 40.

⁴⁸⁷ R. Giaquinta, *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁸ In the manuscript section of the Moscow Institute of World Literature, Meilakh and Aleksandrov unearthed a letter to Pasternak written by Kharms and Vvedensky; the poems supplemented to it are now lost. Meilakh, “Vokrug Kharmsa,” 135.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 137-138. T. N. Glebova was a student of Pavel Filonov and a member of the nucleus of the “Filonov School.” She also worked for the journals *Ezh* and *Chizh* and illustrated the books of Kharms and Vvedensky. Her best works, according to Kovtun, emerged in the period between the 1960s and the 1980s

assume that some of these manuscripts were copied, distributed underground and circulated among Russian unofficial circles long before the scholarly rehabilitation of the *chinari*.⁴⁹⁰ A close associate of Malevich, Shkolovsky and OBERIU, Khardziev kept one of the rare manuscript copies of Kharms' play *Elizaveta Bam* that contained the personal scenographic notes of the author who used the same copy to stage the *Three Left Hours* performance at the Leningrad House of Print.⁴⁹¹ Khardziev showed the manuscript to Petrov who allegedly made a "huge number" of poor, typewritten copies which were distributed hand to hand.⁴⁹²

"Published" in the 1960s and 1970s only in suppressed *samizdat* and foreign editions with limited circulation in Russia, the literary output of Kharms nevertheless had a significant impact on the Soviet underground of that period. In the words of Yankelevich, Kharms "lurks in the background of Moscow Conceptualism (in the works of Ilya Kabakov and D. A. Prigov)..."⁴⁹³ In his memoir, Prigov attests:

In the end of the 1960s, copies of Kharms' poetry began circulating in Moscow. One such publication, a relatively big one, containing poems, stories and *Elizaveta Bam*, was acquired by Kabakov as a gift, and we read aloud with

when she began exploring religious and Christian themes. See E. Kovtun, "P. N. Filonov i ego dnevnik" in *Pavel Filonov: Dnevnik* (St. Petersburg: "Azбуka", 2000), 55 and 455-6.

⁴⁹⁰ For instance, Petrov gave some of Kharms manuscripts and his copies of those manuscripts to the Pushkin House from which they mysteriously disappeared. See Aleksandrov, "Materialy o Daniile Kharmse i stikhi ego v fonde V. N. Petrova" in *Ezhegodnik Rukopisnogo otdela Pushkinskogo Doman a 1990 god.* (Leningrad, 1993), 201-04 and 208-13. Meilakh also testifies that a secondhand bookseller in St. Petersburg told him that, at some point, he acquired six books by Kharms, one of which he bought and immediately sold to somebody who took it to Moscow. Meilakh's conclusion is that those could have been parts of Petrov's papers that disappeared from the Pushkin House. See Meilakh, *Ibid.*, 136. Another portion of Petrov's archive was inherited by relatives who made copies of it. *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴⁹¹ See notes 413 and 478. That version was published by Meilakh and V. Erlem in 1987. See Meilakh, *Ibid.*, 137 and 145, n. 14.

⁴⁹² That "disfigured" version was published by Gibian as well as Kleberg, but "wandering" underground copies started circulating earlier. *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴⁹³ Yankelevich, "Introduction: the Real Kharms," 33.

delight. As a whole, those were Kharms years; there was a sense of comical and dark absurd in the air.⁴⁹⁴

While Kabakov's affinity to Kharms in the late 1960s is thus documented, it is also safe to assume that the nonconformist artist had encounters with OBERIU-related ideas, texts or activities before that, perhaps as early as the early 1960s.⁴⁹⁵ Such a possibility gives an additional semantic dimension to the already polysemantic flight of disembodied corporeal extremities populating Kabakov's 1964 drawings. Like Kharms' autonomous objects, they defy any physical laws, causal relations or categorical boundaries such as the laws of gravity or the hierarchical ratio between part and whole.⁴⁹⁶ Soaring into the sky in some kind of predictable yet unexplainable order, they do not succumb to any mathematical, geometric or grammatical earthly attempts to integrate them into a larger system of thought and ideas; i.e., ideology.⁴⁹⁷ By the same token, they may very well be the "discrete, disconnected" human byproducts of the depersonalized machine-system. At any rate, Kabakov's extremities recall the disorganized flight of Kharms' "autonomous autonomy"—i.e., the essence of the object or the object in its *fifth*

⁴⁹⁴ Victor Pivovarov, *Vlyublenny agent* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2001), 67. Matthew Jackson similarly verifies that in a conversation with him Kabakov's close friend Bulatov stated "there was a 'Kharms cult' among his [Bulatov's] friends." See Jackson, *The Experimental Group*, 290, n. 56.

⁴⁹⁵ In addition to already mentioned articles, memoirs and children's stories published in the early 1960s, Kabakov also knew Khardziev and his assistant (and Kabakov's friend) the poet Gennady Aigi who prepared exhibits at the Mayakovsky Museum, among them shows of Mikhail Matiushin and Pavel Filonov in 1961 as well as Tatlin and Malevich in 1962. As a children's book illustrator, Kabakov might have also encountered the name and the stories of Kharms as a writer of children's literature.

⁴⁹⁶ Since any reference to a whole is missing in the drawing as well as in Kharms' poem, it is unclear whether the disjointed feet and hands are parts of a bigger unity, such as a body or sculpture, or whether they function as metonymies (parts not referring to a whole) or synecdoches (parts representing the whole).

⁴⁹⁷ In comparison, Prigov, who openly discusses the influence of Kharms on his art, has compiled a small interpretative dictionary of his conceptual images-symbols: house, window, couch, separate leg ("otdel'naya noga"), etc. He relates the latter image to the words of the Teacher in a Gnostic gospel and interprets it as a symbol of wandering and escape. Prigov, *Ibid.*, 176.

state as the “full self” or the thing-in-itself that is independent of any relations.⁴⁹⁸ In 1964, after a brief excursion into the geometric and graphic vocabulary of the 1920s Russian avant-garde, Kabakov comes back to the language of the fragmented human body and banal everyday object. Such a gesture resonates with Kharms’ bitter-sweet recollection of Malevich “Your life is only a fly...,” in which human life is represented as a brief moment in time, and the poetic Supremacist dream collapses into the prose of mundane, if not crass, reality.⁴⁹⁹

XII. The Flight of the Defamiliarized Object: *Pipe, Stick, Ball and Fly*

In the same sentence in which Kabakov mentions the drawings of “flying body parts” in his memoir *Zapiski*, the author also discusses another series of works which is closely related in terms of dating, subject and artistic intention. That is a set of drawings of “mundane, unrelated” objects such as “pipe and stick, sticks, lines and globes flying above the hills.”⁵⁰⁰ The disjunction between these objects is similar to the absurd relation between the body parts:

⁴⁹⁸ The reference to Kant here is made through Druskin, because the object-in-itself cannot be understood or explained via rational means or reflection.

⁴⁹⁹ See n. 473.

⁵⁰⁰ I. Kabakov, *Zapiski*, 17-18. The dating of these series is uncertain. In his memoir, Kabakov mentions that the “flying body parts” and the “flying objects” series followed the drawings of “spheres” completed in the winter and spring of 1963, so they probably began emerging in 1964. Thus, the only contemporaneous drawing of “flying body parts” published by Konečný dates to 1964. The surviving drawings of “flying objects,” according to two different publications, date to 1966. See Wallach, *Ilya Kabakov*, 42 and *(Non)conform: Russian and Soviet Artists 1958-1995: Ludwig Collection*, eds. Barbara M. Thiemann and Olga Breiningner (Munich: Prestel, 2007), 253. The best idea of what the early drawings of “flying objects” looked like, perhaps, could be found in Kabakov’s geometric drawings from 1962-1964 preserved in the Ludwig Collection. See *(Non)conform: Russian and Soviet Artists*, 252-255.

In some respect, they [the flying objects] can be defined as “metaphysical” objects in absurd relations—this was their whole metaphysics. Mundane, unrelated objects stand, float in space or become joined in some forced geometric relationship. One common motif—the objects appear “objectified,” yet they are arranged along the lines of forced geometry, within the metrics of the sheet (diagonals, cross, corners, frame, etc) or, to put it differently, the space “behind the sheet” encounters the space of the sheet (and subsequently, based on that idea, “Simple coincidence.”)

The space behind the sheet and the space of the sheet were always white, so this encounter of univocal visuality (color) and varied semantics (meanings) led to interesting results.⁵⁰¹

According to this passage, Kabakov’s earliest drawings of “flying objects” included two groups of items: “pipe and stick” as well as “sticks, line and globes.”⁵⁰²

The author emphasizes the absurdity of this inartistic congregation: the objects are “mundane” and “unrelated,” and their coincidence on the sheet of paper appears as accidental as paradoxical is the flight of the “stump,” “balloon,” “circle” and “spear,” among the airborne objects in Kharms’ *To Ring—To Fly (Third Cisfinite Logic)*.⁵⁰³

Though the connection between the OBERIU poet and the nonconformist artist in the early 1960s is hypothetical, their *absurdism* has a common philosophical denominator.

Kharms’ objects reached their *fifth state* of airborne ontological autonomy after the poet

⁵⁰¹ “V izvestnom smysle ikh mozhno bylo by opredelit’ kak “metafiziku” predmetov v asburdnykh svyazakh—v etom i byla vsya ikh metafizika. Bytovye, nesvodimye vmeste predmety stoyat, plyvut v prostranstve, soedinyayas’ v prinuditel’nykh geometricheskykh svyazyakh. Chasty motiv—predmety vyglyadyat ‘ob’ektivno’, no raspolagayutsya po liniyam prinuditel’noy geometrii, metrike lista (diagonali, krest, ugly, ramka i t.d.), tak skazat’ obgyryvaetsya vstrecha prostranstva ‘za listom’ i prostranstva lista (potom iz etoi idei—‘Prostoe sovpadenie’). I prostranstvo za listom, i prostranstvo lista vseгда byli belye, i iz etogo, iz vstrechi ravnosnachnoy vizual’nosti (tsvet) i raznoy semantiki (znacheniya) vposledstviy proizoshli interesnye rezul’taty.” Ibid., 18.

⁵⁰² In later drawings dated to 1966 as well as in a similar painting from 1965, one encounters a fourth object—a fly. See Wallach, *Ilya Kabakov*, 42 and *(Non)conform: Russian and Soviet Artists*, 253, fig. 186.

⁵⁰³ See note 470.

destroyed all hierarchical, logical and grammatical relations. Similarly, Kabakov's "metaphysical" objects are "unrelated" to each other (i.e., their sequence is strange or illogical) so they behave unusually as they "float in space" and fly "above the hills." The fact that, in Kabakov's words, the objects are "mundane" and "joined in some forced geometric relationship" further emphasizes the absurdity of their formal arrangement and physical situation.

As mentioned earlier, in 1964 Kabakov and Grobman discussed one of the theories that inevitably affected Kharms' writing in the 1920s-1930s—Shkolovsky's notion of *ostranenie* (*defamiliarization*).⁵⁰⁴ Judging by Grobman's exact citation of

⁵⁰⁴ Shkolovsky and Kharms knew each other. During one of their "collective and... theatricalized" poetry readings held during 1926-1927 in the Red Room of the Institute of Art History, for instance, the *Flank of the Left* (among them Kharms and Vvedensky) read selections of the group's work to the Formalists Tynyanov, Eikhenbaum, Shkolovsky and Tomashevsky. See Graham Roberts, *The Last Soviet Avant-Garde. OBERIU—fact, fiction, metafiction*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 6. Tynyanov and Shkolovsky were supposed to contribute, along with Kharms, Vvedensky and Zabolotsky, to a literary-critical Apologia which Kharms planned in spring 1929. Graham, *Ibid.*, 186. After another reading of the group's "manifesto," the theoretician of cultural "scandals" Shkolovsky is said to have approached the *oberiuty* with an ironic remark commenting on their inability to "throw a good scandal." See Meilakh, "Predislovie" in Vvedensky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, ed. M. Meilakh (Michigan: Ardis, 1980-84), I: ix-xxxiii and Ostashevsky, "Editor's Introduction," xvii. In 1967, Shkolovsky wrote a short article on Kharms in which, according to J.P. Jaccard, he discussed the absurd outlook on the world as a mechanism that isolates parts of the world and negates the links between them: "The world is linked not only by causal connections. Things which have risen separately and have found themselves side by side appear logical. But children and poets see them otherwise." Victor Shkolovsky, "O tsvetnykh snakh," *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 47 (22 November 1967): 16, quoted in J. P. Jaccard, "Daniil Kharms in the Context of Russian and European Literature of the Absurd" in *Daniil Kharms and the Poetics of the Absurd*, 53. A. Anemone adds that the same article offers "one of the most interesting interpretations of the effects of 'defamiliarization' in Kharms's prose..." because, in Shkolovsky's view, the "Kharmsian universe is constructed not on 'casual' (*prichinnye*) relations, but rather on 'habitual' connections (*privychnye svyazi*)." This leads to a world of inertia, 'common sense' which for Shkolovsky signifies "nothing but the totality of the prejudices of an age." *Ibid.* Anemone also reveals Shkolovsky's "inability to specify the historical and social targets of Kharms's defamiliarization" that, according to the same author, is "characteristic of all formal readings which refuse to engage the literary work's content as seriously and profoundly as they do its form." See Anthony Anemone, "The anti-World of Daniil Kharms: On the Significance of the Absurd" in *Daniil Kharms and the Poetics of the Absurd*, 74-75. One needs to point out, however, that in 1967 the open engagement of "the absurd in the cultural web of the Soviet society of the 1930s" that Anemone envisions would have had serious political repercussions, in addition to the fact that, Kharms' philosophical critique extends far beyond the cultural boundaries of Soviet totalitarianism.

Shkolovsky's neologism in 1964, this central notion of Russian formalism must have impacted Kabakov in the early 1960s. In respect to Shkolovsky's ideas, both Kabakov and Kharms emphasize the lack of logical, causal and categorical relations between the objects which are *defamiliarized*; i.e., featured in unusual manner and circumstances. While in Kharms' poetry the *essence* of the object lies *beyond* any language and in the state of ontological autonomy, Kabakov's realm *beyond* the visual is conjectured as space "behind the sheet" and as "varied semantics (meaning)." As a result, Kharms demonstrates the inability of any linguistic and cognitive systems to conjecture the ontology of the autonomous object. With an increasingly epistemological predilection, Kabakov explores the tension between *syntagmatics* (the space of the sheet) and *paradigmatics* (the space behind the sheet) as well as the gap between "visuality" and "semantics" to expound upon the relativity of representational systems.

A different kind of complexity between syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations emerged when the artist transpositioned the defamiliarized entities into the medium of painting. Following a path he had already tested in the past, in 1966 he created a large canvas that repeated the iconographic theme of the drawings, depicting a pipe, a stick and a globe (the latter featured in a more mundane fashion as a colorful ball) Fig. 20. In addition, the artist included a fourth object that simultaneously embodied and signified the idea of flying—an image of a fly.⁵⁰⁵ The painting is as explicit, ordered and

⁵⁰⁵ According to *Zapiski*, the work *Pipe, Stick, Ball and Fly* (*Truba, palka, myach i mukha*) was part of a group of four paintings that the author created in 1965-66 and the memoir defines as "large white objects" ("belye bol'shie predmety"). The group also includes the following three paintings: *Couch-Picture* (*Diban-kartina*), *Arm and Reproduction of a Ruysdael* (*Ruka i kartina Reysdalya*), *Machine Gun and Chickens* (*Avtomat i tsyplyata*). Kabakov, *Zapiski*, 21. *Machine Gun and Chickens*, which is currently covered with

“objectified,” as its title appears plain, additive and descriptive. The latter simply states the evident visual fact and lists the depicted objects in their obvious positional sequence: *Pipe, Stick, Ball and Fly (Truba, palka, myach i mukha)*.⁵⁰⁶ Kabakov’s memoir, however, explicitly overplays and implicitly complicates the painting’s apparent simplicity on both—the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic—planes of its artistic expression.

The first complication originates in the already mentioned incongruity between the “space of the sheet” and the “space behind the sheet” and intensifies the tension between the tri-dimensionality of the represented objects and the “metrics” of the sheet. The flatness of the background is challenged by the bulging reliefs three times (by the stick, the ball and the fly) before being broken by the protruding ceramic simulacrum of the pipe. The background, however, has its own dynamic contradictions hidden in the metaphysical qualities that Kabakov assigns to the color “white” in his discussion of the drawings of flying objects he created between 1965 and the end of the 1960s:

At that time, while constantly creating drawings, I increasingly felt that some light, some luminous energy was coming towards me in the process of their preparation. When I started drawing something on the sheet, some unusual light from a peculiar source started beaming towards me from the depths of the sheet... It seemed to me that I was drawing on the surface that was positioned

brown paint, was supposed to be also white, according to its author’s intention. Ibid., 25. In his more recent catalog, Kabakov dates *Pipe, Stick, Ball and Fly* to 1966. See *Kabakov: Paintings/Gemälde 1957-2008*. Catalogue raisonné, ed. Renate Petzinger and Emilia Kabakov (Bielefeld, Germany: Museum Wiesbaden/Kerber Verlag, 2008), 68.

⁵⁰⁶ Similarly to Kharms’ array of flying objects listed one after another with no explanation, connection or relevance to each other, the four nouns in Kabakov’s title are also compiled additively, one next to the other, in a plain and absurd syntagmatic sequence. According to Kabakov, the title was given at the time of the painting’s creation which, as he confirms, happened in 1966. Correspondence with author, July 2010.

perpendicularly to the light. Therefore, every representation on the sheet appears to be floating in light. As a clouded glass, the flat drawing soils, darkens and blocks this light. To me then, every representation seemed as a dirty glass that prevented the light to come from the depth to us. Paradoxically, however, this light appeared, came only when I started to draw something on the sheet. We could say that the light needed the few elements on the sheet and the balance of their positioning in order to burst forth with dazzling power from the depth towards me. The drawing became finished when, out of everything lying in front of me, steady pulsating light started flowing towards me... if a large object was depicted (ball, fly) it “floated” in the deepness of this light...⁵⁰⁷

The paradigmatic function of the white background, loaded here with a range of spiritual, metaphysical and psychological connotations, lends to the painting a sense of depth, freedom and essence (in both the formal and semantic aspects of the terms). However, the paradigmatic depth of the whiteness is soon to be challenged by the “metrics” of the image which brings the viewer back to the “space of the sheet.” Spaced rhythmically and evenly, the depicted objects are situated within the confinements of the painting’s composition, its highly organized arrangement reinforcing the “diagonals, cross, corners, frame” of the visual. Thus, the structure of the painting underpins the “forced geometry” that Kabakov emphasizes in his discussion of the drawings. The objects are positioned symmetrically, as if to balance each other, on the opposite upper and lower, right and left ends of the panel. The fact that that there are two objects, a ball and a fly, on the right, as opposed to a single pipe fragment on the left, only comes to underline the sensation that the two airborne objects are lighter than the massive lower

⁵⁰⁷ Kabakov, *Zapiski*, 21. The author adds that the term “metaphysical” in relation to this same phenomenon emerged later. Ibid. The description of the light coming out of the white background more or less repeats the sensation Kabakov felt when he created his first drawings of the *Shower* series. Thus, the combination of the two motifs—a simple highly charged iconic image depicted on a vast monochromic background—would become one of the signature motifs of artist.

half of the ceramic pipe simulacrum. As a result, the balanced and proportioned composition plays upon the formulaic depiction of a mathematical fracture or any other quotation of a codified mathematical language in which the symbols becomes replaced by figural substitutions.⁵⁰⁸ Slightly tilted to the side, the stick recalls a divider between the numerator and the denominator and plays upon the idea of a central vertical axis.⁵⁰⁹

The mathematical simplicity of the structured arrangement brings another complexity that is also voiced by the author. Looking back at his “absurd” works on paper—a loose group of drawings among which the series of flying objects would have played a prominent part if they had survived—in the mid 1990s Kabakov ruminated:⁵¹⁰

In the “absurd” ones [drawings] you can see how the most heterogeneous objects are connected in the most awkward order to one another, as they form some connections that are logical and precise in their own way, but it is difficult to say according to what rules. The world which is formed from them is also logical and structured in its own way and there is no chaos in it, it is just that the general principle of this structure is beyond our consciousness. And there is neither metaphysics, nor images, nor allegories, nor surrealistic effects in all of this—all connections and the world as a whole are absurd from the very outset.⁵¹¹

Typical for Kabakov, the stature of “leveling with the viewer,” i.e., of describing what seems like an obvious feature or a common response to the work without supplying

⁵⁰⁸ This play and objectification of mathematical languages becomes a central motif in Kabakov’s album *The Mathematical Gorsky*.

⁵⁰⁹ As a central axis, the stick could be referring to the mythological world tree, the cosmic tree of Neizvestny or the woman-tree of Sooster. See Chapter 2. Echoing the same image, the greenish surface of the stick reinforces the associations with the world tree that signifies the center of the universe and connects the terrestrial and the ethereal or water (the pipe) and sky (the ball and the fly) in Slavic art, folklore and mythology. By the same token, the positioning off center and slight tilting of the stick/tree makes an ironic comment of the same idea.

⁵¹⁰ In his memoir, Kabakov lists some of the numerous people, collections and places where some of these drawings, the ones that have survived, might have ended up. See Kabakov, *Zapiski*, 21-22.

⁵¹¹ Wallach, *Ilya Kabakov*, 97.

an authorial explanation, provides a new clue by drawing a correspondence between the space *of* the sheet and the space *behind* the sheet. As it turns out, both planes of expression combine absurdity or heterogeneity, on the one hand, with logic and structure, on the other. What is missing on or beyond the white “sheet” is the *key* or the *code* that would allow one to understand “the general principle of this structure.”

As Kabakov’s *Zapiski* propounds, in his paintings the situation becomes even more complicated, first of all, due to the lack of a “sheet.”⁵¹² By its very existence, the latter makes it easier to “provide light to the drawing on the small white sheet of paper.”⁵¹³ It also lends a sense of “conventionality” (*uslovnost’*):

Bumaga, kak vse v grafike, legko stanovitsya uslovnost’yu, kotoruyu my privychno prinimaem: lista kak by net, kogda my smotrim na risunok.⁵¹⁴

The paper, as everything else in drawings, easily becomes a convention, something that we habitually accept. The sheet seems to be absent when we look at paintings.

As a result of the sheet’s absence, to expand on Kabakov’s own thoughts on the subject, there is no formal separation between the space of the work and the space beyond the work (“the world which is formed from” it). The white background, absurd logic, structural metrics and heterogeneous objects of the painting become indicative of that world and signify a change in the author’s approach to the subject and its representation:

⁵¹² Kabakov, *Zapiski*, 22

⁵¹³ Ibid.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid. The term “uslovnost’” or conventionality/conditionality is one of the key notions of Russian Formalism and structuralism.

Pervoe, s chem ya stolknulsya, kogda stal delat' pervye tri "kartiny",—sam predmet, veshch', vznikaushchaya v protsesse ee izgotovleniya. Prikhodilos' imet' delo s etoy glupoy, muchitel'noy "neustranimost'yu" veshchi, sushchestvuyushchey vovne, pomimo menya i kotoroy net v bumazhnom liste iz-za ego uslovnosti. Samoe interesnoe, vazhnoe i glavnoe—eto to, chto u etoy vznikayushchey "veshchi" ne bylo imeni. Kogda my chto-to izobrazhaem, my imeem pered soboy proobraz—myach, mukhu—i my kopiruem ego. Esli my imeem v vidu chto-to "po tu storonu deystvitel'nosti", nechto "inoe", to ono v printsipe ne izobrazhaemo, a lish' perezhivaemo; no zritel', kak i khudozhnik, znaet gde ono nakhoditsya, gde ego iskat'. No veshch', izdelie, ne imeyushchee otnosheniya ni k veshcham real'noy deystvitel'nosti, ni k deystvitel'nosti "zapredel'noy" bukval'no povisaet kak absolyutnaya nelepost', kak neudachny, nesmeshnoy anekdot.

Eto dazhe i ne utilitarnaya veshch', kotoraya ot peremeny mesta stanovitsya "khudozhestvennoy", kak u Dyushana.

Net, ona prosto i navsegda nelepa.

No imenno takovymi ya i chuvstvoval svoi izdeliya-veshchi. Oni dolzhny byli sushchestvovat' lish' blagodarya interpretatsii. I vsyakiy raz ob"yasneniya zhalko ob"yasnyali "veshch'" tol'ko s odnoy storony, ne pokryvaya i ne izvinyaya soboy ee goloy neleposti.⁵¹⁵

The first thing that I encountered when I began creating the first three "paintings" was the object [*predmet*] itself, the thing [*veshch'*] emerging in the process of its making. I faced the necessity to deal with this stupid, painful "irremovability" of the thing that existed outside, independently of me and was not present on the paper sheet because of the latter's conventionality. What was most interesting, major and important was the fact that the same emerging thing did not have a name. When we create the image of something, we have in front of us a proto-image—ball, fly—and we copy it. If we have in mind something that is "on the other side of reality," something "different," in principle, that cannot be represented, it can only be experienced. However, the viewer and the artist know where to find it, where to look for it. The thing, the creation that does not have any relation either to the things of the objective reality or to the "other-worldly" reality hangs as an absolute absurd, as an anecdote that is neither appropriate nor funny.

That is not even the utilitarian thing which, due to the change of context, becomes "artistic" in Duchamp's case.

No, [in our case] the thing is simply and eternally absurd.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid.

However, that is exactly how I experienced my creation-objects. They existed only thanks to interpretation. And each time, the explanation poorly explained only one aspect of the “thing” without covering or excusing its naked absurdity.⁵¹⁶

As Kabakov’s introspection suggests, the series of flying objects demonstrates an important change in the *semiosis* of Kabakov’s artistic image—i.e., in the way in which the image refers to the extra-artistic reality and evokes meaning in the mind of the viewer. Such a change distinguishes the paintings and drawings of flying objects from all preceding works discussed in Kabakov’s memoir. Not accidentally all of the preceding works treated, in one way or another, human forms and, therefore, had an autobiographic significance—the lost *masterpiece*, the *Shower* series, *Boy*, *Head and Sphere* and the series of *flying body parts*. In contrast, the second *flying* series conjured up another type of visual entity—the material thing or object—which opened a new range of ontological problems and semiotic possibilities for the artistic image. In the theory of the OBERIU philosopher Druskin, the material thing could lead the interpreter to the realm of “other-worldly” ideas (*vestniki*) while in the poetry of the OBERIU writer Kharms the material thing dissipated to conjecture that such “other-worldly” connection is impossible due to the inadequacy of our interpretative systems and languages.

American Pop Art, which by 1966 must have been part of the vocabulary of Kabakov and his friends, judging by the memoir of Grobman, offered a different kind of approach to the object’s ontology by emphasizing its material presence rather than its

⁵¹⁶ The beginning of the passage makes a distinction between two Russian words that can be used to designate object—*predmet* and *veshch*. The first one means “object,” “subject” and “thing,” while the second one typically signifies “object” and “thing.” To keep the Russian distinction throughout the passage, this translation uses “object” for *predmet* and “thing” for *veshch*.

epistemological meaning or signification. The readymade of Marcel Duchamp—the only artist’s name quoted in Kabakov’s text—preserved and intensified the materiality of the thing, but placed it in a different system of connotations in order challenge its meaning and function. Shkolovsky’s concept of *defamiliarization* (*ostranenie*)—a subject of another conversation between Kabakov and Grobman, according to the latter’s memoir—presents another possibility: to *defamiliarize* the materiality of the object and thus to achieve new artistic effect and content.

Kabakov is clearly reflecting on such ontological problems and options in the 1980s when he wrote the passage quoted above, yet he was most probably thinking along those lines even in the mid-1960s. What brings him close to the *absurdity* of Kharms—a term repeated three times in Kabakov’s rumination—was most probably OBERIU’s epistemological concerns and dimension. In the 1960s, those epistemological questions acquire a more methodological approach in Soviet studies on semiotics which, by 1966, has become a familiar name in popular publications and on the pages of the journal *Znanie*. Kabakov’s painting problematizes all aspects of the sign—its syntactic, pragmatic and semantic relations. The image emphasizes the material characteristics and tangible presence of the objects through the bulging reliefs and vibrant colors of the ball, the stick and the fly and through the three-dimensional protruding piece of ceramic standing for the “pipe.” At the same time, the objects seem to float—half-present and half-disappearing into the white background.

The painting’s *things* [*veshchi*] also appear to be fairly straightforward in their reference to specific objects [*predmety*] in the external non-artistic reality (pipe, stick,

etc) or to the images of these objects in the mind of the viewer (i.e., *proto-images* in the words of Kabakov). However, the referentiality of the depicted objects appears undermined by their artificial character (the pipe, for instance, is represented by a piece of a ceramic pot), disproportioned size and absurd relation. Thus, if the artistic images are pointedly codified, their semantic connection with each other and the whole are rendered nonsensical. As a result, Kabakov's *creation-objects* "hang" on the picture, disconnected from the reality and from the world of ideas, without any relation to their referent or to their *prototype*. Like Kharms' autonomous flying objects, they can only signify an "absolute absurd" and "an anecdote that is neither appropriate nor funny."⁵¹⁷

Recalling Kharms' poems, Kabakov's painting can be seen as an absurdist take on the epistemological systems, scientific laws and languages of codifications used to structure, explain and understand the world—from physics and mathematics, to semiotics, grammar and language. For instance, according to the laws of gravity, lighter objects naturally float and fly (ball and fly) and heavier matter (pipe) rests on the ground, while, in relation to the normal sequence of cause and effect, it seems possible that the ball and the insect would fly away after one hits the pipe with a stick. As Kabakov admits, such readings are purposefully absurd, illogical and anecdotal in a way that seems "inappropriate" to the genre of painting. The meaning of the four descriptive nouns in the title, the sequence of which simply mimics the sequence of objects in the painting

⁵¹⁷ Referring to the same painting, Kabakov quotes the anecdote a couple of pages later: "... the stick hits the ball, and the fly flies away. But why is there a pipe? I do not know; it does not quite work." Ibid., 24. One of Kabakov's drawings depicting the same subject seems to more clearly illustrate that anecdote. See A. Wallach, *Ilya Kabakov*, 42.

(Pipe, Stick, Ball and Fly [Truba, pal'ka, myatch, mukha]), only adds to the semantic absurd and contradictions.⁵¹⁸

One specific characteristic, however, distinguishes Kabakov's "simply and eternally absurd" *creation-object* from Khrams's autonomous and illogical poetic visions. That is the conceptual facture of the painted image. It prevents the work from dissolving into complete meaninglessness and keeps it anchored in the viewer's or the author's interpretation. Each interpretation or explanation, in the view of Kabakov, is incomplete because, as he asserts, "each time, the explanation poorly explained only one aspect of the 'thing' without covering or excusing its naked absurdity."⁵¹⁹ However, the possibility of and openness to interpretation is essential to the creation-objects because, as Kabakov concludes, the conceptual image could *only exist* in interpretation ("They existed only thanks to interpretation").⁵²⁰ Departing away from the autobiographic subject, Kabakov seems to have arrived at the image that, according to his essay *Concealment*, is his true dialogical partner—the image that can exist outside and independently from its author

⁵¹⁸ For instance, the Russian word for pipe *truba* homophonically recalls something difficult and heavy (*trudny*), while the word for ball, *myatch*, refers to soft and light (*myakhy*). The idiomatic expression "delat' chto-n iz-pod palki" (literally to do something under the stick) means "to be bludgeoned into doing something," while the expression "eto palka o dvukh kontsakh" refers to the saying "it cuts both ways." The verb *trubit'* means "to blow," *palotchka* signifies the conductor's baton and *palotchny* implies "heavy-handed discipline." Lastly, the Russian word for fly (*mukha*) recalls phonetically the word for torment and torture (*mutchenie*), while the colloquial expression "pod mukhoy" (literally "under the fly") means legless. The Russian idioms "under the fly" and "under the stick" are also evoked by M. Jackson in his interpretation of the work. See M. J. Jackson, *Ibid.*, 73. As a whole, the two contradictory semi (semantic units) of heavy and light, difficult and playful, disciplined and fleeting seem to mimic the binary oppositions of the visual structure which is divided into left and right, upper and lower, heavy and light. While enhancing the polisemy of the image, they do not resolve its inner tensions.

⁵¹⁹ Kabakov, *60-e-70-e...*, " 22.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*

and, therefore, becomes able to speak and evoke associations leading “into various, often distant areas of culturology, philosophy, social psychology.”⁵²¹

In terms of interpretation, all four objects depicted on the painting point to key signifiers employed by Soviet *newspeak* and *cyberspeak* in the 1960s. The pipe, the ball and the fly as well as the symbolical variations of the stick (tree, rocket and tower) are some of the most frequently depicted visual emblems on the pages of *Znanie* and *Znanie-Sila*. In fact, in 1966—the year in which, according to all accounts, Kabakov painted his work—all four emblem-symbols appeared on the pages of the same issue of *Znanie-Sila* illustrated under the supervision of Sobolev (Figs. 22, 23, 24 and 26). *Pipe*, as one of the most loaded signifiers of the pompous newspeak of Soviet ideology—e.g., pipeline—was quickly adopted by the officialized *cyberspeak*. Thus, from a technical device connecting the vast territories of the Soviet Union and distributing natural gas to the whole country and abroad, it became a circuit of feedback and information (Fig. 23). Similarly, the ball that signified the athletic prowess and physical activities as important aspects of the life of Soviet youth began connoting cybernetic game theories (Fig. 24). Lastly, the fly which was used by both the avant-garde poet Khrams and the communist poet Mayakovsky to denote the simple, banal and everyday existence, in the mid-1960s became one of the key signifiers of cybernetic research in genetics after the discovery of the unique chromosome of *drosophilae* (Figs. 22, 25 and 26).

⁵²¹ Kabakov, *Concealment*, n.p. See Chapter 1.

VII. Conclusion: *Whose Fly is This?* In Wide Retrospect

The painting shown at the Kunsthalle in Basel under the title *Whose Fly is This?* was created in 1986, while *Quartet*'s catalogue dated its earliest version to 1968.⁵²² The recent *Catalogue Raisonné* of Kabakov's paintings published an earlier version of the motif, dated to 1967 and under the same title.⁵²³ The names of the participants and the dialogic exchange between them is slightly different, however, the subject and the central image, the fly, remain the same. Kabakov's memoir and a recent interview with the artist confirm that a painting under the title *Whose Fly is This?* was painted in 1965-1966.⁵²⁴ What was then the date of the first "conversational painting" and when was the beginning of Moscow linguistic conceptualism? Why did Kabakov suddenly change his visual aesthetic by including words within a painting? Written words—in addition to or complementing the title—certainly appeared in some of Kabakov's drawings prior to 1965-1966 mainly to "label" things and to juxtapose word and image. However, the mysterious *Whose Fly is This?* from 1965-66 seems to have been the first work depicting figure and text within the frame of a single painting.⁵²⁵

Certainly, the increasing conceptualization of both word and image in Kabakov's art affected this sudden change and development. In addition, genetic research on the

⁵²² See Chapter 1.

⁵²³ *Ilya Kabakov Paintings...*, 71.

⁵²⁴ Email interview with author, Augusts, 2010. The other conversational painting *To Look for a Scapegoat* which, according to *Zapiski*, was created during the period of 1965-66, is dated by other accounts to the later 1960s.

⁵²⁵ Appropriately, the image in *To Look for a Scapegoat* is missing; there is only writing on the painting.

chromosome of the fruit fly published in *Znanie* in 1965-66 fueled the imagination and induced esteem of the complexity hidden even within the simplest organisms in nature. Cybernetic interest in codes and machine translation contributed to the revived attention to language, information and Jakobson's communicational model. What the Soviet reader was also able to encounter in 1963 was a reprint of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* by Mikhail Bakhtin and a renewed appreciation for Bakhtin's dialogic ideas. Kabakov's friend Mikhail Grobman attests that Kabakov talked with him "about mono-consciousness and poli-consciousness, about Bakhtin and so on" on the December 1st in 1964, i.e., soon after Bakhtin's book was reprinted.⁵²⁶ This short annotation demonstrates that Kabakov and Grobman, the latter well versed in poetry and literature and writing fiction himself, not only knew about Bakhtin's book, but also had an understanding of its fundamental distinction between monophonic and polyphonic discourses. Later interviews of Kabakov have shown his insights into Bakhtin's theory, however, Grobman's documentary writing reveals that his friend was pondering Bakhtin's dialogism even before he created *Whose Fly is This?* in 1965-66. Proposing that Dostoyevski's novels are polyphonic, Bakhtin's study, among other things, discloses the non-dialogic authoritarian character of the official Soviet ideological discourse of *newspeak*. Similarly, Kabakov's painting depicts the informal conversation between two people who discuss the naming, origin or "ownership" of a shifting signifier—a *fly*—that refers simultaneously to Kharms, genetics, Mayakovsky, Malevich, cybernetics,

⁵²⁶ "1 dekabrya 1964... Besedovali s Iley o monosoznanii i polisoznanii, o Bakhtine i pr." "Besedovali" implies talking in length and reflecting together on something. M. Grobman, *Ibid.*, 39.

linguistics, Jakobson and a most banal daily existence. Such ironic combination of polyphony and polysemantics marks the birth of, what would become, Kabakov's most persistent artistic idiom—his conversational object-painting. It also signifies the genesis of a cultural phenomenon that would soon implement hybrid artistic strategies, which would seem simultaneously unsettling, dialogic, dense and provocative, in order to evoke various associations and interpretations—the phenomenon of Moscow linguistic conceptualism.

ILLUSTRATIONS:



Fig. 1 *Quartett August 1968 September 2000*
Baldessari, Kabakov, Kosuth, Pistoletto.
(Basel: Schwabe & Co. AG, 2000), Front cover



Fig. 2 Ilya Kabakov, *20. August 1968, 2000*.
View of the installation in the skylight room.

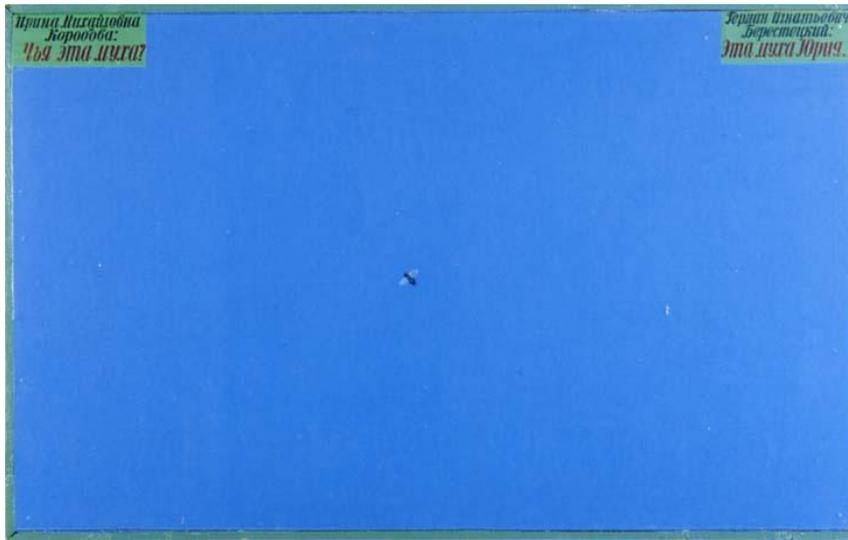


Fig. 3 Ilya Kabakov, *Whose Fly is This?*, 1968, enamel on masonite, 83,5 x 102 cm. Private Collection, Bern

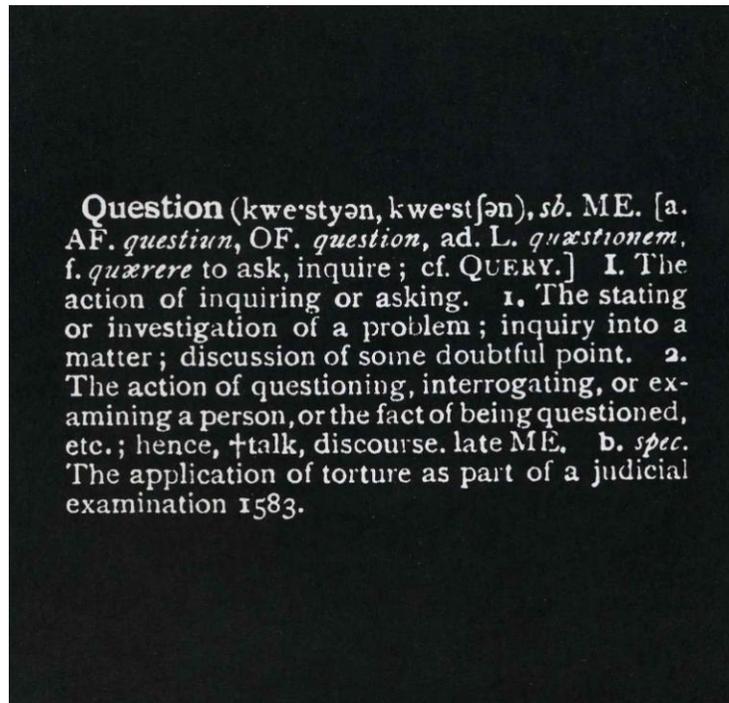


Fig. 4 Joseph Kosuth, *Titled (A.A.I.A.I.)*, 1968, silver gelatin print, 120 x 120 cm. Bruno Bischberger Gallery, Zurich



Fig. 5 *Quartet August 1968 September 2000: Baldessari, Kabakov, Kosuth, Pistoletto*. Kunsthalle Basel, 2000. Verso and recto pages: Joseph Kosuth, *Titled*, Ilya Kabakov, *Whose Fly is This?*

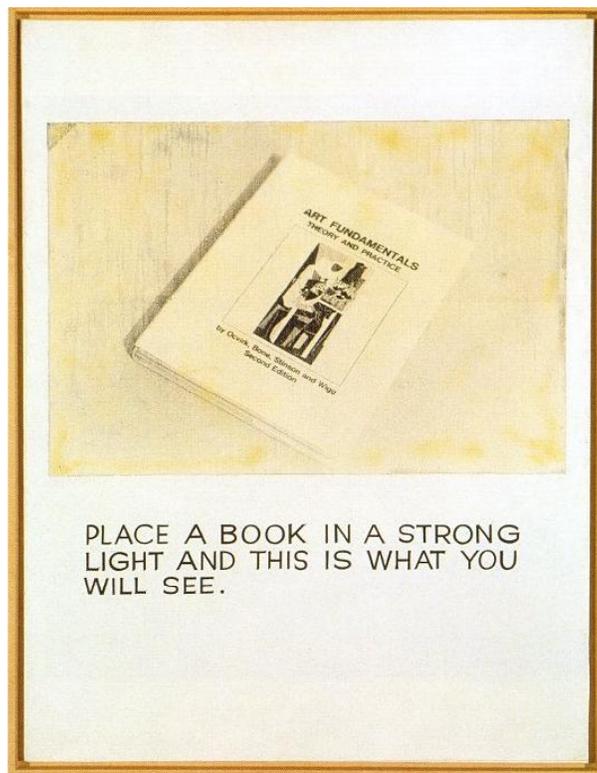


Fig. 6 John Baldessari, *Place a Book in a Strong Light and This is What You Will See*, 1968, acrylic and photo emulsion on canvas, 150 x 114 cm, private collection.

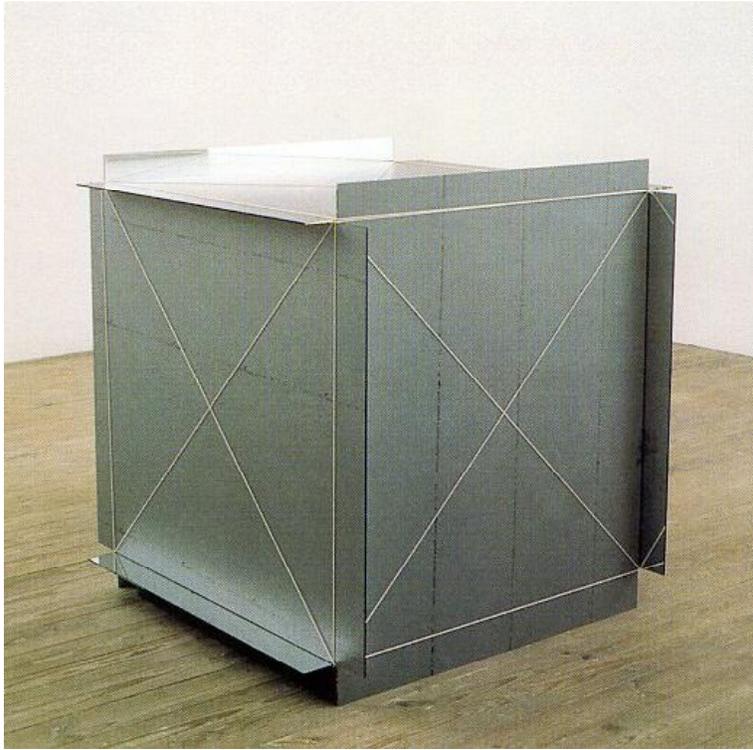


Fig. 7 Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Metrocubo d'infinito*.
1956-66/2000, six mirrors, 120 x 120 cm.



Fig. 8 *Quartett August 1968 September 2000*
Baldessari, Kabakov, Kosuth, Pistoletto,
installation, view of the skylight room.

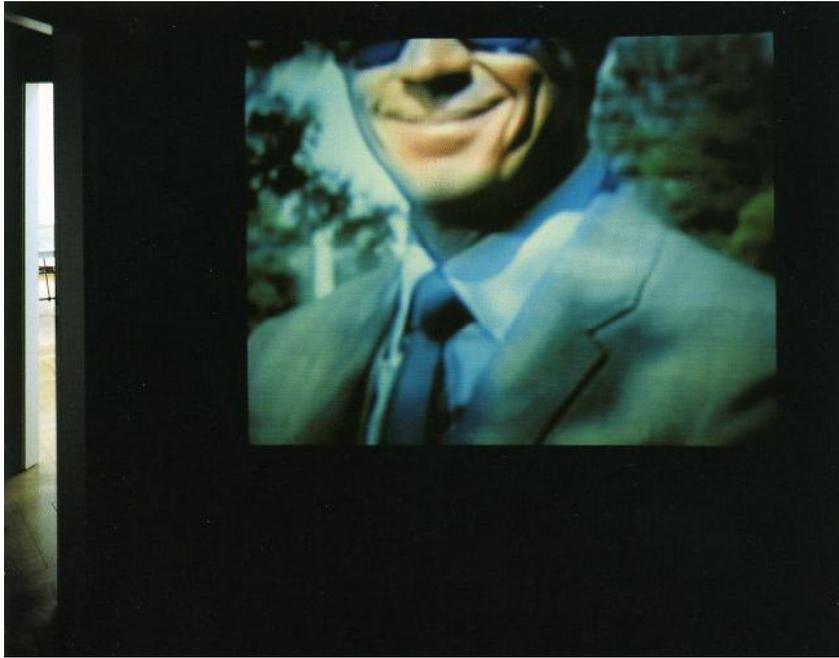


Fig. 9 John Baldessari, *Five 1968 Films (new)*, 2000, video installation.



Fig. 10 Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Outdoor*, 2000, installation (above), *Office* 2000, installation (below).



Fig. 11 Joseph Kosuth, *Per Cola et Commata*
(New York, 1968), 2000, installation.

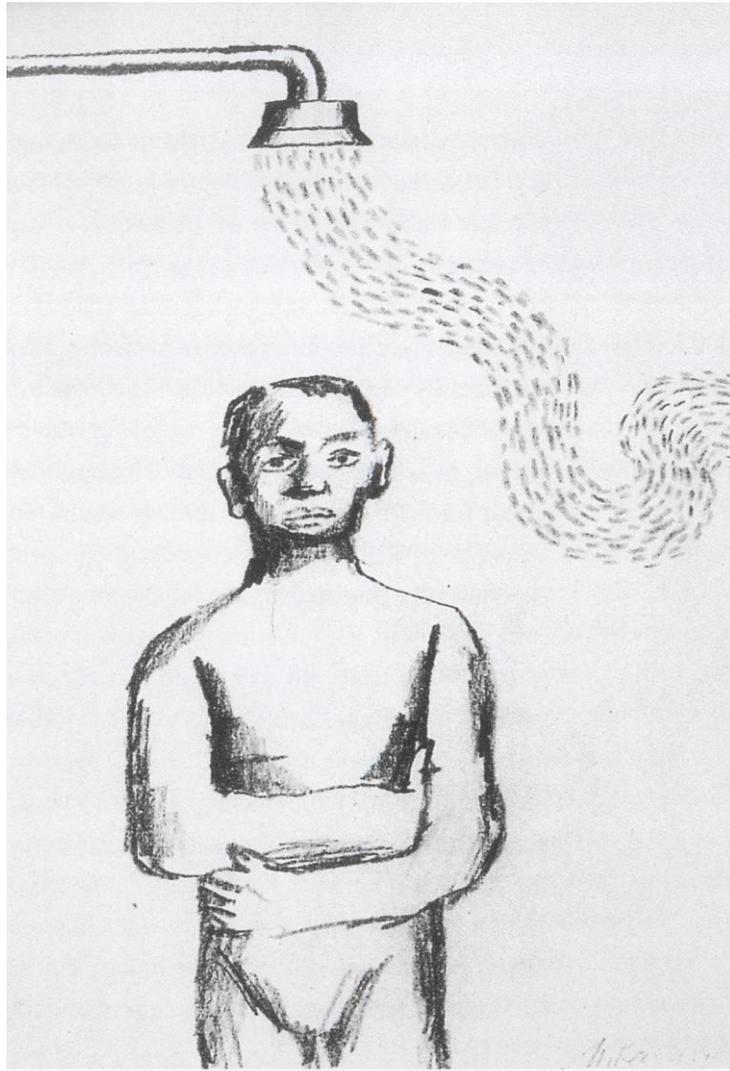


Fig. 12 Ilya Kabakov, from *The Shower* series, 1962, pencil on paper, 19 x 13 cm., private collection

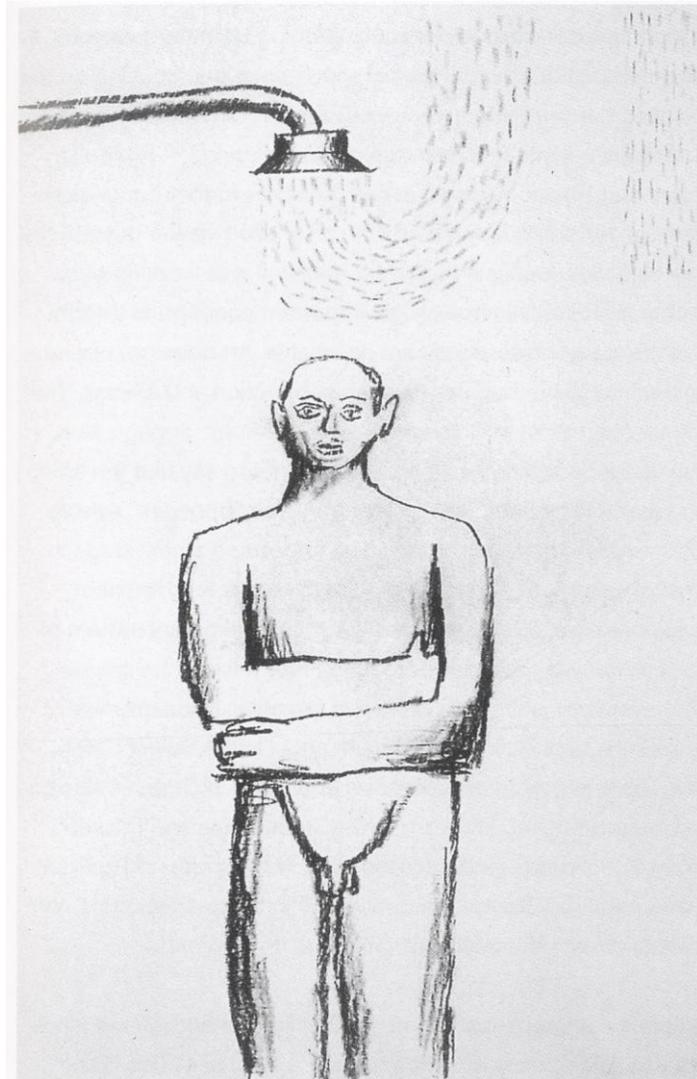


Fig. 13 Ilya Kabakov, from *The Shower* series, 1962, pencil on paper, 19 x 13 cm., private collection.

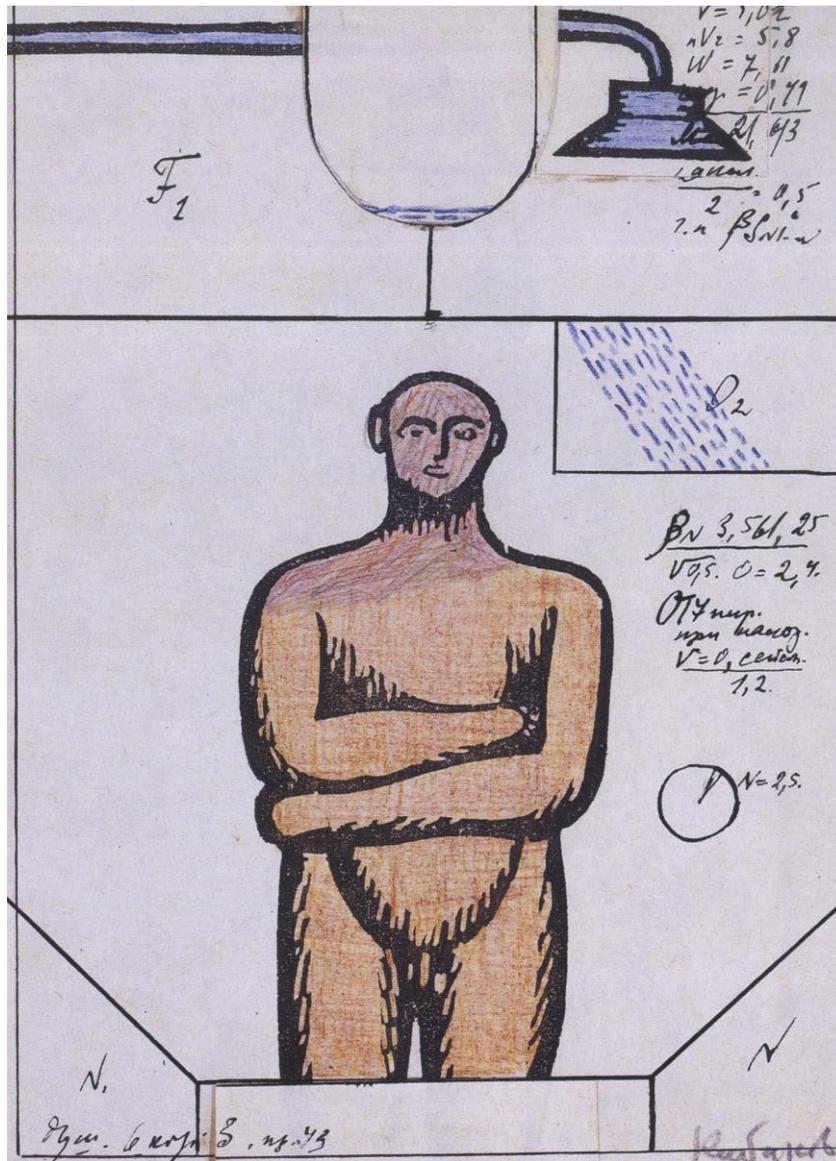


Fig. 14 Ilya Kabakov, *The Shower*, 1964, colored pencil, ink and linocut on paper, 18.8 x 13.5 cm., private collection.

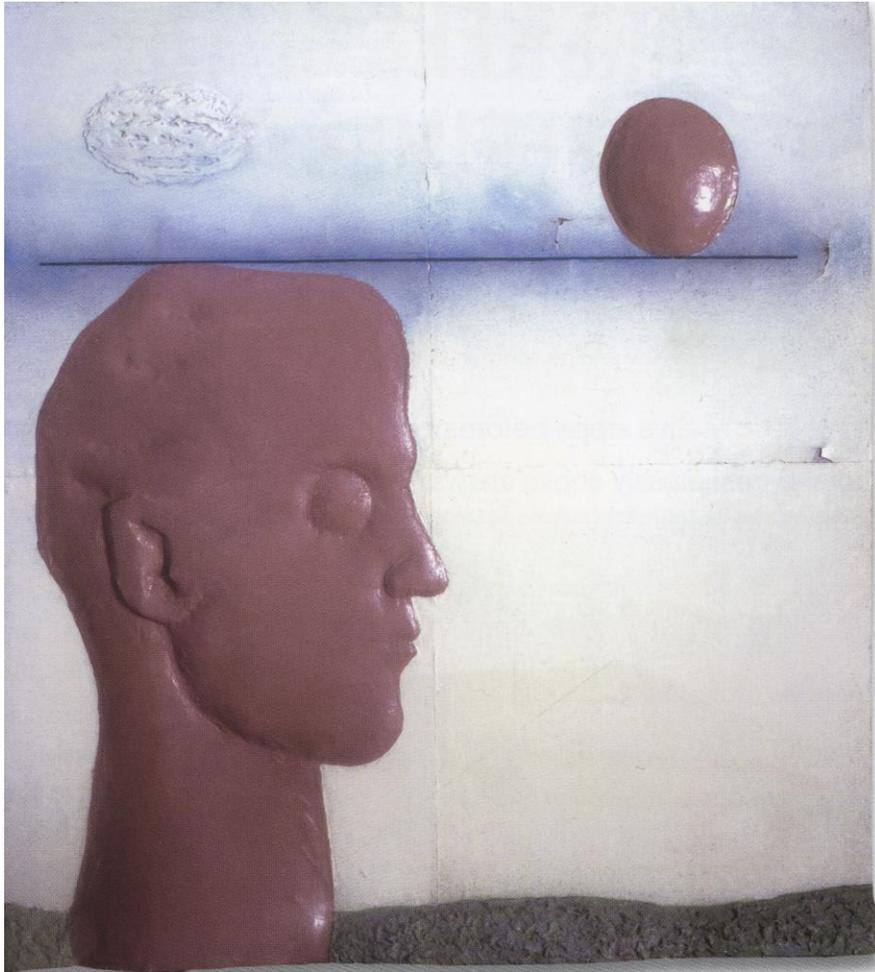


Fig. 15 Ilya Kabakov, *Head with a Sphere*, 1965, mixed media, plaster, oil and enamel on masonite, 150 x 120 x 12 cm., collection of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov.

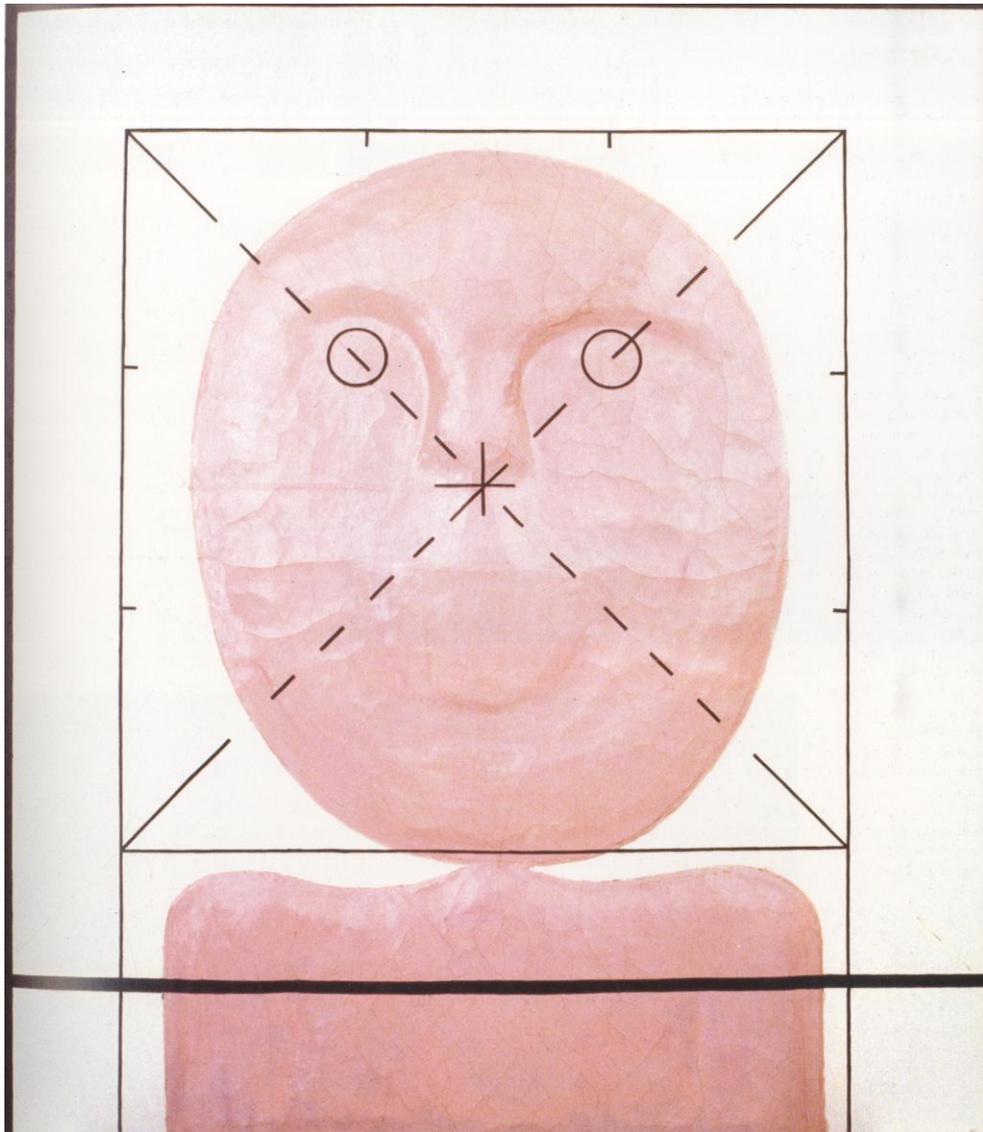


Fig. 16 Ilya Kabakov, *Boy*, 1965, textile relief, oil and enamel on masonite, 160 x 120 x 120 cm., collection of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov.



Fig. 17 Yuri Sobolev, *Cybernetic Fantasy*, 1964, ink on paper.

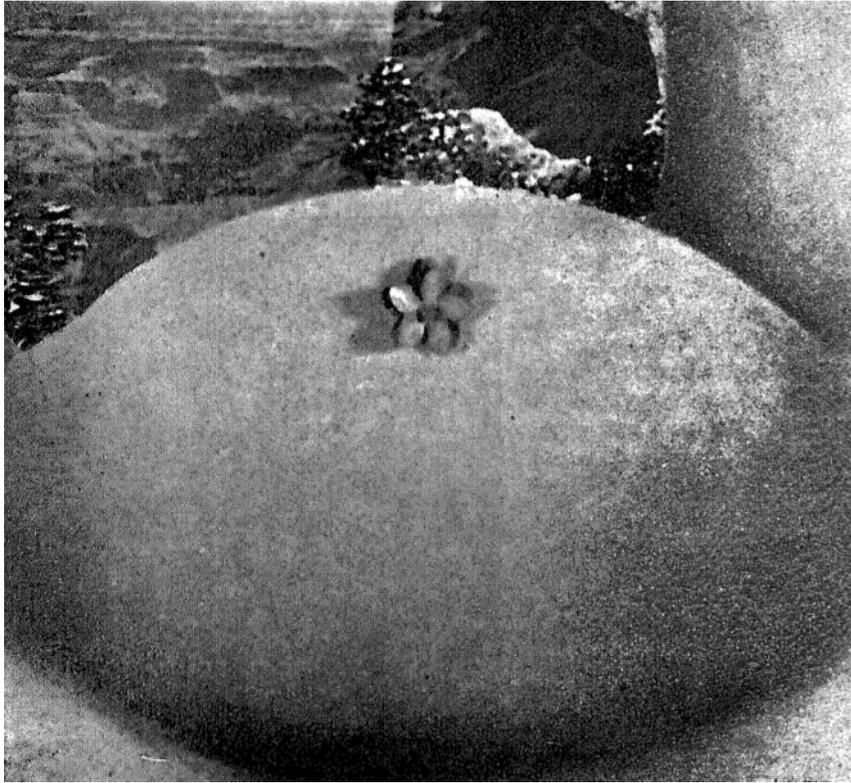


Fig. 18 Ülo Sooster, *Egg*, 1965, mixed media.

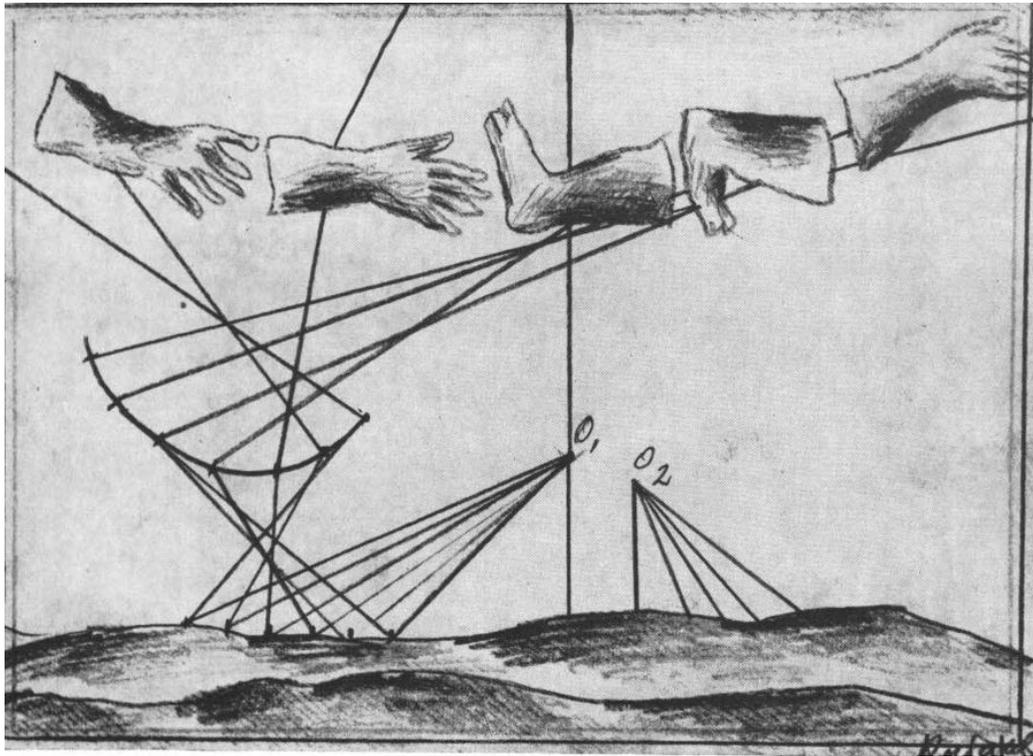


Fig. 19 Ilya Kabakov, from the *Flying Body Parts* series, 1964, pencil on paper.



Fig. 20 Ilya Kabakov, *Pipe, Stick, Ball and Fly*, 1966, ceramic, relief, enamel and oil on plywood, 130 x 180 x 20 cm., Ludwig Forum für international Kunst, Aachen.

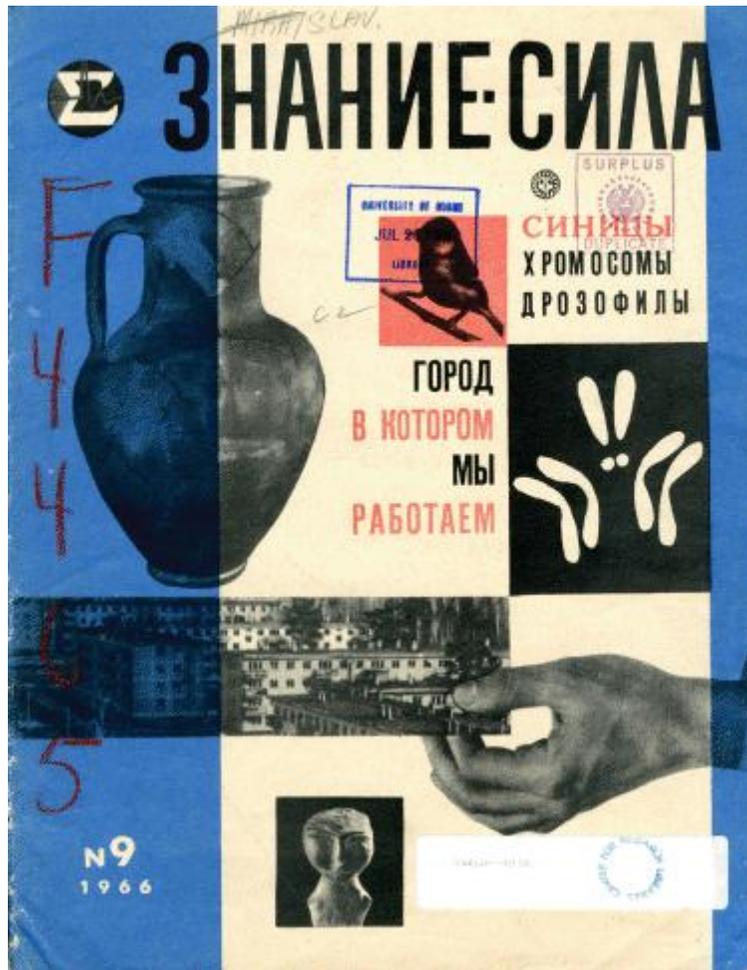


Fig 22 *Znanie-Sila*, (September 1966), front cover

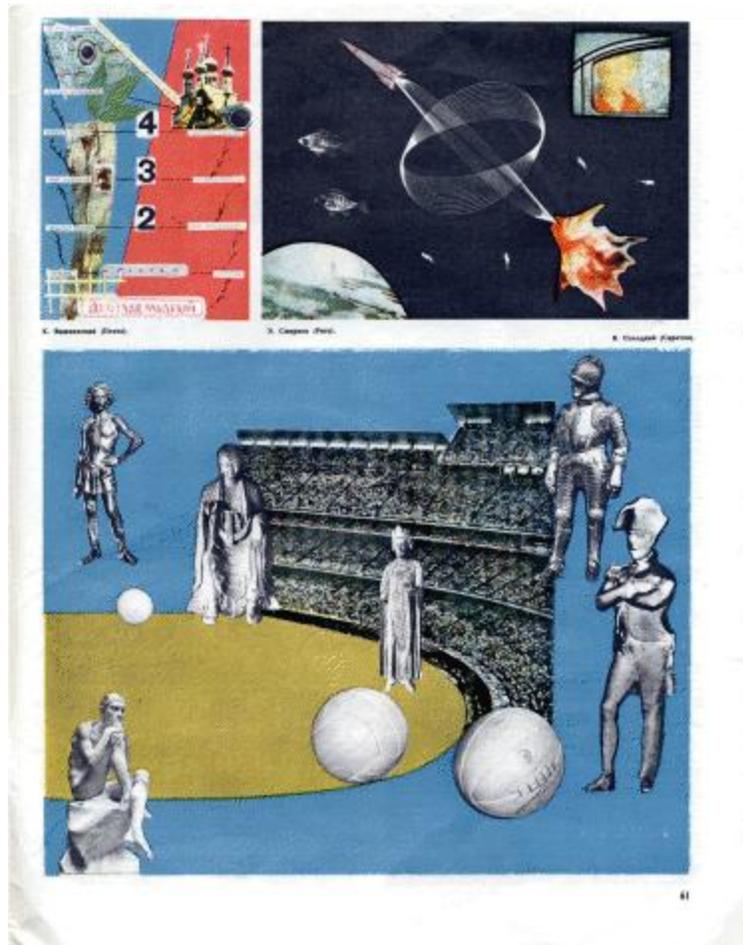


Fig. 24 *Znanie-Sila*, (September 1966), illustration

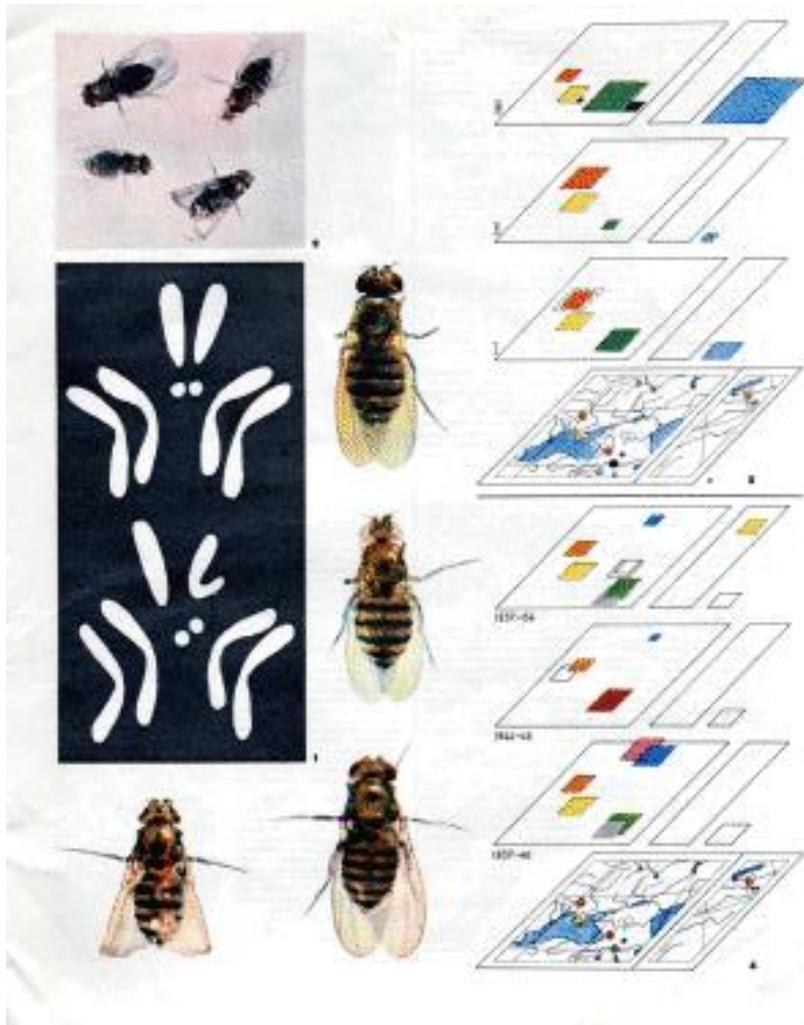


Fig. 26 *Znanie-Sila*, (September 1966), illustrations

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