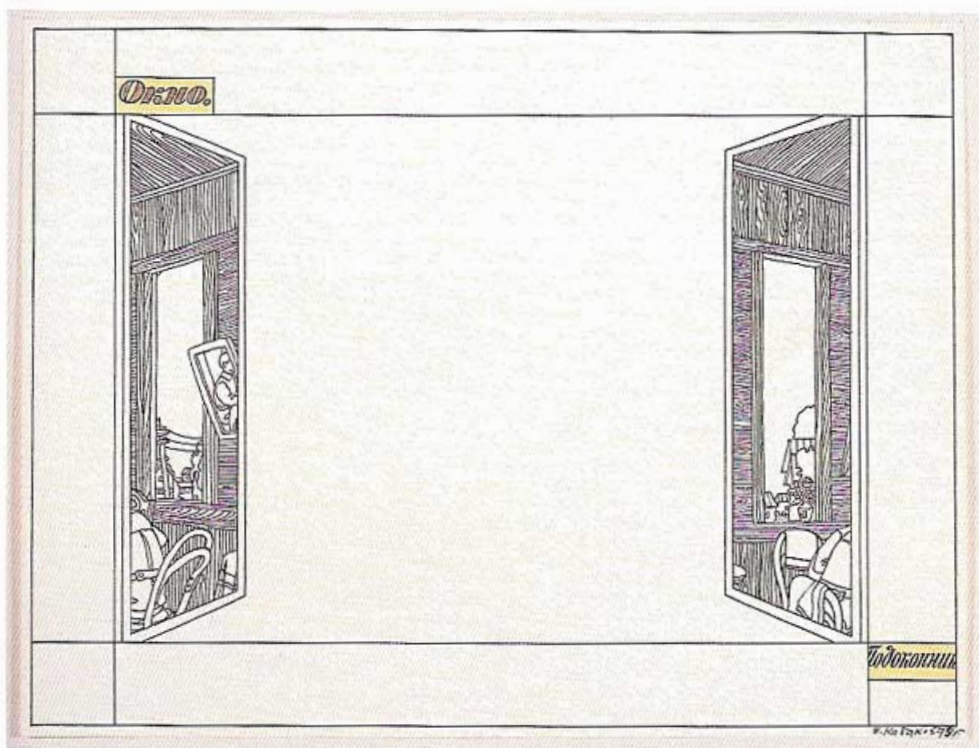


91. *The Bridge* (1991). Mixed media and eighteen paintings. Installation at Museum of Modern Art, New York

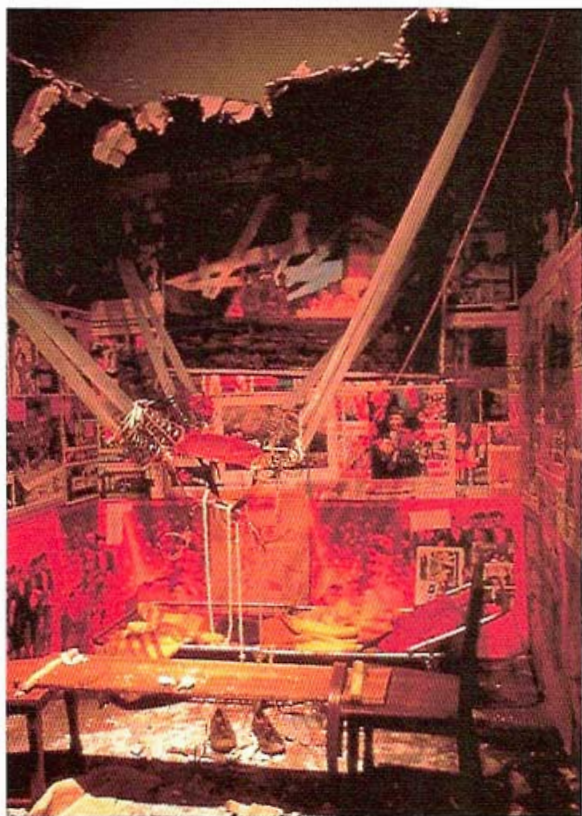
Koh, Germaine. "Ilya Kabakov." *Crossings*. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1998: 128-135.

Like the characters who haunt his work, Ilya Kabakov's biography contains elements of both resignation and nonconformity. Following tumultuous early years which saw the bleak conditions of pre-World War II Ukraine, flight from the advancing German army, and Stalin's crusade against Soviet Jews, Kabakov found a functional existence as an illustrator of children's books. Within the Soviet system, this occupation offered him a certain official status and the right to a studio, in which he was able to make his own artwork. Though not a political dissident, he was nonetheless active in a suspect



92. Page from *Looking through the window Archipov* (from *10 Albums / 10 Characters*, 1970-74)

93. *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment* (1986, later incorporated into *10 Characters*, 1988). Mixed media. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges-Pompidou, Paris



underground art world grappling with both Western and Soviet modernism and the burden of Socialist realism.<sup>1</sup> His work tackled philosophical ideas through conceptual means, as in the absurdist picture albums he produced during the 1970s. For example, *10 Albums/10 Characters* (1970-74) contained storyboard drawings and fancifully dismal text posing existential questions that trouble not only the lives of the imagined characters but also artistic creation.

Kabakov had already begun to move from these abstract investigations towards more immediate, evocative forms by the time of his emigration to the West in 1988 during the period of *glasnost*. Leaving enabled the release of thirty years of collected ideas that had been impossible to realize while in the USSR.<sup>2</sup> He immediately began to practise what he calls "total installation": exhaustive, dramatic, enclosed narrative works re-creating the oppressive atmosphere of mean officialdom that dominated everyday life in his former home. In his environments, the distinction between domestic and official spaces is often unclear, suggesting a pervasive contamination. The occupants of these deserted spaces – petty bureaucrats and common dreamers – have flown, leaving their communal kitchens.

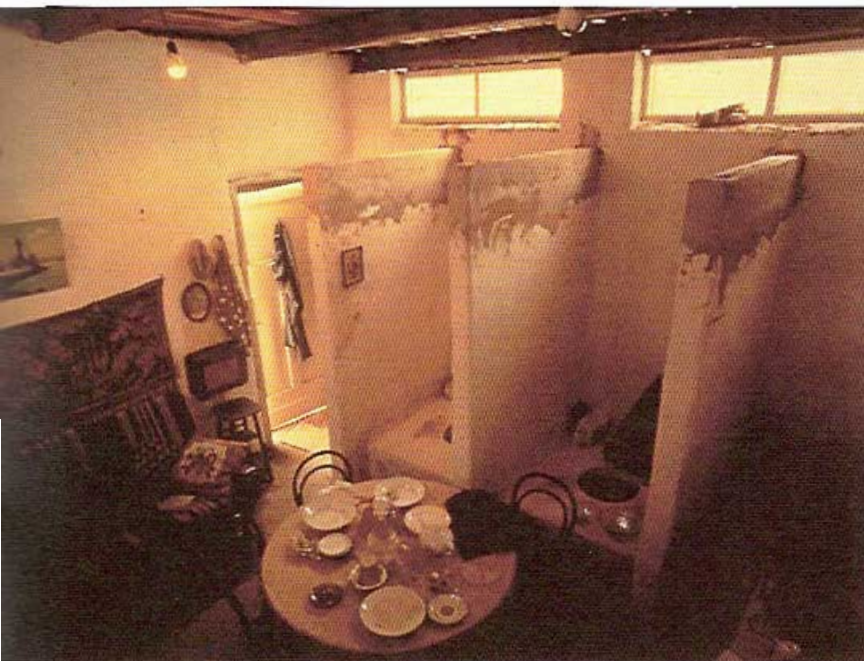
schools, archives, and museums in disarray. As viewers, we seem to encounter the environments at the point at which they are being uncovered, recuperated, and interpreted by other operators. The faithfulness of these renditions has led Robert Storr to point out that, ironically, "now that the Soviet Union has collapsed, Kabakov has, in effect, become its principal archaeologist."<sup>3</sup>

*10 Characters* (1988), the second large-scale installation realized by the artist, established several of the common features of his subsequent work: dreams of escape, the stories of little people, garbage. Each of these incommensurate threads

has categorical weight, as if they were the prime elements of Soviet existence. *10 Characters* describes the practical pressures of stifling communal life. A suite of small rooms re-creates a Soviet collective apartment and at the same time evokes a museum of anthropology, displaying the residue of the lives of its archetypically inconsequential characters, each longing for a way out: *The Man Who Flew into His Picture*, *The Man Who Collects the Opinions of Others*, *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*, *The Untalented Artist*. Kabakov had already developed some of these characters, including *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment* (1984-86), in his Moscow studio. The roughly boarded-off room, strewn with debris, plans, and bare furniture, features a shoddy catapult strung from the ceiling. Posted around the room, texts in various voices recount the man's actions and intentions, while a gaping hole in the ceiling points to his final, slipshod success. Typically, the climactic moment has passed and the environment has lapsed into obscurity: the vestige of a dream of flight.



95. *Incident at the Museum, or Water Music* (1992). Two-room installation at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. Twelve classical paintings, banquette, chairs, plastic sheets, pails, music by Vladimir Tarasov



94. *The Toilet* (1992), detail. Mixed media installation for Documenta IX, Kassel, Germany. Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Ghent, Belgium

96. *Red Pavilion* (1993), detail.  
Mixed media installation at Venice Biennale.  
Museum Ludwig, Cologne



97. *Garbage Box* (1986-87) in Kabakov's Moscow  
studio. Mixed media



Kabakov's installations continue to focus on the individual lives of such "small" people. Sometimes he uses symbolic stand-ins: flies, which he seems to view as the ultimate, almost invisible agents of insurrection, or "little men," tiny white figures attracted by catastrophe, who swarm over the chaotic remains of rooms. In *The Bridge* (1991), these insect-like brigades have taken over a dimly-lit meeting room whose human occupants have evidently fled in panic. The little men are a vision of upheaval, a mirage of will and desire.

Almost every installation includes "garbage" as an element, suggesting an endemic revulsion at the heart of Soviet life and proposing detritus as the essential type of matter forming disillusioned experience – in effect, a sort of everyday speech:

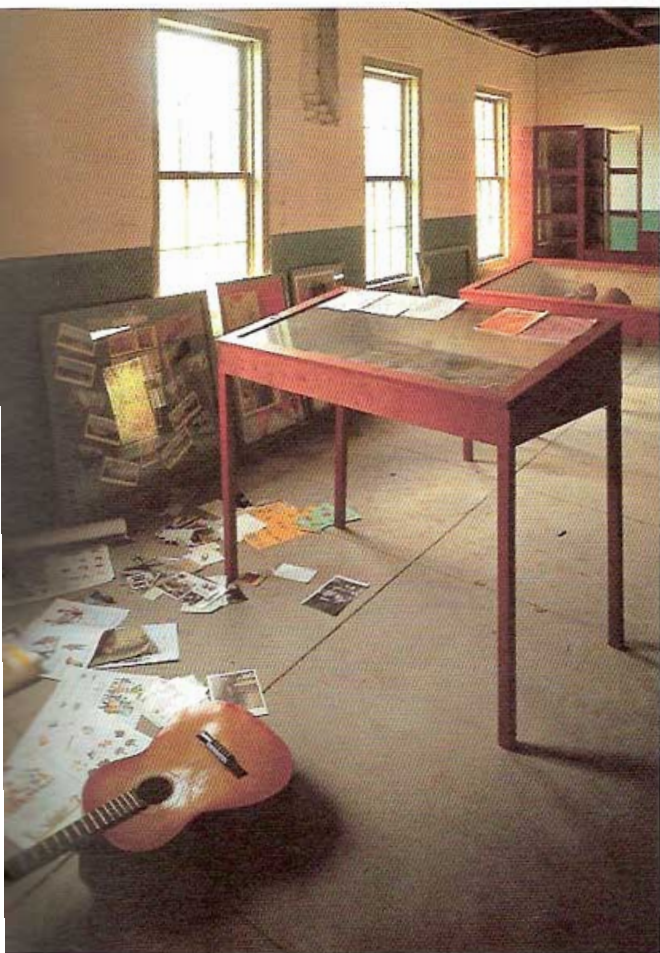
"Everything which surrounded us living in the Soviet Union represented an enormous littered space.... This image of a cluttered, dusty, half-abandoned, ownerless existence is firmly connected for me with the feeling of my Homeland and with the hopeless feeling that it is impossible to get rid of the situation, that it is here forever, and that garbage and dirt are the very unique 'genius' of our place, having taken up residence in it forever."<sup>4</sup>

The artist presented the normality of a degraded existence most forcefully in the installation *The Toilet* (1992), in which a public toilet with bare concrete stalls was set up as a typical family home. In fact, this

## Notes

1. Biographical details based on Amei Wallach, *Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), and on an unpublished interview with Diana Nemiroff, National Gallery of Canada, August 1997.
2. Felicity Barringer citing Emilia Kabakov in "Ghosts of a Vanished World," *Art News* (Sept 1995), p. 134.
3. Robert Storr, "Introduction" to Wallach, op. cit., p. 7.
4. Ilya Kabakov statement in Wallach, op. cit., p. 171.
5. "Red Pavilion" exhibition pamphlet for Venice Biennale, 1993.

98. *School No. 6* (1993).  
Permanent installation at Chinati  
Foundation, Marfa, Texas.  
Mixed media



installation had a certain autobiographical accuracy, as his mother had once subsisted in a bathroom.

Like fantasies of liberation hatched from a cluttered life, Kabakov's work conveys a measure of ambivalence about the loss of his native environment, which was stifling but which continues to provide his points of reference. It is not a matter of nostalgia, but of reckoning with the forces that moulded his experience. His project for the 1993 Venice Biennale, *Red Pavilion*, mockingly re-created a pompous official romanticism or yearning for other times. The Russian (former Soviet) pavilion appeared to be under renovation – littered with repair material and surrounded by a construction fence. The viewer passed through its dim and disordered interior to a balcony overlooking a verdant courtyard, where stood a cheery new pink-and-red "Pavilion of the USSR," about the size of a garden shed, bearing a tall mast with loudspeakers blaring upbeat Soviet songs. The project description imagines the inane bureaucratic form of optimism written into this structure:

"This 'little pavilion' is a territory of a world that still exists, but one which is hiding behind the facade of the other. Poised at the rear of the backyard, it is awaiting its moment to return to its place, from which it was thrown out not so long ago."<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps ironically, the desire for certainty captured here is not so different from the longing – a kind of nostalgia without an object – that underlies his characters' escapist dreams and compulsions to accumulate, as they struggle between making do and undoing. What Kabakov's archaeology of the Soviet era resurrects is an entire society perpetually dreaming of obliterating itself, of being elsewhere. G.K.