

Ilya and Emilia Kabakov

(Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine, 1933, and Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine, 1945)

After graduating from art school, Ilya Kabakov first worked as a children's book illustrator, an occupation that allowed him to earn a living, working only two or three months a year, and to spend the rest of his time working semi-clandestinely as a non-official artist in the Soviet Union. Moreover children's book illustrations were a separate realm within Soviet visual production—less closely regulated than other forms of graphic and pictorial production and a sort of small refuge for the avant-garde, where there was room for ironic, absurd, and fantastical images, combined with playful and paradoxical texts.

Albums (1972–1975), Kabakov's first series that has some of the qualities seen in his more mature work, have a direct relationship with illustration. These are notebooks where an imaginary artist or author describes himself with drawings and texts until the final, blank page representing his death.

A novelistic structure and imaginary characters will continue to characterize all his subsequent work. The type of characters to whom he gives voice together with Emilia Kabakov can be tied back to the small heroes of Dostoyevsky: often lost souls, always forced into situations that oppress and imprison them, although the Kabakovs succeed in coloring their melancholy condition with irony, with a touch, as has been noted, that is reminiscent of Gogol and the disillusioned perspective typical of "southern Russia," which is also the Kabakovs' homeland.

In the 1980s when the opportunity arose for them to create environmental installations in exhibition spaces in the West, they naturally progressed from short stories on drawn pages to sequences of rooms, beginning with *Ten Characters*, 1988, at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York: ten characters whose story is told through the spaces they inhabit.

I Sleep in the Orchard, 1991, in the CRT collection, is a room composed of a hospital-style cot, a panel with an abstract plant motif, a small improvised hedge of apartment plants and green paint applied halfway up the wall—the latter an element that often appears in their installations because they appear in institutional space shared with schools, hospitals, and public offices. The character to whom this environment belongs is Eliazarova. She was torn from the countryside where she lived, in a sort of agrarian idyll, and forced to inhabit an urban condominium with eight other families. Following a suicide attempt, she was taken to a psychiatric hospital, and this is the room that the Kabakovs exhibit. Here, doctors indulge the supposed madness of the patients, recognizing their creative nature and allowing them to express themselves in the way they furnish their spaces. The cot and the green of the walls continue to be melancholy, but reclusion in itself holds a promise of freedom that inhabits an artist's small studio. (EV)