

Kabakov in Dialogue with Lisitsky at MAMM

By [Christopher Brennan](#)

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A giant angel lies collapsed on the floor, its wings pointing in unnatural directions from a crumpled body. It has seemingly fallen through a hole in a large 1930s propaganda poster six stories up and is cordoned off from spectators, who are perhaps wondering why a transcendent being's flight could come crashing down to Earth so violently. This question, like the angel sculpture, stands at the center of "Utopia or Reality?" a new exhibition at the Multimedia Art Museum, Moscow that looks at the artistic promise and eventual disappointments of the Soviet Union.

The show, which bills the show as a dialogue between two prominent artists from different time periods, boasts a large number of works from the early Soviet artist El Lisitsky and the husband and wife duo of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov.

However, those visiting the exhibition, a special guest project for the 5th Moscow Biennale, can see that its real focus is on the Kabakovs, particularly Ilya. While the main event contrasts

two different eras, it is accompanied by a similarly segmented side project entitled "Two Walks with Kabakov," which features black and white photos of the artist taken by his friend Yury Rost during walks along Moscow's Chistiye Prudy and suburban Long Island in 1986 and the early 2010s, respectively.

Indeed, the exhibition's seven floors offer an in-depth look at a large swath of the 79-year-old conceptualist's work, from his early drawings to his late 1980s paintings to his plans for large-scale architectural projects. Kabakov, who has been active in Russian art circles since the 1950s and now works in New York, even made pieces specifically designed for the show, such as the large angel sculpture that seemingly fell through a Lisitsky poster.

Other utopia and reality-themed contrasts, some no less stark than the fallen angel, make up a dialogue between the artists that sometimes looks like Lisitsky's pre-World War II optimism is playing an unwitting sparring partner for the later artist's sharp insights into the Soviet system. On the exhibition's fourth floor, Lisitsky's plans for a device to raise and lower a statue of Lenin, labeled "Monument to a Leader" is juxtaposed with Kabakov's "Monument to a Tyrant," where the statue of a dictator has walked off his pedestal and reaches out to the crowd in a gesture that appears either beggarly or sinister.

However, curator Charles Eshe, who heads the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven and became involved in the MAMM exhibit because of his museum's large Lisitsky collection, said that while Kabakov may have the last word, his relationship with his early Soviet counterpart is not so simple. "It's not utopia and anti-utopia; it's utopia and reality," he told The Moscow Times at the show's Monday opening, adding, "There's a touch of reality in Lisitsky and a touch of utopia in Kabakov and I hope that this exhibition brings that out."

The best parts of the exhibition are those that give a hint as to why Kabakov and Lisitsky, as opposed to any others from the bookends of the Soviet era, should be compared, like the pair's shared penchant for grand, large-scale projects. One of the museum's top floors features models and theater set designs from both artists, including Lisitsky's unused set for a censored Vsevolod Meyerhold production called "I Want a Baby" and the Kabakov's giant stained-glass cupola stage that was used in Madrid in 2011 for the Olivier Messiaen opera "St. Francois d'Assisi." Both artists imagined utopic, dream-like installations, though, unfortunately for Lisitsky, only one became a reality.

Contact the author at c.brennan@imedia.ru

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