Ilya Kabakov's death in May 2023, Long Island has remained Emilia Kabakov's home and place of work. She is continuing their joint activity, finalising projects, initiating exhibitions and representing Ilya & Emilia Kabakov all around the globe. The Kabakovs created several hundred works over the course of their creative lives: installations, conceptual works and illustrations, most of which are situated in the domain between art practice and theoretical discourse.

Boris Groys

Boris Groys (*1947 in East Berlin) was born into a Jewish family from Kazakhstan. He grew up in Leningrad (today St. Petersburg) and studied philosophy and mathematics. Groys enjoyed a close relationship with the Moscow Conceptualists. His task was to record the theoretical background of their artistic œuvres. Groys left the Soviet Union in 1981 in order to embark on an international academic career. He dedicated his studies to analysing the Russian avant-garde, to totalitarianism and to Soviet culture. In 2008, he curated the exhibition "Die Totale Aufklärung. Moskauer Konzeptkunst 1960–1990" ("The Total Enlightenment. Conceptual Art in Moscow, 1960–1990")in Frankfurt and Madrid. In 2011, he curated the Russian pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale with an adapted version of that selfsame exhibition.

Today, Boris Groys is a Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies at the renowned New York University, a Senior Research Fellow at the Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design and a Professor of Philosophy at the European Graduate School/EGS.

Project head: Dr Matthias Haldemann
(until April 2025), Mia Jenni (since June 2025)
Research assistant: Irina Gerber
Project support: Jana Bruggmann, Malte Frank, Fabienne Loosli

Supporters

Stadt Zug

Trias Stiftung, Zug

Information

Opening hours

10 am – 5 pm on the following Sundays:
2025: Oct 19 & 26, Nov 9 & 23, Dec 7 & 21
2026: Jan 11 & 25, Feb 8 & 22, Mar 8 & 22, Apr 5 & 19, May 3, 17 & 31, Jun 14 & 28

Publications

Publications relevant to the exhibition are available at the entrance, offering deeper insights into the work of the two artists. You can also find these publications online on our website and order them direct from the publishers.

Events

This exhibition will be complemented by a diverse, participatory accompanying programme run by Mia Jenni that includes a city tour, starting at the "Drinking fountain" on the Bahnhofplatz next to the Zug main station (Sun, October 26, 2–4 pm; please register in advance) and two open workshop events: A dialogue in drawing (Sun, November 23, 2–5 pm) and a ping-pong tournament (Sun, December 7, 2–4 pm).

Whether young or old, everyone is invited to participate actively, to take part in a creative dialogue and to immerse themselves playfully in the work.

You can visit our online events calendar to get more details, plan your visit and add your personal favourites directly to your own digital calendar.

Art around town

Ilya & Emilia Kabakov
Drinking Fountain
2003

As part of the 2003 renovation of the square in front of Zug's main railway station, Ilya & Emilia Kabakov created an extraordinary drinking fountain made of Carrara marble. This was a gift to the people of Zug from the water company Wasserwerke Zug AG on the occasion of its 125th anniversary.

Further projects by the two artists in collaboration with Kunsthaus Zug can be found online under "Project: Collection":

**Oct 19, 2025–
Jun 28, 2026**

Handout EN

Ilya & Emilia Kabakov *The Tennis Game. In Dialogue with Boris Groys.*

"The topic 'animal' awakens feelings of bafflement in me..."

Ilya Kabakov speaking to Boris Groys

"What is a human being?" is one of the core philosophical questions. The follow-up questions that result from it often involve a comparison with animals. What actually differentiates human beings from animals? How do we delimit ourselves?

The installation "The Tennis Game by Ilya & Emilia Kabakov" searches for answers in the maelstrom of historical events and in the depths of psychology. Its fast-paced game of questions and answers between Ilya Kabakov and the philosopher Boris Groys begins with bafflement before continuing across the 14 blackboards of the installation. Initially, they seem to be reflecting on the nature and being of animals, but over the course of their discussion, it emerges that "The Tennis Game" is in fact about probing the nature of humanity itself.

Do our conscience and our sense of morality distinguish us humans from animals? And does this also apply in times of crisis? Is there something animalistic about being human? And does this emerge in moments of triumph and abundance, or is the opposite the case, namely that it emerges instead when we experience feelings of deprivation and fear?

At the same time, how humans treat animals is also discussed. We observe them in zoos, but still drive them out of our world (and our world of thought). When they are our pets we talk to them, elevating them to the status of our cohabitants. We give them identities, we recreate them with technology and clone them, but sometimes we seem to forget their nature and their significance for the environment.

"The Tennis Game" is one of Ilya & Emilia Kabakov's "total installations". In it – in a dialogue with Boris Groys – they demonstrate their mastery of the art of narrative. This multi-layered work overcomes the divide between East and West by removing utopia from both of them. What remains is naked humanity, with its humorous heights and dry honesty.

Kunsthaus Zug
Schaudepot

Introduction

“The Tennis Game”

In 2024, the Kunsthaus Zug was honoured with the donation of the work “The Tennis Game” by Ilya & Emilia Kabakov (2nd version, with Boris Groys). It is now being exhibited for the first time, at the Kunsthaus Zug Schaudepot.

Total Installation

This work belongs to the category of “total installations”. With this new genre of installation art, Ilya & Emilia Kabakov broke down the boundaries between art and its observers. These installations let visitors enter into a work, with the resultant spatial and atmospheric experience enabling them to achieve a new level of immersion. The installation encompasses all the dimensions of the space in question, meaning that visitors are completely enclosed by it.

When you read the conversation between Ilya Kabakov and Boris Groys, you begin to ponder things for yourself, and – if you follow the artists’ invitation – you’ll also enter into discussions with your fellow visitors.

First and second versions

Two versions of this “total installation” exist. The first was created in 1996 in collaboration with the artist Pavel Pepperstein, and was exhibited at the exhibition Strangers in the Arctic: “Ultima Thule” and Modernity in Copenhagen in Denmark. Its game of questions and answers on 16 blackboards contained questions about alienness and marginalisation, with repeated references to the Soviet Union.

The second version of “The Tennis Game”, shown here, comprises 14 blackboards. It was shown for the first time in 2000, at the City Gallery in the Center for Art and Media (ZKM) in Karlsruhe in the exhibition Herausforderung Tier – Von Beuys bis Kabakov (“The challenge of the animal – from Beuys to Kabakov”). At that time, the discussion on the blackboards was written in German. Since then, however, the work has been exhibited in various languages. At the request of the artist Emilia Kabakov, Zug is exhibiting an English version.

“The Tennis Game” is typical of Ilya & Emilia Kabakov’s installations. With its fast-paced game of questions and answers, this work engages with metaphysical topics such as the nature of humanity and what drives us. Its discussion arises from shared experiences of living in the Soviet Union, though without the work becoming autobiographical. Historical, psychoanalytical and theoretical considerations also influence the flow of the conversation between the two participants.

Immersion

In its dimensions, its lines and its net stretched across the centre, this installation is reminiscent of a tennis court. Its soundscape of players serving and of applause similarly helps to convey to visitors the impression of being at a tennis match. But the real game isn’t taking place on the court itself: it’s already been played by Ilya Kabakov and Boris Groys. We can witness their playful encounter on TV screens situated above the blackboards, where these film sequences and the soundscape of their tennis match are continuously repeated – which also means that their game never really comes to an end. When you enter the installation, it also soon becomes clear that, in sporting terms, the game only took place as a formality, as is underlined by the amateurish nature of the tennis match that we see taking place between the two participants. The installation is much more of a playful discussion – an intellectual disputation such as was already practised back in the Middle Ages. The open-ended nature of the installation opens up the space to its observers, enabling them to read the discussion not as anything definitive, but rather as an opportunity for them to search for both questions and answers and to discuss these with their fellow visitors.

Links with Zug

The Kabakovs are among the most significant conceptual and installation artists of their generation. Assorted international museums exhibit their works – as, for example, in their solo exhibition at the Tate Modern in London in 2017/2018. Other exhibitions of theirs have included the installation “Kommunale Wohnung” (“Municipal Housing”) at the 9th Kassel Documenta in 1992 and their show for the Russian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1993, entitled “The Red Pavilion”.

Ilya & Emilia Kabakov’s relationship with the Kunsthaus Zug goes back more than 20 years. The first exhibition here in which Ilya & Emilia Kabakov participated took place in 2001. The Exhibition of a Conversation by Pavel Pepperstein, Ilya Kabakov and Boris Groys placed their conversation at the heart of the exhibition. Their textualisation and exhibition of a fleeting moment of dialogue took up the entire Kunsthaus at the time and was created exclusively for it.

With their second exhibition, “Die Architekturprojekte” (“The Architecture Projects”), held at the Kunsthaus Zug in 2005, the artists also posed critical questions about the dividing lines between illusion, utopia and reality. This exhibition also displayed plans for “The utopian city, a city for the little man”, in the form of architectural plans for the Zollverein coking plant in the city of Essen in Germany. As a matter of fact, a few years before this, in 2003, Ilya & Emilia Kabakov had already played a role in shaping Zug’s urban space by designing the “Drinking fountain” made of Carrara marble that stands to this day in front of Zug’s main railway station.

Further exhibitions followed for the Kabakovs at the Kunsthaus Zug. In 2009, their plans for the museum’s possible extension were exhibited under the title “The Museum’s Archive”. This building project was not realised, however. In 2010, the Kunsthaus Zug organised a large-scale exhibition of Ilya Kabakov’s illustrative work: “Orbis Pictoris”, in which many of Kabakov’s works were shown for the first-ever time in Europe. This helped to focus attention on Ilya Kabakov the illustrator, whose art was highly regarded in the former Soviet Union, long before it opened up to the rest of the world. The retrospective “Ich beginne zu vergessen” (“I am beginning to forget”) followed in 2015. In 2022, against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, the Kabakovs’ monumental work “THE LAST STROKE or The Monument to the Last Man” was donated to the Zug Art Society. This installation had to be brought to Zug after the outbreak of the war, being transported from a gallery in Moscow via Helsinki. The content of this work is appropriate to its time: it is a ceiling-high installation showing a man rowing – the last man, already about to sink. Despite the bleakness of his situation, flying angels are projected onto his head, bringing a sense of hope that remains immortal.

Up to today, the population of Zug is probably most familiar with Ilya & Emilia Kabakov on account of their large-scale participatory project “The Ship of Tolerance”, which was built on Lake Zug in 2016. This full-size ship addresses comprehensive topics such as escape, globalisation and tolerance. This work can no longer be seen in Zug, but is instead exhibited around the world with the support of the General Conference of UNESCO. It is currently being exhibited in Samarkand in Uzbekistan.

Biographies

Ilya & Emilia Kabakov

Ilya Iosifovich Kabakov (1933–2023) was born to Jewish parents in Dnipropetrovsk in the Soviet Union (today Dnipro in Ukraine). He began studying art at the age of ten when he entered the renowned Academy of Arts in Leningrad (today St. Petersburg). When the Second World War ended in 1945, his lack of the necessary residence permit occasioned his move to the Moscow Art School. His mother always accompanied him and supported him during his studies, despite the great personal sacrifices that this brought upon her. After his mother’s death, Kabakov thematised these hardships and the necessity of her losses in his “total installations” entitled “Labyrinth (My Mother’s Album)” (1990) and “The Toilet” (1992). The autobiographical dimension of these works makes them an exception in Ilya Kabakov’s œuvre. His works are generally characterised more by a multi-layered, partly fictional authorial stance and by metaphysical questions.

After completing his studies, Ilya Kabakov began a double life as an artist. He earned his living as a book illustrator. This profession enjoyed a high reputation in the Soviet Union, and the income that it brought was sufficient for him to be able to embark on a secret life as a conceptual and installation artist. Ilya Kabakov was one of the leading members of the group of artists founded in the 1970s and known as the Moscow Conceptualists. These installation, performance, actionist and visual artists – whose number also included Erik Bulatov and Pavel Pepperstein – created works whose lack of realism and critical content made them unwelcome to the Soviet leadership. They did not engage in directly political art, but instead used ironic installations and humorous actions to address life and the art scene in the Soviet Union. Kabakov often disguised the authorship of his works by creating alter egos, thereby offering observers a space in which they could identify with his work and participate in it. The œuvre of the Moscow Conceptualists remained invisible in then USSR itself, but their contacts in the West enabled them to engage with a small public outside the borders of their native land.

Ilya Kabakov ended this double life when he emigrated to the USA in 1987 at the age of 54. As early as 1985, the Kunsthalle Bern had already dedicated a solo exhibition to him, entitled “Am Rande” (“On the margins”).

Emilia Kabakov (née Lekach, born in 1945, also in Dnipro) studied music and literature, became a professional musician, and emigrated to Israel in 1973. She moved to New York in 1975, working as an art consultant and curator. In the late 1980s, she began an artistic collaboration with Ilya Kabakov. In 1992, after Ilya Kabakov moved to New York, they married. Ilya & Emilia Kabakov acquired an international reputation above all for their pioneering, room-filling “total installations”. Their works reveal the multi-layered realities of everyday (Soviet) life. They also reveal the tensions between the social utopias of the USSR and the disillusionment that was its reality. From the 2000s onwards, Ilya & Emilia Kabakov declared their unambiguous authorship of their works, where they had previously often employed the names of fictitious artists.

The Kabakovs worked together as artists from 1989 onwards, living on Long Island in New York. Since