Ilya & Emilia Kabakov
The Tennis Game.
Im Dialog mit Boris Groys.

Dialogue in EN

A Dialogue between Ilya Kabakov and Boris Groys
Original written exchange between Ilya Kabakov and Boris Groys
Translated into English by Emilia Kabakov and Orliana Morag

Game 1 **Serve: Kabakov | Respond: Groys**

1. K: The theme of the "Animal" evokes in me the feeling of bewilderment and incomprehension, why must we even discuss this?
1. G: Animals progressively vanish from real life and this is why they surface in art. Some animals have been domesticated – for instance, dogs and cats. Such domesticated animals are of little aesthetic interest to us. Other animals are replaced by their virtual, "artistic" doppelgängers.

2. K: Animals, even if they do exist, are located somewhere very far away. But some can be seen in the zoo and circus. Don't they remind you there of professional clowns?
2. G: The fact that animals are humans in disguise is undoubtedly true. This is the basis of all our mythology of antiquity. We have only forgotten this a bit. Animals, in this sense, are simply people, overwhelmingly insisting on their specific cultural identity.

3. K: Nonetheless, there is a sense that something savage surrounds you, lurks somewhere nearby. Where is it?
3. G: There is a concept of a "beast," there is a concept of an "animal." A "beast" sounds aggressive, negative. But such a connotation is not necessary. We behave like animals, first of all, in peaceful situations – when we sleep, eat, walk in nature, and contemplate our surroundings.

4. K: This sense of the "Animal" in the atmosphere, sometimes appearing, sometimes hiding, as if pulsating, does it have some sort of law? Some rhythm?
4. G: I think that this is the same rhythm as the rhythm that determines the transition between work and free time. We are people – and here Karl Marx is right – only during work. The rest of the time we spend animalistically. It should also be noted that all the most beastly wars occur in traditional leisure zones, where people usually spend their vacation time – in Yugoslavia, the Caucasus, Palestine, and so on.

5. K: In Moscow, at the end of the 1960s, there was a cue for oranges. The line was long and patient. Suddenly, the voice of the hawker was heard: "Only one crate left!". Instantly, everything came to a head and a panic ensued, a battle roiled. Is the appearance of "savage" behavior related to the perception of "abundance" or "deficit?"

5. G: The phenomenon of Soviet animalism was not connected with a lack of food, but with too much free time to stand in lines. A normal civilized person will eat his fast food and run to work. He simply does not have enough time to be vicious. And when extra time appears to want oranges, a fistfight immediately ensues.

Game 2 **Serve: Groys | Respond: Kabakov**

1. G: Can an animal behave like a beast?
1. K: In case of victory he behaves like a beast and in case of defeat, where he is a victim, he behaves sacrificially.

2. G: Can we say that it is only a true humanist who won't hurt a fly?
2. K: A true humanist sees the person in a fly, but this is precisely what can be offensive to a person.

3. G: Is it possible to offend the fly with her representation in art?
3. K: The instant I finished an installation about flies, live flies appeared which buzzed terribly, but I still don't know what they wanted to say – something offensive or approbatory?

4. G: An animal can act as an object of art and also as an artist (for example, in a circus). Can an animal also be the audience?
4. K: To be the "audience" is to know how to behave oneself; it is first of all to be disciplined. I saw a dog in the cinema which behaved absolutely calmly for two hours and at the same time did not take its eyes off the screen.

5. G: Is an exhibition about beasts, the audience for which is exclusively human, politically and aesthetically correct?
5. K: I think it is absolutely incorrect. I have a lot of experience in this. For over ten years I have done and continue to do installations in the West about the Soviet Union and never once in my homeland.

Game 3 **Serve: Kabakov | Respond: Groys**

1. K: Earth, as is well known, serves as a habitat for animals. The sky is given to birds and angels. The top and bottom are thus occupied. Where to attribute the inhabitants of the sea?

1. G: Angels are our super-ego. Beasts are what we observe with our consciousness in the surrounding reality. The inhabitants of the sea should, obviously, be attributed to the realm of the subconscious. So our subconscious is, apparently, not angelic and not beastly – it just floats.

2. K: The animal is earthly, tangible. The angel is airy, intangible. What is the nature of the fallen angel?
2. G: Fallen angels are also not tangible. But animals can be possessed by demons. Then they become quite like people.

3. K: Strange aggregates – beasts with wings (sphinx, pegasus, the Venetian lion) – do not exist in nature but have always and everywhere been fascinating. What is the reason?
3. G: Cultural tradition considers the human soul to be a combination of an angel and a beast. Therefore, winged beasts symbolize the "inner man" – and besides, such a person whose soul does not readily fatigue. All these sphinxes and pegasuses look very cheerful and vital if you compare them with your own state of mind.

4. K: Until quite recently the meaning behind "animal" was understood as something symbolic. Suddenly the "animal" appeared nearby and is discussed as something real. Might there be a reason that the "symbolic" vanished somewhere?
4. G: You are absolutely correct. Everyone mourns the extinction of animals due to some kind of environmental problem, but in fact the symbolic is dying out. Only for the symbolic, there is no red book. The last red book for the dying symbolic was communism. And now this book itself is extinct. Only cats and dogs remain.

5. K: In the modern world, interest is concentrated around economics and sex. "Animals" are not yet included in either one or the other. Is it possible that the particular fascination with "animals" is the desire to fill this gap?
5. G: The current fascination with animals is caused by the fact that man today considers himself primarily an animal – after God and other metaphysics were abolished. Our future is genetics, which constitutes a combination of sex and economics. As a result, humanity will be remade, by way of genetic engineering, into many different animal species (including, perhaps, sphinxes and winged lions). And so we are fascinated, even now, by how this will look for us.

Game 4 Serve: Groys | Respond: Kabakov

1. G: Can microbes be considered animals?
1. K: Of course, if you reduce yourself to the size of a microbe, but it's nice to think that even in this volume we remain human.

2. G: How are we meant to feel towards the animals inside us – as microbes, viruses, as well as worms, and so on?
2. K: Like towards everything else in this world – with horror.

3. G: Should we become vegetarians?
3. K: It is desirable, but the presence of the beast is preserved: hunger remains decisive – we devour grass with the same passion as we devour the chicken.

4. G: Should the lion be morally condemned for his unwillingness to become vegetarian?
4. K: Here, it's rather a problem not of the imperative but of identification. If I see myself as a lion, I shouldn't condemn my neighbor, and if I am a rabbit, I should condemn him without mercy.

5. G: Do vegetarians kill the animal in themselves – which is at least as bad as killing and eating other animals?
5. K: The question is related to the well-known situation of being "inside and outside the elevator." Outside the vegetarian "rides in the elevator" (kills the beast). But inside the elevator the passenger "stands" – in other words, the vegetarian has already "killed the beast."

Game 5 Serve: Kabakov | Respond: Groys

1. K: Before: "Now the wolf will come and grab you!" The child listens, believes, and gets horrified. Now on TV scary and bloodthirsty scenes from the "World of Animals" – everyone, children included, look on indifferently. Is the verbal more powerful than the visual?
1. G: One glimpse of the TV box calms down both children and adults, regardless of what is shown there. I think that modern children can be seriously scared only if the TV malfunctions.

2. K: How do childhood memories prompt horror of any animal, even a mouse, when it unexpectedly appears? In the zoo it is "at home" and we appear ourselves. What is the place of "suddenness" in "viciousness?"
2. G: Sudden appearance is an attribute of gods, demons, spirits, ghosts, and evil powers. If an animal appears suddenly, it appears as a mask for evil spirits or a totemic beast bringing danger. This is a particularly effective manifestation of "beastly spirituality."

3. K: My neighbor – for eleven years – has been sewing a lady's dress for a cat, and pants for a dog. What does this mean?
3. G: Your neighbor is a child of the new era of global genetic experiments. She, obviously, dreams of a domestic animal that would combine all the best qualities of a dog and a cat and thus overcome the eternal opposition of "cat vs. dog," which is no less crucial than the question: "Whom do you love more? Dad or mom?" – demonstrating to the child the impossibility of the absolute. The mystical marriage between a cat and a dog acts here as an analogue of marriage between Christ and the Church, Yin and Yang, and so on.

4. K: It is known that children, when left alone, like to talk to animals. In what language does this happen?

4. G: Children do not talk to animals, but "in the presence of animals," as some say "in the presence of God." Language doesn't really matter.

5. K: The Russian avant-garde artist Matyushin proposed at the beginning of the century to find a common language with animals, but instead of by teaching them human words, by delving into and participating in their "conversations." What did he mean?
5. G: I think he meant Velemir Khlebnikov's theory that individual sounds themselves, independent of any particular language, have their own meaning – so beasts speak because they make sounds. But I think that then it's better to talk to stones that are mostly silent but also somehow make sound from time to time.

Game 6 Serve: Groys | Respond: Kabakov

1. G: What kind of animal is an artist – wild or domesticated?
1. K: As is known, the difference between a wild and a tame animal is that one permits and the other does not, someone to touch them. The artist allows himself to be touched in some places, not others, therefore, he is a hybrid variety.

2. G: Is there a difference between a museum and a zoo?
2. K: The same difference as between a classical museum and a museum of modern art: the first one shows tanned and dried skins, in the second one the skins have not yet been removed.

3. G: Doesn't a modern artist sit in his installation like an animal in a cage?
3. K: No, he doesn't sit, but it smells a lot of his urine and excrement. However, in many it doesn't even smell.

4. G: Whom does the modern curator most resemble – a ringmaster in the circus or a keeper in the zoo?
4. K: He most resembles a city official who calculates the estimate for the maintenance of cultural establishments (including the circus and the zoo).

5. G: Can we assume that animals have fun in the circus?
5. K: Yes, of course, after all, what is "to have fun?" First of all, it's not to work.

Game 7 Serve: Kabakov | Respond: Groys

1. K: Doesn't it seem that with the development of civilization, the images of "animals" have shifted from lions, elephants, and hippos to mosquitoes, ants, and flies, and cause an appropriate reaction?
1. G: With the development of civilization, people are less and less interested in what is bigger than them. Comparing oneself with a fly, however, man feels himself, even today, the king of creation.

2. K: The ancient fear: "Beasts are all around us" has been transferred to terrorists, bandits. What place do insects occupy in this "total fear?"
2. G: Most of all, we are afraid that insects are already "inside us" or can climb inside us.

3. K: Isn't the worldwide "fear of insects" – locusts, flies, mosquitoes – related to the development of aviation (meaning not only buzzing)?
3. G: Fear of flying insects – of course. In this respect, Hitchcock's film The Birds is also characteristic.

4. K: In ancient times, man associated himself with animals possessed of maximum strength: eagles, lions, tigers, and the like. In modern times: bugs (Kafka), spiders (Louise Bourgeois), scarabs (Jan Fabre), flies or bedbugs; why?
4. G: The class of insects appeals to the subconscious – to what crawls through our entrails, inside our psyche. Since modern artists want to work with the viewer's subconscious, they pretend to be insects.

5. K: With which kind of animal do you identify?
5. G: According to my horoscope – with any fish.

Game 8 Serve: Groys | Respond: Kabakov

1. G: Are you afraid of dogs if you meet them on the street?
1. K: Of course, it's terrible, because all dogs are torture for me.

2. G: Do you want to pet a cat?
2. K: Of course I want to, because all cats are for me... well you see...

3. G: Where do all these affectionate nicknames come from: ah, my kitten, mousey, hatchling, and so on?
3. K: You listed (of course, subconsciously), all the affectionate names that a man gives to his beloved ladies (see answer number 5). Here's a similar list that I heard from women I know in reference to their partners: my little hippo, my darling crocodile, little hare, teddy bear, dear bunny, my little leviathan, and so on.

4. G: Can we say that sex is an animalistic trait in a person?
4. K: We can say anything, but can we do it?

5. G: Does the sexual act turn a person into a beast?
5. K: It's easy to answer this question – imagine the poses in which people find themselves in a similar state...

Game 9 Serve: Kabakov | Respond: Groys

1. K: What will be the relationship between animals and people in the near future?
1. G: It's not impossible that they will go extinct together.

2. K: Do you think that the brain of some animals, such as flies, is more highly organized than the human's?
2. G: I think so. But I don't think it has a positive effect on the intellect of flies. A complex brain is not always the smartest.

3. K: Is it believed that a person remembers "everything" and then, for certain reasons, forgets almost everything? Does the fly remember "everything?"
3. G: Of course – genetic memory.

4. K: Don't you think that it's not a human who stands at the top of the evolutionary ladder, but, for example, ants that may have been human in the past?
4. G: I think that viruses are at the peak of evolution – according to the criteria of dynamism and contagiousness.

5. K: Do you think that the speed and completeness of information in animals is much higher than in us, who are trying to increase it with the help of the global internet?
5. G: Animals have all their information from God – they don't need anything else.

Game 10 Serve: Groys | Respond: Kabakov

1. G: Can we say that some animals are better than others?
1. K: You can, and this depends on the distance to them: the closer, the worse they are, the further, the better. Or vice versa.

2. G: Can we say that all animals are equal?
2. K: Equal, if they are at the same distance. As from the plane all countries are the same and equal. Inequality occurs as soon as the plane lands on the ground.

3. G: Do animals have a homeland or only a habitat?
3. K: As is known, the difference between the first and the second is only in the quality of reminiscence. The question is whether the memory is genetically encoded in animals as a species or unique for each individual as in us.

4. G: Are there any emigrant animals?
4. K: The decisive definition is the frequency and abruptness of relocation. It is appropriate to compare here two states of migration and emigration: sheep and horses of the Mongols eat the grass in front of them, capable of migrating over huge distances without even glancing up at the "change in scenery." A lion transported in a cage a much shorter distance can die from such a trauma.

5. G: Are there any Jews among animals?
5. K: For the answer, let's ask a similar question: are animals able to distinguish a Jew from a non-Jew? Most likely – no. The answer to the 5th point(!)[1] – most likely there are, but we are not able to see them if we are not born anti-Semites.

Game 11 Serve: Kabakov | Respond: Groys

1. K: Is it possible to say that the political structure of the animal world is democratic in principle?
1. G: No, we cannot say so. Some animals eat other animals, and others don't.

2. K: Do animals have a clearly defined individualism, or are they governed by the laws of the collective?
2. G: Of course, individualism exists. For example, males fight for females. However, the goal here is still collective, i.e. the continuation of the species, and not personal pleasure.

3. K: It is considered that the "mode of existence" of animals is built on the idea of the destruction of "another." Or, on the contrary, is there a cult of admiration for "another," i.e. "celebrity obsession?"
3. G: It seems that there is no admiration, only fear of the other. But it can be interpreted that admiration is a form of fear.

4. K: Is the will to power already widespread among certain species, or does it extend, like it does with humans, to other species?
4. G: Certainly. The will to power here is the same as a good appetite.

5. K: Are animals able to observe themselves "from outside," "through the eyes of others?"
5. G: Of course – the phenomenon of mimicry is based on this. The most appropriate reaction to the outside perspective is to mesh with the surrounding environment.

Game 12 Serve: Groys | Respond: Kabakov

1. G: Aren't some people similar to dogs, cats, pigs, snakes, and so on?
1. K: The problem is, as usual, in elevated nervousness. So your question is the same. Only a nervous person can distinguish dogs from cats, pigs from snakes...

2. G: Isn't a person primarily an animal?
2. K: Again, the question is very nervous: Only in a nervous state can one distinguish something. The main thing – calm.

3. G: The problem of humanism: should we treat people well because animals in general should be treated well?
3. K: The problem of humanism is one of the most nervous. One must be calm, and then everything will be alright. It will be good for everyone – for you, for me, and for animals.

4. G: Or, maybe, human is not an animal after all, and therefore, should not be treated well?
4. K: In one sentence you have: uncertainty, doubts, opposition (human – not animal) and right there the word "good." How is this possible? It's "nerves."

5. G: Or human is a sick animal, and should be treated especially well?
5. K: Any question which arises is the result of the poor state of the nervous system. A poor state of the nervous system – not good. A good state of the nervous system – good. Animals do not get nervous.

Game 13 Serve: Kabakov | Respond: Groys

1. K: In a Russian song they sing: ...The strength flows through the veins. What can I do with this strength? Isn't there some kind of fatal mistake in this goal-setting (axiological)?
1. G: Of course, there is. Health must be protected, and not spent on all sorts of dubious purposes.

2. K: Isn't there some kind of so-called "vitality" (health), some kind of special world, universe, which we don't want to notice?
2. G: We notice it, when we get sick – for example, with the flu.

3. K: Isn't there some kind of deliberate tyranny of our minds over our lungs, stomach, blood vessels, which exist on a more democratic basis?
3. G: I don't think so. The living organism is built hierarchically. Democratic equality is established only in the butcher's shop – where all organs of the body are laid out in a row on the shelf.

4. K: Doesn't our brain invent in order to maintain its power over the enemies surrounding us, thereby forcing our democracy (the stomach, liver, and so on) into an elevated stress state, in the end destroying it?
4. G: Without stress there is no progress.

5. K: Maybe there is a realized paradise, a paradise constantly "inside" us, a cheerful and festive harmony of the liver, spleen, and bladder, seen if not for the constant, oppressive anxiety emanating from the brain, inventing differences of external, internal, hierarchy, and so on?
5. G: Here I, of course, agree – all woe stems from wit.

Game 14 Serve: Groys | Respond: Kabakov

1. G: Do we not live more by instinct than by the mind?
1. K: Of course, yes, however the mind also consists of an awareness of this fact.

2. G: Do we not like certain things because they smell good or taste good – and not because they are intelligent?
2. K: As you well remember, in the 18th century, it was believed that to be intelligent was to have good taste. Yes, those were the times. However, it smelled bad due to the absence of toilets.

3. G: How are decisions made in art: with the brain or with animal instinct?
3. K: The artist instinctively chooses from real possibilities. Everything in him psychologically calls to mind the crew of a locomotive: one looks ahead at the signals, the other throws coal into the furnace. But each one knows: below lie the rails.

4. G: Is the sense for fashion a human or animal quality?
4. K: Like in many other cases, it's a combination of one and the other. It calls to mind the famous thesis of Soviet times – "to be the first among equals" – the sense for fashion is quite instinctive, but to be the best within "fashion" – requires "human" strategy, however even this is basically instinctive.

5. G: Do all animals strive to get a place under the sun?
5. K: No, not all. Some, and even many, believe that they already have it.

1 The fifth point or fifth line was an indication of ethnicity on the personnel form for the staff of the Soviet passport department. Passports and other official documents were issued on this basis. The fifth point or fifth line was often used as a euphemistic expression for a person's Jewish background. This veiled term was often used to refer to anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union.