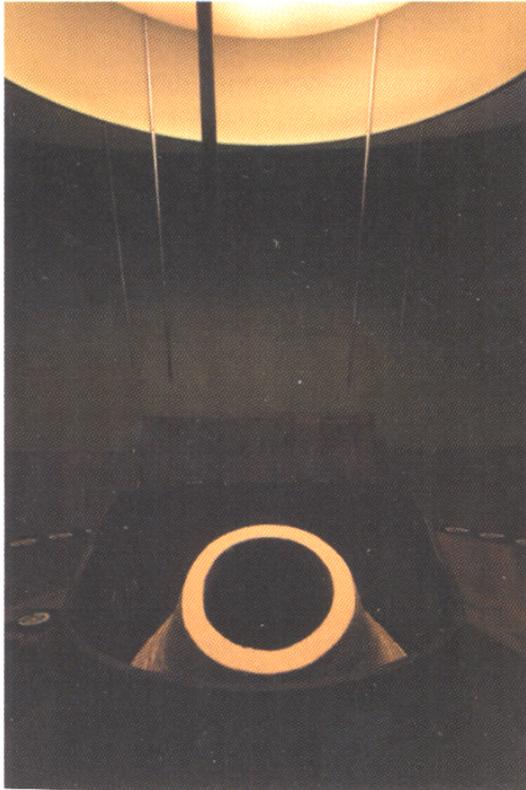


Art in America

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View of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov's installation "The Center of Cosmic Energy," 2007; at the Tufts Art Gallery.

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Ilya and Emilia Kabakov at the Tufts Art Gallery

Practiced diagnosticians of idealism's various strains, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov produced, in their "Center of Cosmic Energy," a project that crossed Tatlin's Monument to the Third International with a CAT scan. The centerpiece of this exhibition was a circular chamber with three tiers of seating that created a kind of enormous throne. It surrounded what looked like a planetarium-style projector pointed toward a ceiling-mounted lens that aimed its big baleful eye at the audience.

When viewers entered, the room was darkened, and an invisible narrator delivered a hypnotic stream of information concerning sacred sites across history and around the world. Emphasis was placed on the recurrence, among the structures built on those sites, of features oriented at angles of 60 degrees—which, we noticed soon enough, was the vector

on which the slowly but steadily brightening oculus was mounted. This angle, the narrator explained, is the one at which 'cosmic energy' approaches the earth. Reference was also made to the (actual) Russian scientist VI. Vernadsky, who helped define the biosphere as an area of study and, a little more mistily, coined the term noosphere to describe a force field of organic energy surrounding and shaping our planet. Lastly, the Centers narrator related the progress of a (fictional) excavation under way on the Tufts campus, during which a massive but unidentified object had been revealed.

At the roughly 15-minute narrative's conclusion, viewers were instructed to exit through a rear door, which led via a narrow staircase to a dark, low-ceilinged basement room. A planked walkway there permitted viewing of a bulky, rough-surfaced form: the partly buried hulk of the unidentified object that had been described in the theater above. Its exposed nose protruded, needless to say, at a 60-degree angle. Also explained by the narration was a slide show of sacred places from Mexico to Myanmar that greeted viewers in an "orientation space" before they entered the circular theater.

In addition to the planetarium and archeological site, the three Cosmic Energy components variously evoked science laboratories, centers for space travel and trade pavilions celebrating industrial progress, all showcases for cold-war grandstanding on both sides. But the project's first association was to a place of worship, a link clearly imbued with as much wistfulness as irony. In an interview a dozen years ago, Ilya Kabakov (whose wife Emilia has since become a credited collaborator) noted a connection between being in an installation of his and in a temple, where "We are all together, and each of us feels good because of the presence of the thing in whose name we are standing here."

The temples to which "The Center for Cosmic Energy" makes reference include those of socialism—surely as good a religion to practice as any. If the cultural politics of collecting, cataloguing and displaying visual artifacts is a longstanding Kabakov theme, ecstatic utopianism has been no less important. That the artists view it as a state bordering on pure absurdity is meant as no disgrace.

—Nancy Princenthal