

SOVIET LIFE IN I. KABAKOV'S "COMMUNAL KITCHEN" AND V. SOROKIN'S "QUEUE"

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Abstract: The purpose of the study is to analyze the comparability of the leading tactics and strategies of a group of Moscow conceptualists in the field of painting and literature. The attention of researchers is directed to the consideration of the artistic moves of the leader and ideologist of the Moscow conceptual circle Ilya Kabakov in his installation "Communal Kitchen" and the ways of their reception in the literary work of Vladimir Sorokin, in particular in his first conceptual novel "Queue". It is shown that the object of application of conceptualist strategies — pictorial in Kabakov and verbal in Sorokin — is the Soviet communal reality, the Soviet world and the Soviet man.

Keywords: Ilya Kabakov; Vladimir Sorokin; Moscow conceptualism; tactics and strategies; installation "Communal kitchen"; novel "Queue".

1 Introduction

The most important strategy of Moscow conceptualist artists, which played a key role in the formation of conceptual writers, is the combination of word and image, bringing verbal text into the visual field of the painting. V. Pivovarov, one of the founders of the Moscow conceptual circle, very precisely formulated the new status of a conceptual painting: "The painting became not only visible, but also audible, it found a voice, it began to speak, first individual words, then phrases, then large texts" (Bobrinskaya 1994, 87). That is why, when considering the novels of conceptual writers, it seems extremely important to trace the artistic strategies of the Moscow conceptualists, which were transferred to poetic or prose soil and received a new embodiment in the works of conceptual writers. In this study, the focus of the research is aimed at examining the artistic strategies of Ilya Kabakov, the leader and ideologist of the Moscow conceptual circle, and the ways in which they are received by the literary work of Vladimir Sorokin.

2 Literature Review

Many researchers have written about the techniques of conceptual art (Dobrenko 1990, Eisenberg 1991, Arkhangelsky 1991, Groys 1993, Lipovetsky 1997, Gunther 2000, Epstein 2000, Kuritsyn 2001, Leiderman 2003). There are works in critical literature on both pictorial conceptualism and literary conceptualism (Bobrinskaya 1994, Bogdanova 2005, Andreeva 2010, Bibergan 2011, Uffelman 2022). In this article, we will try to compare the strategies and tactics of pictorial and literary conceptualism, what some researchers have already written about (Skoropanova 2002, Bogdanova 2004, Those who overcame socialist realism 2023 and others).

3 Communal space in the aesthetics of conceptualism

Considering the works of I. Kabakov as literary examples of Sorokin's conceptual novel, it is necessary first of all to turn to the installation "Communal Kitchen". In its final form, the installation dates back to 1991, but the idea itself was born much earlier — in our opinion, in the late 1960s, simultaneously with

the appearance of Kabakov's painting "Whose fly is this?". It is obvious that Vladimir Sorokin, who got into the environment of Moscow conceptualism in the mid-1970s, was a participant in theoretical discussions that were regularly held by conceptual artists and where they often touched on the topic of communal life, its understanding, and ways of its embodiment in art.

Kabakov chooses a communal space, the space of a Soviet communal apartment, for the installation "Communal Kitchen": "One of the main images that combines everything when I think about our lives is a communal kitchen" (Kabakov 2010, 62). In this regard, we can talk about the metaphorical nature of Kabakov's installation of the same name, because, according to Kabakov, the entire Soviet world is a large communal kitchen.

Ilya Kabakov: "A communal apartment combines a lot of content, a lot of different plots. A communal apartment is a good metaphor for Soviet life, because you can't live in it, but you can't live any other way either, because it's almost impossible to leave a communal apartment. This is the combination: you can't live like this, but you can't live any other way either — it describes the Soviet situation as a whole well. Other forms of Soviet life, including, for example, the camp, are only different versions of communal living" (Kabakov 2010, 62).

With regard to "communal situations" — Kabakov's kitchen — the parallel cited by B. Groys in his reflections on the peculiarities of communal society turns out to be fair (Groys 1993). For example, Boris Groys addresses the theory of dialogism and polyphony of M. Bakhtin and the point of forced collision of the hero(s) with other characters (Bakhtin 1978). Groys sees the similarity of situations and points out the polyphony of communal space: "Dostoevsky's departure is impossible, a real break is impossible. His characters are, as it were, forever registered in the space of his novel. In this sense, the communal apartment really forms a certain type of aesthetic space, which has a purely literary background in Russian literature" (Kabakov 2010, 62).

Vladimir Sorokin, who has been immersed in the life of Moscow artistic conceptualism since the late 1970s, witnessed and participated in discussions of the Soviet communal space, attempts to theorize various aspects of its manifestations and their impact on Soviet man and Soviet society as a whole. And, of course, such a model of society's existence, ways of manifesting the principles of communal dialogism could not but manifest themselves in literature. Sorokin managed to perceive them and transfer them to a new literary ground and reflect them in the novel "Queue" (1983).

Reflecting on the phenomenon of communal life, Kabakov points out an important feature: "The apartment, in addition to junk and litter, is exhausted by another thing: the incessant noise of voices, whether it's screams, scuffling children or quiet conversations that do not subside day or night, coming from all sides, from the kitchen, from the corridor, from behind thin partitions rooms" (Kabakov 2010, 60–61). That is why the artist complements the space of the total installation with a sound row — the voices of its inhabitants are heard in the communal kitchen (audio recording), which means that the person who got into the space of the total installation, turning out to be both a spectator and a listener at the same time, he is maximally immersed in the atmosphere of communal life. It is obvious that this particular feature was noticed by V. Sorokin in another phenomenon of Soviet life, no less communal — in the Soviet queue.

Filling the novel "Queue" with an incredible number of characters (there are about two thousand people in the queue), V. Sorokin allows you to see (or rather imagine) residents of communal apartments during their one more habitual occupation — standing in line. The novelist gives the reader the opportunity to hear a variety of conversations, discussions, arguments, quarrels, jokes, complaints and more.

Describing the details of the communal kitchen as a special space, I. Kabakov notes its very special atmosphere: “No one can and dare stay away, being a passive or active participant in everything, and anything can happen here at any moment: from a quiet, thoughtful conversation to frenzied screaming and howling, from quiet stirring with a spoon in the compote before the typhoon fight, tearing shelves off the walls and turning everything around — plates, pots, dinners, cans — into a shapeless mess on the tiled floor...” (Kabakov 2010, 241).

This is also the principle of V. Sorokin’s queue image. For a period of almost two days standing in line, his characters experience a rapid change of states, moods, behavior — from mutual help, mutual assistance, joint crossword puzzle solving to unexpected irritation and undisguised anger, turning into swearing (“Well, why did you get up? It stands like a *pillar*. <...> The *goat* <...> a *damn bully!*”) (Sorokin 2002, 143–144).

4 Kabakov’s communal pretexts

Kabakov, in order for the viewer to fully immerse himself in the atmosphere of the communal kitchen, when creating the installation, writes a text called “Olga Georgievna, you are boiling!” and places it within the boundaries of the installation. Text: “Surrounding the entire room, there was a long screen behind barriers at the level of human height, where each sheet was pasted a lot of lines spoken by the inhabitants of the communal kitchen. Taken all together, these remarks formed a kind of encyclopedia of the problems of residents of a communal apartment” (Kabakov 2010, 242).

Kabakov’s text is a list of quotes from residents of a communal apartment — such as they could be in every communal kitchen — as realistic, rude, and by no means romanticized as possible. Quotes are given in a list — the author’s words, his remarks are omitted. Not immediately, but gradually the reader (viewer) begins to guess what is happening in the kitchen and what the balance of power is.

Kabakov imitates the speech of residents of a communal apartment using language stamps, stylizing the speech of characters of different genders, different ages and professions. At first glance, it may seem that Kabakov simply cites various statements that could sound in a communal kitchen — from cooking recipes to swearing with obscene vocabulary (V. Sorokin’s characters are just as colorful in their statements). However, upon closer examination, it turns out that this is not the case. It is important that all the quotes given are as they should be in a communal kitchen (see Kabakov’s series of paintings on the theme of communal life “Whose grater is this?”, “Whose ladle is this?”, “Whose saucepan is this?” etc.), have their own character owners. Kabakov gives the characters names, but they are as impersonal as possible — as if they did not exist at all (and in Sorokin’s “Queue” all the characters are nameless except for four — Lena, Vadim, Luda, and the boy Volodya). For example, Kabakov takes the name Maria and combines it with various patronymics, getting several characters at once — Maria Gavrilovna, Maria Nikolaevna, Maria Akimovna, Maria Vasilyevna, Maria Zosimovna, then does the same with the names Olga and Anna, thereby getting a whole crowd of actors in the kitchen (among them, however, there are also rarer names — Eva Pavlovna, Zoya Ignatievna, Zoya Yakovlevna, Lidia Nikolaevna).

It is noteworthy that with all the variety of combinations of the heroine’s names there is no heroine with the name Olga Georgievna in the text. But the speech formula “You are boiling!” or “You are burning!” sounds repeatedly — “Anna Lvovna, your kettle has completely boiled away!”, “Anna Borisovna, something is burning here-should I screw it up a little?” (Kabakov 2010, 378–380).

Kabakov probably puts the name of a non-existent character in the title of the work “Olga Georgievna” in order to scale. That is, there are so many neighbors in a communal apartment that you can’t even mention them all, and maybe it doesn’t matter whose name to

name — anyway, someone will go and check if a certain Olga Georgievna turned off the fire on the stove.

Kabakov’s voices belong mainly to female characters, because, as the artist notes, in the communal kitchen “all contacts are made by women, and the atmosphere depends primarily on them. Sometimes it’s a wonderful world of mutual assistance — favors, treats, confidential conversations and advice. Sometimes it is a sinister world of incessant quarrels, insults, long-term enmity and revenge, where men are also attracted as heavy weapons” (Kabakov 2010, 238).

Upon closer reading, it turns out that Kabakov is playing out a drama in front of the viewer, in which the classic unity of place (a separate communal kitchen), unity of time (the action fits into one day) and unity of action (some kind of domestic conflict) are sustained. Sorokin’s “Queue” has a similar construction. Sorokin’s action revolves around one conflict node (to buy some desired product), lasts one day (to be precise, a little more than a day), tramples on the same place (streets of Moscow). That is, both texts conditionally show *one day in the life...* — I. Kabakov’s communal kitchen and V. Sorokin’s Soviet queue.

Kabakov and Sorokin’s texts turn out to be so artistically likened that it feels as if they involve almost the same characters who finished their business in the kitchen and now went outside, where they stood in an interminably long queue.

5 The voice of the Soviet people

Both texts represent the voice of the Soviet people, its sound, sometimes turning into noise. Formally, the ways of organizing the text are also close. Kabakov’s text is presented in the form of a list of phrases that overlap thematically and plot-wise, that is, they form a polylogue that took place (could have taken place) in a communal kitchen. In Sorokin’s text, all the replicas are designed as parts of a single polylogue.

At first, it seems difficult to find a common thread, but Sorokin’s thematic proximity and cause-and-effect relationships are easily detected. In one case and in another, the reader turns out to be a casual witness of what is happening, he is completely immersed in artistic reality (in one case, an installation about a communal kitchen, in the other, a novel about a queue). The recipient can hear snatches of phrases and conversations, as if he were present in a crowded communal kitchen or standing in line on a noisy street.

It is noteworthy that the texts of Kabakov and Sorokin reveal similarities at the level of microthemes, images and plot moves. Thus, one of the most striking and readable lines in Kabakov’s text turns out to be a discussion of recipes. Indeed, the shortage of goods forced Soviet housewives to go to culinary delights and improve their skills in an attempt to diversify all the boring products and the way they are cooked. In Kabakov’s installation, the motif of new recipes flashes throughout, which is quite natural, since the action takes place in a communal kitchen during the cooking process.

It is surprising that every time the reader hears a fragment of a new conversation about a new recipe, the speakers switch very quickly from one dish to another. Culinary frenzy reaches its climax when it comes to the recipe for cooking (dyeing) jeans, as if it were a recipe for another edible dish (Kabakov 2010, 338–339).

The prescription variety in Kabakov’s text is similar to the commodity variety in Sorokin’s text. As Kabakov asks the reader a culinary riddle (what is being prepared in the communal kitchen?), so Sorokin asks the reader a riddle, what kind of product are his characters behind. The introductory data changes all the time — the writer confuses the reader, each time pointing to a new product (the queue is either for fruits, shoes, coats, or polished furniture). However, the object of the conceptual game is easily represented in both texts, it is logically predetermined: the recipe is relevant in the kitchen, the name of the product is in the queue.

6 Motives of personal and communal freedom

An important common place in the texts of I. Kabakov and V. Sorokin is the presence of a child (children) in the artistic space of the work. On the one hand, this is the motif of the “tears of a child”, coming from F. Dostoevsky, on the other hand, is the perspective of a child’s view, perceiving what is happening in a special way.

So in Kabakov’s text, in the midst of an expletive using obscene vocabulary, a child turns out to be among the quarreling. “Nothing, nothing, let the child hear what they are doing here...” (Kabakov 2010, 316). The child does not leave the space of Kabakov’s kitchen, and in the spirit of the heroes of F. Dostoevsky’s novels motive arises for the heavy share of the child.

In Sorokin’s novel “Queue”, the children’s character is the only one, besides the participants in the love triangle (Lena — Vadim — Luda), who is endowed with the name (Volodya). It is obvious that Sorokin does not accidentally give the child his own name, thus he seems to trust him with the author’s view — able to see the true, and not ideologically introduced. The consciousness of the young character Volodya is not clouded by Soviet propaganda.

Special attention should be paid to the episode in which the boy, watching the pigeons, says: “I would fly away, mom, right away” (Sorokin 2002, 80), but on the rational argument of the mother that the birds have a feeder here (“I pecked and flew. He pecked again and flew again...”), the boy replies: “Boring...” (Sorokin 2002, 80).

Sorokin actually implements in this dialogue the idea of classical Russian literature that freedom is the only natural state of man, and man will always strive for it. Sorokin shows that the desire for freedom relentlessly accompanies a person throughout his life, revealing himself with all evidence at moments when a person does not even think yet, but already feels any restrictions on his freedom. The boy Volodya, who for a moment imagined himself as a pigeon living in captivity, immediately decides to fly away.

In this episode, the motive of the child’s plight clearly emerges, when the boy, instead of children’s fun, is forced to stand in line with his mother under the midday sun, to witness a drunken quarrel of men standing in line, women’s squabbles, unable to escape from this space, return to his usual childhood world.

It is quite natural that next to the theme of childhood in Sorokin’s novel is the theme of cats, the relationship to our younger brothers. In both texts, this topic is given a significant place, it appears in various episodes. The texts have similar perspectives of perception: some characters feel tenderness for cats, a desire to caress them and feed them, while others perceive cats as carriers of infection. It is also natural that the child (child consciousness) treats the cat with sympathy, seeing in it exclusively positive qualities, and adults see cats as carriers of infection (walking on the street, catching mice). So Kabakov and Sorokin show the difference between a natural consciousness (in this case, childish, free) and a consciousness overshadowed by civilization (in this case, communal life, which distorts the kind attitude towards animals).

In the artistic reality of Sorokin’s novel, the consciousness of adults (i.e., those who grew up in communal life, brought up by Soviet ideology) turns out to be wary, apprehensive, deprived of the opportunity to see beauty in everyday things, to show warmth towards an animal.

7 Results and prospects

Thus, completing the comparison of I. Kabakov’s installation “Communal Kitchen” and V. Sorokin’s novel “Queue”, we can conclude that the artist and the writer, depicting the most representative phenomena of the Soviet era — communal kitchen and queue — create collective symbolic images, which allows them to achieve the effect of artistic universalization. It turns out that I. Kabakov’s communal kitchen is capable of accommodating the whole of Moscow and the entire Soviet

Union, and V. Sorokin’s countless queue, the beginning and end of which none of those present in the novel saw, permeates the entire Soviet world.

In conclusion, it can be added that the writer Sorokin (one of the youngest conceptualists in the early 1980s) consistently copied and repeated the tactics of older conceptualists, in particular the artist I. Kabakov. Sorokin consciously — conceptually — transferred the visual strategies of artists into the field of literature, combined verbal and visual. Sorokin was (and remains) consistently a secondary writer, who both before and now imitates other people’s techniques, brilliantly transferring them from one sphere of art to another.

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