Ilya Kabakov

Suppose that you and several of your friends go to a museum. Then suppose that someone at the museum hands each of you a copy of the drawing that is pictured on this card and asks you to look at it carefully and then to talk about what you think the drawing means. What would you say?

You might start by trying to figure out whether the drawing is vertical or horizontal. As you look at it more closely, you might notice that the gigantic "bubble head" is superimposed over the drawings of eight children, each of which, in turn, is superimposed over his or her own bubble head. You might also notice the color scheme: the two boys in the upper right and the two girls (both girls?) in the lower left have pinkish/red bubble heads on a green background; the two children (both boys?) in the upper left and the two children (both girls? a boy and a girl?) in the lower right have yellow bubble heads on blue backgrounds. And if you look really closely, you might see what appear to be the ears of a dog peeking out from just behind where the large bubble head's left cheek and neck meet (i.e., the right side, as you look at the bubble head).

But what would you and your friends say about the drawing? Let me give you several options:

> *Commentator A:* "This drawing obviously deals with the concept of layering. The drawing starts with creme-colored paper. The artist covered that with green and blue backgrounds. On top of that, he put a layer of bubble heads. Then he put the layer of the children and dog, and on top of that is the large bubble head. I think the artist is saying that life is multi-layered; that what you see isn't necessarily what you get."

> *Commentator B:* "I think the dog ears are the best part. I wonder if there's a cat or something behind the big guy's head. Maybe the kids feel like they're in a shell when they have to go to school or when they are doing something that their parents make them do, but they feel like real people when they get to play with their dog or cat."

> *Commentator C:* "I think I read something somewhere about the artist who did this drawing. I think he's a really famous artist from Russia, and I think he is saying that, during Soviet times, you always had to hide who you really were behind a mask of conformity. I bet it's got something to do with isolation and alienation."

> *Commentator D:* "I think this drawing is stupid! You can't even figure out which way it goes, which side is up! Let's get out of here; I want to get something to eat before the movie, and the show starts in a little over an hour."

> *Commentator E:* "I kind of like it. It seems simple, kind of like what you might see in a children's book. But I don't think there is any way we can figure out what the artist is trying to tell us."

The artist who made this drawing, Ilya Kabakov (b. 1933), was one of the leading members of Russia's "unofficial art" movement. He and several of his closest artist friends (such as Eric Bulatov and Oleg Vassiliev) worked half of the year illustrating children's books for Soviet-recognized publishing houses. For the rest of the year, they did artwork for themselves and their friends, work that the Soviet government considered subversive and, therefore, work that the artists had to keep hidden from public view.

In 1967, drawings like the one on this card functioned much like the museum hypothetical posed above, although the setting was much more intimate. Kabakov and other unofficial artists hung their works in their studios in Moscow. The unofficial artists, philosophers and

poets (and people sympathetic to them) often gathered in one or the other of their studios or apartments, and they talked about what these works might mean. Consequently, a drawing such as this served as a "visual question," prompting discussion and commentary from Kabakov and his close friends and colleagues.

Kabakov noticed that he acted one way when doing his "official" work and another way when he was with his friends, and he developed an artistic style that included multiple points of view. For example, one of his paintings includes several painted or real objects (a coat hanger, toy train, nail and piece of wood) and a list of comments about them. Kabakov invented the comments, but they were supposedly made by real people. Kabakov feels that this kind of fragmented approach is the only way to capture the complexity of life as it really exists. Nothing has only one meaning. Any one event or object has multiple meanings to even one person, and the number of valid meanings is multiplied exponentially when the event or object is seen or experienced by a group of people.

Drawings like the one on this card are in some ways like a photograph: they seem to be part of a story, but it isn't exactly clear what the story is about or what came before or after the moment depicted. In the early 1970s, Kabakov turned these "photographs" into "movies" by creating a series of multiple panel drawings and text that he called "albums." In the albums, Kabakov told stories about invented characters he called "personages." The albums were made to be shown to a very small audience. Kabakov would place the album on a music stand and then slowly turn the pages, showing his drawings and reading the story he had written to go along with them. At the end of every album is a section containing comments by imaginary people about the story told by the album. This, of course, prompted further discussion from the audience, which had its own interpretation of what the album meant. Since the 1980s, Kabakov has taken his work into three dimensional form by creating a series of "installations." While the albums have a movie-like plot, the installations are somewhat like deserted movie sets. The viewer feels as if he has somehow been able to walk into a painting so that it exists all around him, and not just in front of him hanging on the wall.

Since he left Russia in the late 1980s, Kabakov has become one of the most highly respected and exhibited artists working today. In December, 1999, ARTnews magazine called him one of the 10 best living artists.