The Garden of Hidden Delights of the Russian-Jewish Avant-Garde

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1 author:

Dennis Ioffe
Université Libre de Bruxelles
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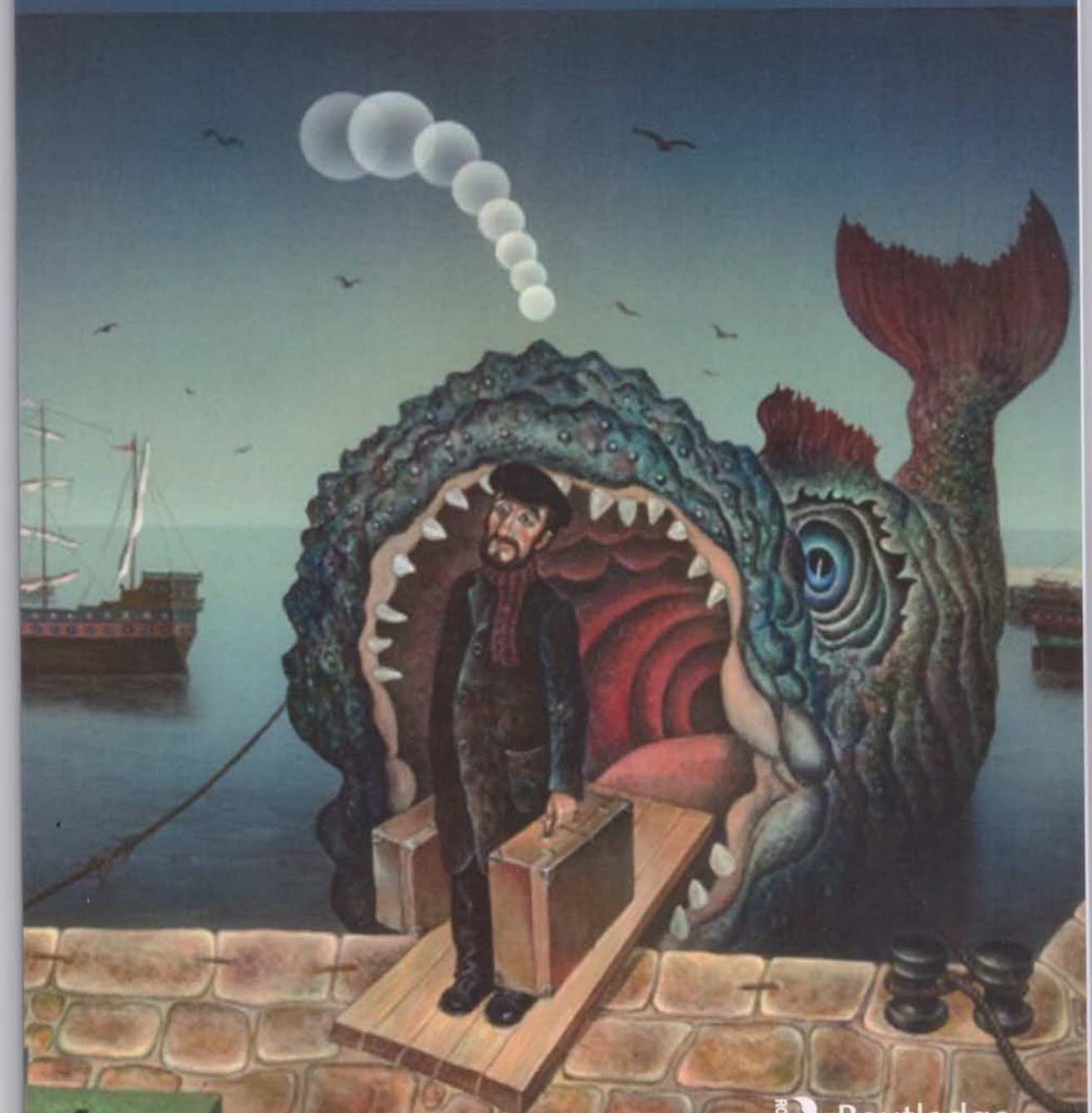

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Dennis Ioffe

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REVIEW ESSAY

The Garden of Hidden Delights of the Russian-Jewish Avant-Garde

Contemporaries of the Future. Jewish Artists in The Russian Avant-Garde, 1910s–1980s. A catalogue published for the exhibition, Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center, Moscow, 2015.

Materialy biografii by Edik Shtejnberg. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie (NLO), 2015.

Utopia and Reality by El Lissitzky, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov. St. Petersburg: The State Hermitage Publishers, 2013.

Grobman by Lola Kantor-Kazovsky. Moscow: Novoye literaturnoye obozreniye (NLO), 2014.

What is the Russian-Jewish avant-garde?[1] How can it be defined in recent scholarly bibliography? The suggestive Jewish element in Russian Modernism was always, quite heavily (and at times playfully), pronounced. The term, then, represents an umbrella concept that unites both currents within the Russian Jewish community, the religious and the secular, in the perspective of its tortuous history.

Secular Jewish art flourished in St. Petersburg, where Leon Bakst was one of the major names along with artists such as Marc Chagall, Alexander Romm, and Sofia Dymshitz. A timid modernist, Leonid Pasternak might be mentioned here as an occasional character, too, along with Iosif Shkolnik and the group "Union of Youth." A special episode of Russian-Jewish Avant-Garde relates to France and Paris. This historical cluster, all part of the *School of Paris*, featured a variety of names, including Ossip Zadkine, Jacques Lipschitz, Hannah Orlova, and Emmanuel Mane-Katz, all of whom had undeniable biographical ties with Russia.[2]

Back in the last century, as a student of the history of art, I was lucky to have witnessed passionate lectures by Avram Kampf where he expounded on his ideas of what actually constituted the "Jewish component" in the art of the European Modernism.[3] It was his pioneering research that turned a new page in understanding the "Jewish experience" and "Jewish style" in the Era of the Russian Revolution, introducing many of the hitherto less known painters as legitimate objects of scholarly attention.[4]

In the 1920s, there emerged a sort of Russian Modernist Academy in Paris, culminating in several notably successful (and sometimes provocative) artistic exhibitions. Additional important names related to this milieu included Mikhail Kikoin and Zachary-Issachar Rybak. At the time, the renowned Parisian artists' residence, *La Ruche* (the beehive), accommodated some important Russian Modernist painters of Jewish background such as Marc Chagall, Ossip Zadkine, Nathan Altman, Pinchus Krémègne, Iosif Chaikoff, Chaïm Soutine, Antoine Pevzner, Naum Gabo, David Shterenberg, and occasionally El Lissitsky.[5] This group used to inhabit the Montparnasse neighborhood, conveniently located in Paris's 15th arrondissement, in which their three-story circular beehive was to be found. *La Ruche* was originally designed

as a wine rotunda by none other than Gustave Eiffel for the 1900 *Exposition Universelle*. The bigger existential queries of this group of Modernists revolved around the very same age-old issues of what Jewish Avant-Garde art is and how it corresponds to the roots of their ethnical and religious tradition.[6]

This entire concern of updating modernism via a national lens represents, however ambivalently, the creative dynamics of an accelerated utopia, which catalyzed the Russian-Jewish avant-garde from the 1920s to the 1980s. The utopian aspect of the avant-garde is well-acknowledged and researched. In what way did the (Russian-Jewish) avant-garde utopian creativity express itself? What can be said of the variety of forms, which championed accelerated perceptive development and "intensification" (as well as "radicalization") of some of its central concepts and imagery? The result of these processes constitutes what is widely known as the "Second Russian avant-garde," which involved some major Jewish experimental artists who were profoundly interested in utopian/dystopian themes: some of them also focused on the concept of time-conquest. The most prominent among these artists were Oscar Rabin, Ilia Kabakov, Mikhail Grobman, Eduard Shteinberg, and Mikhail Shvartsman.

It is important to stress the point that the Russian-Jewish geo-cultural topic by no means relates to a unique avant-gardist phenomenon. A comparable situation arose in a number of other European contexts. The most prominent of those was the Hungarian-Jewish avant-garde, which included prolific artistic such as Endre Bálint, Vilmos Huszár, Béla Czóbel, László Moholy-Nagy, Lahos Tihanyi, Róbert Berény, Béla Kádár, Armand Schönberger, and Lili Ország among others. Hungary proved to be a fertile ground for raising Jewish avant-gardists to be eventually "exported" to the neighboring European countries.[7] In this vein, Vilmos Huszár is considered one of the iconic figures in the Dutch avant-gardist movement of De Stijl, whereas László Moholy-Nagy was a leading exponent of German/International Bauhaus. What is common to all these names and ideas is the unique "Jewish" avant-gardist desire to create an ideal-embodying place on this earth, be it in Bauhaus or Moscow.

The topic of Jewish Modernist experimentation with geographical spaces, however, originated in the "heroic" futurist days of Russian-Ukrainian Hylaea that flourished on the fertile mythological soil of the Russian Imperial South. This is something that was once aptly described by Vladimir Khazan as "a unique Russian-Jewish atmosphere of life."[8] Russian-Ukrainian Hylaea can lure us into some unexpected loci. The contemporary Russian experimental avant-gardist publisher Hylaea ("Gilea") takes its well-earned pride in specializing in Russian (radical) avant-garde and granting new life to a huge number of texts that would have otherwise remained in complete and regrettable obscurity.[9] According to the famous literary memoirs written by Benedict Livshits, "it was Hylaea ('Gilea'), the name used by the ancient Greeks, mentioned several times by Herodotus, familiar to all Russian Futurists from their school lessons in classical history."[10] As he observed, "'Hylaea, the ancient Hylaea, trod upon by our feet, took the meaning of a symbol and had to become a banner.'"[11] In my view, Hylaea embraces here a Biblical concept of a "migrant/movable Israel" of sorts, the one that can be discovered or even created elsewhere, not only in *Terra Sancta*. The books under review here represent this very kind of a "collective" vigorous production.

Contemporaries of the Future. Jewish Artists in The Russian Avant-Garde, 1910s–1980s, a catalogue published for the exhibition presented at the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow in 2015, offers a unique collection of analytical texts as well as a very impressive survey of images pertaining to the topic in its title. The volume is prefaced by a short introduction by Maria Nasimova, the chief curator of the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center. This text positions the problem of what may or may not be considered Jewish art *per se*, what should be included in this umbrella term, and why. What constitutes the specific contribution of Jews to the Russian Avant-Garde? Nasimova relies heavily on Avram Kampf's aforementioned

theoretical set of definitions for the "Jewish experience in art" (4). The two "waves" of the Russian avant-garde (the original, "historic" and the "Second" to follow) were equally immersed in the Jewish cultural paradigm through a great number of painters who brought their ethnic background into their art (4–5). Nasimova's essay is followed by a programmatic article by Gregory Kazovsky. His valuable text summarizes his rich previous findings focusing on various issues related to the ways of Jewish art during the time of Russian historical avant-garde. Kazovsky's main subject of study is the *Kultur-lige*, which "was founded in Kiev in the early 1918 to promote the development of Yiddish culture" (11–12). It was able to launch an "expansive cultural program" that became a major part of Jewish social and cultural life in the Southern regions of the former Russian Empire. "*Kultur-lige* branches were opened in nearly 100 towns and villages of Ukraine where they administered schools, opened kindergartens, evening courses for adults and libraries, [and] organized drama studios and music classes." According to Kazovsky, *Kultur-lige* leaders and ideologues declared the organization's intention to follow Modernist trend and saw it as their mission to develop the aspects of the national culture that required "exploration and experimentation."[12] As Kazovsky does not fail to observe, those Jewish artists (particularly Aronson and Ryback) viewed abstract form "as *pure* and free of any naturalism and literariness."[13] This should have contributed, we might add, to the new stage of revision of the iconoclastic commandment whose semantic message can also be found in *The Book of Exodus* 20:4: לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ פֶסֶל, וְכָל-תְּמוּנָה ("You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness"). Since "abstract art" is precisely that – the absence of anything figurative or naturalistic – then the avant-garde radical abstraction is a logical remedy that reconciles Jewish theological tradition and the natural human desire of visual creation.

As the Jewish artists admit, according to Kazovsky, revealing this abstract form is the main goal of art in general and of Jewish artists in particular. By working on this goal, artists move toward accomplishing international avant-garde's universal mission and at the same time approach their national objectives. "Jewish artists feel a kinship with European innovators who promote the principles of abstract painting, since only through abstract art it is possible to develop one's own national sense of form."[14] The article by Lola Kantor-Kazovsky picks up the chronology where Grigory Kazovsky stopped just a few pages before that. Her valuable piece offers a detailed overview of the role of Jews in the "Second Russian Avant-Garde" (68–75). The phenomenon does present a unique case of Jewish dominance in one particular artistic current, seen as if it were a special "chronotope" of Jewish presence in Russian art of that period. Lola Kantor-Kazovsky provides some reasoning as to why this happened, connecting it to certain societal impact factors. The late Soviet society did everything to marginalize Jews and they were indeed marginalized, finding sanctuary in the underground art where they could be the way they were (70). The article places the Russian-Jewish avant-garde and one of the most typical painters of this circle, Mikhail Grobman, in a wider international context. For instance, Kantor-Kazovsky mentions a manifesto by Barnett Newman, which renewed the interest in the concept of the sublime by playing with the Torah ban on making images and launching a radical abstraction, a non-representational style inspired by the Kabballah. According to her, non-orthodox Jewish religiosity is a feature that may bring together artists as different as Mikhail Grobman and Ilia Kabakov.[15] At this point, we are offered a brief discussion on Jean-François Lyotard's suggestive examination of the hidden meaning of the Second Commandment in Kant's *Analytic of the Sublime*, used as an artistic strategy of the radical avant-garde.[16] Kabbalistic allusions here might function as a hermeneutic logical pattern, which might be particularly relevant for Grobman.[17] For some natural reason Kantor-Kazovsky's article is mostly focused on Grobman rather than, say, Mikhail Shvartsman or Vladimir Jankilevsky. Mikhail Grobman's oeuvre will be also discussed below.

Aside from the scholarly articles, the volume also contains some "Primary documents," such as personal accounts, a conversation, and even a manifesto written by the members of the post-war Russian-Jewish avant-gardist milieu. Grobman's "The Square as a Biblical Composition" opens this section, followed by a sincere dialog between Joseph Backstein and Lev Rubinstein, mostly focused on the topic of Jewishness within the ranks of Moscow Conceptualism. Moscow conceptualism is presented there as a more or less purely secular entity with some ethnic Jews occasionally settling inside its framework of operation. The volume is conceptually finalized by a stimulatingly summarizing essay by Boris Groys, "Captives of Universalism: Jewish Artists of the Soviet Era," which not only raises some sharp questions about Jewish artistic (historic) identities but also provides many meaningful and thought-provoking answers. Groys justly points out that the great majority of the Soviet-Jewish artists were used to internally identifying themselves with the dominant culture of the ruling majority (148). The Jewish artists of the Soviet period were quite keen to forsake their ethnic background in favor of the Universal, abstract, and Global. Groys provides a logical example of how the great majority of Marc Chagall's Jewish students preferred (a non-Jew) Kazimir Malevich as a teaching leader because of his appealing "inclusive" abstract and global agenda that breaks away from the culture of the local, the culture of the shtetl in favor of the broader horizon of the internationally-spirited avant-garde (149–150). Groys remarks that generally speaking, albeit not without some possible exceptions, the Jewish artists of the Soviet-Russian avant-garde tradition were actively distancing themselves from all things Jewish. Among the characteristic exceptions to this evident rule Groys mentions the artistic project of Grisha Bruskin (154). It has to be stressed at this point that Groys excludes in his theoretical purview artists such as Dmitry Lion or Vladimir Iakovlev, who maintained a completely different stance towards the notion of Jewish culture in their art and life strategies. The same can be said of the group of artists centered around the so-called *Gazanevsky exhibitions*, which had an important subgroup known as "Aleph," represented by Jewish painters Evgeny Abezgauz and Alek Rappoport.

We must not fail to remember that the very concept of Jewish art can be traced back to Biblical Bezalel who in Exodus 31:1–6 and chapters 36–39 appears as the chief artisan of the Tabernacle (summoned to design the *tent of meeting* and its furniture), being also in charge of building the Ark of the Covenant.[18] As I have already mentioned above, what specifically constitutes Jewish art remains a perpetually unresolved issue.[19] This topic questions once again the issue of the limits of Jewish cultural and existential identity, extending itself to the notion of the so-called "crypto-Jewishness."[20] Ultimately it is the evaluator-recipient who determines whether a painter is perceived as Jewish, in the same way as the "public" generally determines who is a Jew and who is not.

The issue of Jewish art is also the issue of Jewish artists who refuse to stress or admit their (in)voluntarily-taken Jewish identities, being at the very same time unable to erase completely their obvious Jewish background. A renowned Russian theorist of poetry once remarked that the history of poetic syntax is, dialectically speaking, also a history of its ultimate disappearance and destruction.[21] In the same way the *non-Jewish Jews* of Russian art inevitably – nolens volens – belong to the history of Jewish art of this country. I suggest calling them "Non-Jewish Jewish Artists." The most prominent names of this group that naturally pertain to the Second Russian avant-garde are Edik Shteinberg, Oscar Rabin, Vladimir Jankilevsky, Mikhail Roginsky, and Ilia Kabakov. Our first case to be reviewed is Eduard/Edik Shteinberg and a recent book dedicated to his epistolary and creative oeuvre: *Materialy biografii*.[22]

Indeed, Eduard Shteinberg (1937–2012) was one of the most typical representatives of the "Russian-Non-Jewish Jewish" art of the "Second" avant-garde. Being a champion of radical abstraction, he never had his art fully acknowledged in the Soviet Union, which forced him

to lead a life of an underground artist dwelling in the counter-culture milieu of his time. After he became an icon of the second wave of the Russian avant-garde he was fortunately allowed to travel abroad. In 1988, he settled in Paris where he died after a long battle with cancer in 2012. At first glance, there is nothing particularly "Jewish" in Shteinberg's oeuvre or in any of his self-describing materials. Apart from the "traditional Jewish abstraction," already partially known to us from the *Kultur-lige,* there is hardly anything that could be effectively used in order to (co)r-elate him to his own ethnic background. Hence, Shteinberg is one of the more problematic cases to position within the broad topic of Russian-Jewish art, despite his typically Jewish phys-ical looks and most telling family name. During the course of his life Shteinberg-The-Jew decided to part with his ethnic religious background and accept the teachings of Jesus Christ as the True Jew of the Eternal Israel.[23] It is no wonder that the aforementioned volume of the Jewish Museum barely discusses his name (the very same holds true for another major artist of this kind, Oscar Rabin). On few occasions in his book Shteinberg clearly alludes to his conversion into Christianity, calling Christ "Our Savior who was crucified," expressing his mild discomfort with "what currently happens in the Motherland of our Savior, in the land of Israel" (288). As to his own religious identity, Shteinberg compares it elsewhere to that of another semi-Jewish painter, Mark Rothko whose "ecumenical" spiritual paintings exer-cised powerful influence and seemed to bear a hidden meaning for Shteinberg (287).

This lavish NLO volume includes mostly "ego-documents" related to Shteinberg's personal life and self-writing. These constitute a voluminous bulk of essays, private letters, and inter-views. In the first part of the book, "[t]he voice of the artist" includes his monologues and dia-logues and a large number of fragmented essays. The second part of the book tries to shed more light upon the painter's biography and, for the first time, publishes a large volume of letters addressed to Eduard Shteinberg from various correspondents (including some major artists). This part also includes letters dating from the Perestroika period, sent by his friends during his Parisian period. The final, concluding part, titled "Memory," offers posthumous memoirs written by his close friends and colleagues. One of the dominant topics throughout the book is the motif of the Moscow circle of underground artists, the relations between the official and unofficial culture, and the splendid, charming town of Tarusa where Shteinberg spent much of his life. The most valuable aspect of the volume has to do with the unique materials related to the painter's private *epistolaria* and memorabilia as well as to the *ad hoc* comprised corpus of memoirs about this extraordinary artist.

Utopia and Reality by El Lissitzky, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov is a unique volume which rep-resents one of the best illustrations of the overall topic of *continuity* in the Russian-Jewish/ Non-Jewish avant-garde. Hitherto I have tried to briefly delineate the *ad hoc* definition of this sort of artistic affiliation. Are we in a position to enlist Lissitsky and Kabakov as contributors to the Jewish experience in art? To my mind, the answer is yes, since both painters at certain (early) stages of their respective careers worked actively with Jewish subjects and themes. The principal course of this sort of art originates with the *Kultur-lige* (Lissitsky) but then dialectically negates itself (as Lissitsky departs from his Jewish interests in favor of more universal ones). This course was maintained by the post-war Russian-Jewish (Second) avant-garde, of which Ilya Kabakov is one of the most inventive representatives. To a greater extent than Lissitsky, Ilia Kabakov is a classic Jewish/Non-Jewish artist of the Russian avant-garde. He, nevertheless, still occasionally displays some traceable pointers to his family background, as in the case of his early illustrational project focused on Sholem Aleichem or his much later endeavor related to the so-called "Charles Rosenthal" with his burlesque Vitebsk-Parisian imaginary bio-graphy that betrays a certain Jewish sense and scent.

This volume, carefully prepared as a collaboration between Hermitage and Van Abbe Museum, represents, so to say, the persistence of memory of Russian-(Non)Jewish avant-garde.

The detailed catalogue accompanies the original exhibition at the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven, which was then relocated to Russia, to the State Hermitage. The volume opens with an inspiriting essay by Boris Groys, "Installing Communism" which narrates the story of the post-Avant-Garde non-official art as exemplified by Kabakov. A particularly interesting point is made with regard to the very concept of "exhibiting" in the perspective of both Avant-Garde traditions. A notable place here is distinctly occupied by the discussion about the role of artist in the semi-Utopian society based on Marxian attitudes. Who can be a new (hyper)Modernist artist? How would Lissitsky answer this question, and how would Kabakov? Groys radically challenges the notion of "self-empowerment" as a perceived goal of artistic avant-gardes. Rather than emphasizing the obvious parallels between the two artists he points at the radical difference in some of their approaches to the relations between art and life. Groys believes that Kabakov's "artists-heroes reduce everything, including themselves" (45). This process of *reducing* has to do with the Kabbalistic (Lurianic) matter of *tsimtsum*. Kabbalistic reduction = tsimtsum has to do with the "empty space" where the spiritual world secretly coexists with the physical. This corresponds to the irresolvable issue of the simultaneous Divine *presence & absence* within the vacuum, and the resultant Creation. Possibly, Kabakov had this very abstract metaphysical context in mind.[24] The messianism of Judaism and Communism, according to Groys, signifies their "iconoclastic nature" (170). As the critic points out, iconoclastic cultures "believe in the text and not in the image." Therefore, that is why they question the very possibility of art itself: "the role of the artist becomes problematic and unclear."[25] In his special study Groys deals with the problematic puzzles an artist faces if he chooses to adopt the identity of a "Soviet Jew."[26] The difference between the two Soviet Jewish (non)Jews Lissitsky and Kabakov lies therefore in their somewhat different ways of dealing with reality, absorbing its material meanings, and creating the *ad hoc* and *ad libitum* obtained ready-mades.

The catalogue continues with an extensive interview between Dmitry Ozerkov and the Kabakov couple. They touch upon many important subjects pertaining to the theory of art and the conceptualist milieu. Some of the questions pose major metaphysical challenges to the artist and Kabakov addresses them in his answers. The same style of an intimate, "very Russian" dialog is continued with Olga Sviblova in her own shrewd interrogation of the Kabakov couple arranged for this volume. The main value of this conversations lies with Kabakov's attempt to delineate his inner attitude to Lissistky and the corresponding avant-garde culture – the information that was not readily available before. Among these are Kabakov's thoughts on how an ideal museum should be organized, on the unique importance of music for his art (55), on his views of the "static Soviet time, resembling one giant installation with people and objects" (71), on his attitude to the Jewish period of Lissitsky (72), and many other intriguing thoughts that were aired with regard to the *universal language* of Lissitsky (79). Also present are some valuable opinions on the more traditional subjects related to the history of art, including Kabakov's paradoxical reflections on certain artists and their respective oeuvres.

Mikhail Grobman is one of the most influential Russian-Jewish contemporary artists who belong to the Israeli art *per se* as well as to the "Second Russian Avant-Garde" – a term of his own creative invention.[27] Unlike the aforementioned Shteinberg, Kabakov, or even Lissitsky, Grobman belongs to the clearest current of the "genuine" Jewish art complete with all the relevant accompanying subjects, subtexts, and meanings. *Grobman* by Lola Kantor-Kazovsky is a splendid book which constitutes the first major study of one of the founding fathers of the Second Russian Avant-Garde written from the standpoint particularly close to the artist himself. Lola Kantor-Kazovsky is a long-time friend and an intimate connoisseur of Grobman's oeuvre, being equipped better than anyone else with means to produce a detailed account of the painter's life and art. The Grobman family duo entrusts her personal expertise

with their invaluable and closely kept information in the very same way as the Kabakov family duo did for the pioneering monograph by Matthew Jesse Jackson.[28] Lola Kantor-Kazovsky's book is positioned as a large-scale overview – a promulgated fusion between an album and a primary research endeavor. The book opens with the chapter "The Second Russian Avant-Garde in the 1950s and 1960s and the politics of the Cold War," focused on the early events of modernist penetrations into the "body Soviet." This chapter deals with the early history of Mikhail Grobman and his intimate circle of friends. According to the author, several important "semi-international" exhibitions shaped the original post-war reception of the "new art" in the USSR, despite the fact that the Iron Curtain was still in place. There is abundant information on Grobman's underground activity as a curator of private exhibitions of the counter-culture and its art. Also mentioned are some rare art catalogues published in Samizdat and abroad, which were either initiated by Grobman or produced thanks to close collaborative efforts (16).

During this highly formative time, Grobman carefully distilled himself as an inventive art collector and a highly competent art connoisseur. He made friends with the most notable personalities of the underground art world of Moscow and generally emerged as an independent actor on his own. As one Western visitor observed, "Grobman collects everything to preserve what can so easily be forgotten" (17). One can add that the artist continues the same habitual practice until the very present day. The first chapter offers a very useful abundant observation with respect to the inner attitudes and dispositions of various groups within the milieu of the Second Russian Avant-Garde of this time. Another important point this chapter makes has to do with the scope of influence of the American pre- and post-war Avant-Garde on the so-called new left art of Moscow at that time. The following chapter, entitled "Mikhail Grobman and the idea of Modern Jewish Art in Russia and the West" is more closely focused on the painter's personal style sub specie its Jewish aspects. What is the ultimate difference between Grobman and, say, Chagall? How could the Jewish art be reinvented if at all? Such are the provocative questions that the chapter poses. Another, bigger cluster of ideas is related to the problems of Kabballah and its importance in Grobman's art. The role of (historic and traditional) Jewish folklore and the so-called "Judaica" artifacts are examined as opposed to Hasidism Chasidism. Grobman usually opposes Hasidic Judaism, finding it far too rigid and unfit to dwell within a healthy modern Jewish State as the painter sees it. As a current within Judaic Thought, Hasidism traces its origins to early eighteenth-century Russian Ukraine, having gradually spread across the entire Eastern Europe. Currently, Hasidism is a very powerful sub-group within the Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Judaism, notorious for its religious conservatism and social seclusion. It is these particular aspects of the Haredi and Chasidic Hasidic habits that usually become targets of Grobman's negative wit. Harold Rosenberg, whom Lola Kantor-Kazovsky extensively quotes throughout her book, has a somewhat different opinion on this complex of problems. For Rosenberg, radical modernism and Jewish people are somewhat akin to each other as they both emerge from the ruins of the past. Jews are, therefore, an example of an "abstraction" (as a surviving political nation). For Rosenberg as Kantor-Kazovsky emphasizes the notions of abstract expressionism, which is understood as *action painting*, is closely connected to Jewish sources.[29] It was Harold Rosenberg, according to Lola Kantor-Kazovsky, who re-actualized Hasidic heritage for radical abstraction in art, speaking of such matters as the ultimate Absolut and the depth of the "Inner I."[30] It was also Harold Rosenberg who championed the idea that Biblical art was the real abstraction of the primordial value (54).

One of the main problems posed in Lola Kantor-Kazovsky's book is the ambivalent issue of what actually constitutes the inner nature of avant-garde art as opposed to the Jewish

tradition. The author meaningfully quotes Leo Steinberg "The New York School: Second Generation" (1957) where he speaks of the strange resemblance between the Jewish people and Modernist art (53). In this influential piece he elaborates on the specific reasoning as to why the Judaic way of thinking is so much akin to radical abstraction – the trend which prevailed in the art of the American 1950s to an enormous extent. Jews are the forefathers of abstraction and, therefore, of the entire modern/contemporary art scene as well. Harold Rosenberg's influential essay ("Is there a Jewish art?") provides another major source for Lola Kantor-Kazovsky's analysis appearing in this chapter. Some of Grobman's important manifestoes, such as "Magical symbolism" are examined in great detail (63). Interesting creative relations between Grobman's art and Byzantine icons are also discussed there (66). By the end of the 1970s, Grobman established a group of artists that became known as "Leviathan" (72–73).

The next chapter in Lola Kantor-Kazovsky's book is fully focused on the so-called "Jerusalem" period of the painter, dealing with the legendary times when the Grobman couple were not living at their home at *Simtat Nes Tsiona* street in central Tel Aviv. Grobman's main interest during this period seems to have been the (Jewish) spiritual revolution and a radical departure from the ordinary Judaist tradition. Grobman intends to create his own private mystical mythology, his own sphere of being and creating. In his view, the new revolution will bring the modernist and avant-gardist blessing to the old vine of Judaist habitual routine. Grobman goes to the Judean desert and creates his art straight upon the rocks, in an attempt to be able to generate a new, captivating artistic language never heard of before. This was supposed to become a new Jewish tradition of cave painting (106–107). The forth chapter's playful title "Is God not cast down?" alludes to Malevich (125). In this chapter Lola Kantor-Kazovsky describes Grobman's current period, which is most firmly associated with Tel Aviv. One of the important exhibition-programs of this period is the so-called "Understandable Art" (1993). As the scholar points out, "Grobman's Understandable art is a political art aimed at deconstructing communism, Nazism, Islamic infernal terror, having a non-politically correct agenda once again different from that of most of his fellow artists." (151) The final section of the volume includes excellent reproductions of some of the most vivid and interesting artistic works by Grobman, accompanied by some of his theoretical pieces, many of which have never been published before. Another valuable element of the book is the full catalogue of Grobman's artistic production from his fantastic solo exhibition at *Moscow Museum of Modern Art* (Winter 2013–2014).

Concluding the brief examination of some of the ideas that have been reigning within the Russian Jewish (as well as Jewish-non/Jewish) avant-garde, it might be worthwhile to recapitulate some of them once again. Russian and International Jewish avant-garde of the twentieth century represented an attempt (that some would claim as Utopian) to reconcile radical non-figurative art with the Jewish tradition, providing conceptual ground for the formal abolishing of the Commandment "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image" from Asereth hadibrot. If "nothing" (no image) is actually depicted, then there is nothing that can be forbidden on any possible logical grounds. The radical abstraction must be at peace with the Jewish religious tradition (that is why the great majority of Israeli public sculptures are almost always proudly abstract). The Biblical inner narrative structure and spirit is at times openly abstract, so should be the Jewish art of the new age. The Kabbalistic concept of *tsimtsum* and the "divine zero" comes in quite handy here. Another important point has to do with the new intention to create a truly international universal style (and "language") that would have a broader appeal beyond the traditional, national circles, an ambitious intention that would fall in line with the initial objectives of the avant-garde aesthetic practice as such.

Notes

1. See for more relevant details a valuable study: Shatskikh, "Jewish Artists in Russian avant-garde."
2. See more details in Litvak, "Painting and Sculpture."
3. The department of Art History at the University of Haifa, the early 1990s.
4. See Kampf, *Jewish Experience in the Art of the Twentieth Century*. This idea was further explored by many other art historians, particularly by Gregory Kazovsky in his fundamental work *Khudozhniki Kultur-Ligi*.
5. One cannot avoid comparing it to Vitebsk during the time of Yehuda Pen's School. See on this Wolitz, "Vitebsk Versus Betsalel."
6. How is Jewish art even possible given the firm commandment prescribing that "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image" from *Asereth ha-dibrot*? This commandment was obviously never taken literally by the secular Jews of the later European diaspora. One, however, should never fail to remember its grim "theological" shadow cast on any enterprise that can be possibly referred to as "Jewish art."
7. On this, see a more recent, valuable study by Cahen, *Joodse avant-gardekunstenaars uit Hongarije*.
8. Using the expression of a Russian-Jewish poet Dovid Knut, who once lived in France. See Khazan, *Osobenyi evreisko-russkii vozdukh*. On the later Russian avant-garde versus Jews see Klebanov, "Daniil Kharms and the Jews."
9. See their catalogue at: http://hylaea.ru/
10. The ethnicity of Livshitz was obviously Jewish, the fact that was never sufficiently expressed in his oeuvre.
11. Quoted in Markov, *Russian Futurism*, 33.
12. *Contemporaries of the Future*, 16.
13. *Contemporaries of the Future*, 18.
14. Ibid.
15. *Contemporaries of the Future*, 75.
16. Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde." See also his famous work which deals with some related subjects: *Heidegger and "the Jews."*
17. According to Lola Kantor-Kazovsky, Grobman met Gershom Scholem in Jerusalem in 1978.
18. It is hardly any coincidence that this biblical name graces the Academy of Fine Arts in Jerusalem.
19. On the topic of Russian-Jewish cultural and literary identity, see in particular Shrayer, "Introduction;" Markish, "À propos de l'histoire et de la méthodologie de l'étude de la littérature juive d'expression russe." See a special book-section "Russian-Jewish Intelligentsia's Cultural Vibrancy" in Horowitz's recent volume *The Russian-Jewish Tradition*. See also general collections such as: Budnickij, *Russko-evrejskaja kul'tura. Sbornik statej* as well as many other relevant studies.
20. Here one must keep in mind the *anusim*: the (forced) Jewish converts also known as *cristianos nuevos*, *Converso* or *Marrano* The term has been used to refer to the conversion of the Ashkenazim in Germanic lands (twelfth century), followed by the much more famous (and mostly forced) mass conversion of the Sephardim in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Spain and Portugal.
21. Maxim Ilich Shapir, personal communication with the author, 2002.
22. As part of the same wonderful series, a related splendid volume was issued in 2009: Elshevskaia, *Mikhail Roginsky*.
23. Let us not forget that according to the teachings of Christians, they are the True Israel as opposed to the original Jews who rejected the Gospel. The matter of Jesus perceived as Jewish Christ is by no means unknown in the Russian/Soviet-Jewish late Modernism – see in particular Litvak, "Rome and Jerusalem."

24. Boris Groys actively and meaningfully plays with Kabbalistic suggestive nomenclature when talking about Kabakov's adopted son, the painter Pavel Peppershtein and his brand of Conceptualist Art: "Medical Hermeneutics," 161–69.
25. Groys, 170.
26. Ibid.
27. Consult: Ioffe, "Life-Creation in the Russian Israeli Culture;" and "The Revolutionary Aesthetics of the Second Russian Avant-Garde's «cynic» terror."
28. See his: *The Experimental Group*.
29. See on this Baigell, "Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, and their Jewish Issues."
30. Rosenberg, "Mystics of this World."

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Dennis Ioffe
University of Ghent, Belgium
University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Dennis.Ioffe@UGent.be http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7701-2662

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