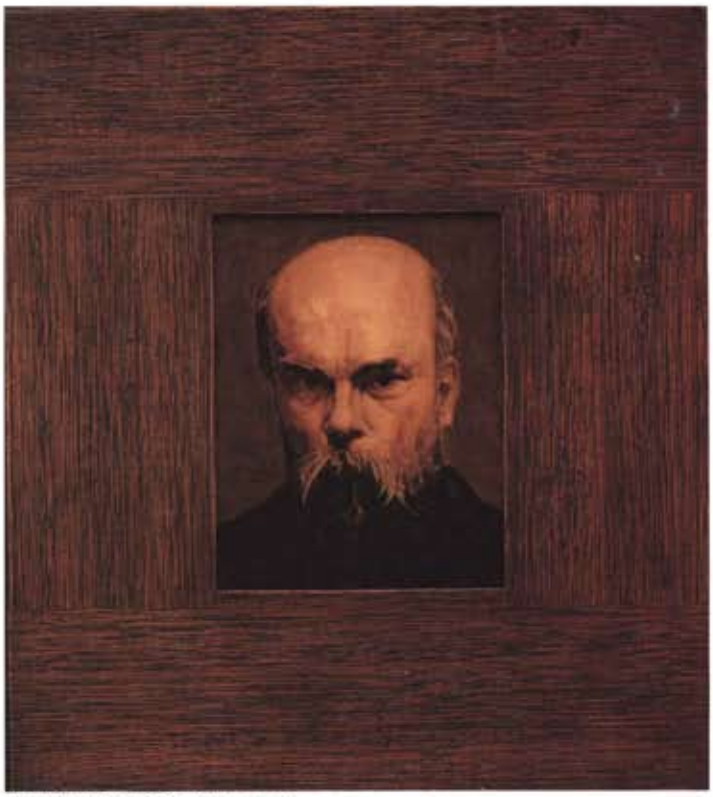
*Thomas Chimes:* Edgar Poe ("Departure from the Present"), *1974, oil on panel, 20¼ by 18¼ inches.*



Paul Verlaine, *1975, oil on wood, 13¼ by 12⅛ inches.*

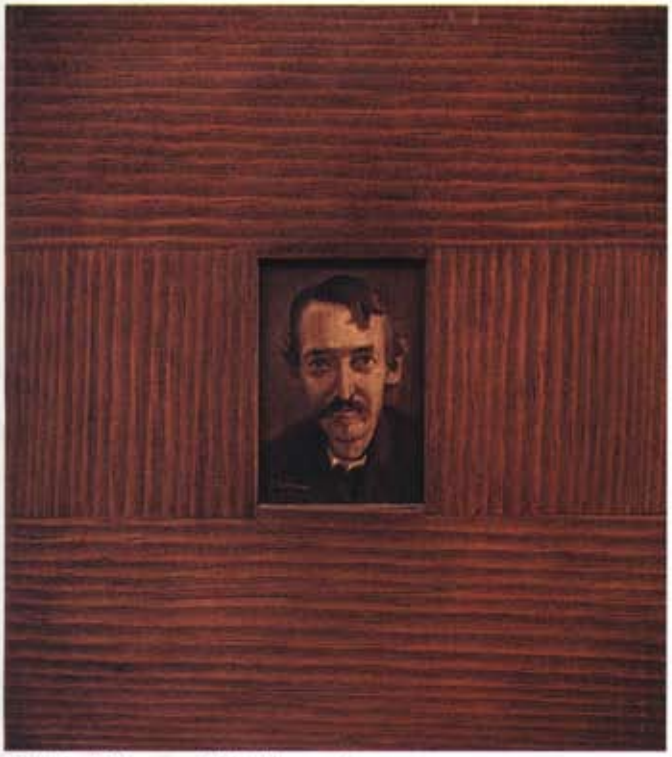
# Theater of Memory

**BY BARRY SCHWABSKY**

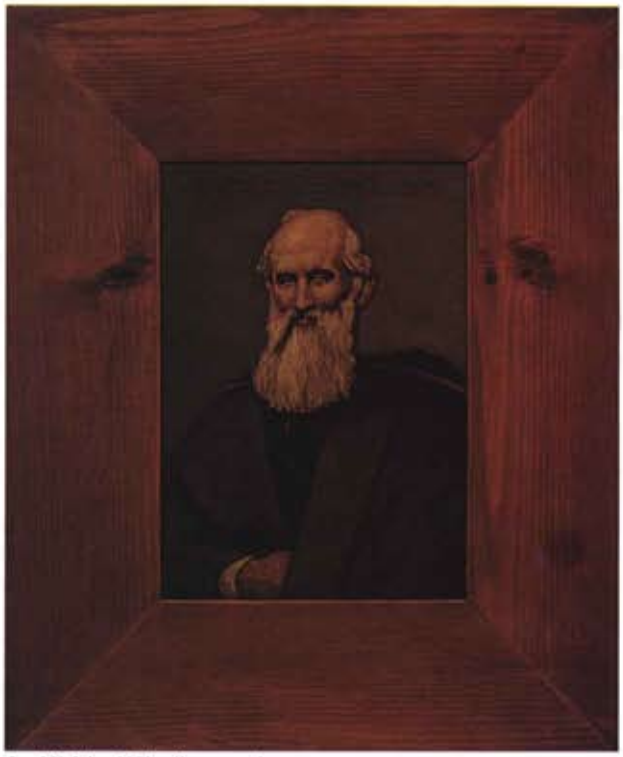
A little reflection reminds us of how misleading the distinction between trained artists and self-taught "visionaries" or "outsiders" can be. To think of an artist like Alfred Jensen, with his eccentric painting-diagrams based on an idiosyncratic understanding of the Mayan calendar, is to realize the permeability of the barrier we tend to place between what is publicly accessible and what is irreducibly arcane. In a different way, the fanatical concentration of an artist such as Myron Stout, with his abstract invocations of primal myth, recalls the fierce necessity of abstention from apparent consensus. It may well be that to make more than ephemerally significant art today requires—even, or especially, of the academically educated artist—a self-imposed autodidacticism. At the very least, there's a need for an infusion of information, however fantastic or unverifiable, tangential to the obvious and acknowledged sources of public discourse. Certain artists willingly turn to sources that are, in the etymological sense of the word, *occult*—that is, hidden, concealed. We see this in artists like Stout or Jensen, Bruce Conner or Jess. And among the artists taking that risk today I would name the Philadelphian Thomas Chimes.

To place Chimes in Philadelphia could imply an ambivalent desire, on his part, for both nearness to and distance from that international art capital to the northeast. But it would perhaps be more apt to recall the presence in Philadelphia of a venerable and continuing tradition of realist painting, on the one hand, and of the Arensberg Collection with its great hoard of Duchampiana on the other. (It may not be irrelevant to note that in Philadelphia, Chimes and I have been able to lunch in a restaurant housed in the former dwelling of Madame Blavatsky.) Born in 1921 of Greek parentage, Chimes lived and studied in New York through much of the '40s and early '50s, one of the innumerable young artists to breathe the atmosphere of Abstract Expressionism, right down to the obligatory hostile encounter with Jackson Pollock at the Cedar (Chimes still cites Pollock as an influence, though not for his innovation of the allover surface so much as his involvement with Jungian psychology). Chimes returned permanently to his hometown in 1953, though it was exhibitions at New York's Avant-Garde Gallery in the late '50s that really began his public career as an abstract painter, leading to the inclusion of his work in collections such as those of the Museum of Modern Art, the Ringling Museum and the Philadelphia Museum.

By the mid-'60s, Chimes had temporarily abandoned painting in favor



Robert Louis Stevenson, *1976, oil on wood, 10⅝ by 9¼ inches.*

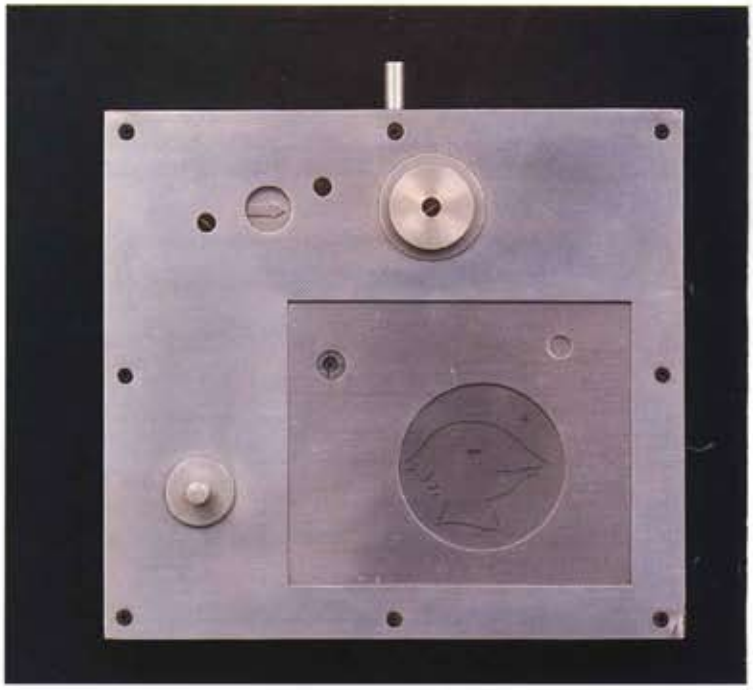


Lord Kelvin, *1974, oil on panel, 26 by 21⅛ inches.*

*Since the '70s, Thomas Chimes's paintings have reflected his interest in Symbolist esthetics and the figure of Alfred Jarry. Two recent shows of allusive portraits and glazed monochromes traced this obsession.*

of making boxlike wall-mounted objects constructed primarily of metal over a wood core. Their surfaces inscribed with cutout shapes and cryptic emblems, adorned with inset images and useless hardware, these seem to be picture machines of an unidentifiable function. These boxes, with their easy synthesis of Surrealism, Minimalism and Pop and their witty allusiveness, reflect perhaps too easily the manner of their time. They are period pieces. But in the early '70s Chimes married the "objectness" of his metal boxes to an extreme and willfully anachronistic manner that, in retrospect, looks far more interesting. Between 1973 and 1978 Chimes executed a series of 48 small panel portraits of figures prominent in 19th- and early 20th-century culture—Guillaume Apollinaire, André Breton, Edgar Allan Poe, Marcel Proust, Arthur Rimbaud, Robert Louis Stevenson, for example. Each was based on a period photograph (never a painting) and painted in nocturnal shades of depressive brown that echo the wide, heavy wooden frames that enclose them (as well as citing the wood panel supports).

It's clear enough that these portraits document an interest in 19th-century Symbolist esthetics, its sources and its early 20th-century offspring such as Surrealism. But a few figures seem anomalous—what, for



Le Momo, *1965, metal box, 9⅛ by 10 by 1 inches.*
*All photos this article courtesy Locks Gallery, Philadelphia.*

**Chimes's portraits represent a search for origins, an invention of artistic community, but they are hardly idealized and not really nostalgic.**

instance, is Lord Kelvin, the British physicist and mathematician, doing among the *poètes maudits*?—until one realizes that there is a more specific unifying thread to the group: each figure has some connection, direct or merely speculative, to an individual who reappears in this series in several different guises, the scandalous, enigmatic, and finally pitiful creator of Père Ubu and Faustroll, Alfred Jarry. (Lord Kelvin, for instance, is a sort of guiding spirit behind Jarry's posthumous mock-scientific masterpiece, *Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician*.)

But why Jarry? Certainly he is a pivotal figure in the transition from Symbolism to modernism, thanks to his cross-circuiting of art and life, which "pushed systematic absurdity into the realm of hallucination, of violated consciousness," as Roger Shattuck put it.[1] Yet Jarry's influence, while pervasive in modern art, is more easily traced through the careers of provocateurs and theatrical quasi-charlatans from Duchamp and Marinetti through Yves Klein to James Lee Byars, Gino de Dominicis, or even Mike Kelley. In contrast, Chimes is a soberly contemplative, reclusive painter who for once (and this is his virtue) purifies Jarry's heritage of everything puerilely transgressive, domesticating this tradition, as it were. In turning to Jarry, Chimes's portraits may represent a search for origins, an invention of artistic community, but they are hardly idealized and not really nostalgic. Rather they are haunted and mournful, like the "sad, accurate faces of artists" they convey.[2] As Chimes emphasizes, *hylē*, the ancient Greek word for matter, in mundane usage simply means *wood*. These images, boxed in by oversized wooden frames, are those of spirits unhappily imprisoned in and distorted by matter.

In an interview conducted in 1977—that is, as the series of portraits was beginning to wind down—Chimes cited the British psychologist Havelock Ellis's comment on the religious conversion of J.K. Huysmans, the French Decadent writer whose *A Rebours* so influenced Oscar Wilde (both Huysmans and Wilde are among Chimes's portrait subjects). As Chimes describes Ellis's account of the conversion experience, "it occurs especially in those who have undergone long and torturing disquietude, coming at last as the spontaneous resolution of all their doubts, the eruption of a soothing flood of peace, the silent explosion of inner light."[3] Chimes's dark portraits seem to offer evocations of that "long and torturing disquietude," and not only as the private condition of a few individuals but as a driving force in late 19th-century European culture. His paintings also remind us (if we needed reminding) that far from having found its resolution in the unholy release of the First World War, this condition still resonates today.

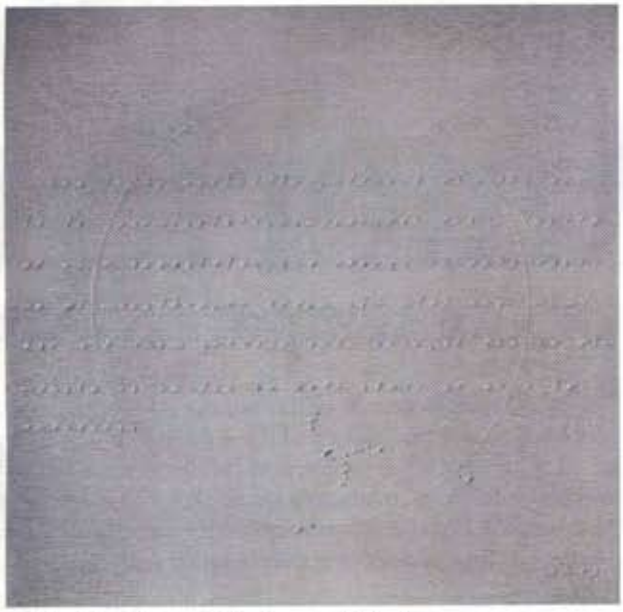
**Alfred Jarry, *1986, oil on canvas, 52 by 60 inches.***

What crises these portraits of Jarry and his circle may have been charting in Chimes's own artistic development is hard to say. After the portrait series, there followed several years of silence until the initiation, in the early '80s, of the current phase of Chimes's work—a re-emergence with a difference that can indeed appear as a sort of conversion, a "silent explosion of inner light." But the doubts whose "spontaneous resolution" is contained in Chimes's paintings of the past decade were already present in the dark portraits of the '70s. Thus, paradoxically, these doubts have been sustained, over more than a decade, in the very medium of their resolution.

**Memorial Hall, *1982, oil on canvas, 30 by 40 inches.*.**

Chimes's current work began in 1983 with a group of nearly pure white landscapes, images essentially faded to nebulous fields of atmosphere inhabited at the center by a shadowy horizon line from which a nipplelike dome rises up. According to one commentator, Jane Livingston, the source of this image is the view of Philadelphia Memorial Hall from the artist's childhood home at 31st Street and Girard Avenue; the image is the euphoric resolution of a tension between the overwhelming nearness of the maternal breast and the elusiveness of a distant prospect, between origin and goal.[4] Along the bottom of these paintings there is sometimes a barely legible inscription, and the edge of the canvas (later in the decade Chimes would return to painting on wood panel) is invariably painted a discreet black, giving a hint of the boundedness of this area of illumination.

The Jarry connection remains important, as in the painting whose inscription (and title) reads, "And behold the body of Faustroll's wallpaper was unrolled by the saliva and by the teeth of the water." The body is the landscape, and the landscape is the lacteous light in which it is bathed. The basis of all of Chimes's subsequent work is contained in the early '80s paintings, awaiting its patient "unrolling" and articulation,



God is, by Definition, *1992, oil on wood, 9 inches square.*

although new elements will enter and aspects of the earlier work will recur, transposed into a new key. First among these recurrences is photo-derived portraiture, with Jarry and the constellation around him returning, their lineaments shadowy, incorporeal apparitions from within a benevolent white light. The contrast with the '70s portraits is striking: where there was shabbiness there is now grace, where there was neurotic disproportion there now reigns equanimity.

By the end of the '80s, Jarry's profile is practically the only image left in Chimes's repertoire. Just as often there is no imagery left at all, only white-to-gray fields of half-buried inscriptions, as often in Greek as in English, constellationlike sets of points disposing letters by means of Fibonacci spirals or other formulas. We can also discern the recurrent geometrical figure of the perfect circle, sometimes showing up as the merest halo of light (it can even appear to be an effect of the ambient illumination rather than part of the painting), sometimes as a slight elevation of the painting's surface, the lowest of low relief. In certain of the most recent paintings, segments of Jarry's profile are overlapped to form ribbonlike abstract forms in relief that, with a crazy sort of near-idolatry, suggest the generation of cosmic patterns from the outline of a single face. In *The Alchemist* (1994), which uses this technique of monochrome relief, braided strands of profile segments, flanked with triangles and circles, lead towards the central image of Jarry's complete profile. Inside Jarry's head is a Chinese box arrangement of squares, circles and pentagons. Just below, tiny letters spell out the title.

To some, these paintings may seem trapped between hermeticism and didacticism, private reverie and the insistent reiteration of a preconceived message. Taking such a narrow view would be to assume that the opacity endemic to Chimes's paintings exists only for the viewer, contingently, that opacity is not part of the artist's method and message. It would also be to miss their obsessive but ambiguous connection to what Frances A. Yates called "the art of memory." By this, Yates meant the part of rhetoric (often closely allied with the aura of magic, divination and cosmological speculation) concerned with the creation of fanciful imagery and "memory theaters" for the memorization and coordination of otherwise dauntingly intricate and wide-ranging bodies of information and reference.[5]

Chimes's paintings are theaters of both memory and forgetting and, far from being didactic, ought to be called auto-didactic, as I realized only while viewing them in the company of the artist. It was fascinating to see how he would, less to me than to himself, "read off" the elements in them, pointing to some barely legible lines of text as he concentrated on half-reading, half-recalling the words he had secreted there. This process seemed surprisingly similar to how any viewer might try to work out the contents of the painting. Fewer of the constituent bits of information may be accessible to most of us than to the artist himself, but the elementary process of drawing connections—and seeing in them a Platonic sense of recollection, anamnesis—is what is most at stake in this work.

The specifics of what Chimes thinks about Jarry, for instance his connection with the mythological figure of Hermes and with Goethe's Mephistopheles, are fascinating and could generate endless commentary, but to concentrate on them would be to lose sight of the paintings as such. What counts is essentially Jarry's polymorphous identity. When asked, for instance, why his subjects (aside from the French novelist Rachilde) have been exclusively male, Chimes replied, "The representation is either masculine or feminine or both . . . I paint a portrait of Alfred Jarry, but at the same time a woman appears."[6] Indeed, sometimes Chimes gives Jarry a distinctly androgynous air.

Entering a room full of Chimes's newer paintings (as was possible recently at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia), one first seems to see simply a collection of mostly small grayish-white monochromes. Aside from their varying proportions—proportion itself being among the subjects of Chimes's meditations—the immediate differentiating quality among the paintings is their degree and quality of grayness. That already signifies a good deal. Chimes uses just two pigments in his work, titanium white and Mars black, each painting consisting of 20 or more layers of glaze applied in horizontal strokes. Images and inscriptions are revised, emphasized or covered over from

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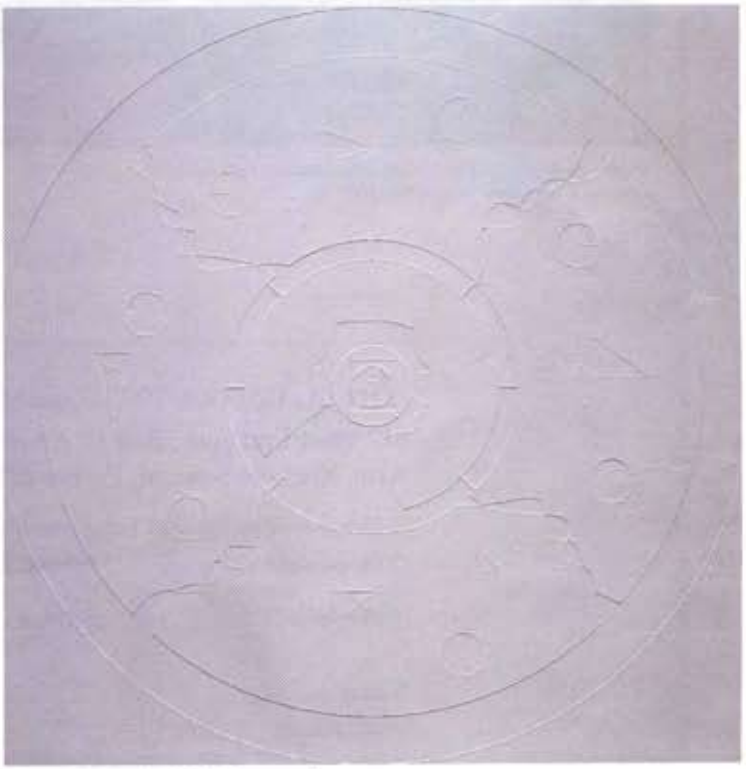

The Alchemist II, *1994, oil on wood, 23¼ inches square.*

# Thomas Chimes

*continued from page 95*

layer to layer, sometimes becoming completely buried or transformed into effects of texture reminiscent of scarification. The purer and more pristine their whiteness, the more intensely the paintings seem to glow with inner light and come forward to claim the space between themselves and the viewer. On the other hand, when they are grayer they appear more soiled, sooty, "touched by hands," and their light hovers close to the surface, diffused and absorptive, reflecting a sort of inwardness back into the work.

If we linger on the surface of the paintings—as the title of a 1989 work, *Concerning the Surface*, seems to explictly urge—it becomes clearer that the degree of whiteness or grayness is a function of Chimes's working method. As layers of information accumulate on a particular painting—that is, layers of paint—the grayer it tends to be. Chimes's is a universe where information, obsessively veiling itself, does not correspond to intelligibility but to obscurity; only the pure white light, more suggested than presented, is given as wholly intelligible. In their refinement of surface and their dialectic of emptiness and density, abstraction and image, the paintings Chimes has made over the last decade are somewhat reminiscent of those of Vija Celmins.

An even closer (and quite unexpected) relation is to the work of the Polish conceptual painter Roman Opalka, whose ongoing sequence of counting works is based on a gradual increase in the ratio of white to black in the paint he uses. In both Opalka and Chimes, the work's deep subject turns out to be something purely quantitative yet endlessly metaphorical. The ratio of admixture of white to black corresponds to metaphysical equations involving information and illumination, spleen and ideal, disappearance and revelation, death and life. Unfortunately, to give these expansive terms greater precision would require a lengthy

**By the late '80s, Jarry's profile is almost the only image left in Chimes's work. Just as often there is no image at all, only grayish-white fields.**

self-education in hermetic philosophy and mythology as well as the history of modern art and literature, and would open the risk, common to all appeals to arcane learning, of leading to a cul-de-sac. What's needed is not so much a process of reproducing the knowledge Chimes himself has gathered in the course of his work as of matching him in passionate commitment. Are there viewers prepared for such a task? In this sense, as well as in a more worldly one, Chimes remains to be discovered. □

1. Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France 1885 to World War I*, revised ed., New York, Vintage, 1968, p. 34. This remains the best general introduction to Jarry and his milieu. See also *Selected Works of Alfred Jarry*, ed. by Roger Shattuck and Simon Watson Taylor, New York, Grove Press, 1965.
2. Stephen Berg, "Framed Faces, Infinite White," in *Tom Chimes, A Compendium: 1961-1986*, Philadelphia, Goldie Paley Gallery, Moore College of Art, 1986, p. 14.
3. Eileen Berger, "A Conversation with Tom Chimes," *Arts Exchange*, March/April 1978, p. 26.
4. Jane Livingston, *Thomas Chimes: The Hermes Cycle-Paintings*, Philadelphia, Locks Gallery, 1992, unpaginated.
5. Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, University of Chicago Press, 1966; *Theatre of the World*, University of Chicago Press, 1969.
6. "A Conversation with Thomas Chimes and Marian Locks," *Thomas Chimes*, Philadelphia, Marian Locks Gallery, 1990, unpaginated.

*Chimes was one of six artists, three from Philadelphia, three English, featured in "Conversation Pieces," organized by Patrick T. Murphy at the Institute of Contemporary Art [May 13-July 17, 1994]. A selection of Chimes's work since the '60s was on view at the Alexander S. Onassis Center for Hellenic Studies, New York University [Nov. 10-Dec. 23, 1994].*

Author: *Barry Schwabsky is an art critic living in New York.*

# Kabakov

*continued from page 69*

a poorly painted room.

The task is complicated further by the fact that the origins of the Western and Eastern European installations are different. As far as I can judge, the roots of Western installation lie in Happenings and Actions; the installation is actually the remains of events frozen in time, like the installations of Beuys, Kounellis and Merz. The origins of the East European installations lie in painting. Here the viewer falls into the painting, makes the passage to the other side of the glass, enters into the painting. The Western installation is oriented toward the object, toward the appearance of different objects after the action. The Eastern installation is oriented toward space, toward the atmosphere of a particular situation.

**RS:** When I organized "*Dis*locations" at MOMA in 1991, some people said that there should have been explanatory placards at the entrance to each installation so that people would know how to look at them. My assumption was that the whole point of encountering installation work is to enter a space where you don't know where you are and you have to learn how to imaginatively put it together. That's something that once had to be done with modern painting. But now the surprise of modern painting has been made official, whereas the surprise of installation art has not. In a way, learning how to look at installations might teach people what they have forgotten to see in paintings.

**IK:** You are touching upon the most important dilemma facing any viewer of a work of art: whether to gain concrete knowledge and then leave, or to immerse yourself in what is offered. To receive information and then depart is the first temptation, and what aids in this departure are the explanations and inscriptions which accompany the work. The important thing is that when we read we are probably doing it so that we don't have to look anymore. As pertains to the tendency to immerse oneself, for this there cannot be explanatory texts. For this it is crucial that you are alone and that you are near the work of art in solitude.

Works of art, I think, consist of a series of traps, or concealments, through which the viewer has to pass. There is a naive notion that past art was easy to understand but today's art is too closed and yields itself poorly to discovery. Old paintings, however, are just as closed as today's; it's just that they have been discovered many times and a method now exists for revealing them. But there are still a lot of good closed things. I stood before *Las Meniñas* recently, and it was like standing in front of many closed doors.

**RS:** Then installation may save painting rather than kill it off.

**IK:** Absolutely. In installations people actually stand and look at the paintings contained within them.

**RS:** So you make these rooms that are filled with the evidence of people, in order that one person can be there alone, can discover a kind of isolation in that room full of the presence of others.

**IK:** Yes. It may sound bombastic, but this is what happens in a temple. We are all together, and each of us feels good because of the presence of the thing in whose name we are standing here.

**RS:** The irony of the situation today is that people

***"Our generation believed that Soviet power would last for 10,000 years, that nothing would ever change. Therefore each of us oriented his art not to the future but to the varied spaces of the past or of the existing Soviet environment."***

read newspapers, watch television and read books at home, and they go to museums to be alone. Their public thinking is done in private and their private thinking is done in public.

**IK:** Brilliant. A person goes to a public place to be alone. And at home we do our public thing. □

*This interview was conducted in English and Russian with the assistance of the artist's wife, Emilia Kabakov. Ilya Kabakov's taped responses were translated by Cynthia Martin.*

*In 1995, Ilya Kabakov will have solo exhibitions at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris [May 17-Sept.4]; Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris [opens May 17]; the Deichtorhallen, Hamburg [June 23]; the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam [July 15]; the Kunstmuseum, Basel [Aug. 15]; and the Recalde art space, Bilbao [Dec. 15].*

Author: *Robert Storr is an artist and critic who is also a curator in the department of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art.*