

An immersed visitor inside  
"The Cherry Orchard."



fig. 1. The Museum of Contemporary Art Erarta is housed in a massive neo-classical building in St. Petersburg, Russia.



SERAFIMA KOSTROVA

# The “User-Friendly” Museum: Russian Interactivity

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Apollinaria Nemkova

*Yes, you really can touch the art*, is what museum employees sometime tell visitors. But it can still sound dismaying in post-Soviet countries for visitors who were taught to treat a museum almost as a temple: *Don't touch, keep silent, no photos*. However, in our world of technological ubiquity where we can experience, post and share, museums are reconsidering their status as silent temples. And this is for the better.

Here I present reflections on a contemporary art museum in Russia that was able to overcome challenges – tough competition, conservative audiences, and an inconvenient location – to attract long lines of visitors. This was possible thanks to a thoughtfully

curated collection, but also due to a radically interactive approach, which encourages visitors to feel as if they are a part of the exhibitions and involved in the art. Besides the overall interactive and immersive layout of the museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art Erarta introduced an interactive specialty – U-Space: a “total installation” and the focus of this article.

Erarta (fig. 1), opened in 2010, is a privately-owned institution in St. Petersburg, Russia's second largest city and its cultural hotspot.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For more details about the museum and collection, visit the museum's website: [www.erarta.com](http://www.erarta.com). You can also find information on Erarta's page on Google Art & Culture Project at: [artsandculture.google.com/partner/erarta-museum](https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/erarta-museum).

In a country where most museums are devoted to the past and run by government officials, Erarta is a radical departure: It was created to promote living Russian artists. For that it houses and displays the country's largest non-governmental collection of contemporary art, and it offers a non-traditional representation of Russian culture, showing a blend of emerging artists and more accomplished ones.

In sharp contrast to other Russian museums, here the visitor is the main priority. The wall next to the staircase, the restrooms and lockers, the elevators, the benches in the yard: all of those provide recommendations, notes of gratitude, or artistic quotes. In other words, the museum talks with the visitor. This interaction helps guests to navigate the sprawling building (the museum occupies a five-floor building). Officially-designated "Selfie Zones" and a wall covered with computer screens, where visitors tweet on behalf of the museum, can make them feel welcome. This is not a usual sentiment among museumgoers in this part of the world, where visitors are often treated as an afterthought.

The interactive approach runs deep. Like most museums, Erarta has a permanent collection and shows temporary exhibits. But along with traditional media like painting or sculpture, the museum is full of interactive and immersive art objects, which invite visitors to participate at every turn. For example, the first floor of the museum houses *Model of Bipolar Activity*, created by artist Dmitry Kawarga with programming by Sergei Monakhov and scientific consulting by Timor Schukin. This biomorphic sculpture invites visitors to place two fingers of each hand inside provided slots. Reading signals of brain cells, the sculpture then emanates sound that varies with brain activity (fig. 2). The next hall features *Dinner Alone*, an installation by Yury Tatianin (fig. 3). It juxtaposes a painting with real objects, aiming to blend art and reality, making a viewer feel herself as a part of the painting. Painting in a naïve style, it jokingly presents a traditional Russian dinner – a faceted glass of vodka and a pickle – as does the installation next to it. Now, the visitor is invited to join a table next to the painting, pour a shot of the strong stuff and chase it with a pickle. What could be more interactive?

Interactivity can be fun, but at Erarta it was born by a challenge. For one, unlike most of the city attractions, the museum is not within walking distance from the center or a subway station. It faces competition for visitors from established, world-famous art institutions such as the State Hermitage Museum and the State Russian Museum. For most visitors, a cluster of landmark museums will easily win over a promising but remote Erarta. The challenges were evident to the founding team, which realized the need to stand out, to introduce something new, and led to the design of a visitor-oriented and interactive museum. Along with stressing the visitor's experience and using interactive exhibits, Erarta introduced something new for the city and, perhaps, for the country – a selection of "total installations."

### U-Space: Introducing Interactivity

Total installation is the brainchild of Ilya Kabakov, the Soviet-born American artist and critic. It utilizes other art forms, like painting or sculpture, but stresses exhibiting space – complemented by objects in it – rather than showing objects in some space.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps inspired by Kabakov's work, Erarta created its own version of total installations, called U-Spaces, which stands for "your space."

In Erarta, U-Spaces are rooms of various sizes, filled with objects that combine interactivity and immersion. They aim to put a viewer into a certain mood by engaging sight, sound, touch, sometimes smell, all in individually-designated sessions. Each U-Space is site-specific, created by artists and museum employees.

Here is how it works: a visitor books a 15-minute session and can bring up to four other people, typically family or friends. Ticketing is separate from general admission and carries a designated time. During the visit, the chosen U-Space is available only to the reserving party. They are encouraged to interact with the objects inside, explore the space, and essentially do anything (except damaging the objects, of course). The sessions, as one visitor put it, offer "a very private experience."

<sup>2</sup> Ilya Kabakov, *On the "Total" Installation* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 1995); Kabakov, *Texts* (Russia: German Titov, 2010).

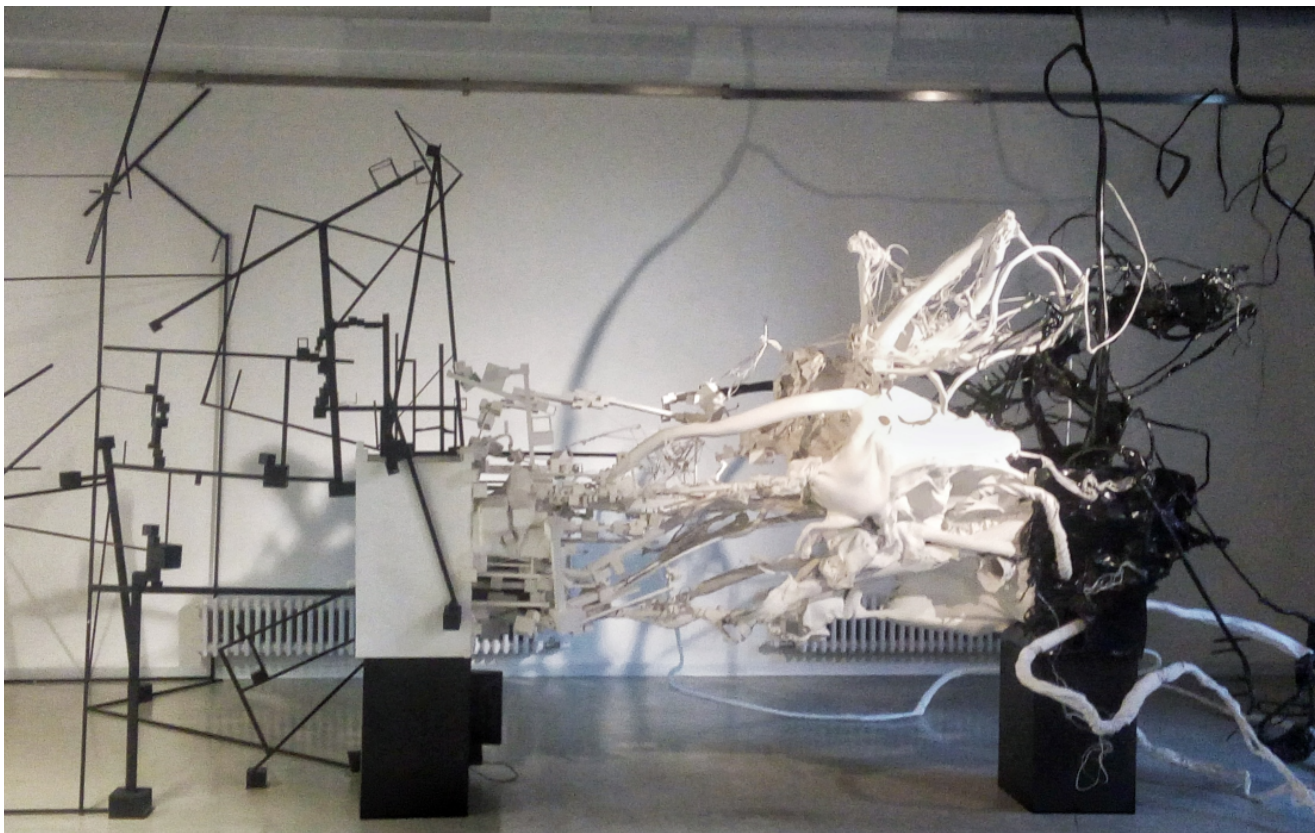


fig. 2. "Model of Bipolar Activity."

A visitor is invited to place two fingers of each hand inside provided slots. Reading signals of brain cells, the sculpture then produces sound according to the activity of the visitor's brain hemispheres.



fig. 3. "Dinner Alone" is an example of one of the many interactive art objects at Erarta. Visitors are invited to join dinner with the person on the painting - sit at the table, pour a glass of vodka, and sample a pickle.

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fig. 4. A view in the U-Space titled "What's Left When Everything's Gone?"



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Starting with just one, there are now eight U-Spaces in Erarta. They vary in size, content, and mood, but each is accompanied by an introductory text, which attunes the reader to the coming atmosphere of the installation. As a visitor recommended in her review, “read all the texts to every exposition, they are very simple and very important.”

For instance, what would you expect to see in a U-Space titled “What’s Left When Everything’s Gone?” (fig. 4). While you may guess the nostalgic and melancholic mood of the installation from the name, its introductory narrative suggests an experience of loss. And it is almost impossible not to sense it inside.

Behind a plain door is a small room decorated in a recognizably dilapidated Soviet style (faded wallpapers, cracking wood floor, scarce furniture). On the wall, a large painting depicts a boy with a strong stare, sitting at a white table. His facial expression is mature, confident but also condemning. In the same room, you will also find a large cuckoo clock and a rocking chair. Sitting in it feels comfortable – until you meet the boy’s stare. It makes you feel a bit uncomfortable, prompting you to go to the next room.

Inside the next room, the feeling of loss is amplified. There is an identically-sized painting: The same white table is still on the canvas, but now no one sits next to it. Looking below the painting, you find a small chair. On the floor are metal toy soldiers and a child’s shoe. What happened here? Then, your eyes spot another door. Attached to it are some old letters and a school grade book. The letters speak of “The War” (which must mean World War II, a still-common theme in Russian art). The sound of a metronome mimicking a clock can be heard behind the closed door. Once opening it, you step into a black, long, narrow corridor, which turns and leads to the exit. The message becomes clearer: the boy went to the war and never returned.

The melancholy here is contrasted by the mood of the most popular U-Space – “The Cherry Orchard.” The introduction recounts the story of an old man who was poor but wanted to leave something behind before his death. Having little to give, he instead planted thousands of cherry trees next to Mount Fuji. After his death, the trees blossomed all at once, amazing the



fig. 5. A close-up of the water droplets in “The Cherry Orchard.”

public. The message: good things can live longer than we do. As the story continues, the visitor is invited to experience the beauty of blossoms as a symbol of new life and new dreams.

While approaching the door of “The Cherry Orchard,” visitors can already hear the comforting sounds of Mozart’s “Piano Concerto No. 21 in C major.” With walls painted in deep purple, the installation welcomes the viewer with a group of illuminated floor-to-ceiling strings and velvety pillows. Once the door opens, the visitor can see the whole U-Space. In the middle of the room is a combination of vertical strings, each carrying transparent polymer balls, reminiscent of water drops (fig. 5). Spotlights in the ceiling highlight the flexible construction in the center, washing it with the wine hue of the walls. The glossy floor adds reflections. Dark velvet pillows, placed between the strings, invite the visitor further into the strings group. Once she wades through the strings, the visitor sees myriad self-reflections on the balls. Eventually, the pillows offer a resting right inside the forest of the strings (intro image). Laying in the center, the visitor can relax her mind or contemplate the tale, all to the tunes of Mozart’s piano.

## Challenges and Lessons

In creating U-Spaces, Erarta had to balance interactivity and meaning. Is more interactivity better – or does it risk turning a museum into a funfair? The challenge is epitomized by “The Cherry Orchard,” which quickly became a favorite for wedding shoots. Just-married couples began reserving entire weekends for photo sessions, monopolizing the exhibit and preventing others from experiencing it. For some, this risked trivializing art, turning it into a sparkly background, losing its promise of contemplation. As one visitor commented, “they [U-Spaces] impressed me a lot, despite of the fact that it’s not an ART, it’s more like amusement park. Still it’s fun.” Of course, others may delight at such repurposing, seeing it as a natural progression. Yet, it is a point that museum professionals must consider.

Another challenge was how to best convey to visitors the necessity of interaction. To grasp the U-Space concept, one must immerse herself in it, a requirement unfamiliar to many. For example, the melancholic installation “What’s Left When Everything is Gone?” combines objects and requires intimacy to create a feeling of loss. The challenge – and the opportunity – is that such a feeling can emerge only through thoughtful interaction with the artifacts. The visitor is expected to attentively connect the pieces: the clock, the paintings, the toys, the single shoe. If a visitor skipped the introductory narrative, that could be difficult. Misplaced attention could explain why reviews of this piece vary dramatically. Some left with tears in their eyes while others complained that “nothing is happening here.”

Instructions for interaction can be tricky. The museum staff, concerned about anything that would be longwinded or overly didactic, has settled on use of introductory texts and repeated urges to visitors to interact with the art. The feedback seems positive. For instance, one visitor wrote that by entering “The Cherry Orchard,” “you make a deep dive...and you can without any distraction face your unique emotions

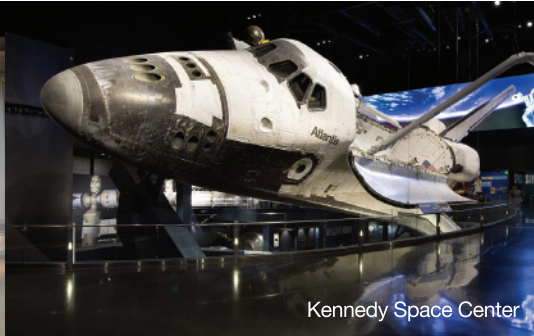
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and feelings. It is perfect for escape into a magic world of eternity.” Or another one shared that after visiting U-Space he “really felt like it was more ‘user-friendly’ for those who may not have a huge art background.” At the same time, the brief instructions allowed for reinterpretation, intentionally or not. As another visitor wrote, “these installations give you a chance to take some cool pics with your friends.”

U-Space became a specialty of Erarta. Some enjoy it while others may prefer a more traditional approach to art appreciation. However, all would probably agree that experiencing art individually, interactively, and immersively is a novelty. With new technologies such as augmented reality, total installations may become more versatile, delivering concepts that are more complex. U-Spaces may become more popular among museums, allowing them to establish a unique position. With popularity, I believe, new and evolving uses will emerge.

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