

# NEW TIDES

**Brigitte Schenk** discusses Ilya and Emilia Kabakov's *Boat of Tolerance*, which recently made its way to Sharjah as a collateral project alongside the emirate's biennial.

**I**nternationally acclaimed Russian artist duo Ilya and Emilia Kabakov are renowned for their large-scale conceptual installation art projects that address socio-political issues of our time. Their site-specific *Boat of Tolerance* was launched in Siwa, Egypt in 2006 and has since travelled to Venice (for the 2007 Biennale), St Moritz in Switzerland, in 2010 and was recently brought to Sharjah by the Sharjah Department of Culture and Information and Galerie Brigitte Schenk, for the emirate's 10th biennial. The artwork has been touring the world on a mission to stimulate dialogue about the fundamental idea of tolerance.

Believing that the quality of a society is determined by the education of its children, the Kabakovs hope to "rally children worldwide with the message, 'Tolerance: Learn It and Live It.'" The objective is to reach them "at such a young age as to make many of the world's problems obsolete in the future," believes Emilia Kabakov. In each host country, the artists work collaboratively with children aged six to 12, inviting them to create drawings and other artworks which are then integrated into the boat and its sails. The vessel represents the historical influences of each region, as well as the concerns, dreams and desires for the future that are envisioned by the participating young-

Left (detail) and right: Ilya and Emilia Kabakov. *Boat of Tolerance*. 2011. View of the permanent interactive mixed media outdoor installation in Sharjah. 1100 x 1800 x 4000 cm. Image courtesy Galerie Brigitte Schenk. Photography by Klaus Fritze.



sters. The project is therefore not only site-specific but also interactive, as it is created substantially by the people living in a particular city. The subject of tolerance, a key issue facing nations worldwide and of particular importance at the moment, is further explored through talks and workshops supported by materials developed for ongoing education campaigns.

The workshops ask probing questions, as in one extract from a session held in four elementary schools in Sharjah indicates: "Test your tolerance level. Think of yourself as an open-minded person! Be curious about the deep prejudices you may have buried away! Be an 'Upstander'. Ignorance, intolerance and injustice pop up in

casual conversation all the time, but most of us take the 'bystander' position by letting these comments slide. Think of these situations and write them down. What about you is 'different'? If someone else were to step into your shoes for a day, what kind of prejudices are they likely to encounter? Now slip into their shoes..."

Boats have a particular significance in the Gulf, given the region's history of seafaring cultural interchange. This project struck a chord in Sharjah and will hopefully prompt young people to think beyond their immediate surroundings and ponder on how they are perceived outside and what their own attitude is towards people from overseas. ☺

