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Alexander Brodsky builds the impossible

Edwin Heathcote

The architect on conceiving projects as fairy tales — and then making them real



Alexander Brodsky surrounded by concrete plinths on which models of his work are displayed at Ambika P3 in London

Building is not the inevitable result of architecture. It might sound paradoxical but the drawing, the fundamental vehicle of the architectural imagination, is often an end in itself. And, perhaps ironically, it can be far more influential than any building. Drawings can be reproduced in ways that architecture cannot. They can convey fantasies and dreams more eloquently and they can revel in the impossible, using everything we know about structure, gravity and mass and turning it upside down to create unsettling, intriguing worlds.

A case could be made for Giambattista Piranesi (1720-78) being history's most influential architect. His buildings were also-rans but in his drawings he created the architectural sublime. In his depictions of ruined Roman cities he grossly distorted dimensions to suggest the remains of a Herculean civilisation of giants, as if to imply that our world could only ever look insignificant beside the refined fragments of the classical world.

Piranesi was followed by Étienne-Louis Boullée, whose huge visions of an Enlightenment architecture of fearsome geometry have influenced dictators and megalomaniacs ever since. But in the modern era it was the Russians who dominated the speculative drawing. The privations of the civil war of 1917-

1922 made the visionary designs of the revolutionary architects such as Ivan Leonidov and Yakov Chernikhov unrealisable, so they instead imagined them through drawings, dynamic visions of the free-floating geometries of suprematism. And in the 1990s it was another Russian who revived the debate about the provocative, evocative value of the drawing as medium and message combined.

Alexander Brodsky and his collaborator Ilya Utkin, whose drawings are displayed in a room at Tate Modern, reacted to the opportunities of perestroika as their predecessors had to the thrill of building a new society in the wake of the revolution. But rather than the machine imagery of the constructivists, Brodsky's drawings depicted shadowy memories, archetypes from a collective unconscious, images of a precarious architecture of dreamlike surrealism. These were dark, dense spaces which reeked of Piranesi and Boullée, with crowds of lines etched into deep shadows.

When my generation of architects saw these drawings, they were a revelation. They landed in the west via New York gallerist Ronald Feldman and a series of reproductions in the midst of a newfound postmodernist pluralism. More than physical buildings, these drawings embodied the cross-media metanarratives so beloved of the 1980s. They suggested a Borgesian architecture in which words flowed through space and intense, insane cross-sections revealed impossible interiors, dolls' houses of ever-shrinking scale and ad hoc, backstage constructions of ramshackle timbers.

Brodsky's surreal architecture seemed unrealisable, yet in the 2000s he began building. In a pair of small buildings he began to flesh out the dense drawings, beginning with a mysterious white-painted box on Moscow's frozen Klyazma Reservoir.

"I called it the Pavilion for Vodka Drinking Ceremonies. Like the Japanese tea houses but Russian," Brodsky tells me when we meet deep below ground at the University of Westminster's Ambika P3 space, a cavernous former concrete-testing lab on London's traffic-choked Marylebone Road, where his work is currently on display. "[The Pavilion] was built from windows. Only windows. At first I just wanted to save these windows from an old factory that was being torn down. Then we built this."

Brodsky, who was born in Moscow in 1955, is small and austere-looking. He has the hesitancy and considered language of a poet more than the confidence of an architect. His round-framed, horn-rimmed glasses sit low on his nose and he peers over them, carefully. He looks slightly hunched, as if in pain.

As part of *Potential Architecture*, a group show at Ambika P3, he is installing a series of fired clay maquettes on concrete plinths in a tent made from scaffold tarpaulins. "They represent . . . foundations," he says. I wait for more. There is no more. The models, labyrinths filled with shavings and fragments of clay, share the intensity and detail of the drawings yet are more abstract. He has designed houses, an ice pavilion and installations across the world but his best



known built work remains a small structure entitled “Rotunda”, placed in a remote field in Russia. An oval plan, this one was made using old doors. “You could come in and leave in any direction,” he says. “The space changed completely depending on how many doors were left open.” It was a kind of inverse Bluebeard’s castle, with each door leading to endless wheat fields.

“It was an experiment in space and an attempt to save some beautiful things,” Brodsky says. Both these little buildings embodied a wistful yearning for a disappearing past. “In Moscow the new architecture leads to very terrible things. We are losing a bit of the spirit of the city every day and that is more important to me than new buildings. When I see a new building the first thing I think about is what has been lost.”

It’s a curious position for an architect but it also helps explain the remarkable density and intensity in the drawings as an embodiment of loss and memory and fears for a latent future.

“The drawings were opportunities to explore architectural ideas,” says Brodsky. “In those days [in the USSR] it was a period of total state control. You could only work for a big office, there were no chances to do anything small or interesting. Every project for me was a narrative, almost a fairy tale, combining everything on one piece of paper, sometimes poetry, sometimes text. The drawing is the beginning of everything.”



Was it difficult to make the transition from drawings to real building? “The problem is I’m always thinking and always changing. I was always trying to put some kind of fantasies into the building. On paper you can do whatever you want but on a building site it’s very difficult. Once you start a construction it has its own life.”

One of the drawings at Tate depicts houses stacked in niches in a dark, unsettling etching. Inscribed on it are the words “The Inhabited Columbarium or the reservation for little old houses and their inhabitants in a large modern city”. Brodsky’s work is about the space between imagination and reality. It is an architecture for the subconscious and the soul.

‘Potential Architecture’, to April 19, Ambika P3, p3exhibitions.com; Brodsky and Utkin Portfolio, Tate Modern, tate.org.uk

Photographs: Victoria Birkinshaw; Steve White and Calvert 22; Yuri Palmin/Triumph

Russia's Greatest Living Architect Brodsky Opens New Exhibit

By [Sarah Crowther](#)
Nov. 23 2014 20:38



Vladimir Filonov / MT

Visitors at Alexander Brodsky's exhibition "Mainstream," which opened earlier this month at Triumph Gallery.

Alexander Brodsky, who has been called Russia's greatest living architect, does not have any of the self-importance one might associate with such a grand title.

He wears round tortoiseshell glasses and a black suit, almost blending into Triumph Gallery's dark walls at the opening of his latest exhibition "Mainstream."

Soft-spoken and affable, Brodsky exchanged handshakes and laughed with fans, many of whom are friends.

"I've known Sasha for 40 years, since our days at the [Moscow Architecture] Institute," said Lena Budina, an architect and teacher. "He has grown so high, and we all look up to him."

The first floor of "Mainstream," Brodsky's first show since 2013, displays small wooden barn structures, covered in fabric and tar roofing materials. The structures have roofs and low windows cut into the sides,

but no floors; instead there are video projections on the ground with what looks like flowing streams of water.

"The idea is time, which only moves in one direction," Brodsky told The Moscow Times. "Time is not fixed. As it passes, it captures everything in its path."

Fittingly, "Mainstream" is arranged with a flowing stream in mind, moving from one side of the space to the other, said Triumph Gallery spokeswoman Marina Bobyleva.

Brodsky can "go beyond the boundaries of his own architectural thinking and construct significant chunks of real or imagined space," art critic Andrei Tolstoy wrote in the show's introductory brochure, saying Brodsky has the ability to work with his environment, not against it.

Brodsky came of age in the Brezhnev era, architecturally better known for the uniform apartment blocks that dot the country. Jobs were virtually nonexistent for architects who wanted to work creatively, so Brodsky worked outside the Soviet system and sold art abroad or in Moscow, when possible.

Brodsky and his contemporary Ilya Utkin were at the center of what was called the "paper architecture" movement, as their work remained on the drawing board and had no chance of being made.

Their fantastical, gothic drawings stood in stark contrast to the bland designs of the Brezhnev era, and were in their own way a kind of social criticism. One of his most famous works done with Utkin is "Dwelling House of Winnie the Pooh in a Big Modern City" (1983).



Vladimir Filonov / MT

Brodsky is one of the most famous 'paper architects' from Soviet times.

Something of the gothic lives on in Brodsky's "Mainstream." The basement level of the exhibition displays birds and abstract figures painted on lighted windows, as if they were windows around a house.

Despite his history of pushing creative boundaries, Brodsky generally shies away from politics.

"There are no politics [in 'Mainstream']," he said, and he seems to only desire to have the freedom to do the work he chooses.

"Twenty years ago I took a group of my students to one of Sasha's shows," Budina said. "Now they're all grown up — one's a lawyer, one's a journalist. They all became someone. And I wonder whether a small part of that show lodged itself in their minds."

"Mainstream" runs until Nov. 30 at Triumph Gallery. 3/8 Ilinka Ulitsa. Metro Ploshchad Revolyutsii.

Three works by Alexander Brodsky

1. "Rotunda," Kaluga (2009)

Made of wood and brick, Brodsky's "Rotunda," perhaps his best-known structure, stands in the middle of a field in Russia's central Kaluga region, part of the land art in the village of Nikola-Lenivets. Built in a classic form, "Rotunda" has doors around its exterior to open itself up to, or shut out, the elements.

2. "Ice House," Klyazma Reservoir (2003)

Made of ice, wood and metal mesh, the "Ice House" was built in 2003 as a bar set on a frozen lake. The pavilion was then lit from the inside, which made it glow. In spring the ice melted and the structure was dismantled.

3. "Oval Shade," Gorky Park (2012)

"Oval Shade" was designed for Moscow's newly refurbished Gorky Park. Made of wood and polymer resin, it stands from summer until fall. Hammocks hang from its beams and yoga mats can be placed underneath.

THE PLACE OF PAPER (originally published in AArchitecture 21)

AA 2nd Year Buster Rönngren interviews Alexander Brodsky, in an attempt to orientate paper architecture in the present

10 February 2014

Architectural Association, London

'Local? I have never thought about it that way. Paper is a material, different from stone.' – Alexander Brodsky



Once the unmoved mover of the phenomenon of paper architecture in 1970s Moscow, Alexander Brodsky worked alongside Ilya Utkin, creating etchings of potentially better places, seeing paper architecture as presenting another possibility to the uniformity of the sanctioned architecture of the Soviet city. Under the authoritarian state, Brodsky opted to stay on paper, drawing, as if the project was an antonym. Today, the architect, who in the 1980s worked as sculptor of objects and site-specific installations in New York, continues to address his practice, in a now-liberated nation that once hired no architects. (Well, architects didn't have names in the first place, other than the mark of the state, to sign the documents of building.)

On the topic of paper, Brodsky is at variance with the attempt to relate paper to matters concerning commonplaces. From topos (a place), a paper is linked to the term topic, at most, in the sense of determining the evidence of a place. There is perhaps no topographical agenda in the material itself, for right reasons. *'It means that it exists only as an idea,'* explained Brodsky during our interview. *'Even if a project is not a critical piece of paper, but exists in the computer, it can still be called paper architecture.'*

Where do you draw the line between paper architecture and built form; is there a distinction between idea and architecture?

For me personally, paper as a material is an important part of the whole thing. This has nothing to do with paper architecture as a movement or whatever, but it somehow worked with it at that time. It was paper architecture as an idea, and paper architecture on a real piece of paper... From the moment a structure is built it becomes a real thing and it stops being paper architecture. Before the realisation of the building is the border between what I am drawing and what I am building. I am always trying to destroy this border. When I think about the old paper projects, theoretically many of them, let's say all, could be built. But, nobody wanted to build them at the time, so they remained on paper.

When there is no authorship to find behind building, paper architecture can be seen as a reaction: writing the name of a place before there is an actual place to go to. The reason for paper architecture is, in this sense, not about informing the unseen reality, depicting unrealistic places, but about envisioning real places where one is not allowed to go. Acknowledging that state buildings in 1970s London carry signatures of different architects, although initiated as projects on paper, the reaction came from a retroactive elsewhere.

With regard to the material, are there specific types of paper that you prefer or find useful in your work?

For a long time, in this country and city, there was a restricted amount of material. I used what I could get. For instance, producing a master print for a project back in the 80s, there was only one type of etching paper available. And even this etching paper was rare at times. If there was a store supply, you would ask for five metres at once. When I first came to New York though, there was an idea to print an edition of our etchings. At the print shop, they asked about what type of paper I had in mind for the publication. At that time I couldn't reply since I only knew of one type. So I was taken to an art store for reference. 150 different types of etching paper, I didn't know what to say, I wanted to use all of them. A man explained to me that 'these ten types are German, and these are Italian, and these are French', and so forth. Initially the difference between them was only a question of origin, but after some time, I could say I liked the texture of a certain type, no matter where it was from.



Have you ever found yourself in a situation when paper proves insufficient to express an idea, that the medium is too narrow?

Every project begins with a piece of paper. Even if the end product is an installation or sculpture, it is a continuation from a pencil sketch. Paper exists in everything I do, it is the very beginning. When I seek what can be done with a specific piece of paper, I sometimes find that it is too beautiful to do anything with it. The sad thing is that I have a lot of paper that I never used because I somehow don't dare to. I have some amount of paper that came from my father. Some of this paper is from when he was a student in the 40s, really old paper that he got somewhere, but never used himself. He gave it to me many years ago, and I still haven't used it. It is strange, but sometimes I look at it and I think, no, I am not ready to take a pencil to draw the line.

Brodsky working with paper

Although the AA is based in London, it is not an institution of the city as such. At a place where creative people are motivated, have a kind of sovereignty, what is there to respond to? In this laboratory environment, what is the relevance of paper architecture, traditionally a form a retreat or defiance? In fact, where acknowledged authorship merely exists in building and where drawings are not even signed, the reverse of paper architecture is true. Projects in

this visionary category at the AA, tend to lack an opposition, simply becoming a thing of the school. Perhaps the reaction can only come from building in 1:1.

May I add a comment on this? (Brodsky's colleague, Kiril Ass, states further) We grew up in a time when paper was the main medium for producing any kind of ideas, to affix any type of idea. If we take it, not as a presentation method, but as a thinking method, paper is as efficient as talking. Even if you speak in another language, you will still speak better in your mother tongue. This is possibly why this question of relevance is not rising in our own business. We are simply used to do it like this. If you are relating paper architecture to a school project then it is a completely different thing.

Admitting that there was no agenda in paper, no political act to be drawn from paper architecture itself, makes it inaccurate to relate it to the notion that the idea is as good as the building. Furthermore, it is careless to think that paper architecture even matters to us, when we are free to build, and when there is nothing stopping us from making a name of our own. Alexander Brodsky did what he could do under the circumstances: paper architecture was an invention out of necessity, out of materiality. However, Brodsky's concern for paper, to the extent of not wanting to draw on it at all, suggests that there is something besides just the materiality itself. Arguably, this is part of his process. By not drawing and by not building, Brodsky destroys the border, authorising the two practices to be equal. Since his first building commission in 2002, Brodsky is proving that, as an architect, it was the context that was political, not his work when drawing that which would not be built. Having a historical frame of reference is, notwithstanding, what the architect student falls short of. Never have we found ourselves in a political context and unable to get out. In our free society, paper architecture can only go as far as being a material exploration. Thus, what the commonplace of paper is, where paper architecture can be orientated in past and present, is in the matter of making proposals. Now, Brodsky is like any architect:

The main thing is to do good architecture, the rest is less important.

For more information:

[AArchitecture 21](#)

[Buster Rönngren on Projects Review 2012-13](#)

Image credit: Bureau Alexander Brodsky

Russia's Art Scene Honored Its Heroes and Rising Stars at the Innovation Prize Ceremony



Photo by Artem Savateev
 Innovation Prize winners Taus Makhacheva and Alexander Brodsky



Alexander Brodsky, "A work of visual art" prize winner

by Anastasia Barysheva, Eugene Nazarov

MOSCOW — For seven years now, the **Innovation Prize** has been honoring the best in Russian contemporary art, a sort of Russian **Turner Prize**. Founded by Moscow's **National Center for Contemporary Art (NCCA)** and the **Federal Agency for Culture and Cinematography of Russia**, the prize would seem to have been a success — contemporary art and its perception by the masses has noticeably changed for the better during the years of its existence. Interest in the prize's ceremony this week extended beyond the charmed circle of art lovers to encompass a far wider audience.

This year also marked another big step forward for the Innovation Prize: its geography has widened, the number of entries has risen, and the prize's fund has doubled to \$100,000, with \$27,000 going to the winner in the main category, "Best Work of Visual Art." Following the April 3 ceremony, Russian art professionals took note of the positive changes: "The Innovation Prize is really important for Russia," **Matthew Stephenson**, managing director of **Christie's Russia**, told **ARTINFO Russia**. "And it seems to get stronger and stronger every year. I'm very pleased."

NCCA general director **Michael Mindlin** confessed that last year's scandal, with its notorious winners — anarchist art pranksters **Voina**, known for their provocative political interventions and persecution by the police — made Innovation known far outside of artistic circles. "That's why there's even more attention on the prize this year," he said.

Still, despite the fact that the year in Russia was full of major social and political events, it wasn't reflected in Innovation nominees. By and large, nominated artists instead concentrated on personal themes.

The ceremony was held at the vast **Artplay** design center. As a theatrical touch during the ceremony, people in all-white costumes lit by projectors were framed behind a giant window, forming a multi-level tableaux. Perhaps this spectacle was meant to make up for the absence of political context in the nominees (white is the symbol of the Russian protestant movement that erupted in the autumn and winter 2011), or perhaps the color was simply meant to reflect the long-drawn-out Moscow winter. Either, the sight of the white-clad figures doing their strange show was as perplexing as the works of some of the nominees.

There was, in addition, another spectacular touch to the ceremony. In the past, the announcement of each nomination at the Innovation Ceremony has been preceded by an orchestral interlude. This year, ceremony guests were greeted instead by operatic arias. (This explains a prohibition against entering the hall with wine glasses — producers feared that the glass might shatter under the stress of the operatic vocals.) Meanwhile, the masters of ceremony included famous

Moscow gallerist **Aidan Salakhova** and chief editor of “Bolshoy Gorod” (“Big City”) magazine **Philipp Dzyadko**. The ceremony was broadcast online via the [TVRain channel](#).

Among guests, the main topic of conversations was the contrast between artists in the main “Best Work of Visual Art” category, figures of very different stature indeed, at very different points in their careers. “It’s expected that we have artists nominated in the category ‘Work of Visual Art’ who are of different age groups or generations,” **Christina Steinbrecher**, director of Innovation Art Prize, said. “Our expert council selected the five nominees, fully aware of every biographical fact and their exhibition history. The nomination reflects the best work of art of the year in the eyes of the expert council and the jury. The quality of the nominated work of art is all that is important.”

Nevertheless, the prize went to **Alexander Brodsky**, a veteran, for his “Cisterna” (“Tank”) project. Unfortunately, not everyone had a possibility to see it — it only existed for two weeks before being dismantled, leaving only video and photo documentation. Being an architect, Brodsky created his “Cisterna” at the site of an enormous, abandoned concrete space that was originally intended to be a reservoir. Its feeling of utter emptiness became the theme of the work. In fact, the only detail the artist actually added to the space were trembling curtains with light piercing through them. The complete emptiness of the austere half-lit premises and its monumentality created a miraculous feeling of the irreality.

“I’m given the prize for the work which no longer exists,” Brodsky joked. “It’s really soothing: practically no responsibility, no one can check whether it was good or bad.”

The video project “The Fast and the Furious” by **Taus Makhacheva** took the “New Generation” prize for best young artist. Makhacheva burst onto the Russian art-scene not long ago, but has quickly made a name for herself. Her “The Fast and the Furious” project was a reflection upon masculinity and its role in the modern world. “I worked really hard on that project,” she said, commenting on the victory. “I developed it over two years — it went through very many stages. Half of the prize money or more will simply go to covering expenses. It’s awful to say so about yourself, but yes — I deserved it.” (On the April 10 her new exhibition “Let Me be Part of Your Narrative” opens at **Paperworks Gallery**.)

As for the other awards, venerable Moscow conceptualist duo **Elena Elagina** and **Igor Makarevich** took the award for “Contribution to Development of Contemporary Art” — a seemingly uncontroversial choice — while “Best Regional Project” went to “Enclave,” by **Eva Gozhondek**, **Stach Shablovsky**, **Irina Chesnokov**, and **Yevgeny Umansky** from Kaliningrad (one of Innovation guests’ other favorite topics was the prize’s questionable division between “regional” and “big city” art.) Scholar **Andrey Fomenko** was awarded for his book “The Soviet Avant-Garde and the Conception of Manufacturing and Utilitarian Art” in the category of art theory and criticism.

Finally, two special awards, given by the **Embassy of France** and **British Council** went to **Alexander Gronsky**, a figure who is man is said to be the toast of Russian photography but — as often happens with Russian artists — is well-known and better-loved abroad.

Summing up this year’s Innovation Awards, it can be said that they presented few surprises, but did illustrate the growing interest in contemporary art among a Russian audience, as well as a growth in overall quality and the generally high level of artistic activity in the many far-flung regions of Russia. All this holds out some hope for a rapid development and diversification of the art scene, a fact that **Moscow Biennale** commissar and Innovation jurymember **Joseph Backstein** took note of: “Finally I have a reason to travel to a different parts of Russia,” he quipped.



An Interview with Alexander Brodsky

Project Russia: Your father, the well-known artist and illustrator Savva Brodsky, came to art via architecture. You seem to be moving the other direction: from etchings and art installations to 'real' design. Does this mean that it's architecture that has the most appeal for you as a means of self-expression?

Alexander Brodsky: It's difficult to say... My father began as an artist. He went to art school in Leningrad and intended to practise fine art. However, at a certain point he made the decision to study at an architecture college. He spent more than 20 years in architecture and designed a large number of buildings, but never gave up graphic art. And in the end, it was graphic art that became his main profession. I too went to art school and thought I'd become a painter. But then, influenced by my father's stories about what a fine place MArkhl is, I went there. This didn't mean at all that I wanted to become an architect – simply, I found it great fun there. I had loads of friends, a band called 'Luchshie gody' ('Best Years'), etc. I was taught by some brilliant teachers – Turkus, Barshch, Barkhin. But, being young and stupid, I was unable to appreciate them for what they were worth. It seemed to me that our main occupation was drawing merry pictures for Komsomol conferences and New Year's celebrations. Then Ilya Utkin and I started working on the border between fine art and architecture.

Az W: In the 90's you spent several years in the USA, first being invited in 1990 by the New York gallery director Ronald Feldman. How do you remem-

ber this time, switching between the West and East? And what is it that you took with you in coming back to Russia, finally becoming an architect?

AB: We started visiting the US in 1989 with Ilya Utkin, putting on an exhibition at Ronald Feldman's and some other places. New York was a really great place to visit – beautiful and interesting. We went back and forth for several years. In 1996 I went to NY with my family for a couple of months to set up an exhibition. And we stayed for almost four years. It was very interesting and a very hard experience to make ends meet. I was doing different kinds of things — sculpture, installations, graphics... During these years I made many good friends, so my connection with NY is still very strong.

PR: And eventually you became an architect...

AB: I gradually became one. It took me more than 20 years to start replying 'architect' when asked what my profession was. For many years I was almost certain I'd never actually begin building anything – that this was not my occupation, but one for other people, for those who fit in in some special way. To be honest, I still think so even today. It's the same as driving a car. All my life, I was sure I'd never be able to drive; it seemed to me that there were special people who were able to do so, but that I wasn't one of them. Then it turned out there was nothing much to it. And this amazes me to this day. I've been driving for a long time and I'm still full of wonder: I get into the car, turn the ignition, the vehicle starts moving, and all of a sudden I'm driving... It's the same with architecture. We've been building things for six years now, and I still just can't get used to the thought that I'm actually an architect. It amazes me.

PR: Architectural practice always tend to expand spatially – from a small to a large scale. And not just from plans on paper to the realization of a design in bricks and mortar, but also from small structures to structures that are increasingly large. Is the desire to create something big something you're familiar with or are you completely satisfied with work for private clients?

AB: I am satisfied with what I'm doing at the moment. I don't mean with the results – that's always problematic – but with the process itself. The fact that I am approached by serious-minded people who want me to design a house for them is much more important for me than the physical dimensions of the house. I get great pleasure from fussing over small details, although they can sometimes prove fatiguing. It's probably why architects should sometimes design enormous buildings: in order to give their eyes a rest from the small stuff.

PR: You get involved in all the details?

AB: I try to, at any rate. For the moment, the volume of work commissioned from us allows me to think about every skirting board and have my say about every little nail. But it's becoming more and more difficult.

Az W: How do you decide which materials to use in your projects? You seem to favor basic materials like wood and brick. Are you at all interested in new building materials?

AB: It's true, I prefer things like wood, brick or concrete — materials that become more beautiful in time. Usually I don't have to choose the materials - the decision comes with the first sketches. I like glass and metal as well and I think I'll use some modern materials in the future.

PR: Might it be said that your finished buildings are an absolute reflection of your creative will?

AB: For the most part, yes. After all, most of my clients come to me for a particular reason. They more or less know what they want. So there's never any need for serious compromises.

PR: Do they regard you as an architect or an artist?

AB: My first two clients – Marat Guelman and Sasha Yezhkov – knew me only as an artist. However, they were aware that I have a degree in architecture and decided to risk it. The first to do so was Guelman, who commissioned me to design the interior of his own apartment. I had previously been one of the artists exhibited in his gallery. Almost at the same time Yezhkov offered me the chance to design a summer restaurant that was to be built on the shores of the Pirogovskoe Reservoir. These commissions launched my career as an architect. Half of Moscow has seen Guelman's apartment. The restaurant too became a popular spot and the first in an entire series of structures we've built at Pirogovo. Interestingly, these two commissions are linked with one another: Yezhkov got to know me when he bought an art object from my exhibition at the Guelman Gallery. A chain reaction followed: the designs were published, I received new proposals, and gradually a circle of clients formed.

PR: Do you follow a specific method in working on a brief? What do you start with: an image, functions, structural considerations, context?

AB: My method is intuitive more than anything. I have no principles – at least, when it comes to style. I suppose architects should have some guiding principle, but I've never formulated it, declared it, or set it down on paper. And I've never told anyone about my principles. Although there have been moments when in my head I've tried to string together a few words on this subject.

Az W: It is obvious that hand drawing plays a key role for you. But is the next step in testing and developing the spatial concept of a design the working model?

AB: Of course I always start with drawings, but in some stages of the project, models become very important. My first building, 95° Restaurant, was built with no technical drawings at all, using only a model. But unfortunately in many cases we don't have time to make models.

PR: How accurate are art and architecture critics when they write about your creations? How happy are you with the way your work is perceived?

AB: I don't know. It's not often I read these texts. And if I do read them, I try not to pay too much attention to the meaning of what's written about me. If it's praise, that's fine. And if they criticize me, well, you take the rough with smooth... It's a different matter when your close friends have been asked to write about you. That's touching.

PR: So as an author you've already said everything you wanted to say in your buildings?

AB: That's how it should be, ideally. But I don't really care if I'm misunderstood. Is it really worth spending time worrying about someone's incorrect interpretations? It's best to use your energy to create something new instead.

PR: Do you set strategic goals and tasks for the office or do you prefer to swim with the flow?

AB: We've been operating for almost six years and we're constantly saying we should work out some kind of strategy. I'm confident that once we work one out, it'll be the best strategy in the world. But for the moment we go with the flow. But it's not just any old flow – it's the flow that we have chosen for ourselves. Previously, our office didn't seem much like an architect's office to me – it was more like a 'club for aficionados of architecture', a place where you could drop in to take a cup of tea and do a spot of drawing. But now everyone here slogs their guts out.

PR: Do you personally use a computer in your work?

AB: No, that's something I'm unable to do – and I've no desire to learn. I draw in pencil on tracing paper, and that's quite enough for me.

PR: And then you sit next to one of your team and direct them while they draw on the computer?

AB: It's a wonderful, incomparable feeling – sitting behind someone's back and saying: 'More to the right, more to the left. No, not that way.' And

then seeing how your brilliant idea takes shape on the screen. In the end I discovered that this passion of mine doesn't give the person who has to do the drawing any particular pleasure. And can even prove a source of slight irritation to him or her. But there are still moments when I can't deny myself this pleasure.

Az W: How important is it for you spend time at the building site?

AB: Very important. It's amazing to see how a sketch, an idea becomes a building. For me personally the important thing is that there is always a small chance to change something during the construction if you see a mistake. I've done that many times.

PR_Az W: Are you attracted by teaching as a job? Have you been invited to teach at MarchI?

AB: Several years ago, I happened to drop in to MarchI in search of some quality drawing paper, I think it was, and was unexpectedly approached by some very serious people with an offer to teach. I was not at all ready for this, and said as much. What could I teach them? There are only ten ways to open a bottle of beer.

But last year I suddenly changed my mind and tried teaching. It was one semester in École Spéciale d'Architecture in Paris. It was nice and interesting and very different as well. Now I have at least a bit of experience, but I'm not sure I'm going to do it again soon.

PR: It's a well established opinion that the main leitmotif of your work is nostalgia. As one critic wrote, 'Brodsky has turned his nostalgia into an artistic technique'. What kind of nostalgia is this?

AB: This widely accepted opinion arose, I think, because over the course of years of being an artist I've spent quite a lot of time depicting various ruins. I've drawn ruins together with Ilya Utkin, and I've drawn them on my own. I've fashioned ruins out of clay and made "ruined" interiors and installations. Possibly, the reason for this was that the main problem I experienced while studying at MarchI – and afterwards too – was my complete inability to understand modern architecture. I bust my gut trying to understand how and why I should like it, but was unable to do so. But I had always adored Piranesi and consequently Roman ruins – and all other kinds too. For me this was Architecture that I could love. When necessary, like all the other students, I would go to the library, take a magazine, and copy designs by, say, Paul Rudolph or James Stirling without feeling the slightest bit of affection for them, not understanding why I was doing it, and not believing that there lay something important behind it. I was likewise unable to understand or like Russian Con-

structivism. In order to take my mind off my own failings and calm down, I would draw ruins.

PR: There are, though, people for whom this has no appeal. Instead of ruins, they draw new buildings in the Classical style. Mikhail Filippov, say, or your former partner, Ilya Utkin.

AB: They are undisguised heirs to the Palladian tradition, and for this they deserve to be respected. As for me, I was never very fond of pure Neoclassicism. In any case, not so fond as to swear allegiance on Palladio's grave to the order system. I continued to feel a tender love for all Classical architecture, but at the same time, dreamed of loving contemporary architecture as well. And in the end, I achieved this. Here I have to give credit to my old friend Eugene Ass, who played a key role in my education in this respect. Whenever we drank and talked together, he would always show me something that had recently been built in different parts of the world, and this always hit the mark and caught my imagination. Gradually, I gained a point of view, acquired my own taste and favourite buildings, favourite architects.

PR: So you developed an understanding of contemporary architecture at the moment when you became a practising architect?

AB: No, a little earlier. Otherwise, I'd have been unlikely to take that first step.

Az W: Can it be said that your more recent projects already have lost a bit of this nostalgic note your earlier projects were so-said influenced by?

AB: It's difficult to answer this kind of question about my own projects. I know that my works are changing and I think it's good.

PR: Are you interested in recent trends in architecture – to be more specific, in organic or bubble-like forms?

AB: To be honest with you, no. For the moment, at any rate, I've got to grow some more before I can appreciate organic forms. But who knows: maybe some day I'll start appreciating bubbles too...

PR_AZW: In various interviews, you've advanced some rather curious criteria by which to measure the value of structures you've designed. The main thing, it seems, is that a building should not irritate you. Do you ever feel excited when you come into contact with contemporary architecture?

AB: Not often, but occasionally, yes. Unfortunately, the few modern structures that I find exciting I've seen mainly in photographs. For instance, works by Peter Märkli, Bienefeld, and Zumthor. I have, though, been lucky enough

to see some buildings in the flesh – for instance, Asplund's library in Stockholm or Lewerenz's church in the same city. I've realized that buildings that are delightful when seen in a photo are not always delightful when seen in the flesh, and vice-versa. Once I was walking around London at night with a friend when he dragged me into the courtyard of the British Museum. It was unexpected and amazing, although I had, of course, already heard about this work by Norman Foster. I have to say, I found this space ravishing. And a couple of years ago I was very lucky to visit a building I knew from books and wanted to see for a long time, Peter Märkli's La Congiunta Museum in Giornico. It's an amazing piece of architecture and I'm really happy that I could spend some time near it and inside it.

PR: What about the futurophobia that is usually ascribed to you? Is it possible to be a futurophobe and yet delight in Foster's high-tech at the same time?

AB: 'Futurophobia' was the name given to my exhibition at the Guelman Gallery in 1997. At the time I was sure I had invented this word. Even now I haven't actually looked to see whether it's there in the dictionary. So it was more a beautiful name that fit the contents of the exhibition than a declaration of my true feelings. Although, if I think about it, there is probably something like this lurking in the depths of my being. I see how much of that which is dear to my mind and heart has disappeared. And there is less and less that is interesting to replace it. This undoubtedly gives rise to both futurophobia and nostalgia.

PR: You mean what's happening in Moscow?

AB: Mainly in Moscow, but not just Moscow. I recently learned, for instance, that old Peking has been all but destroyed. All that's left is souvenir-like fragments for tourists. This is very sad. It means that another wonderful place I haven't had time to visit is gone.

PR: Have you ever been approached by a client with a proposal for a 'demolition and reconstruction' job?

AB: Not yet. Most clients, it seems, have a degree of intuition. They sense which architects it's worth approaching to do which job, so they don't waste their time.

Az W: How often do you still get involved in art projects?

AB: Unfortunately, much less often than I'd like. Combining art with work as an architect is very difficult: there's just not enough time. But I need to do art projects and I try to take advantage of every possibility. 2009 and 2010

were two years when I managed to make many different things; the most important art project this year for me will be the exhibition in Vienna.

PR: In your art projects, you have always been interested in cities as a theme, which also made your invitation to take part in the Architecture Biennale in Venice in 2006 – where the theme was ‘cities’ – quite natural.

AB: All my life I’ve been depicting cities. I depicted them as an artist, but without getting involved in specific questions of urban design with its sociological and traffic problems, etc. I am enthralled by the existence of the city as an object, a cultural phenomenon. The poetic side of cities appeals to me. I enjoy inventing and drawing cities – in the same way that people draw dreams.

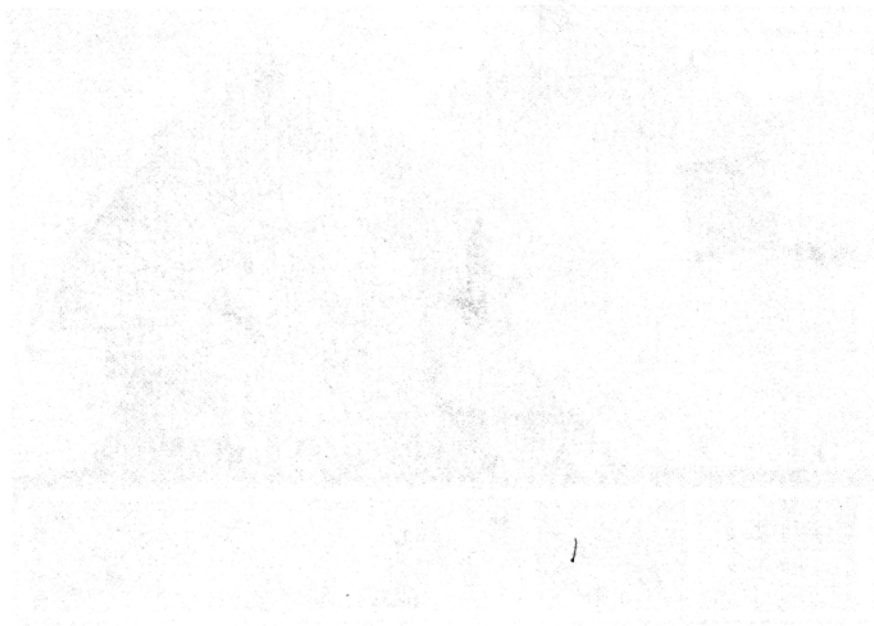
PR: And which cities give rise to the sweetest dreams?

AB: Moscow is my favourite city in all respects. Right now, it’s real torture for me to see the daily disappearance of this city, which I’ve always loved and continue to love. For the last 25 years this has given me the most pain. But talking about it doesn’t change anything and brings no relief.

PR: In one of the interviews you said that paper architecture was accompanied by a feeling of festivity boosted by a large degree of alcohol consumption. ‘We never managed to concentrate properly, thank God’, you said. Have your feelings changed since then? Is there a place for festivity, humor, jokes in architecture today? Or is it a profoundly serious process?

AB: Life then was completely different. We were young, out for a good time, unburdened by any feeling of responsibility. Apart from enjoying ourselves, there really was nothing for us to do. We drank, painted pictures, sometimes received awards for them, and then drank even more. That’s how I remember that period of my life. Since then, life has changed radically. I have children now. Any form of responsibility slightly reduces the level of festivity in the blood... And yet what I do now is also a kind of festivity. The fact that I have young people sitting in my studio is an important part of that feeling. They could all be my children, and this appeals to me tremendously. It would probably be difficult for me to work with people the same age as me or older. The way I feel, I could be back in about the year 1972. And these kids around me help to maintain the illusion. We have drinking sessions every so often. Perhaps the most unpleasant part of the situation is that I have to get up early. First thing in the morning is a difficult time to feel festive, but over the course of the day the feeling grows – and by evening it’s in full swing.

The interview was originally conducted by Elena Gonzalez and Alexei Muratov for a special issue of the Architekturzeitschrift Project Russia about Alexander Brodsky (Issue 41, 2006). Some questions were added or re-posed for the version printed here.



MOSCOW

Alexander Brodsky

WINZAVOD CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

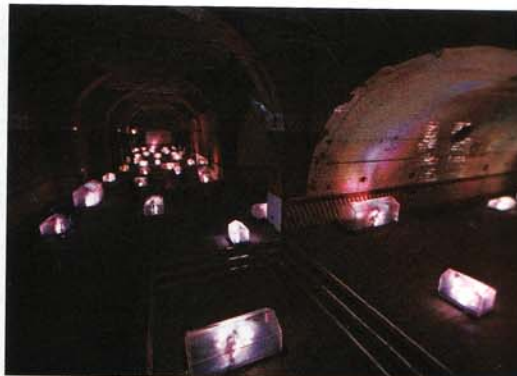
Architects often aspire to build something larger than life, appreciated by multitudes. But bigness can also be banal—hulking residential developments that exemplify bare necessity in dense urban space—or even threatening, a reminder of the individual's weakness. These side effects surface in the art of Alexander Brodsky, a practicing architect who channels critical thoughts on his trade in sculptures and installations. *Night Before the Attack*, 2009, co-organized by the Winzavod Center for Contemporary Art and M+J Guelman Gallery, was his most recent dramatization of the emotive associations of structure and scale. The long vaults of a nineteenth-century winery's defunct storage cellar, with a total area of some twenty-six-thousand square feet, were scattered with nearly a hundred shin-high, filmy plastic tents. Each was illuminated from within by pinkish bulbs; their light flickered as it hit thin strips of paper fluttering over small fans. White plaster figurines—mini-monuments with angular heads suggestive of prehistoric statuary—huddled pensively in groups of two or more over the simulated campfires. Brodsky's programmatic title instructed viewers to read the tableau as a settlement's mobilization in the face of danger. The tents and figurines thus constitute a kind of three-dimensional rendering of history painting, with the theatrical qualities of the environment compensating for absent details of setting and period. Abstract theatrical tension was inherent in the way the darkness filled the high-ceilinged basement and encroached on the tents; it came from the contrast between the dank air and the points of warm light. When a structure outlives its functional use, other properties can come to the fore, and Brodsky deftly exploits this vulnerability to the imputation of a new symbolic value.

Other works by Brodsky were on view in Moscow concurrently with *Night Before the Attack*. An exhibition of conceptual architecture from the 1980s and early '90s at the Tretyakov Gallery included twelve of his finely detailed, whimsical etchings made in collaboration with Ilya Utkin, which inserted human characters into architectural drawings to narrate the alienating aspects of urban space. The Third Moscow Biennale at the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture included Brodsky's *20 Trash Bins*, 2002, in which the glass-and-mirror

grid of a futuristic fantasy city spread inside rows of rusted Dumpsters. Interior and exterior engaged in a spatial montage as the bins' crusty substance collided with the naive ambition of the toy city. Devices seen in these earlier works were employed again in *Night Before the Attack*: The basement ruins became a shabby shell that contained a narrative of vulnerability. The large scale presented Brodsky with new opportunity.

This time, rather than modeling structures on the shrunken scale of comics or toys, allowing the viewer to contemplate up close the gap between architecture's aspirations and realities, Brodsky lined a real relic of the past with an evocation of an uncertain future. As you walked among the mass repetition of identical figurines in near-identical tents, the present felt slower; the flicker of fake fire in the statues' motionless faces suspended the moment.

—Brian Droitcour



Alexander Brodsky,
*Night Before the
Attack*, 2009, mixed
media installation.

Alexander Brodsky

RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS

31 Mercer Street**April 5–May 10**

Fourteen clay heads stare at miniature television sets embedded in one another's occiputs. A man holds an umbrella against a shaft of rain that falls only on his umbrella. A dim scene of rained-on pedestrians—a painting that seems to have been drawn by a finger in clay slip—is backlit by a light box. A vitrine presents neat rows of used teabags. Another glass box holds a working fan, scraps of paper, and bottlenecked weights that keep the fluttering paper put. In the manner of Greek math problems, Alexander Brodsky's pictures and installations—all hermetically called *Untitled*—illustrate concepts of balance and counterbalance by way of unlikely vignettes.

Brodsky is an art-friendly architect whose projects include diorama-like models of urban decay and a Moscow gallery complex in a prerevolutionary wine-bottling plant. In the 1980s, he was one of several young Soviet "paper architects" who used fantasy and narrative in their drawings to imbue structural design with human weaknesses, thus undermining the modernist project of devising machinelike buildings from ideal forms. Brodsky's new series is constructed around characters and artifacts that would have appeared as eccentric details in earlier sketches for a bridge or a house. The image of the little man struggling in the rain, for instance, has been multiplied in the light-box paintings, in which Brodsky explores the formal possibilities of the curvature of his hunched back and umbrella. The same could be said of the pseudoprimitive busts. The translations of personified awkwardness into semiabstract pattern—realized in humble substances vulnerable to heat and moisture—is a new wrinkle in Brodsky's ongoing effort to find room for flux in structure.

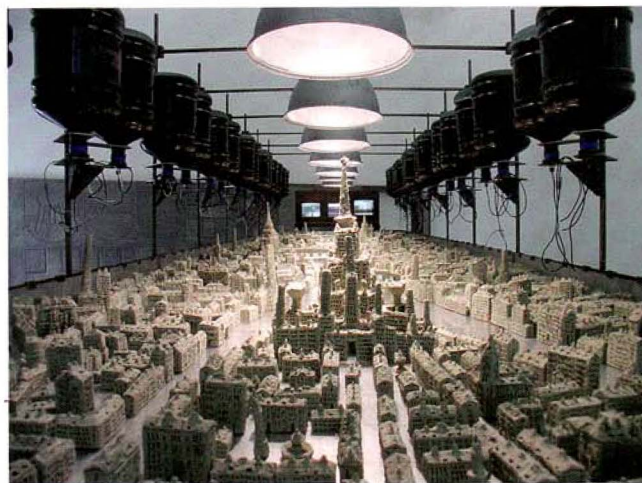
—Brian Draitacov



View of "Alexander Brodsky." From foreground: *Untitled (heads)*, 2008; *Untitled (tea bags)*, 2008; *Untitled (street)*, 2008.

Premio Milano-Museo del Presente

MILAN – Russian artist **Alexander Brodsky** was named winner of the €50,000 award for the Premio Milano—Museo del Presente for his installation *Coma*, depicting a ghostly city of houses and skyscrapers attached to intravenous feeding tubes that nourish the city with a continuous drip of crude oil. The general public had chosen a list of twenty finalists who participated in the group show *Milano Europa 2000. Fine secolo. I semi del futuro*, hosted by the PAC and the Milan Triennale. They were: **Mario Airò** (Italy), **Stefano Arienti** (Italy), **Maja Bajevic** (Bosnia-Herzegovina), **Catarina Campino** (Portugal), **Federico Diaz** (the Czech Republic), **Bruna Esposito** (Italy), **Rainer Ganahl** (Austria), **Ivan Kafka** (the Czech Republic), **Pertti Kekarainen** (Finland), **Laila Kongevold** (Norway), **Ann Veronica Janssens** (Belgium), **Cornelia Parker** (Great Britain), **Marco Peljhan** (Slovenia), **Cristiano Pintaldi** (Italy), **Francisco Ruiz de Infante** (Spain), **The Icelandic Love Corporation** (Iceland), **Thorvaldur Thorsteinsson** (Iceland), **Milica Tomic** (Serbia), and **Tamas Waliczky** (Hungary). The jury gave a special mention to **Cornelia Parker**, who vied for first place with Brodsky right up to the end, and **Federico Diaz**, who received the greatest number of popular votes. The Sotheby's Prize for Italian contemporary art went to **Stefano Arienti**.



Alexander Brodsky, *Coma*, 2000-2001, installation, 290 x 800 x 400 cm.

Alexander Brodsky

RONALD FELDMAN

During the Soviet regime, Moscow students used to joke that someday in the distant future their descendants would be attending lectures devoted to the archeology of the Soviet Union.

Then the Soviet Union became history. Now those very intellectuals who mocked the rotten regime have been discovering that that "evil empire" can provoke some unexpectedly nostalgic feelings. Alexander Brodsky's show "Grey Matter" brilliantly triggered and captured those complex emotions.

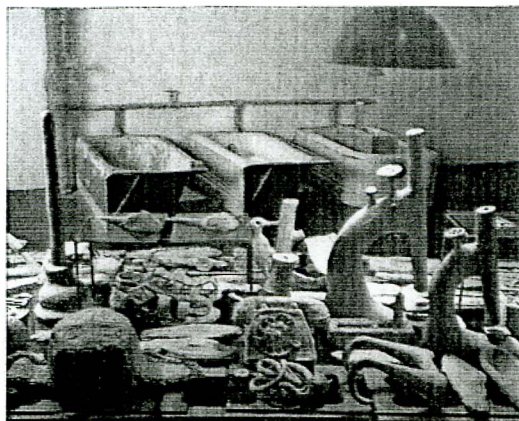
The abundance of objects reproduced here in gray clay highlighted the material underpinnings of the Soviet Union, a lost world that Brodsky reconstructed with the precision of an archeologist. One of the most impressive displays in the main gallery was a long tableful of clay sculptures in the shape of everyday objects—a kind of Soviet Pompeii consisting of irons, radios, bras, opened sardine cans, old skates, busts of Lenin, boots, and lots and lots of buttons. Today, in every post-Soviet city, you can see all this junk laid out on blankets and atop portable tables being sold by pensioners who couldn't survive the brave new world of the free market.

The only signs of new times among these objects were different kinds of firearms—the trademark of the new capitalism, according to comrade criminals. Elsewhere there were several broken and rusty bathtubs containing models of dilapidated industrial buildings—crosses between the Chernobyl nuclear plant and Gulag facilities—and more junk, including nails, splints, and buttons.

A central element in the show was a gigantic cornucopia—a traditional feature of Stalinist architecture and a symbol of the fertile Soviet soil. Not far away was a bed with three figures under a blanket—a father, a mother, and a child—all turned to stone by the lava of the Vesuvius of perestroika. Close to the bed was a statue of a dog looking at a TV set running black-and-white footage of rainy Moscow streets.

Brodsky created for this show a museum of unnecessary things in which everything was uniformly gray. And while it was able to evoke the tone of Soviet life, on the one hand, it also conjured up the sense of volcanic dust destroying a city after an unexpected eruption.

—Konstantin Akinsha



Alexander Brodsky,
Grey Matter, 1999,
unfired clay,
installation view.
Ronald Feldman.

JOHN LAMKA

David Ebony's Top Ten

Alexander Brodsky at Ronald Feldman



Grey Matter (table)
1999

Russian-born sculptor Alexander Brodsky has received recognition in recent years for large-scale public projects. In 1997 he transformed flooded train tracks in a disused subway station under Manhattan's Canal Street into an imaginative Venetian waterway complete with gondolas. More recently in Pittsburgh, the 44-year-old artist unveiled *Palazzo Nudo*, a soaring monument made of architectural fragments salvaged from some historic buildings that could not escape real estate developers' wrecking balls.

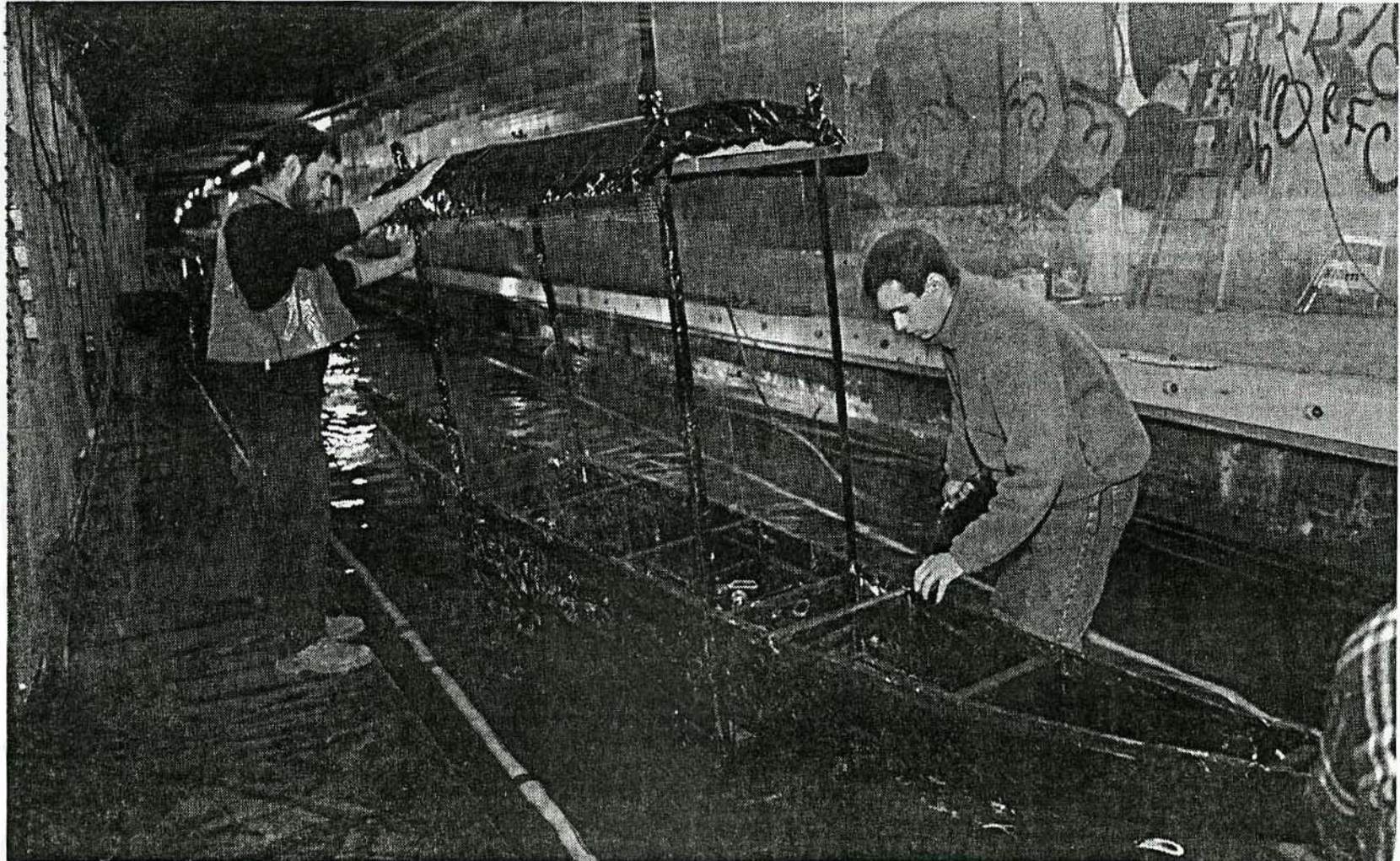


Grey Matter (dog)
1999

This sprawling gallery exhibition at Ronald Feldman, aptly titled "Grey Matter," features mostly terra-cotta objects in shades of gray, offering a glimpse inside the artist's brain. Ultimately, Brodsky's work deals with the social and political upheavals of the former Soviet Union, but the sculptures and two-dimensional objects on view also operate on a very intimate, personal level.

In the front room is a long table piled with terra-cotta objects relating to Brodsky's upbringing, like toy cars, food items (a can of sardines), a microscope and a stylized bust of Lenin. Subtly illuminated bathtubs with ceramic water pipes are installed against one of the walls. The rear gallery is dominated by a huge fruit bowl and an over-life-size dog that sits on the floor watching a TV propped up on cinder blocks. Flashing on the TV's cracked screen are flickering black-and-white images shot from the window of a car as it races through city streets. Brodsky, in this show, takes viewers on a breathtaking and exhilarating ride.

Alexander Brodsky, "Grey Matter," Nov. 20- Dec. 18, 1999, at Ronald Feldman, 31 Mercer St., New York, N.Y. 10013. Photo credit: John Lamka.



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

'O Sole Mio' on a Faux Canal (Street)

The Russian artist Alexander Brodsky, left, and Gregor Clark working on one of eight gondolas to be installed in a flooded section of unused subway track at the Canal Street and Broadway station. The exhibit, sponsored by the Public Art Fund and Arts for Transit, runs through January.