Exhibition

SCIENTIFIC DIRECTORS AND CURATORS
Giuseppe Barbieri
Silvia Burini

SCIENTIFIC SECRETARY
Matteo Bertelé
Alessia Cavallaro

PROJECT MANAGER
Stefania Amerighi

GRAPHIC DESIGN AND COMMUNICATION PLAN
DM&B Associati, Pordenone

PRESS OFFICE
Servizio Comunicazione
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia

EXHIBITION DESIGN
Grisha Bruskin
Giuseppe Barbieri
Silvia Burini

FOUNDRY WORKERS
Francesco Bonaccorso
Antonio de Girolamo
Alessandro Mare
Enrico Salvadori
Giacomo Salvadori
Gianluca Salvadori
Teresa Salvadori

SOUND DIRECTOR
Konstantin Dudakov

MULTIMEDIA INSTALLATIONS
ID-Contract, Padova

CULTURAL MEDIATORS
Angela Bianco

LAYOUT COORDINATION
Silvio Moretti

EXHIBITION SET-UP AND TRANSPORTATION
Daniele Carraro
Ivan Paluello
ID-Contract, Padova

CONDITION REPORTS
Matteo Bertelé
Angela Bianco

Catalogue

CURATORS
Giuseppe Barbieri
Silvia Burini

EDITORIAL COORDINATOR
Matteo Bertelé

ESSAYS
Giuseppe Barbieri
Ekaterina Bobrinskaja
Grisha Bruskin
Silvia Burini
Sauro Gelichi
Boris Groys
Mikhail Iampolski
Marcello Miccio

TRANSLATIONS
Daniela Almansi
Patricia Donegan
Antonina W. Bouis

PHOTOGRAPHY
Grisha Bruskin
Alessandra Chemollo
Dima Galanternik
Mark Luthrell
Shannon Niehus

EDITORIAL PRODUCTION
Terra Ferma – Crocetta del Montello (TV)

EDITORIAL COORDINATOR
Alessandra Crosato

LAYOUT
Renata Pizzol

GRAPHIC DESIGN
Patrizio De Mattio

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
A special thank to Marlborough Gallery

Enrico Babbolin
Paolo Bertini
Luca Bottone
Sonia Chianchiano
Renata Codello
Vittoria Dall'Armellina
Elisa Daniele
Rocco Fiano
Monica Guaraldo
Orazio Levantino
Maria Redaelli
Margherita Zuin

CSAR Partners

ASIAGO
FORMAGGIO D.O.P.

grafiche
antiga

MALÌPARMI

TINO

Grisha Bruskin
An Archaeologist's Collection

edited by
Giuseppe Barbieri and Silvia Burini

TERRA FERMA

Index

"The Secret of History lies in the Mystery of its Language"
From a *Fundamental Lexicon* for the Future to *An Archaeologist's Collection*

Silvia Burini

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT: CONCEPTUALISM AND SOTS-ART

Today, Grisha Bruskin is a well-known, even famous artist, with a story worthy of a novel. In Soviet times, this was not the case: personal exhibitions of the artist were prohibited, and his works were unknown outside of a limited circle. Then, in 1988, he suddenly – and quite unexpectedly – rose to fame when Miloš Forman, invited by Mikhail Gorbachev, asked to buy one of his paintings. Shortly after that, part of Bruskin's *Fundamental Lexicon* (*Fundamental'nyj leksikon,* 1986) was sold at a record price, together with six other paintings by the artist, at the only Sotheby's auction ever organized in Moscow. One week later, Bruskin flew to America for a cultural exchange and gradually gained an international recognition which has never faded since then. The artist, who is also a writer, gives us a wonderful account of this fascinating story in his text *Past Imperfect*[1].

In order to really take stock of the exceptional nature of the episode, the latter must be contextualised in a world that is now gone, namely the Soviet Union, marked by a deep and relevant distinction between official and non-official art. Bruskin's training took place in the context of late Socialist Realism, no longer in its monolithic version of the 1930s, but in that of the so-called "Thaw", already besieged with the underground trends that emerged on the art scene from the end of the 1950s. In the same years, Bruskin was finding in Judaism an entirely new theme for Soviet society and art, at a time when the Jewish way of life, both in religious and daily practice, was virtually absent in the USSR. Bruskin's discovery of that culture happened, so to say, by a sideway path: he did come from a Jewish family of scientists, but one that was quite detached from religious issues. His understanding and awareness of being Jewish emerged – as he repeatedly stated himself – through the books and accounts of his relatives. The configuration of that experience is therefore that of an archaeological "reconstruction" and of the creation of a pe-

culiar "collection". This led him to achieve a highly idiosyncratic and original style, where the fragments of a past lost and retrieved seem to emerge, at least initially, from a kind of pictorial fairy-tale Carnival, rich in allegorical, symbolic, but also surrealist motives. In the 1980s, Bruskin's work went through a considerable change, one could even say a rift, as he started associating with the main exponents of Conceptualism and Sots-Art[2]: Dmitrij Prigov, Boris Orlov and Rostislav Lebedev. His style (and themes) henceforth evolved from a slightly decorative primitivism applied to the topic of Hebraism to a concise manner that evoked the graphics of Soviet posters (i.e. in the style of Ilya Kabakov's series about the communal apartment known as *kommunal'ka*). Bruskin's interest in ideological Soviet production certainly arose from his frequentation of Sots-Artists and Conceptualists; however, while Orlov looked at the regime's monumental aesthetics, Bruskin was attracted to the more modest statues of the *pionery* (Soviet boy-scouts), soldiers, and workers decorating the façades and parks under the Stalinist regime. This was the birth of his *Fundamental Lexicon*, a kind of Bruskinian grammar – an alphabet, a primer containing the origins and synthesis of his entire language – through which Bruskin compiled a systematic catalogue of the Soviet sign system, with the same accuracy used in the Torah's listing of human sins. The painting is a kind of huge display cabinet where each niche contains a plaster statue holding a visual sign – a prop, a medal, a small model of Lenin's mausoleum, a street sign, or a geographical map. This series of characters carrying emblems can be seen as a kind of secular menology in which each figure is denoted by their insignia, or as a kind of peculiar Soviet hagiography whose characters can be recognised with the help of allegorical elements. Bruskin was essentially striving at a less esoteric language than the one used by his colleagues, and privileged storytelling and narration. For instance, in the same years, the theme of the alphabet, so central in the work of Bruskin, was also very

Fundamental Lexicon, 1985, oil on canvas, part 1, detail

dear to Dmitrij Prigov, whose *Azbuki* ("Alphabets") present several affinities with Bruskin's alphabets, and in particular with his project *Alefbet*. This openness towards the public was also due to the change in the political situation. The restricted public of the 1970s, which often coincided with the artists themselves attending exhibitions set up in their own flats, was a thing of the past. During the *perestroika*, it was finally possible to set up exhibitions in exhibition spaces, and therefore to showcase larger formats. In a laconic style based on local colour, Bruskin delivers a genuine mythology of the Soviet period, to be contextualised between the early 1970s to the end of the 1980s, a period strongly marked by the aesthetics of Conceptualism.

In light of its importance within non-official Soviet culture, according to Mikhail Epstein's definition, Moscow Conceptualism can be considered as synonymous with Russian Postmodernism[3]. In Moscow, the early 1970s witnessed the creation of two circles that championed Conceptualist aesthetics. The first was the "Moscow Conceptualist Circle", which revolved around the figures of Ilya Kabakov and Viktor Pivovarov; the second group was associated with Vitalij Komar and Aleksandr Melamid, whose perspective was named "Sots-Art". Ekaterina Degot'[4] considers that both groups can be defined as "Conceptualist projects", insofar as Conceptualism is a kind of mental procedure practiced on the text and therefore also applicable to forms of Sots-Art. The "Moscow Conceptualist Circle" is characterised by hybrid forms born on the border between figurative arts and literature (especially poetry), a border which is often blurred, as testified by Ilya Kabakov's verbal-visual expressions, Lev Rubinsten's index cards, Dmitrij Prigov's spatial texts, but also by Valerij and Rimma Gerloviny's "book-objects". In the 1970s-1980s, Conceptualism and Sots-Art arguably defined the quasi-totality of Soviet non-official art. It is virtually impossible to draw a clear line between Conceptualism and Sots-Art, as the artists frequented the same places and used the same methods. The basic procedure followed by Sots-Artists is the deconstruction of the mythology and style of Socialist Realism, something we also find in numerous works of Conceptualists: the difference lies in the nature of such deconstruction. Sots-Art privileges a paradoxical game with ideological emblems, and the social theme is interpreted in a style which is often, at least in the case of Komar and Melamid, similar to the one paraded by Socialist Realism. This is not the case with Conceptualists, who do not address the exterior forms of Soviet mythology. The deconstruction performed by Sots-Art preserves the expressive structure and plastic appearance of Socialist Realism, as does Bruskin, whereas Conceptualists tend to neutralise it. And yet, we are tempted to associate Bruskin with Conceptualism rather than Sots-Art. Despite the artist's at least partial resort to the language of Socialist Realism, his operation does not consist in a mocking immersion, but rather, as I mentioned above, in turning the sign into an emblem, something closer to Conceptualist rather than Sots-Art aesthetics. It is often quite difficult to establish with certainty if we are dealing with Conceptualism or Sots-Art: the text remains that of Soviet ideology, but the procedure is slightly different. Although the different artistic genres evolved in a discontinuous manner, the privileged means of expression of these artists were paintings, objects, and performances. In painting and graphic art, Conceptualism takes shape already at the beginning of the 1970s, while objects and performances date from the middle of the same decade. The second half and the end of the 1970s see the emergence of new trends, partly coeval with a new generation of artists. If the mid 1970s are marked by the calibrated presence of objects, paintings and performances, toward the end of the decade paintings start losing ground, and at the beginning of the 1980s installations start prevailing. One further clarification is in order: while Western Conceptualism constitutes the beginning of Postmodernism and slowly fades out, making place for new currents, in Soviet Russia conceptualist artists continued to play an essential role up to the late 20th century, often interacting with Sots-Art as late as in the 1990s. Moreover, as in the case of other Western-derived "-isms", Moscow artists claimed their autonomy from their Western colleagues. Kabakov[5], for instance, claimed that the lack of interest in the tangible form of an artwork is ingrained in the Russian artistic tradition. In any case, setting aside the declarations of the artists themselves, there is no doubt that Russian Conceptualism, including its Sots-Art expression, evolved in political and social conditions that were quite different than in the West. Its non-official status implied a different attitude toward the artwork and a greater focus on the project, primarily due to the exhibition ban. Moreover, Moscow Conceptualism was dominated by the performative aspect, almost by a manipulation of the work itself: the artist tried to master the artwork through a
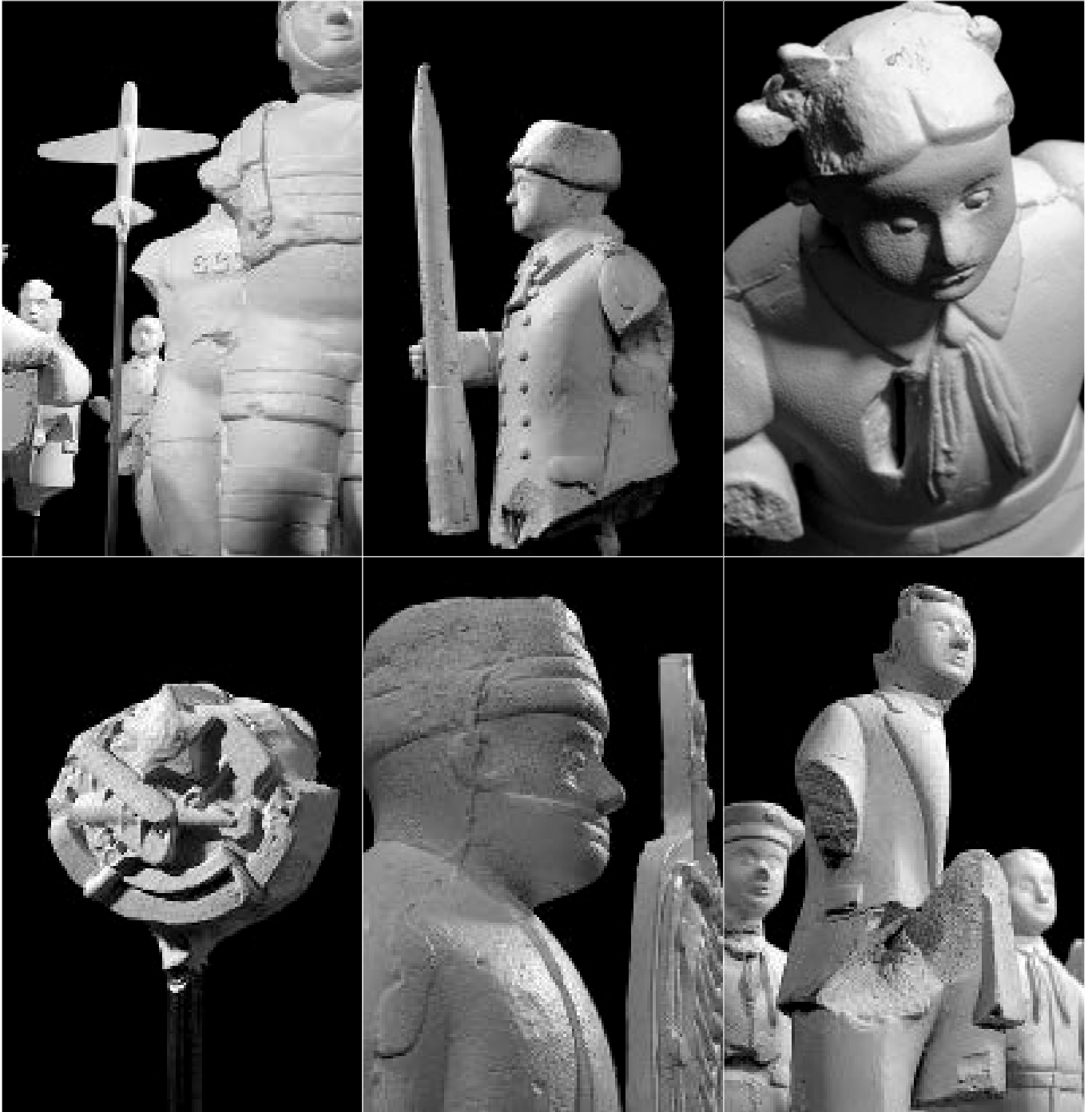
An Archaeologist's Collection, detail

physical contact with the object, in clear contrast with the bombastic rhetoric of Socialist Realism. Any modern culture has its own underground[6] counterposed to official culture, but in totalitarian regimes this opposition takes on specific forms: the underground contests not only the cultural establishment, but also the socio-political one, i.e the power. It is power itself that forces the underground into this position, as any non-authorised action is interpreted as a socio-political subversive act against the power. Moscow Conceptualism contributed in good measure to defining the intellectual atmosphere of the non-official culture of the 1970s. It was also the first artistic movement, since the 1920s, to be essentially synchronous with its Western counterpart, namely Conceptualism (the first Russian Conceptualist artworks date from the late 1960s and early 1970s). However, the Russian variant drew inspiration from the autochthonous cultural tradition through a creative appropriation of the Western model. This mode of reception of foreign cultural models was not new in Russia. Russian Conceptualism differentiates itself from Western Conceptualism by being embedded in the Moscow context and for its specific status as "non-official" art. Moreover, the dynamics by which Russia arrived to Conceptualism were different: Western Conceptualism was the logical development of Modernism, which in the history of Russian culture ended up in the 1920s with Constructivism. Finally, Moscow Conceptualism was further complicated by the presence of a realistic or pseudo-realistic trend (Socialist Realism) and by mass ideology. In virtue of these chronological and thematic discrepancies, Moscow-based artists turned their attention to their national tradition in a different way than did their Western counterparts: on the one hand, they reconnected, jumping back a few decades, with the experiences of the avant-gardes (the *oberiuty* in poetry and the historical avant-gardes in art); on the other hand, they included in their works the formal artifices employed by the trends that had preceded Conceptualism in the West, especially by the almost coeval Pop Art. Another intrinsic characteristic of non-official art was – as mentioned above – the lack of visibility of Conceptual artists, who throughout the 1970s and early 1980s could not be exhibited if not in private contexts. Such an isolation from the surrounding cultural environment marked the history of Russian art of the time, and defined its characteristic features, some of which are connected to the concept of "marginality within the cultural system"; some even consider Conceptualism as a whole as a kind of marginal genre, although its marginality is sophisticated and semiotically relevant.

However, marginality and intimacy are not the only categories that differentiate Moscow Conceptualism[7] from its Western counterpart: the former presents a more lyrical character, more closely connected to the literary tradition. As mentioned above, the works of the Moscow-based artists blend verbal and visual elements whose connection is not merely analytical, but takes on a narrative tone. Russian Conceptualism, while straddling visual and verbal elements, went through a poetic season whose intensity and impact was never matched in the West. And that is not all: according to Epstein[8], Conceptualism tried to change the very status of pictorial and verbal works by blending them into a *unicum*. The group of artists revolving around Conceptualism was rather wide: in addition to the above-mentioned Ilya Kabakov, Rimma and Valerij Gerloviny, and Andrej Monastyrskij, as well as the group KD (Kollektivnye Dejstvija), all associated to the early stage of the movement (1960s-1970s), one should mention the work of Viktor Pivovarov, Ivan Chuikov, Eduard Gorokhovskij, and Nikita Alekseev, who were associated to Conceptualism only for short periods. Finally, there were artists who produced only single Conceptualist works, as in the case of the groups Mukhomor (Sven Gundlakh, Konstantin Zvezdochetov, Vladimir Mironenko, Sergey Mironenko, and Aleksey Kamenskij) and SZ (Viktor Skersis, Vadim Zacharov). In the 1980s, Conceptualist themes continued to be developed by the groups Percy (Liudmila Skripkina and Oleg Petrenko) and Meditsinskaya Germenevtika (Pavel Pepperstein, Jurij Leiderman, Sergey Anufriev). In the work of Dmitrij Prigov, Erik Bulatov, Vitalij Komar and Aleksandr Melamid, and of the group Gnezdo (Mikhail Roshal', Georgij Donskoj, Viktor Skersis) the conceptual trend interacted with Sots-Art. As previously mentioned, from the mid 1970s a new generation of Moscow Conceptualists started appearing, centred around the figures of Andrej Monastyrskij and the group KD. Their aesthetics was defined as *Minimalizm* (minimalism), although it had nothing to do with the American Minimalism of the 1960s. Russian Minimalism is neither laconic nor abstract, and does not differentiate between representation and the intrinsic value of the visual. Minimalist aesthetics is essentially expressed through the music and poetry of performance.

Excavation of the sculptures of *An Archaeologist's Collection*,
Tuscany, November 2009
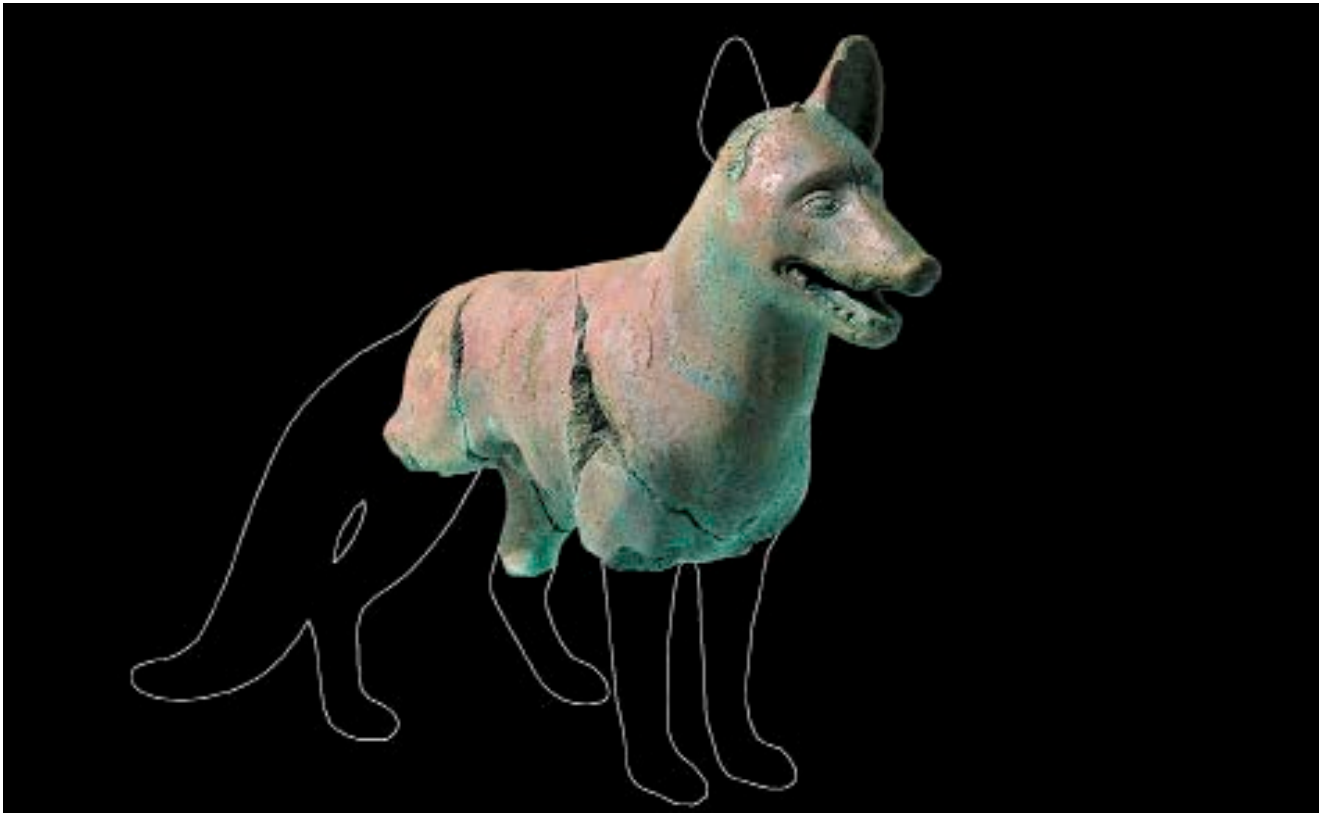
One should also underline the centrality of language in Conceptualist thought and its associated paradox, whereby no direct enunciation is possible either in natural or in artistic languages. This impossibility is due to the fact that the instrument of such an enunciation, namely language itself, is independent from humans, to whom it is given whether they want it or not, pre-determining their structures of understanding and reception. Nothing can be said outside of language, which is why we are irremediably and structurally conditioned by language. By unmasking the illusion of the "immediacy" of artistic reception, Conceptualism does not merely recognise and expose the hegemony of language, but looks for forms of perception that are not subjected to linguistic expression. This is why Conceptualists place great stock in the categories of nothingness, zero, indefinitess and in artistic forms that tend toward the cancellation of plastic appearance.

"The Secret of History lies in the Mystery of its Language"[9]

Now that the context has been clarified, I would like to propose a few keys to interpret the project *An Archaeologist's Collection*, where Grisha Bruskin, on behalf of an archaeologist of the future, tries to understand the meaning of the artefacts of a past civilisation, or rather the ruins of an ideology.

The quote at the beginning of this section and article comes from Jurij Lotman and gives us an insight into the fact that understanding a sense means understanding a language. Our archaeologist knows perfectly the language he is using, thanks to his affiliation to the category of *homo sovieticus*, which according to Kabakov is a specific anthropological type[10]. But Bruskin changes the perspective and shuffles the cards. By means of a quintessentially artistic operation, he transfigures this language and puts himself in the shoes of a future archaeologist who must interpret it. The act of

working "on behalf of someone else" happens to be a typical strategy of Conceptual art.

It is therefore necessary to start from here, or rather from the title of this work. One should take into account that, at a few months' distance, we curated two projects by Bruskin: first *Alefbet, an alphabet of memory,* and now *An Archaeologist's Collection.* The two projects are closely connected both on formal and on semantic levels: the connection between alphabets and collections is inescapable. With the attitude of an entomologist or archaeologist, Bruskin searched for universal schemes to explore a civilisation through its remaining "signs". We know, by the way, that Jurij Lotman wanted to become an entomologist...

The monochromatic figures of *Fundamental Lexicon* have come out of the painting to become "incarnated" into statues. We are facing a kind of huge *vanitas vanitatum* whose decoding will require finding the key to the language of a lost civilisation.

The artist's intentions are explicitly stated: the question that Bruskin asks himself follows the wake of the Russian tradition: it is the Gogolian question "Ah, troika! Bird troika [...] where are you racing to?"[11] – the classical question about identity, about the road to take, the destiny of a great civilisation. A question about Russia.

"I decided to write an epistolary painting for the humans of the future"[12], writes Bruskin. Adding: "I wrote the *Fundamental Lexicon*, an epistolary painting for the distant Nowhere"[13]. To which we can add the following observation:

> The painting *Fundamental Lexicon* is a collection in which each character is an archetype of the Soviet ideological myth. [...] Each figure has an accessory, which is coloured and more real than the person himself. The accessory defines the character, gives him a name. Working on the collection, I was like an entomologist who catches butterflies and puts them out with ether[14].

As suggested above, we are facing a huge still life of the *vanitas* kind, in which life is but a memory turned into a necropolis for the archaeologist of the future. The objects, in this case the statues, either in ruins or damaged, provide us with indications about the civilisation of which they speak. Bruskin writes: "I am not interested in the historical style. I am interested in ideas. In Artefacts. *An Archaeologist's Col-*

lection does not represent the destruction of Soviet monuments, but the ruins of an ideology"[15]. The task of the artist is clear: to send a message to the humans of the future. But who could have foreseen that the Soviet empire would have collapsed so suddenly and unexpectedly, like an explosion (*vzryv*) in Lotman's acceptation of the term[16]? Thus, the artist himself has become that man of the future and imagines, as if in a time machine, that he is beholding the ruins of a lost empire, of a crumbling archaeology.

Here lies the essence of the transition from the models of *Fundamental Lexicon* to those of the installation – almost "total", in Kabakov's sense – *An Archaeologist's Collection*, of which Bruskin said: "before my eyes arose the ruins of the damaged civilization"[17], and "the future is the unlived present. I should steal the majestic picture that was revealed to me and show it to my contemporaries. In order to do it, I took the heroes of Fundamental Lexicon and the emblems of Soviet civilization. Thirty-three. The number of letters in the Russian alphabet. Because it is believed that the world was created by the letters of the alphabet"[18].

The characters have escaped their fixed order, the almost claustrophobic alphabet of *Fundamental Lexicon* and have started their own stories: from simple letters, they have become words composing a narrative. This is how Bruskin explains the choice to bury these statues in Tuscany, in a gesture that harks back to a classical Russian idea, that of Moscow as a third Rome:

> But the Soviet Empire did not last, either. It fell like a house of cards in 1991. I decided to bring the shards of the Third Roman Empire to Italy, to bury them in the ground with the ruins of the First and Second Empires already reposing there. So that Truth, liberated from vessels, would acquire freedom and now be present all over the world the world, sanctifying people whatever their geographical location[19].

As mentioned above, his artistic gesture is primarily centred on cultural memory, while also being marked by a typically Russian need of self-definition that must come to grips with the concept of time. This is a peculiar trait of Russian culture, which, according to Jurij Lotman, "in its proper acceptation is a concatenation of explosions. [...] The very word 'new' reappears again and again across Russian culture as a whole, with persisting repetitiveness"[20].

Explosions and Ruins

To shed light on these complex questions, Lotman comes again to our rescue – especially the writings of Lotman's last period, almost coeval with *Fundamental Lexicon*. From the second half of the 1980s to his death (in 1993), Lotman elaborated a kind of increasingly open science of culture (in the last years, he even talked of "culturology"), intended as an integral and trans-disciplinary approach to the study of human cultures. The term "culturology" does not actually replace that of "semiotics of culture", but rather extends it, and considers the historical dimension of humanity through time both on a collective and individual level.

Lotman's great innovation, however, lies in the concept of explosion (*vzryv*) and its connection to that of social cataclysm. Contrary to common belief, this concept is not an absolute novelty of Lotman's last writings, as it had appeared long before in his reflections: in other words, it is not so
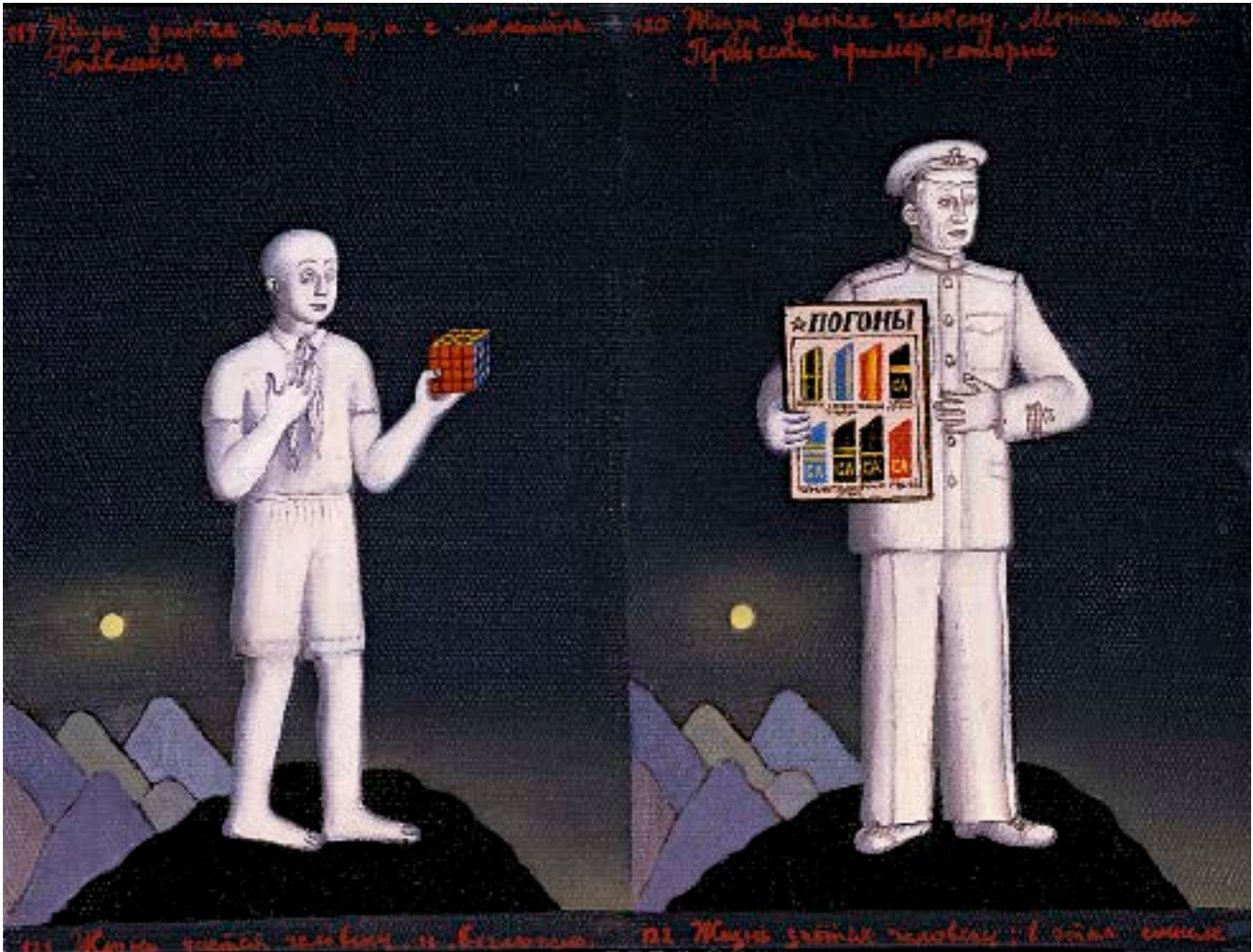
Fundamental Lexicon, 1985, part 1, detail

much an extemporaneous idea as the development of a series of previous themes such as those of rhetoric, collision, and conflict. Besides, also according to Boris Uspenskij, "the history of Russian culture cannot be read as a natural and organic evolution process, marked as it is by constant revolutionary jolts"[21].

The "themes of unpredictability [*nepredskazuemost'*] and explosion [*vzryv*]"[22], correlated to that of social cataclysm, lead to the concept of "semiotics of fear". For Lotman, "fear" represents an important topic of investigation, in virtue of its association with the presence of the "other", the "alien", the "stranger", the "foreigner" (*chuzhoj*), i.e. the person outside of the system. The cultural function of the *other* is immense: placed outside of any function, he bursts into the realm of the "ordinary". Besides, the connection between *chuzhoj* and "outcast" (*izgoj*) is of primary importance and highly topical: every culture creates its own fringe of non-integrated outcasts. Their irruption into the system turns the extra-systemic dimension into one of the essential stimuli for the transformation of a static model into a dynamic one. The dynamic nature of culture is the fruit of the coexistence within one single cultural space of different languages associated with different degrees of translatability or untranslatability: the more densely packed and crowded is a cultural space, the more complex the system that it generates. This fundamental confrontation – the irruption of the extrasystemic – will precisely be the challenge faced by the Soviet system.

Thus, from the semiosphere – a term coined by Lotman in 1984 to explain the reality of culture as a complex system, a multi-dimensional space-time packed with sense in continuous growth and evolution – we arrive to the scientific vision of Lotman's last period and to its new vision of an open and multiple time. This vision anticipates the historical explosion that he will experience along with his entire cultural universe, namely the collapse of the Soviet system after the dissolution of the USSR.

The concepts of "explosion" and "unpredictability" are the theoretical *leitmotivs* of the last four years of Lotman's life. They convey a complex vision of culture in which sense is generated by collective as well as individual thoughts in an "unpredictable", and therefore creative and artistic manner. The theme of history is addressed in light of the cultural distinction between "gradual" and "explosive" processes. Lotman rethinks his theory of culturology within a more mark-

edly historical perspective, already present in his previous writings, but amplified in the late 1980s and early 1990s by an ethical/anthropological reflection on episodes of momentous crisis. For Lotman, history is first and foremost a narrative category, a way in which humans interpret events by telling them: without an interpretation and "narrativization", humans would lack the necessary explanatory connections between what comes before and what comes next, and would therefore lack a collective and individual perspective on what is going on. Memory looks at the past by constantly reinterpreting and retelling the great texts that inform our cultural identity, and the extent of truth is quite limited in this ever-changing universe.

In the last stage of his research, Lotman often returned to the theme of Hegelianism in Russia, subjecting it to a critical evaluation. Indeed, the concept of "explosion" is supposed to disarticulate and deconstruct the inevitably utopian vision of the historical process that characterises Hegel's impact in Russia.

Lotman's spatial semiotics thereby ended up incorporating temporal elements, in conjunction with a kind of change of direction: from Vladimir Vernadskij, who inspired the semiosphere, to Ilya Prigozhin. Due to his Russian heritage, Lotman tended toward a spatial vision of time, but with the years he also started taking into account the temporal dimension which is the essential requisite of any semiotics of culture, as the latter is also the experience of the passing of time.

At this point, however, an additional step is necessary. Prigogine doubtlessly adopted the concept of unpredictability in his scientific discoveries. History is studded with junctures or crossroads, where the choice is only one among many possibilities. According to Lotman, history underwent a kind of rationalization process but, on the basis of Prigogine, he felt the necessity to introduce "the possible" in his methodology[23]. When Lotman wrote this, he was experiencing the full extent of the transition to the post-Soviet era along with its radical changes issued from an event – the collapse of the regime – that was far from predictable and seemed to open up a wide range of fruitful possibilities.

According to Lotman, enhancing the "unexploded" (the possible) meant identifying alternative ways which, due to their weakness or marginal position, had been dismissed and which, despite being unexplored and "lost", were ripe with suggestions for the present.

I believe that Lotman's perspective outlined so far is quite appropriate to understand Bruskin's complex installation, i.e. to perceive history as a line occasionally disturbed by a cycle that brings us back to the present day, and to look at it in the form of texts and cultural forms deposited in the collective conscience, especially symbolic-artistic ones (evocative, among others, of the philosophy of Aby Warburg and Georges Didi-Huberman).

The collapse of the Soviet empire was doubtlessly an explosion, a trauma, a rift that placed at the heart of Bruskin's work a strong element of unpredictability connected to the problem of time, memory, and collective and individual identities. Lotman ultimately would have explained Bruskin's operation with the following words:

> What is new is generated by an explosion. Implicit to these very words is a principle of unpredictability, but the historical study of explosion, any attempt to think of it as a moment of dynamic development, implies the proliferation of different hypotheses that formulate, in Pasternak's words, "backward predictions". [...] In history, the present acts upon the future not only directly, but also through the past. The retrospective from the moment of the explosion to what preceded it can redefine the course of history and have a new impact on the future. The past never ends, and therefore the future can be reborn again in unexpectedly different forms[24].

MEMORIES AND RUINS

The consolidation of a collective memory is a task of the utmost importance in the framework of what we could call a contemporary cultural strategy. By considering culture as a non-hereditary memory of humanity, whose contents are acquired through the preservation and gathering of information[25], today's Europe set itself the priority of saving, knowing and sharing a common cultural past whose traces must not be lost (as insightfully highlighted in the 19th century by Francis Haskell[26]). The preservation of memory cannot be erased from the history of the human intellect, as testi-

fied by the fact that the destruction of a culture is first and foremost expressed through the destruction of its memory, the elimination of texts and monuments, the forgetting of its signs. This explains the relevance of ruins. Never more than today, perhaps, was there such a strongly felt need to preserve memory. The identity needs generated by current social changes focus the contemporary intellectual and scientific debate on the connection between memory and identity (both subjective and collective) and between memory and history. Maybe no period in human history ever showed such an obsession with memory.

Culture is a necessary condition for the existence of any form of human community. As Lotman[27] writes, there never was a community with no characteristic texts, no characteristic behaviour, no characteristic moment charged with a *cultural* function.

Grisha Bruskin's installation, presented as a collateral event at the 56th Venice Biennale, is a kind of cultural window, an open perspective from which we can investigate a path that has already been walked to the end, and which helps us understand how the ruins of Soviet civilisation and of its Marxist-based ideology constitute, first and foremost, an integral part of a global cultural text. As it happens, the 2015 Biennale is called *All the World's Futures*, a title perfectly in line with Bruskin's concerns about the future of a Russia that must come to grips with the ruins of its ideology.

However, as suggested once again by Jurij Lotman, this problem does not concern Russia alone:

> If the semiotic process was traditionally addressed to the space of a language and constituted a closed model, now the moment has clearly come for a principally open model. The window of the cultural world is never closed. Culture is always an open window. The historical destiny of Russian culture is always to explode beyond its own borders. In this light, any theoretical research on Russian culture is not only part of world culture, but becomes its inescapable field of investigation[28].

cat. 12, p. 116

NOTES

[1]   GRISHA BRUSKIN, *Proshedshee vremja nesovershennogo vida*, Moscow, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2007.

[2]   The relationship with coeval artistic trends was enabled through non-official channels, often thanks to magazines such as *Flash Art* and *Art Forum*, illegally smuggled in the country by foreign diplomats.

[3]   MIKHAIL EPSTEIN, *Postmodern v russkoj literature*, Moscow, Vysshaja shkola, 2005.

[4]   EKATERINA DEGOT', *Russkoe iskusstvo XX veka*, Moscow, Trilistik, 2000, p. 167.

[5]   ILYA KABAKOV, *Tri installjatsii*, Moscow, Ad marginem, 2002, p. 199.

[6]   See DMITRIJ PRIGOV, "Il samizdat sovietico", Progetto Grafico, II, November 2007, p. 10.

[7]   Art historian Boris Groys's contribution to the early theoretical canon of Russian Conceptualism is almost simultaneous with the development of the movement.

[8]   EPSTEIN, *Postmodern v russkoj literature*, cit., p. 237.

[9]   See LOTMAN, *Cercare la strada,* cit., p. 23.

[10]   ILYA KABAKOV, personal communication.

[11]   Bruskin paraphrases a well-known passage from NIKOLAI GOGOL, *Dead Souls*. Translated by Bernard Guilbert Guerney. Revised, edited, and with an introduction by Susanne Fusso, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1996, p.164.

[12]   GRISHA BRUSKIN, present catalogue, p. 9.

[13]   Id., p. 11.

Fragment, 1980, detail

[14] Ibid, (my emphasis – S.B.).

[15] Id., p. 8.

[16] See Jurij Lotman, *Kul'tura i vzryv*, Gnozis, Moscow, 1992.

[17] Grisha Bruskin, present catalogue, p. 11.

[18] Id., p. 12.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Jurij Lotman, *Tesi per una semiotica della cultura russa*, in Laura Gherlone, *Dopo la semiosfera. Con saggi inediti di Jurij M. Lotman*, Mimesis, Milan-Udine 2014, p. 169. My translation.

[21] See Boris Uspenskij, *La pittura nella storia della cultura russa*, in *Volti dell'Impero russo. Da Ivan il terribile a Nicola I*, Electa, Milan 1991, pp. 41-44.

[22] Lotman, *Tesi per una semiotica della cultura russa,* cit., p. 175.

[23] See Jurij Lotman, *Klio na rasput'e*, in Jurij Lotman, *Izbrannye stat'i*, Aleksandra, Tallinn, 1992, vol. I, pp.464-471. My translation.

[24] Lotman, *Tesi per una semiotica della cultura russa*, cit., p. 172.

[25] See Jurij Lotman, *Pamjat' v kulturologicheskom osvesenii,* in Id., *Semiosfera*, Iskusstvo, Saint-Petersburg, 2001, p.673-676.

[26] Francis Haskell, *History and its Images: Art and Interpretation of the Past*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1993.

[27] See Boris Uspenskij, Jurij Lotman, *Tipologia della cultura*, Bompiani, Milan, 1995.

[28] Jurij Lotman, *Tesi per una semiotica della cultura russa*, cit., p. 175.