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DIVISION OF LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE

СЛАВИСТИЧЕСКИЙ СБОРНИК
REVIEW OF SLAVIC STUDIES

92

НОВИ САД

VERBA VOLANT, SCRIPTA MANENT

Фестшрифт к 50-летию Игоря Пильщикова

Редакторы-составители: Николай Поселягин и Михаил Трунин

Silvia Burini
Ca' Foscari University of Venice
siburini@unive.it

GRISHA BRUSKIN: ALPHABETS OF MEMORY

*Colui che mai non vide cosa nova
produsse esto visibile parlare,
novello a noi perché qui non si trova.*

Dante: Purgatorio, 10, 94–96

*(“He who never saw anything new, made this visible speech,
which is novel to us because it is not found here”).*

The article is devoted to Grisha Bruskin’s project *Alefbet* as sub specie semioticae. Bruskin’s visual work is explicitly shaped by linguistic models; however, it also transcends them by being not only an “alphabet,” but also a “text” in broader semiotic sense. Bruskin’s work is clearly composed of differently encoded texts (because he is a ternary artist: Russian, Jewish, and Soviet), but also of texts that are intertextually related (between word and image). Thus, what is “one’s own” (“svoe”) is clarified by what is “of the Other” (“chuzhoe”). The article examines the Bruskin’s project as the “text” not only through semiotic analysis (mainly by using Juri Lotman’s theory of semiosphere) but also by putting it in the context of Soviet and post-Soviet Conceptualism.

Key words: Grisha Bruskin, *Alefbet*, Moscow Conceptualist movement, semiotics, text.

В статье рассматривается проект Гриши Брускина «Алефбет» в семиотическом аспекте. Визуальная работа Брускина со всей очевидностью оформлена по лингвистической модели, однако она преодолевает ее, будучи не только «алфавитом», но и «текстом» в более широком семиотическом смысле. Она состоит из текстов, кодированных различными способами (поскольку его художественный бэкграунд тройственный: русский, еврейский и советский), но также из текстов, которые связаны между собой интертекстуально (через слово и визуальный образ). Таким образом, «свое» здесь проясняется через «чужое». В статье проект Брускина изучается не только с помощью имманентного семиотического анализа (основанного прежде всего на теории семиосферы Юрия Лотмана), но и посредством помещения его в контекст советского и постсоветского концептуализма.

Ключевые слова: Гриша Брускин, «Алефбет», московский концептуализм, семиотика, текст.

In 2015 I curated, together with Giuseppe Barbieri, two major projects *Grisha Bruskin: Alefbet — The Alphabet of Memory* and *Grisha Bruskin: An Archaeologist’s Collection* as Collateral Event of the 56th Venice Biennale of

Fine Arts. In both exhibitions Juri Lotman's theoretical inquiries served as essential interpretation.

When I was asked to write a text for this festschrift I started thinking back to the time spent in Tartu, to the encounter with Igor Pilshchikov at the Lotman conference held in Keele in 1992, considering that since then I have been working mainly on the semiotics of representation and on Russian art. That is why I intend to dedicate to him this text, as a synthesis of my interests marked by Lotman's matrix which nowadays unites us.

*I. Visible speech¹:
Intertextuality and secondary modelling systems in
Grisha Bruskin's Alefbet*

A mysterious alphabet of 160 characters: angels, animal-faced demons, thunderstruck figures, humans carrying their own shadow on their shoulder, or delving into the secrets of the book. For his first exhibition in Venice, Grisha Bruskin, one of the greatest Russian artists alive, internationally appreciated and acknowledged at least since the mid 1980s, has chosen the project *Alefbet*. At the heart of the collection are five large tapestries (2.80 × 2.10 m). These, however, can be reached only after examining the artist's preparatory sketches, gouaches, and six striking paintings that articulate the steps of this complex and fascinating "archive of the sign". This highly condensed synthesis draws on the millenary Jewish traditions of the Talmud and Kabbalah, offered as possible and permanent symbolic keys to our own history and present.

Towards the end of the 1950s, Bruskin found 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 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 peculiar "collection". This led him to achieve a highly idiosyncratic 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.

But let us set aside the theme of Grisha Bruskin's Jewishness, which is more appropriately treated in other essays of the catalogue *Grisha Bruskin: Alefbet. The Alphabet of Memory* (Barbieri – Burini 2015), and examine more closely the semiotic structure of his discursive strategy.

In his famous painting *Fundamental'nyj leksikon* ("Fundamental Vocabulary", 1986), a kind of Bruskinian grammar and primordial primer con-

¹ See: (Pozzi 1993).

taining the origins and synthesis of his entire language, Bruskin compiled a systematic catalogue of the Soviet sign system, with the same accuracy used in the Torah's listing of human sins: each niche contains a plaster statue holding a visual sign — a medal, a small model of Lenin's mausoleum, a street sign, or a geographical map. Bruskin was essentially striving at a less esoteric language than the one used by his colleagues, and privileged storytelling and narration. It is as if he were impersonating a future archaeologist who tries to understand the artefacts of a past civilization. This openness towards the public was also caused by 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 years, it was finally possible to set up exhibitions in exhibition spaces, and therefore to showcase larger formats.

In this sense, the *Alefbet* project is an essential part of Bruskin's global macrotext: a "sewn-up", material alphabet, an archive of the memory turned into a text. Bruskin writes:

Judaism, for well-known historical reasons, did not create the artistic equivalent of its spiritual initiatives. I always sensed a certain cultural vacuum that I wanted to fill on an individual, artistic level (2015a: 7).

And again:

Jews are the people of the Book. The Book is the fundamental image of Judaism. The Book is the World, and the World is the Book. The Book contains the Universe. They believe that in the Book lies hidden the name of the Author, a golden key to the mysteries of the world. That the letters and text were written by the Creator. That is why the Book as such became the proto-image of my art in general and of the *Alefbet* tapestry in particular.

I consider the idea of *Alefbet* as an artistic concept, as art and nothing more, a kind of a "glass bead game." It was important for me to create a work in the form of pages, palimpsest, letter, envoy, message, a fragment of an endless book that can be continued, added to, and commented upon. *Alefbet*—secret writing, a declaration, a rebus, a mythological dictionary—"continues the language" in a system of symbols and mythologemes, allegories that must be deciphered and puzzled out. You must find your own explanation.

The background of the work is in the form of script. Against that background are placed figures of people, unified by their dress: tallits and covered heads, that is, they are addressing God. There are one hundred sixty people. Nothing is happening between them, they are merely presented and tied by the context. Each character is provided with an accessory. It becomes a symbol-figure, a mythologeme-figure. These figures form a kind of dictionary, lexicon, collection, alphabet (in Hebrew, *alefbet*). This is my personal commentary on the Book (Bruskin 2015a: 7–8).

The tapestry is accompanied by a commentary to the commentaries, written by the artist himself. In turn, following the Talmudic tradition, viewers must add their own commentaries to the artist's, and thereby get closer to truth.

“*Alefber*” is a sphinx that poses riddles to the viewers.² To use a metaphor from the Kabbalah, one could say that each element of the work, down to the minor characters, is a tiny particle composing the overall mystery of history, a sparkle of light. As the viewers move from one mythologem to the next, and perceive their sense and relationship, they put the pieces together and reconstruct the meaning of the painting. Bruskin’s entire work should therefore be taken as a macrotext. His literary production — he is also a writer³ — should not be separated from his visual production, and both, as we shall see, are connected by a profound intertextual relationship.

Moreover, I think that Bruskin should be viewed less as a “binary” than as a “ternary” artist. While it is true, as pointed out by Boris Groys (2015) e Mikhail Iampolski (2015), that he is a “Soviet Jewish” artist, he is also an artist deeply connected to the Russian tradition.

Bruskin’s entire artistic trajectory takes us back to the act of naming, to the alphabet as a symbolic form (a morpheme more than a phoneme, the beginning and end of every text). However, his research also results in a kind of “magic mirror” in which the world is recomposed in a kaleidoscope of fragments. Bruskin’s literary texts are fully isomorphic with his tapestries: the act of sewing together, over and over, these written pieces, brings us back, almost mimetically, to the tapestry itself, where the final image becomes assembled — and seems at times out of focus, as if it were the anamorphosis of a tapestry.

In order to discuss Bruskin’s work, we must also address the issue of the “genre”. Bruskin moves from painting to sculpture, from painted ceramic to tapestry, from drawing to gouaches, showing an interest in *materials* that strongly distinguishes him from his conceptualist colleagues and friends, less concerned with the problem of plastic rendering (see Burini 2008). If there is a uniting element in his work, it is to be found not so much in the form as in the repetition of signs, in the constant use of a primordial alphabet that each time is declined, or rather embodied, in different genres. By genres, I mean not only the genres of figurative expression, but also literary texts. Hence the fundamental role of the “collection” in Bruskin’s “macrotext”. Barabanov (2015) already underlined it, but the artist himself writes about it when he discusses his first book, *Proshedshee vremia nesovershennogo vida* (“Past Imperfect”): “The idea immediately came to me to organise the narrative on the principle of the collection... The ideal of the collection is among the most important ones in my visual work” (Bruskin 2005: 521–522)⁴. And again: “As I was working on the book, I kept feeling I was completing a kind of Mendeleev’s table. My book can be read in any way. For instance, from the end to the beginning, or by choosing a passage right in the middle and reading in all directions” (2005: 522). Bruskin also gives us a precious indication about the importance of the

² The theme of the “commentary” is also present in Moscow Conceptualism, for instance in the work of Dmitrii A. Prigov and Ilya Kabakov.

³ See: (Bruskin 2003; 2005; 2007; 2008). On Bruskin’s writing, see: (Lipovetskii 2005).

⁴ Unless otherwise stated, the translation is mine. — S. B.

image of the text: “Images in the books are an important part of the TEXT. I always wanted to represent images as texts and texts as images” (2005: 523).

Moreover, when discussing his book *Myslenno vami* (“Thinking [of] you”), Bruskin presents it as a variation on the principle of the collection, or as “the artist’s private archive turned into text” (2005: 523); and he defines *Podrobnosti pis’mom* (“Letter follows”) as “the last book of a trilogy built on the alphabetical principle of a list of names” (2005: 525) and as a work “glued together like a collage. The principle of the collage makes the difference here” (2005: 526).

This very element inscribes Bruskin firmly within the great Russian tradition. As repeatedly noted, Russian art is “literature-centric” (see e.g. Epshstein 1993) — not only in contemporary art trends or post-modernist strategies, but rather, I think, because of a much more structural motivation which concerns first and foremost the particular connection, or even the primordial commonality, between word and image, alphabet and representation. Dmitrii Likhachëv observed:

In the culture of Ancient Rus’, word and image were more tightly connected than they would later become. And this connection left a mark both in literature and in figurative arts. This interpenetration is a given feature of their inner structure and must be taken into account not only in terms of literary history, but also from a theoretical standpoint (quoted from Lichačëv 1991: 92).

And also:

Figurative art is static by nature and always represents a specific, frozen moment. It has always aspired to overcome immobility by creating the illusion of movement or by leaning toward narrative and story-telling (Lichačëv 1991: 95).

As we know, the tendency towards artistic syncretism intensified towards the end of the 19th century via the works of the poet Andrei Belyi, of the painter of Lithuanian origins Mikalojus Čiurlionis, of the composer Aleksandr Skriabin and others, who assimilated Wagner’s idea of “*Gesamtkunstwerk*” and combined it with original elements of the Slavic tradition. The greatest Russian Symbolist poet, Aleksandr Blok, wrote on this matter:

Russia is a young country, with a culture of synthesis. Russian artists need not and should not be specialists. Writers should not forget painters, architects and musicians. Even more importantly, prose writers should take poets into account, and vice-versa. <...> In Russia, painting, music, prose and poetry are inseparable and also tightly linked to philosophy, religion, public opinion, and even to politics. Together, they create an impetuous stream that conveys the treasures of our national culture (Blok 1962: 175–176).

The very origins of Russian figurative art — the sacred icon and its mundane variant, the *lubok*, i.e. folk print — suggest the impossibility to separate the two elements in the history of Russian culture and thought. Even a

multifaceted figure like Pavel Florensky, while constantly referring to religious thought in his philosophical, psychological and artistic meditations leading to unifying hypotheses, did pay great attention to mundane art, which he saw as an integral part of his *Weltanschauung* aimed at a global synthesis.

All this should remind us of the dangers of assimilating the history of Russian art and culture with that of contemporary Western European trends. Obviously, at the beginning of the 20th century, the synthesis of all arts is a general trend that responds to the need for a new world vision. It is a collective journey, a complex itinerary, which cannot be ignored and is certainly not only Russian. However, the concept of artistic universalism is re-elaborated in a very original manner in Russia, precisely because of the double layer of that nation's culture. I am referring in particular to the coexistence of a superficial layer and of a remote one, corresponding to a contrast between visible and invisible which is not as substantial in the West. The transmission of profound feelings is connected to a strong aesthetic sense. The word "*krasota*" denotes a spontaneous, hard-to-define inner beauty. Its paradigm is the icon, which expresses the beauty of a profound message. Thus, in the Russian world, the prevailing concept of beauty is a synthesis of life, an ethical-aesthetic concept that is fundamental to understanding these philosophers' stances on art, which is not regarded as a self-standing value, but refers to an ethical, moral, and spiritual framework. Beauty, therefore, is to be seen as a theological, rather than aesthetic, category. For Russians, the observation of nature is not to be considered as an aesthetic experience overlapping with awareness, but — in Wassily Kandinsky's words — as a "*vnutrenniaia neobkhodimost'*," an "inner necessity" derived from the daily experience ("*byt'*") of the invisible ("*nevidimoe*"), too. This occurs quite naturally, because the primordial model of this behaviour, the icon, is synthetically both verbal and visual (indeed, icons are always accompanied by a written text).

This passion or rather obsession for beauty is justified by a cultural tradition that is worth mentioning. Pavel Evdokimov (1984) believes that the value of an icon comes from the fact that it gathers fragments of meaning and synthesizes them into a guiding image for those who contemplate it. The experience of nature, of the world, and at the same time of the invisible, of which the icon is a sign, is therefore mainly visual. While in the West, the iconic projection, i.e. the perception of reality (*byt'*) according to pictorial parameters, is mainly an artistic experience, in Russia it is wholly natural, inevitable and ineluctable, because it is connected to the religious tradition (icon) and to folklore (in the *lubok* variation).

The icon, as a theological — not as an aesthetic — model, has a double function: orienting the believer's conscience and shaping the world according to the prototype offered by the icon-*lubok*. Evdokimov describes the icon as an artistic form that can express God's revelation and unveil the truth of humans. The icon conveys the ineffable and makes it present in its symbolic reality. It is a theological venue where speech is expressed in images, or more exactly:

“it is that sacred space where, through beauty, *the image enacts the word*” (Evdokimov 1984: 20).

It is precisely a visual text such as the icon, a synthesis of speech and image, which originates in Arnheim’s words the difference in “visual thinking” that marks so deeply the whole Russian culture, creating a synthetic and strongly dynamic relation between speech and pictorial sign. As demonstrated by Likhachëv’s works, the literature of Ancient Rus’ knew no exact and fixed barrier between verbal and plastic arts. But speech, in turn, was the basis of many artworks of Ancient Rus’, especially the miniatures and icons that told the lives of the saints. Real observation was, as it were, submitted to speech; figurative art, being connected to writing, depended largely on the latter’s development. Likhachëv also notes:

It is difficult to identify what comes first, whether speech precedes representation or vice-versa. In any case, the second possibility is not rare. In fact, themes of figurative art occupy an unusually important place in the literature of Ancient Rus’. . . One of the favourite themes of the literature of that period is the living image, the image that speaks and betrays itself, moves in space, appears to the artist and declares its wish to be represented. . . In painting (in all forms of painting), literature verified and commented itself (quoted from Lichačëv 1991: 46).

We must bear in mind, moreover, that Russian socio-cultural imagery contains an “*obraz*” (‘image’, but also ‘icon’) that legitimates, also from an aesthetic and philosophical viewpoint, an intersystemic and intertextual approach. One can therefore say that there is a proto-model that can motivate the development lines of the Russian cultural process (and make it unique), a kind of “matrix” upon which epochal elements become grafted (again, see the notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk*).

All of this, I think, is particularly relevant to Bruskin’s work: not only because icons, and in particular those with the lives of saints, play a crucial part in his models and reminiscences, but because of the intimately intertextual structure of his work.

As Juri Lotman repeatedly stated, the world is not a text until we decode it, and in order to do so, we need an alphabet. The letter as morpheme is an image of the alphabet where text is produced by the combination of letters, but at the same time, it also becomes a phoneme, hence a sound. All this is connected to a form of convention that underlies every alphabet, of which the smallest part is the sign.

It is therefore fundamental, I think, to address Bruskin’s figurative work — and in this sense, the whole *Alefbet* project must be viewed as a “macrotext” — in an intersystemic perspective that includes his literary production. The two are fully comparable at a thematic level, and besides, all his writings and books are accompanied by visual series that require in turn to be “completed” by a written comment. Taking speech as a model — the proto-model is always the alphabet — Bruskin creates his own “secondary modelling system”, to use Lotman’s term.

Meyer Shapiro (1969) had already attempted a promising comparison between speech and image by correlating grammar and pictorial space. Starting from Jakobson's theory (see Jakobson 1981: 63–97), he proceeded to demonstrate how some relations are not commutative. This relation between formal and semantic systems constitutes a good starting point.

Setting aside the direct or indirect correspondences between the two semiotic systems — written and visual signs — we must also consider the medium as such, and distinguish between the intrinsic properties of an artwork and its position within a semiotic system. Arnheim states that objects can remain unmodified by their context only in a fictitious world, but that due to the semic aspect of the work of art, a tension necessarily arises in both literary and pictorial systems: only then do they become semantically and semiotically comparable. However, the imperfect structural correspondence between painting and writing does not preclude their comparison, if we consider the inter-artistic parallel as an exploration of how these two structures can interact (see Arnheim 1974 and 1993).

According to Roman Jakobson (1971: 703), the linguistic model can be applied to other semiotic systems, and Dora Vallier (1990: 359) insisted on the usefulness, if not the extreme necessity, for art historians to look at Jakobson's writings. Vallier maintains, for instance, that some of his statements, to which linguists pay hardly any attention, can open infinite horizons to art critics. For instance, when he writes about differential qualities in his definition of the minimal units of the system, Jakobson aligns two psycho-physical processes: sound and colour, while also stressing a double difference that suggests, beyond succession, a successive simultaneity of oppositions. Therefore, in a space-related visual system such as painting, signs do not form a chain but a simultaneously perceived network. Minimal components cannot be examined outside the simultaneity that holds them together. Jakobson's definition of differential qualities already allows us to posit a convergence between sound and colour. It is up to the art historian to demonstrate it, by applying the linguistic model to the reading of a painting.

Bruskin's work is indeed explicitly shaped by the linguistic model, but it also transcends it by being not only an “alphabet”, but also a “text”, following a mechanism already identified by Lotman:

But if art is a special means of communication, a language organized in a particular manners (our concept of language derives from the broad semiotic definition: any ordered system which serves as a means of communication and employs signs), then works of arts, that is, messages in this language, can be viewed as texts (Lotman 1977: 6).

These words foretell an idea that Lotman would take up several years later: that of a dialogue between different semiotic systems and of the textual nature of culture.

Let us briefly return to the concept of language: insofar as every system aimed at communication can be defined as language, pictorial language can also be interpreted as such:

Every language makes use of signs that constitute its “vocabulary” (sometimes we say its “alphabet” — these concepts have identical meaning for the general theory of sign systems). Every language has certain rules for combining these signs, every language is a hierarchical structure (Lotman 1977: 7–8).

Bruskin’s work is clearly composed of *differently encoded texts* (because, as we said, he is a ternary artist: Russian, Jewish, and Soviet), but also of texts that are *intertextually related* (between word and image). Thus, what is “one’s own” (“*svoe*”) is clarified by what is “of the Other” (“*chuzhoe*”). We can therefore consider Bruskin’s text as a “rhetorical” one, according to a definition provided once again by Lotman:

We shall define the rhetorical text, as distinct from the non-rhetorical text, as one which can be conceptualized as a structural unity of two (or more) subtexts encoded with the help of several, mutually untranslatable, codes. These subtexts may be conceptualized as local subsystems and the text therefore, in its different parts, must be read with the help of different languages... Rhetorical texts will include all instances of contrapuntal collision of different semiotic languages within a single structure (Lotman 1990: 57).

A striking example of this is when the represented object is decoded by means of a different code. In Bruskin’s work, such a transcoding between different genres takes place at various levels: *structurally*, as the alphabet is represented through the tapestry technique which, *per se*, belongs to another semiotic system; *semantically*, because these texts are at the intersection of various traditions; and *semiotically*, as they intertextually connect word and image.

Nowadays, the notion of “intertextuality”, as defined by Julia Kristeva (1967; 1981), is frequently used. When she introduced the term *intertextualité* (1967: 440–441), it immediately became successful and consequently the object of proper and improper uses. Actually, this concept has often been misunderstood, because it does not refer to the influence of an author upon another, or to the influence exercised by the sources of artistic creation. Instead, it is based on the notion of textual system, and is defined as the transposition of one or more sign systems into another, accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotative position.

However, if we use the term “text” in Lotman’s sense — i.e. not only in terms of verbal messages, but also about visual ones — then the concept of intertextuality can also be applied to the study of pictorial arts. This creates the above-mentioned possibility to consider the functions between literary and pictorial texts in an intertextual relationship. As Bruskin is both artist and writer, his macrotext is particularly amenable to the identification of an “inner intertextual” relation.

II. *From a Fundamental Lexicon for the Future to An Archaeologist's Collection*

1. *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* 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* (Bruskin 2007).

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 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-Art⁵: Dmitrii A. 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 *kommunalka*). 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. As I've already written, this was the birth of his *Fundamental Lexicon*: 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 al-

⁵ 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.

legorical elements. As in the same years, the theme of the alphabet, so central in the work of Bruskin, was also very dear to Dmitrii A. Prigov, whose *Az-buki* ("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 Epshtein's definition (2005), Moscow Conceptualism can be considered as synonymous with Russian Postmodernism. 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 Vitalii Komar and Aleksandr Melamid, whose perspective was named "Sots-Art". Ekaterina Degot' (2000: 167) 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 Rubinshtein's library index cards, Dmitrii A. Prigov's spatial texts, but also by Rimma Gerlovina's and Valeriy Gerlovina'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, for instance, claimed (2002: 199) 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 physical contact with the object, in clear contrast with the bombastic rhetoric of Socialist Realism. Any modern culture has its own underground counterposed to official culture (Prigov 2007: 10), 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-authorized 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 Construc-

tivism. 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 Obeiriuty 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 Conceptualism⁶ 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 (2005: 237), 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 Gerlovina and Valeriy Gerlovin, and Andrei Monastyrsky, as well as the group KD (*Kollektivnye Deistviia*), all associated to the early stage of the movement (1960s and 1970s), one should mention the work of Viktor Pivovarov, Ivan Chuikov, Eduard Gorokhovskiy, 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 Aleksei Kamensky) and SZ (Viktor Skersis, Vadim Zakharov). In the 1980s, Conceptualist themes continued to be developed by the groups Percy (Liudmila Skripkina and Oleg Petrenko) and Meditsinskaia Germenevtika (Pavel Peppershtein, Yuri Leiderman, Sergei Anufriev). In the work of Dmitrii A. Prigov, Erik Bulatov, Vitalii Komar and Aleksandr Melamid, and of the group Gnezdo (Mikhail Roshal', Georgii Donskoy, Viktor Skersis) the conceptual trend interacted with Sots-Art. As previously mentioned, from

⁶ Art historian Boris Groys's contribution to the early theoretical canon of Russian Conceptualism is almost simultaneous with the development of the movement.

the mid 1970s a new generation of Moscow Conceptualists started appearing, centred around the figures of Andrei Monastyrsky 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.

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, indefiniteness and in artistic forms that tend toward the cancellation of plastic appearance.

III: “The secret of history lies in the mystery of its language”⁷

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 Juri 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 type⁸. 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: The Alphabet of Memory*, and then *An Archaeologist’s Collection*. The two projects are closely connected both on formal and on semantic levels: the connection between alphabets and collec-

⁷ Lotman 1994: 23.

⁸ Ilya Kabakov, personal communication.

tions 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 Juri 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?”⁹ — 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”, writes Bruskin (2015b: 9). Adding: “I wrote *Fundamental Lexicon*, an epistolary painting for the distant Nowhere” (Ibid.). 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 (Bruskin 2015b: 9; my emphasis. — S. B.).

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 Collection* does not represent the destruction of Soviet monuments, but the ruins of an ideology (2015b: 8).

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 acceptance of the term (Lotman 1992a)? 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 ... [and] the future is the unlivd present. I should steal the majestic picture that

⁹ Bruskin paraphrases a well-known passage from Nikolai Gogol’s *Dead Souls* (cf. Gogol 1996: 164).

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 (1995b: 11, 12).

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, sanctifying people whatever their geographical location (Bruskin 1995b: 12).

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 Juri 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” (Lotman 2014: 169).

IV. 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 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 Uspensky, “the history of Russian culture cannot be read as a natural and or-

ganic evolution process, marked as it is by constant revolutionary jolts” (Uspenskij 1991: 41).

The “themes of unpredictability [*nepredskazuemost'*] and explosion [*vzryv*]” (Lotman 2014: 175), correlated to that of social cataclysm, lead to the concept of “semiotics of fear” (Lotman 1998). 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” (*chuzhoi*), 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 *chuzhoi* and “outcast” (*izgoi*) 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 leitmotifs 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 markedly 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 Vernadsky, who inspired the semiosphere, to Ilya Prigogine. 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 (Lotman 1992b). 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 (Lotman 2014: 172).

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 (Lotman 2001), 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, see Haskell 1993). The preservation of memory cannot be erased from the history of the human intellect, as testified 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 writes, there never was a community with no characteristic texts, no characteristic behaviour, no characteristic moment charged with a *cultural* function (see Lotman – Uspenskij 1995).

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 was 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 Michajlovic 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 (Lotman 2014: 175).



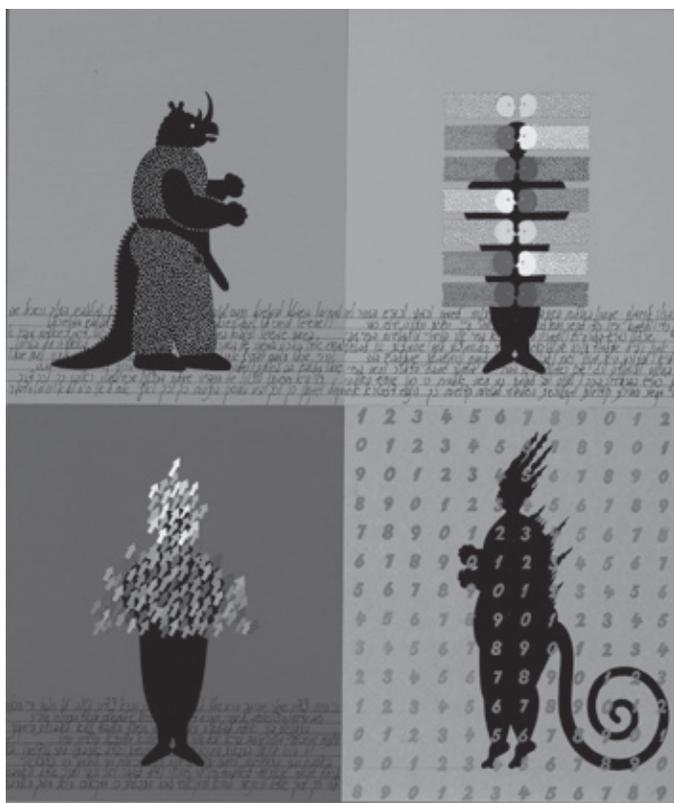
Pic. 1. Poster of the exhibition Grisha Bruskin: Alefbet. Alphabet of Memory (Venice, Fondazione Querini Stampalia, February 12 — September 13, 2015)



Pic. 2. View of the goblins room at the exhibition Grisha Bruskin: Alefbet



Pic. 3. View of the goblins room at the exhibition Grisha Bruskin: Alefbet



Pic. 4. Grisha Bruskin, Metamorphoses, 1992, gouache, 29 × 25 cm



Pic. 5. View of the paintings room at the exhibition Grisha Bruskin: Alefbet



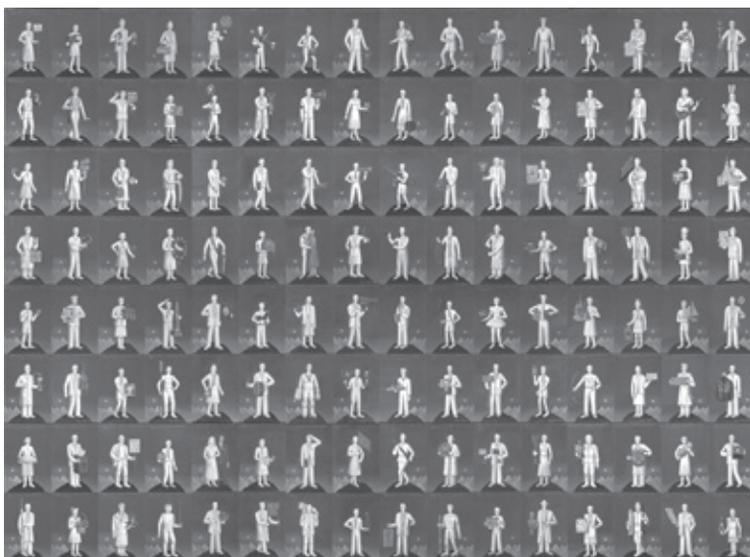
Pic. 6. Poster of the exhibition Grisha Bruskin: An Archaeologist's Collection (Venice, former church Santa Caterina, May 7 — November 22, 2015)



Pic. 7. View of the exhibition Grisha Bruskin: An Archaeologist's Collection



Pic. 8. View of the exhibition Grisha Bruskin: An Archaeologist's Collection



Pic. 9. Grisha Bruskin, Fundamental Lexicon, 1985, oil on canvas, part 1, 220 × 304 cm



Pic. 10. Grisha Bruskin, Lenin's Mausoleum, 2004–2009, bronze, natural patina, 24 × 34 × 34 cm

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Силвија Бурини

ГРИША БРУСКИН: „АЛЕФБЕТ“ ПАМЋЕЊА

Резиме

У чланку се анализира пројекат Грише Брускина «Алефбет» са семиотичког аспекта. Визуелни рад Брускина у свој својој очигледности осмишљен је као лингвистички модел, али он га истовремено и надилази, будући да није само „алфбет“ него и „текст“ у ширем семиотичком смислу. Овај рад се састоји од текстова, кодираних на различите начине (пошто је његов уметнички бекграунд трострук: руски, јеврејски и совјетски), али исто тако и од текстова који су међусобно интертекстуално повезани (преко речи и визуелне слике). На тај начин се „своје“ открива кроз „туђе“. У чланку се пројекат Брускина не проучава само помоћу иманентне семиотичке анализе (основане пре свега на теорији семиосфере Јурија Лотмана) него и путем његовог смештања у контекст совјетског и пост-совјетског концептуализма.

Кључне речи: Гриша Брускин, „Алефбет“, московски концептуализам, семиотика, текст.

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Телефон – Phone
(021) 420-199, 6622-726
e-mail: jdjukic@maticasrpska.org.rs

e-mail: kornelijaicin@gmail.com
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