

The Physics of Memory: Alexander Brodsky

by Susan Yung

Physical memory is a stealth sense that awakens when needed. It leaps into action when you descend a staircase, knowing, without counting, how many steps lead to the bottom, or in church when executing rituals as if you were merely breathing. When a familiar old song comes on the radio, it quickly fills you with the confidence to sing along with gusto, revealing a skilled vocal memory. (This can be a pleasant shock for non-singers.) Or riding the subway, it cues your body to make countless imperceptible adjustments to allow for acceleration, deceleration, turns, and silently makes note of the train's rhythm until it alerts you to disembark.

When these subtle regular patterns are altered, it can be disruptive. If you are ill, it can cause you to inadvertently miss your subway stop because your physical memory is off kilter. Have you begun to sing along with an old favorite song now used to shill soda only to find that a small, even number of notes has been excised so that it fits within the air time? This can leave those to whom it was meant to appeal angry and tongue twisted and longing for the absent notes.

Alternately, a disruption of pattern can be enlightening. A Phillip Glass composi-

tion. A reinterpretation of an old favorite song done with respect to the original. Steps from an old dance combination. An art installation that causes disorientation and conveyance simultaneously.

Such an instrument of displacement is Alexander Brodsky's *Canal Street Subway Project* (illustration 1) in New York City, sponsored by the Public Art Fund, which transports the pedestrian from a dank passageway to the exotic environs of Venice. The location is a bit of a setup for the artist, who was trained as an architect; it is an inactive subway tunnel awaiting renovations. Currently, only the pedestrian platform is in use as a walkway between train lines. So the users of this particular tunnel, having been forced to descend and ascend multiple staircases and dodge condensation dripping in the claustrophobic, inert tube, are quite susceptible to a visual treat.

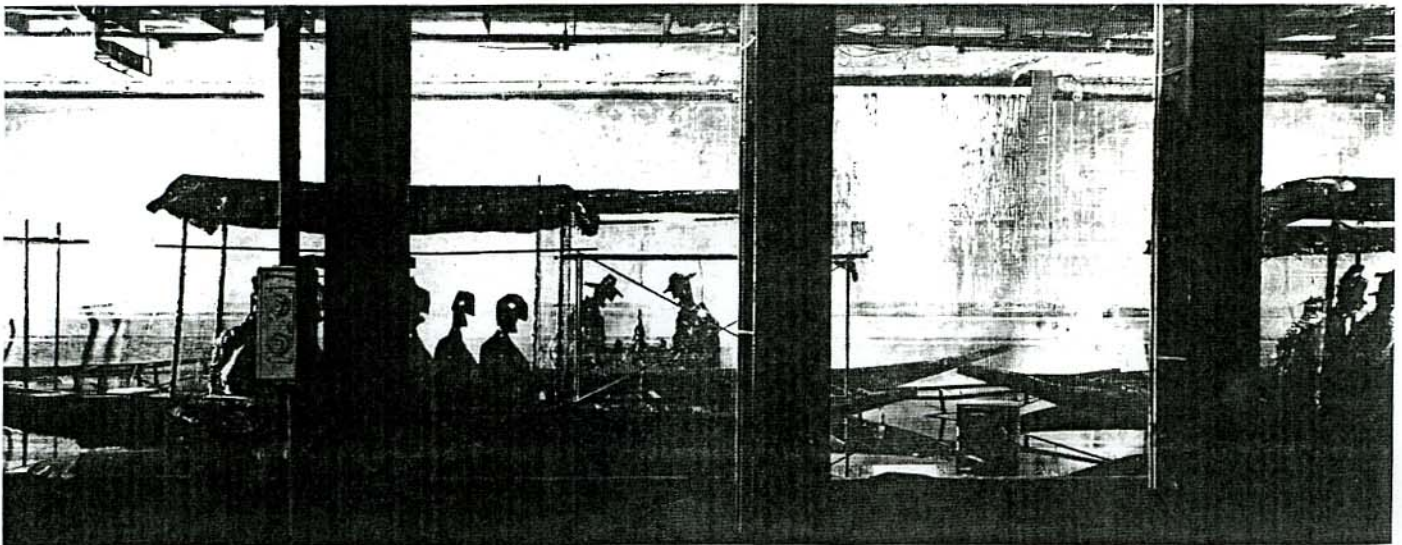
The Canal Street site permitted Brodsky to introduce one of his favorite set pieces, the Venetian gondola. First on paper in the etching, *Forum de Mille Veritatis*, and subsequently in the monumental installation at the Ronald Feldman Gallery based on the etching (illustration 2), solitary gondoliers poled their way silently through a forest of columns. In the subway installation, the gondola-borne cast wends its way

through the columned underground passageway, seemingly indifferent to the urbanity bustling by. It is evident that the gondoliers belong in the space and the pedestrians are intruding on the idyllic scene. Gondolas at both far ends of the installation are merely skeletal frames, suggesting that there is a magic zone through which they pass that brings them to life, albeit briefly. It is hoped that we, too, will pass through that same zone and be transported, Calgon-like, to a sweeter place.

Brodsky recognizes Canal Street's vital role in New York's history. It began as a 40' canal to the Hudson River dug in 1805 in order to drain The Collect, a pond that had become a health hazard due to sewage problems and mosquito infestation. The canal became a health hazard for similar reasons and was eventually filled in. Broadway crossed the canal as a bridge which was assimilated into the roadbed (Moscow, Henry. *The Street Book*, Hagstrom Co., 1978, p. 33.) Aboveground, Canal Street still drains the city, but of traffic and onto bridges and tunnels.

As a mother lode of ethnic intermix, New York quite naturally lends itself to displaced cultural elements. Brodsky acknowledges the contemporary cultural makeup of the site where Little Italy is just up the block. Venice is a sentimental icon representing the golden age of Italy, while above ground Little Italy as we once knew it is being crowded out by an aggressive, expanding Chinatown. As neighborhoods

Ill. 1: Alexander Brodsky, *Canal Street Subway Project*. Mixed media installation. 1996-97, New York City. Sponsored by the Public Art Fund and MTA/Arts for Transit. Photo courtesy Public Art Fund. Photo: Andrew Moore.

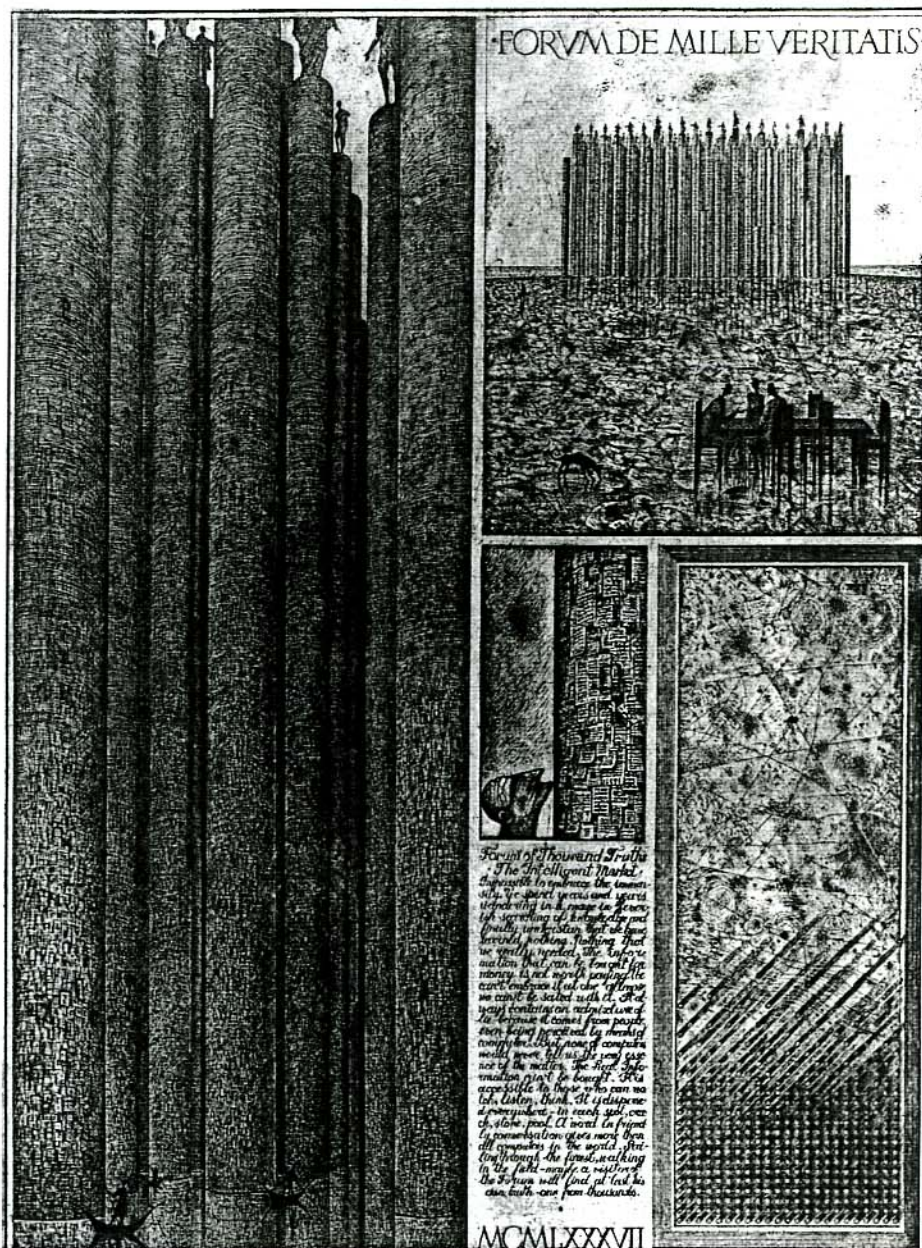


rapidly change their ethnic face, it is natural for particular ethnic stamps to remain in our mind's eye, and there, for a long time to come, the noodle shops will mingle with the pasta restaurants.

Brodsky's work reflects the state of turn-of-the-century New York City. At times, the city lives up to the Gothamesque imagery conjured up by writers, filmmakers and visual artists for decades. The subway tunnel housing Brodsky's installation belongs to Gotham City. But it is the gritty side of Gotham with real rats, not the Disney version with cartoon mice. Its romantic appeal is that it delivers a necessary service with impressive reliability and economy. When you encounter the Brodsky piece, you are reminded with a jolt of another, more splendid, result of centuries of civilization. Of course, New York is not without its San Marco plazas, but the subway, despite its numerous merits, would most likely not be counted among them.

Brodsky's work, including many collaborations with Ilya Utkin, celebrates decay. Sculptures and installations teeter on the cusp of crumbling into dust. The effect, as with *Portrait of an Unknown Person or Carl Faberge's Nightmares*, (illustration 3) an elephantine egg shrouded with visual speaking-in tongues, is tragic — that a thing of such beauty and stature is about to return to the pile of sand in which it incubates. The etchings covering the sphere relay a sense of desperation, that so much information cannot be communicated in the time given and the lone Sisyphian figure, constituted only of a skeletal framework, cannot possibly budge the egg in time. Too much, too beautiful, too late.

Another recent installation by Brodsky, *Visible Parts*, 1996, was concerned with temporary disorientation and first impressions. A gigantic ear embedded in earth was submerged in the street front basement of the Feldman Gallery in New York's Soho. Passersby confronted by the mammoth ear were left to wonder to whom it belonged and where the rest of its person was. If only viewers were able to see the rest of the ear's body and take several passes around it to size things up. But they were left, ultimately, with a citric hunger for knowledge and one big ear. It evoked the Wicked Witch's demise in *The Wizard of Oz* — would the ear suddenly shrivel up and disappear, leaving only vapors to whisper its story?



Ill. 2: Alexander Brodsky and Ilya Utkin, *Forum de Mille Veritatis*, 1987, etching, 40"x32". Courtesy Feldman Gallery. Photo: D. James Dee.

As well, it alluded to the Schadenfreude of photographic journalism: the extremities of bomb blast victims protruding from piles of rubble, the cruel indifference of chance, the creeping sense that it might as well have been you and wasn't.

When facing a person straight on, it is impossible to get a good look at both ears of the person simultaneously. Even several quick trips round both sides of the head won't build a thorough picture. Chances are you'll forget a small detail about the polar

opposite ear. Likewise, it is impossible to comprehend a person's true character after the first meeting. Each subsequent encounter weaves a richer tapestry of the person's history. Invariably, you are consigned to reassess the acquaintance with each meeting, no matter how many meetings you have. *Visible Parts* reminds us that judgments are better postponed until a bigger picture crystallizes.

Certain works such as *Twelfth Street Pedestrian Bridge: Tacoma* (illustration 4)

utilize a simple construction method to convey truisms about societal structures. The accretion of thin, black structural elements in an overlapping, reinforced chaos speaks on one level to an architect's role, and in a broader sense, to an individual's role in society. The architect is simply one player on a large team necessary to construct an edifice. So, too, it requires a group of people to form a functional civilization, which, as it goes, is only as strong as its weakest link.

The overall effect of the *Twelfth Street Pedestrian Bridge* and other similar constructs is simultaneously that of a delicate, lacy structure and an immensely sturdy one. Even if a fair percentage of the structural members were removed, the whole would remain steadfast. *Twelfth Street Bridge*, from the upper pedestrian approach, appears to be a solid monument with stone beasts flanking the entrance. From the side, however, it is an airy, precarious structure that is cantilevered off the shore — more a diving board than a solid link across the water. Yet it looks prepared to endure the ages. It is a physical manifestation of the magic zone through which the gondoliers pass, transforming past and future through the present.

In a similar way, Brodsky uses the layering of fragments to create images that assemble and re-fragment depending on one's vantage point. In the etching *Crystal Palace*, (illustration 5) by Brodsky & Utkin, oddly shaped single planes of glass planted in rows align to form a tower when viewed straight on. From the side, the tower deconstructs into its individual panes. United and aligned it is a promising edifice; apart, the layers are floating abstractions. Either way, it is all an illusion.

In Brodsky's work, standards of civilization repeatedly prevail over harsh environments. In *Villa Nautilus*, (illustration 6) a typically resilient character maintains a glass-caged island of serenity in the midst of a torrent of traffic. From a bird's eye view, the dwelling resembles a lone dry spot in a flooding river. The domestic tableau turns out to be the rooftop garden of a multi-story underground edifice. The most surprising thing of all is not that the man insists on remaining in this incongruous spot, but that he has the option of retreating into what appears to be total privacy. This brings us to the gondola riders in the subway and their enviable obliviousness to the environs of the subway.

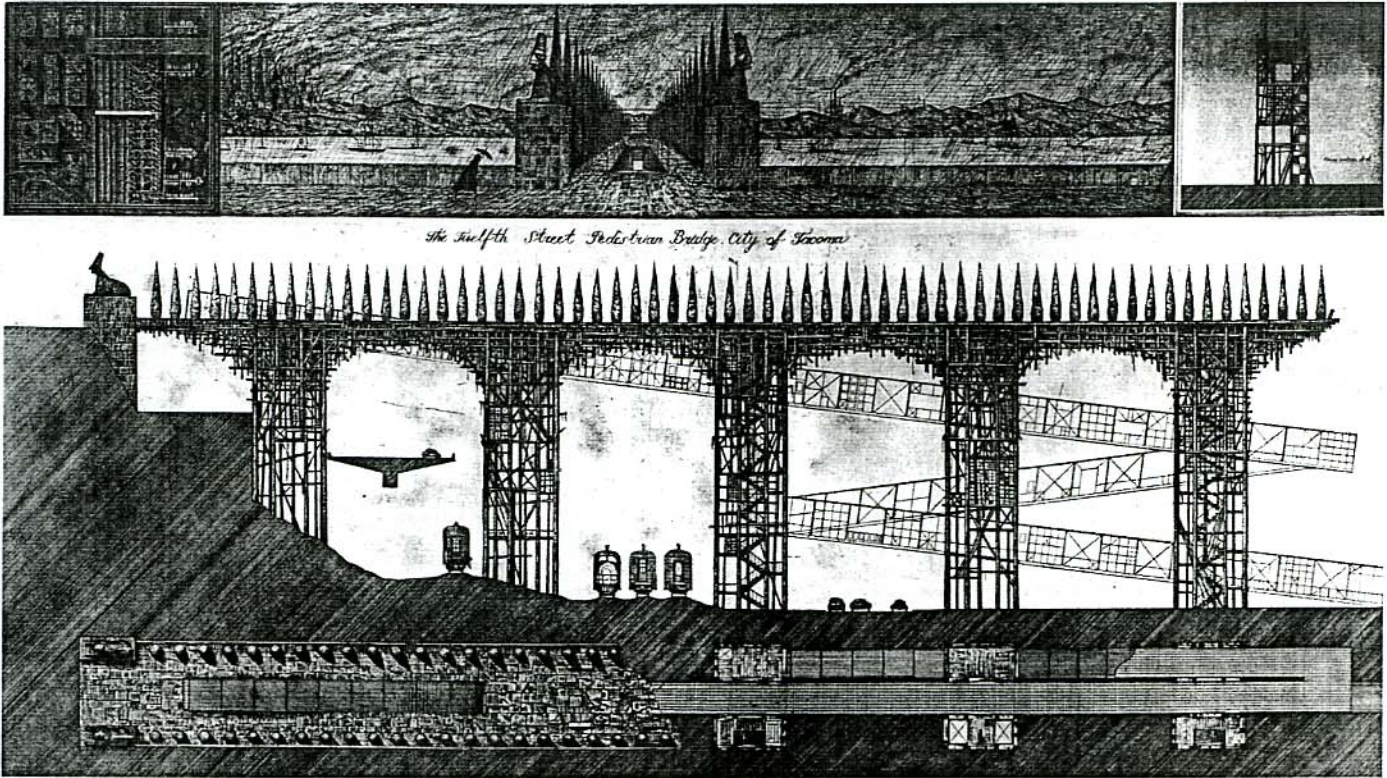


Ill. 3: Alexander Brodsky and Ilya Utkin, *Portrait of an Unknown Person or Peter Carl Faberge's Nightmare*, 1987, installation detail. Courtesy Feldman Gallery. Photo: D. James Dee.

Such a theatrical approach as the *Crystal Palace* befits the Canal Street Subway installation and reinforces its appeal. Of course the gondolas are simply frameworks covered with materials to imply the real thing; the people in the gondolas are caricatures with oversized features, and it is obvious that the water doesn't continue past the edges of the installation. But it is the concurrence of all these materials by the artist's hand in the New York City subway, plus the political and cultural enzymes, that make this piece remarkable and as rare as a solar eclipse. And it strengthens one's faith that with time, under intense pressure, in an unlikely spot, a lump of coal can turn into a

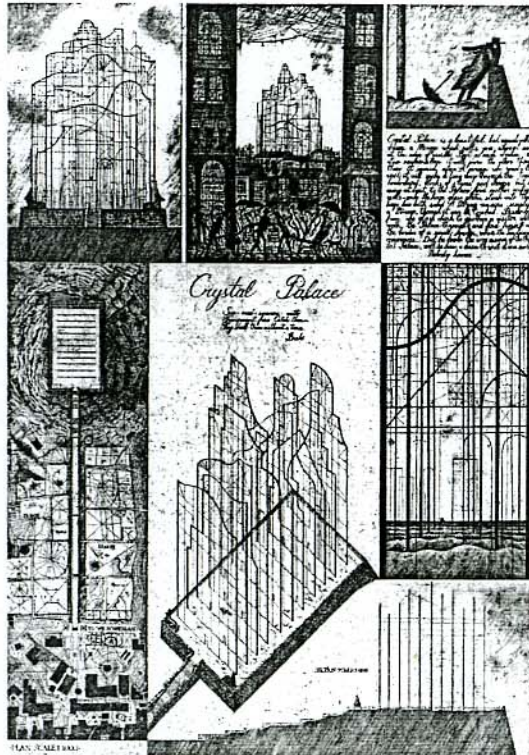
diamond. We experience first hand indomitable human resiliency in the face of extreme adversity and we are heartened. And the next time we pass through this piece of tunnel, our hearts will sink because the gondoliers have gone home.

Biographical notes on Alexander Brodsky: Born 1955, Moscow, USSR. Graduated 1978 from The Moscow Architecture Institute. Solo exhibitions include Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York and Regina Gallery, Moscow. Joint exhibitions with Ilya Utkin (Brodsky & Utkin) include Bell Gallery, Brown University; Gallery 210 at Univ. of Missouri/St. Louis; Portland Museum of Art (Oregon); Bayly Art Museum, Univ. of Virginia/Charlottesville; Wellington City Art Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand; Pittsburgh Center for the Arts; Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo; Duke University Museum of Art, Durham, North Carolina.



III. 4: Alexander Brodsky and Ilya Utkin, *Twelfth Street Pedestrian Bridge: Tacoma*, 1991, etching, 36" x 60". Courtesy Feldman Gallery. Photo: D. James Dee.

III. 5: Alexander Brodsky and Ilya Utkin, *Crystal Palace*, 1989-90, etching, 33" x 23-1/4". Courtesy Feldman Gallery. Photo: D. James Dee.



III. 6: Alexander Brodsky and Ilya Utkin, *Villa Nautilus*, 1990, etching, 43" x 31-1/4". Courtesy Feldman Gallery. Photo: D. James Dee.

