

Egg-ceptional

By Kate Dobbs Ariail

I had seen the photo of the "egg"—the Alexander Brodsky and Ilya Utkin sculpture of a man pushing a giant egg-shaped thing—and I had seen the photo of the egg, and I had seen it yet again, as if that were the only object of significance in the exhibition it was being used to advertise.

If it weren't my job to go to art shows, I probably would have skipped *Russian Conceptual Art of the 1980s: The Collection of the Duke*

University Museum of Art, currently on view at that museum, because I was already sick of that damn egg. And that would have been a terrible shame.

Because the egg is a wonderful piece of sculpture.

Its real title is "Portrait of an Unknown Person or The Nightmare of Carl Fabergé." I'm going to keep calling it the egg. Among sculpture's many purposes are the examination, contemplation and expression of space, volume and mass: The egg makes me aware of how rarely mass and density are explored these days.

This thing has its own gravity. It is, as its makers say, "for those who are tired of plastic vanity, for those who feel sick of foam rubber life, for those who believe in heavy things that are difficult to move..." The sculpture pulls you into its orbit instantly. You feel in your own body its weight and inertia as the figure presses against it. In this age of virtual this and that, when art is taking to the Internet and museums are pouring resources into putting images on computers, this sculpture reinvigorates my faith in actual art objects and the importance of experiencing them with the body, as well as the eyes.

Brodsky and Utkin began collaborating on projects while still studying at the Moscow Architecture Institute. Architectural creativity being disallowed in Communist U.S.S.R., the pair began entering—and winning—design competitions around the world and became known as the Soviet Union's leading "paper architects." In 1984 they entered a competition to design a museum of sculpture, calling their design "Island of Stability."

"Life in cities like Moscow and New York is very hectic, and there are all these lightweight, transitory, ephemeral objects clamoring for our

ART

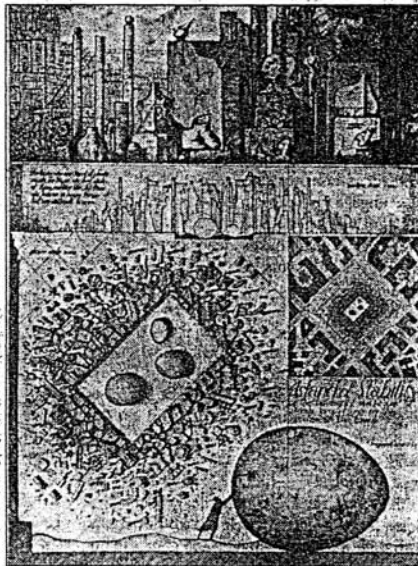
attention," the artists have noted. "This museum was supposed to be a symbol of something genuine, something stable—i.e., a Museum of Stone Sculpture, only stone, set outdoors on a square."

In their design, quantities of stone sculptures surround a sand-filled square, effectively screening out the city. Three huge stone eggs, beautiful natural forms—self-contained, serene and heavy—rest in the square. To the drawing, Brodsky and Utkin added a little man trying to move one of the eggs. Five years later they translated this idea to three dimensions. Now, amazingly, it has come into the collection of the Duke Museum.

As have a number of their remarkable large etchings, including the delightful "Island of Stability." It's as if a couple of architects who had become *New Yorker* cartoonists fell down the rabbit hole and started drawing from a previ-

ously undiscovered viewpoint: The work is surreally funny, humane and very witty. All the etchings consist of multiple architectural images and deal with the human uses of these structures. Many depict buildings as the containers of our lives, or as stages on which the human drama plays, or as symbols of human spirit.

There are a number of other interesting works in the exhibition, though Brodsky and Utkin's are to my mind the most important. Most of this



Alexander Brodsky and Ilya Utkin turned part of their "Island of Stability" etching into the famous "egg" sculpture.

work was made before the collapse of Soviet communism, and much of it is incomprehensible to us without some interpretation because we lack the cultural background (not to mention the Russian-language skills) to get the references. A number of the pieces have little to redeem them in aesthetic terms, but with adequate auxiliary information they can help us form a realistic picture of late Soviet culture. Unfortunately, there is no exhibition catalog and the wall texts and gallery handouts don't give as much information as we need.

Now that museum director Michael Mezzatesta has succeeded in bringing this important group of works into the collection, further enhancing the museum's importance and underlining its vitality, it seems incredible to still be asking the question: When is Duke going to build a real art museum? One where hurried students won't be rushing through the foyer, colliding with absorbed art viewers. One with a raked auditorium large enough to hold the crowds for lectures.

One where the egg can rest heavily in the square, an island of stability in a torrent of artistic froth. ■

RUSSIAN CONCEPTUAL ART OF THE 1980s
Continuing at the Duke University Museum of Art, East Campus, Duke, Durham, through March 31. "After Hours" programs with related lectures and activities will continue through February. Call 684-5135.