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Fondazione Querini Stampalia  
Onlus

## “GRISHA BRUSKIN. ALEFBET: ALPHABET OF MEMORY”

Venice - Fondazione Querini Stampalia  
12 February – 13 September 2015

Additional information and pictures: [www.studioesseci.net](http://www.studioesseci.net)

Press release

A mysterious alphabet composed of 160 characters: angels, animal-faced demons, figures pierced by lightning, men carrying their own shadow on their shoulders or gazing into the secrets of a book. For his first exhibition in Venice, Grisha Bruskin, one of the great living Russian artists, with an international reputation dating at least from the mid 1980s, has chosen the project “Alefbet”: at the heart of the exhibition are five large tapestries (2,80 x 2,10). These, however, can be reached only after examining the preparatory drawings, gouaches, and six extraordinary paintings that articulate the successive stages of this complex and fascinating “archive of the sign”. This highly condensed synthesis draws on the thousand-years-old Jewish tradition of the Talmud and Kabbalah, presented as a possible and permanent interpretation key of our own history and present. The stunning visual impact of “Alefbet” cannot fail to fascinate, accompany and draw the viewers through a series of original multimedia apparatuses, designed in collaboration with Marco Barsottini from CamerAnebbia-Milano and aimed at highlighting the extraordinary narrative power of Bruskin’s work.

The exhibition, promoted by the Centre of Studies of Russian Art (CSAR) at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, is curated by Giuseppe Barbieri and Silvia Burini in collaboration with Fondazione Querini Stampalia. The catalogue, published by Terra Ferma, features essays by Evgenij Barabanov, Giuseppe Barbieri, Grisha Bruskin, Silvia Burini, Boris Groys, and Michail Jampolskij.

At the end of the 1960s, Bruskin found in the Jewish tradition an entirely new subject, at a time when Soviet society and art were categorically alien to any form of Jewish everyday life and cult. Bruskin’s discovery of that culture happened, so to say, by a sideways path: he did come from a Jewish family of scientists, but 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” that led him to achieve a highly personal and original style, where the fragments of a past lost and found seem to emerge, at least in a first stage, from a kind of pictorial fairy-tale Carnival, rich in allegorical, symbolic, but also surrealist themes.

In the 1980s, his work went through a considerable change, one could even say a rift, as Bruskin started associating with the main exponents of Sots-Art: Prigov, Orlov, and Lebedev. His style evolved from a slightly ornamental primitivism to a concise manner that evoked the graphics of Soviet Posters. Bruskin’s interest in Soviet ideological products certainly came from his contacts with Sots-Artists. 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.

The Jewish theme, however, was not forgotten, but remained parallel to the Soviet one: in the artist's writings, the Talmudic and Marxist approaches have much in common.

In his *Fundamental'nyj leksikon* (1986), a kind of Bruskinian grammar containing the origins and synthesis of his language, the artist compiled a systematic catalogue of the Soviet sign system, with the same accuracy applied in the Torah to listing the sins of humanity: each cell contains a plaster cast statue holding a visual sign, a medal, a small-scale model of Lenin's mausoleum, a street sign, or a map. The language sought by Bruskin is essentially less esoteric than that of his colleagues, and privileges narrative elements. As if he were acting in the name of an archaeologist of the future trying to decipher the artefacts of a past civilisation. That openness was also dictated 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*, it was finally possible to set up exhibitions in exhibition spaces, and therefore to showcase larger formats.

*Fundamental'nyj leksikon* was presented in Moscow in 1987, at the Kashirka exhibition space (the venue of all the major artistic events of the 1980s), during the exhibition "*The artist and modernity*". With his clear-cut language and delicate paintings, Bruskin became on that occasion the most important artist of the *perestroika*.

This episode was crucial: although the official power had tried to build a case around the exhibition, part of the artwork was bought by the famous director Milos Forman, who had been officially invited by Gorbachev. This marked the end of the ban on the exhibition of non-official art in the USSR. And that was not all. A year later, *Fundamental'nyj leksikon* was to play again a crucial role in the Russian art market. At a landmark Sotheby's auction, the work was sold for 242.000 GBP, whereas shortly before Kabakov's *Otvety* had made a mere 22.000 GBP.

It was the start of the Russian "boom": Bruskin moved to New York, and started increasing the format of the figures of his *Fundamental'nyj leksikon*, which evolved into monumental sculptures, and later also into porcelain figures.

The project "Alefbet" constitutes an essential part of Bruskin's long and complex macrotext. A "sewn up", textured alphabet. An archive turned into a text.

The artist writes that Judaism, for historical reasons, did not produce an art that matched its spiritual achievements: "I have always felt a cultural void, and I wanted to fill it with an individual artistic level. The Jews are the people of the Book, and the book is their main symbol: the book is the world and the world is the book. The book is the proto-model of my art and in particular of Alefbet".

"My conception of Alefbet is purely artistic, as if it were a game of marbles. It was important for me to create something in the shape of pages, palimpsests, writing, news, commentary... Alefbet is also made of mysterious writings, of rebuses. It is a kind of mythological dictionary where language is developed into a series of symbols, mythologems, and allegories that must be deciphered and guessed. You have to find your own personal explanation".

"160 figures are placed against a background made of writings. Nothing is going on among them, they are merely represented and associated by the context. Each hero, endowed with an accessory, becomes a symbolical figure, a mythologem, creating a kind of dictionary, a collection, or an alphabet – *alefbet* in Hebrew. 'Alefbet' represents my personal commentary to the Book".

The tapestry is accompanied by a commentary to the commentaries, written by the artist. The viewers, following the Talmudic tradition, must add their own comments to those of the artist, and thereby get closer to truth. "Alefbet" is a sphinx that poses riddles to the viewers. 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.

Grisha Bruskin (Grigory Davidovich Bruskin) was born in Moscow in 1945. In 1968 he graduated from the Moscow Textile Institute and, on the next year, entered the Union of Soviet Artists. His first exhibition, presented in Vilnius in 1983, was shut down a few days later by order of the Lithuanian Communist Party. On the next year, another exhibition at the Central Workers House in Moscow was shut down one day before the opening by order of the Moscow section of the Communist Party. His first non-censored group exhibition, "*The artist and modernity*", was opened to the public in 1987 at the Kashirka exhibition space. On 7 July 1988, during an auction organised by Sotheby's in Moscow, 7 artworks by Bruskin reached a record price for Russian contemporary art. In the same year, the artist moved to New York, where he started collaborating with the Marlborough Gallery. In 1999, he was commissioned by the German government a monumental triptych titled *Life before everything* on the occasion of the reconstruction of the Reichstag in Berlin. In 2005, he took part in the major collective exhibition *Russia!* at the Guggenheim in New York. In 2012, he was awarded the Kandinsky prize for Russian contemporary art with the project *H-Hour*. Today, Bruskin lives and works between Moscow and New York.

**Useful info:**

Exhibition venue: Fondazione Querini Stampalia, Venezia, Campo Santa Maria Formosa, Castello 5252

Dates: from 12 February to 13 September 2015

Open to the public from Tuesday to Sunday from 10 am to 6 pm.

Closed on Monday.

Free entrance

Catalogue: Terra Ferma

**Press Office**

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