

A conversation with Alexander Brodsky

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A CONVERSATION
WITH
ALEXANDER BRODSKY

Alexander and I both sip on tea and sit around a table in his dacha. I can hear the rhythmic taps of the ping-pong ball against the table in the next room. Among the trees lies his retreat from Moscow, where his beloved dog, Gul, runs free. At the end of the interview, he gets up to check on the newborn puppies living under the house, peering into the darkness with his torch.

TM You've told me so many stories about Moscow, about all these buildings and the layers of time and narrative on the city. I wanted to ask, what is your favourite story about Moscow?

AB I have a number of stories, but they are all in Russian. My favourite stories play on the Russian language and some situation and it's really difficult to translate something that people say. It's amazing in Russian, but it's untranslatable. It's just not possible. If you translate it as it is, literally, it loses everything. But one of my favourite stories is one that could have taken place anywhere, but it happened in Moscow. For me it's a very Moscow thing. It's just a few words, a couple of words, but it's very hard to translate so that you understand why it is so beautiful. I'll try, and if it's not successful just forget about it. I lived in an old building, not in the centre, but not far away from the centre. It was a big pre-war apartment block from 1936. The whole ground floor was occupied by a big office for the national pension fund, SOBES, which was usually very busy because all the men and women from the area went there. I was at the beginning of my driving career, I had just got my driver's license and owned a very old car. Once I went somewhere with the car very early in the morning, when the streets were absolutely empty. A Saturday, it was the end of May or beginning of June, a very beautiful bright morning. So I went outside of my yard in the car and went down the street, passing by the pension office, but it was closed because it was like 7 o'clock in the morning. An absolutely empty street, the sun is shining and it's beautiful weather. I saw, about 50 meters away, a figure of some person standing there. And suddenly, just as I was passing my house, the car broke down. It was very old and was often breaking down. I didn't understand anything, but I knew that if something had gone wrong, I should open the bonnet and look inside. So I got out of the car and opened the bonnet, simultaneously I saw that this person who was standing there was starting to move towards me. Of course I didn't find anything to fix in the engine, so I closed the bonnet and tried to start the car again, back inside the car. I could see that the man was coming towards me. I tried

several times and suddenly it started. Just at the moment as I was about to set off, the old man came to my window. He was probably about the age I am now, but maybe a little older, like 65 years old. He was looking at me and smiling as he approached the car. I started to set off with the car, and at this moment he said something really short, just three words, but it's so difficult to translate. He said, «to SOBES, I think they will». As I left, he was smiling and suddenly I understood the whole story. He was probably going to ask for a small addition to his very small pension, but he was afraid of the long queue, so he came much earlier. But it was closed, so he was just standing there, bored, alone, and wanted to talk to someone. Then he saw that my car had broken down and saw it as an opportunity to talk to someone, tell his story with all the details about why he was asking for more pension money. But as he came closer, he realised that I was about to set off, so he condensed his whole story that he expected to tell for an hour, into three words. It was like a Japanese haiku, just three words in Russian: to SOBES, I came here this morning, I think they will give me more money, without explaining what he actually wanted. It was ingenious. Probably it's not so understandable in English, but it was amazing.

So all the stories that I like are like this, linked to the Russian language, but untranslatable.

I have a favourite living poet, Sergei Gandlevsky, who's a very good friend of mine. He's a genius, and I wanted to publish his poems in a magazine that was publishing my works. They asked me to introduce some artists and architects that I like, so I brought materials about Peter Märkli, the Russian artist, Oleg Kudryashov, and this poet. It was an Italian magazine, so I asked if they had an Italian translation. The book had just come out in Italy with an Italian translation and I could select three samples from these poems. So I took the list of translated poems, but since I can't read Italian, I couldn't check it. But as I understood it, all of the poems, even with a very good translation, could never be understood in Italy. It was just absolutely impossible. Because his poems play

on such things that only Russians can understand, and not even every Russian. Amazing poems, but nobody can understand them in Italy or any other country. So in this book of about 25 poems, I barely found three that could be more or less understandable in Italy. I had never thought about this. I called the poet and asked, «Did you think about this?» He said, «Of course, that's why I never won a Nobel Prize.»

TM This is similar to *Moscow – Petushki* by Yerofeyev, I read the English translation and some parts of it I think are just untranslatable, the atmosphere is still evocative, but some details do not translate.

AB I'm trying to think of another story about Moscow. There's another story about Stalin and the Seven Sisters. As he was driving in his car one day, he suddenly noticed something strange about the final Seven Sisters building. For some reason, nobody knows why, the architects had decided not to build the spire at the top of the building. It was to remain different to the other six «Sisters». As Stalin stepped out and looked up, he told all the men around him that he wanted to have the tower built just like the others, and that they had just four weeks to finish it. Everybody knew, that when Stalin gave a command like that, you need to do whatever you can, otherwise you will be killed. Normally it takes several months to add the spire to the top, of stone, but for the last one, the architect found a way to build it ten times faster out of steel, then clad it in stone. It is said it only took three weeks, something like that. It was crazy. Hence one of the Seven Sisters has a spire made of steel, not stone, weaker than the others. But you cannot notice it from the outside. I live not far away, so I see it every day and every time I look at it I think, Stalin was completely right. Here, he was right.

TM You mentioned that because it was made of another material, you could see it ageing faster than the other towers.

AB It was repaired just last year, so it had quite a long life, considering it was built in the early 50s. When you look at it, you can notice that the whole building is quite dark with dirt, but the top of it is all white and very clean, due to the renovation.

TM Do you think that they should rebuild it in a similar way to all the other Seven Sisters towers, or should they leave it like this, to show the story? Because the others are all made of stone, and this one is some sort of lighter structure.

AB It's covered with the same tiles, so it looks ex-

actly the same. I think that all the seven should be the same shape, because there is no reason to make one different. The architects wanted to create something new, a little bit avant-garde, which I don't think Stalin liked at all. I think if they had left it like this, everyone would say, «Why is it like this? Did they not finish? Maybe they ran out of money.»

TM There's also the extraordinary story of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, which was a 19th century cathedral in the centre of Moscow that was torn down in 1931 to give way to the Palace of the Soviets, which was never realised. The plot was then left empty for a long time before it was replaced by a giant round swimming pool in its foundation hole, only to eventually rebuild a copy of the original cathedral, just over 100 years after it was demolished. Which of these options would you prefer?

AB Well, if I could, I would keep the cathedral. This is what I would do. If I were to come and it's already been destroyed, it doesn't exist anymore, and I have the complete project of the Palace of the Soviets ready, I would build the Palace of the Soviets, of course. Then if I don't have the money for the Palace of the Soviets, I would keep the swimming pool. So the last thing I would do, would be to rebuild the church.

TM But why?

AB Because they could not rebuild it in a respectful way. They made a really ugly thing that has nothing to do with the Cathedral of Christ our Saviour. It was a beautiful building. You can see it on the photographs. All the sculptures on the facade were made of white stone. Just one fragment survived and it's in the Donskoy Monastery, somewhere in the back of the garden, there's a fragment of a wall with a huge sculpture with a scene from the Bible, all made of stone. They made a very bad copy. You saw the new cathedral, it's really ugly with its white facade and the sculptures are badly made. Before, the interiors were of beautiful stonework, using wonderful stones brought from different places in the country. Also, as a direct copy, they conceived the new cathedral in exactly the same size, but if I were to rebuild the cathedral, as a last resort, I would have made it 10% bigger than it was before, because the city is different. If you look at the photographs, before it was really dominating the whole area, because the houses were small and the cathedral was huge, really «something». And now everything around it has grown twice as tall as it was, the scale of the city has changed a lot. Ideally, I would build it twice as big. But, to be pragmatic, we could make it just a little bit bigger, because now it

seems smaller than it was. But nobody asked my advice.

TM Do you think it's a metaphor for your own work, where you said that the last thing you would do, is to rebuild the same building in the same place. Do you think it's also something you would do in your own work?

AB I would never just seek to reproduce something, because I use a lot of found objects, that already have a lot of stories behind them. I like to save these objects to give them another life, but I don't make fake things. I use the real things that I find in the junkyard. So, it's not possible to rebuild a cathedral from the 19th century. Or, it is possible, in some abstract way, if you have the same materials, the same masters, the same quality.

TM You often reuse these objects that already have a history, for example the doorhandle of your small winter house. How important is the concept of time for you? Do you think that reusing these old objects in a new way somehow makes them new or do you think it's then still timeless?

AB No, no, it's nothing new, a lot of artists work with this theme of time and memory. It's quite a popular thing, but still, it's important for me. I think that it's basically respect for something that was made a long time ago by someone else. Whether it was a house, or a door or a window, it's something that I cannot just throw away. Especially if it can be used. Like a door can be still a door, not in that same place, but maybe in another place. So I think it's just wonderful, if it's still strong enough to be a door. It's just crazy that people throw away nice things that are still strong and beautiful, just because they are old and because they want to make something new. It's something very important for me because all my life I've been dreaming about the things that can work forever. I hate change. All my life, I've been dreaming about the shoes that I can wear all year, all my life. That are strong enough but always beautiful.

Just strong enough. I would like to have one piece of each item of clothing that I could wear for years, forever.

TM How old are your shoes now?

AB Well, I wore my old shoes for 15 years, but these are not so old, these are maybe 6 years old, so still quite young. I hate to change things. This is the same with my car. I would like to have a car forever, for the rest of my life. That has been my philosophy for quite some time. These days, probably to make money, they make things that are programmed to work for a very short period. Something that you throw away after two months, then buy the next one, and the next one. Before that, they would make things that would last for years and years and years. I still dream about these things, even if it may now be stupid to dream, but I'm too old to care.

TM How do you choose which objects to reuse? Do you always reuse everything or do you choose certain things to use and others to archive?

AB I just follow my inner voice. If I feel that it's nice, I take it. It's intuition. Intuition is the main thing. You have to trust your inner voice.

TM You often talk a lot about dreaming, dreaming about Moscow. I think there is a strong concept of dreaming in your work, but it's also still very real, because it ultimately becomes something at the end. What is your relationship to dreaming and reality?

AB They must both exist and work together somehow. A dream is a dream, reality is reality. I think that both are equally important. It's not as though I want to go inside the dream world and never come back. Somehow they work together. There is an interesting example with my students this semester, where during the semester they were dreaming about Moscow, but I don't know if their dreams in Zurich have matched the reality of what they have seen in Moscow.

Alexander Brodsky, born 1955, is an architect working in Moscow. He studied architecture at the Moscow Architecture Institute, graduating in 1978. In the 1980s, he was part of the Paper Architects group, together with Ilya Utkin, before moving to New York in 1996 to pursue contemporary art. Since 2000, he has established his own architectural practice in Moscow. He has taught at many schools, and since 2017, he is a guest professor at ETH Zurich.