In the wake of glasnost, the projects of a number of young Russian architects came to light that had been produced, allegedly at least, as a form of rebellion against the authoritarian Soviet state and its rigid, modernist aesthetic. Two of the better-known proponents of the underground Russian "paper architecture" movement were Alexander Brodsky and Illya Utkin. In the 1980s Brodsky and Utkin ignored laws forbidding them to practice architecture outside the state system and produced a series of dark etchings; drawings of unbuildable, imaginary or fantasy architecture, which they submitted to international competitions.

In this paper, the depiction of labour in the works of Brodsky and Utkin is analysed through the lens of Jacques Rancière’s "distribution of the sensible". In particular, Rancière’s theories about the value and visibility of labour are used to test the subversive intent of Brodsky and Utkin’s work. Rancière’s ideas are especially appropriate for this analysis because he has previously argued that modernism was not so vulnerable to cross-disciplinary incursions as many theorists suggest and he rejects simple claims that art and architecture are necessarily political as a result of their form, content or mode of representation.
Labour and the Sensible

Sir Banister Fletcher’s history of architecture describes Brodsky and Utkin’s work as being an “attack” on “defeatism and complacency” in the Soviet Union. Postmodern theorists similarly position Brodsky and Utkin’s work in opposition to the modernism of the Soviet state claiming that its intent is innately subversive. Other historians and theorists describe Brodsky and Utkin’s imaginary architecture as being anti-utopian; a visible reaction against the failure of the Soviet dream. Regardless of the fine detail, the common thread in interpretations of Brodsky and Utkin’s architecture is that it is politically subversive. What is unclear is how this seditious influence is achieved. Consider one of their few constructed works, which was exhibited for the first time in 1990.

Peter Carl Fabergé’s Nightmare, depicts a “small, lone figure pushing [a] huge egg [that is] etched with a myriad of images.” This enigmatic work, like many of their projects, has been interpreted as a critique of the Soviet State and its circumscribed aesthetic. The sculpture makes visible both the formal complexity of the contemporary world and the extent to which the anonymous worker supports its fragile state. The seditious power of the sculpture lies partially in the capacity of the geometric form, the egg, to transcend disciplinary boundaries and reveal the historic importance of the worker in the Soviet Union. Both the form and the title of the work refer to one of the most famous examples of Russian arts and crafts of the previous century. Fabergé Eggs, intricately constructed of precious metals, gemstones and enamel, were the pre-eminent example of the jewellers’ craft in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Tsar Alexander III originally commissioned them as Easter gifts for the private enjoyment of the Czarina. Much like a bourgeois version of the peasant matroschka doll, the Fabergé Company prided itself on their practice of nesting a series of elaborate miniatures hidden inside the eggs.

This juxtaposition between two approaches to the aesthetic object, separated by almost a century in execution, brings into focus a range of themes that are pertinent in considering the relationship between politics, architecture and imagination. What is it that allows a Fabergé Egg to be interpreted as socially and politically normative while Fabergé’s Nightmare is provocative? Another way of approaching this issue is to ask whether less arts plastiques can either sustain or depose the dominant laws of a society? For the philosopher Jacques Rancière the answer to this question can only be determined after a careful consideration of a range of issues including visibility, crossings and labour.

In this paper, projects by Brodsky and Utkin that depict various forms of labour are analysed from the viewpoint of the French political and aesthetic philosopher Jacques Rancière. This paper is not specifically concerned with Brodsky and Utkin’s architecture in isolation, but rather with its canonical positioning as being politically inflammatory. Past research has tested this position suggesting that the subversive quality is possibly a result of Brodsky and Utkin’s framing by the media. In the present paper a new explanation is offered which draws out of their work certain attitudes to labour; a central virtue identified by the Soviet state. The paper commences with an overview of Rancière’s political theory, before introducing the background against which Brodsky and Utkin’s architecture is conventionally viewed. After returning briefly to Rancière, to focus on his views on the role of labour in society, the paper describes several of Brodsky and Utkin’s projects, drawing out the way in which labour is made visible or celebrated. Finally the paper returns to Peter Carl Fabergé’s Nightmare, as it offers an alternative explanation for the politics of the imaginary architecture of Brodsky and Utkin.

The Distribution of the Sensible

Rancière’s philosophy is grounded in the “death of politics” and the “end of political divisions.” With the rise of Taylorism, Fordism, and Economic Rationalism, the boundaries that once defined the political world – and partitioned it into left and right – are no longer relevant. The new managerialism is focussed on growth, capitalism and trade; it occupies the space once held by ideological politics and it negates the cross-disciplinary search for utopian territories that once occupied philosophers. It is against this backdrop that Rancière proposes that for the philosopher to remain valuable, they must look within what remains of the political structure, to uncover and expose its component parts, its processes and outcomes. In order to do this, Rancière rejects the conventional ideological understanding of power and governance and develops an alternative definition of politics.

Rancière divides the traditional concept of politics into two new components; the “police” and “politics”. The term “police” (la politique/police) is used to describe the myriad of controls that define what is lawful, right or expected in a society. The “police order” is more than the uniformed officers of the state: it includes everything from the media and social mores, to theological values and cultural practices. Rancière reserves the use of the word “politics” (la politique/politique) to describe only those actions that disrupt the police order. The ultimate purpose of the police order is to maintain what Rancière calls the “distribution of the sensible” and thereby limit the potential for politics.

The “distribution of the sensible” refers both to a system of organisation (a distribution of elements) and the extent to which an individual or group is apparent in this system (a capacity to be seen, heard or otherwise sensed). White describes the concept of “distribution” as relating to the processes that construct a community and the “sensible” as referring to the historic rights of certain groups to be active participants in these communities. Rancière argues that all social systems as constructed upon a “system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it.”

The distribution of the components, relationships and limits embodied in a society, defines the police order. The sensible is the capacity of certain of these components to be apparent; qualities which describe political potential. By their very nature the recessive, the invisible and the inaudible have little impact on the rules or values of a society, its police order. This is why Rancière argues that in the post-political world, the “essence of the police […] is not repression but rather” the maintenance of “a certain distribution of the sensible that precludes the emergence of politics.”

Rancière’s distinction between the police and politics assists in explaining why most aesthetic works, regardless of content or intent, have little subversive capacity. This can be explained by considering two types of disagreement. Actions, events or representations that conform to behaviors anticipated in the police order, even if they disagree with that order, are examples of “dissent”. Actions, events or representations that seek to radically alter the distribution of the sensible are examples of “dissensus” with political intent. Simplistically, the former might
be likened to breaking of a law, while the latter is the advocacy of widespread lawbreaking. In part, the difference is between disagreeing with the distribution of the sensible and actively seeking to subvert or change it. However, the distinction between dissent and dissensus is also context sensitive. Thus, it relies on the extent to which a transgression of the distribution of the sensible is made apparent. The same transgressive event that occurs in private, but is later broadcast through the media, can potentially shift from dissent to dissensus as it becomes more apparent. However, when interpreted in a different police order (a context with different social and cultural values) this same event may not be transgressive at all. The way in which the event is positioned or made visible is the important thing, not the event itself. Rancière rejects any assumption that there are correct, ideal or necessarily authoritative interpretations of events or objects. Each successive framing must be viewed in its own terms.

In order to support the application of his meta-political schema, Rancière identifies two themes that are often found in subversive instances; these themes relate to the encouragement to cross between states and to the visibility of labour. These themes provide useful clues for investigating the political power of Brodsky and Utkin’s work.

**Against Modernism?**

In 1956 Nikita Khrushchev spoke out against the cult of personality that had dominated the communist party in Russia during Stalin’s reign. In the following year Khrushchev famously denounced Stalin’s advocacy of neoclassical design calling instead for the party to endorse a utilitarian modern aesthetic in all forms of cultural, architectural and artistic expression. The result of Khrushchev’s action was, as Alexey Tarkhanov observes, that the communist party resolved to abandon all “excesses in design.” The party officially “outlawed nearly everything which had motivated architecture in the preceding twenty years: historicism, orientation to Classicism, richness of material and abundance of detail.” As Lois Nesbitt argues, from that point in time “aesthetic discourse of any kind was considered unnecessary and immoral” by the communist party in Russia.

In 1957 the Russian Academy of Architecture was directed to abandon all support for neoclassicism and adopt utilitarian modernism as the only cultural expression of the state. For the next 30 years, architectural education in the Soviet Union was dominated by an extreme modernist doctrine that ostensibly rejected all aesthetic concerns. The young architects who graduated during this era found that they were not allowed to engage in private design activity and that it was illegal for them to exhibit their work without the imprimatur of the staunchly modernist Academy of Architecture.

Despite the constraints of the police order, in the mid 1980s a growing number of these young architects entered their unbuilt designs in international “ideas” competitions and several, notably including Brodsky and Utkin, were successful in having their work exhibited and published around the world. Not only was this practice forbidden (and was therefore a form of dissent) but the content of the work was often critical of the Soviet state. For example, in 1982 one of Brodsky and Utkin’s etchings won a competition sponsored by the Japan Architect journal. Their entry, Crystal Palace, presents a towering, glass structure that is sited outside the city limits of an unnamed town. From a distance the structure is like a grand expansion of Joseph Paxton’s iconic modern structure of the same name. Yet, to reach the seemingly magical Palace and be rewarded with the treasures of modernity, the peripatetic traveller must first leave behind the city they know. Once they have crossed the wastelands they discover that instead of being a large building filled with a cornucopia of delights, the structure is largely an illusion. The Palace, which is constructed from a series of “glass plates, stuck into the huge box of sand” is a mirage. It promises the Soviet worker a modernist utopia that, as Rappaport argues, “proves on closer inspection to be an illusion built on a municipal rubbish heap.” It is only by crossing boundaries, something discouraged by the state, that the stark reality is revealed.

A related theme is developed in their Diomede I (1989) project, which depicts a proposal for an underwater bridge, invisible to the naked eye, but able to support an intrepid explorer, or faithful pilgrim, to cross from one island state to another. Significantly, more than a dozen of Brodsky and Utkin’s works are designs for hidden bridges; the architectural type that most clearly expresses and enables the act of crossing between different states. Rancière describes the act of crossing as a political action; it is both the search for new utopias and the implied rejection of old ones. Managerial systems of governance are not concerned with utopian voyages; their aim is to stabilise the distribution of the sensible, to preclude the possibility of any political disturbance and to control the construction of metaphorical bridges. While crossings are one important element that might allow a differentiation of the political from the police order, of greater significance is the value and visibility of labour.

**The Value and Visibility of Work**

In order to explain the significance of labour, for maintaining or subverting the distribution of the sensible, Rancière revisits the Republic wherein Plato famously proposed that poets and artists should be excluded from the ideal polis. This prohibition is most often attributed to his desire to restrict mimesis. Yet, in book III the artist is excluded from the Republic because their labour can only be directed to the pursuit of their art. The artist’s labour is therefore innately selfish and problematic in a utopian community. However, Rancière disagrees with Plato when he argues that, from a political perspective, there is no difference between the “ordinariness” of the farmer’s labour and the “exceptionality” of the artist’s labours. Neither of these forms of labour necessarily has any impact on the distribution of the sensible. The creation of a private work of art, or the performance of a piece of music within the home, is an accepted part of the distribution of the sensible in a post-political state and an anticipated form of dissent in a socialist state. Neither of these disrupts the police order because these labours are effectively hidden. It is not the nature of the aesthetic object that gives it political potential, but a combination of a latent capacity for labour and the ability to make this labour visible.

Tarkhanov proposes that the Russian paper architecture could only come into existence because of the “unlimited Russian free time” the disaffected architects had, and the presence of “Western architectural journals” to make this labour visible. This situation parallels Rancière’s first two propositions for identifying dissensus. Brodsky and Utkin’s primary physical work involves the methodical and protracted tracing of lines on a surface. This is clearly a wasteful application of labour in a socialist system. However, while an informed viewer may gain a sense of the time invested in the delineation of their work, this, in itself, not the most apparent, or sensible, aspect of the work which celebrates
labour and undermines the aesthetic hierarchy; important cues in Rancière’s model.20

If, as Rancière suggests, one possible filter, for differentiating dissent from dissensus, is the proposition of “a public stage for the ‘private’ principle of work”21, then Brodsky and Utkin have several projects that display variations of this theme. For example, in 1986 they produced a work entitled The Stageless Theatre that proposes the creation of a moveable platform for viewing and celebrating everyday life. Positioned on the back of a truck, the Renaissance theatre roams the backstreets of Moscow’s working class neighbourhods, stopping to watch everyday people at work and allowing the audience to applaud this labour. This project directly suggests the creation of a public stage for uncovering previously hidden labours.

Probably the clearest expression of the celebration of labour in Brodsky and Utkin’s work is found in their Glass Tower II. In this project, teeming masses of people surround a large office tower in the centre of a city. At the base of the tower is a single door that leads to a long stairway. If an individual decides to climb the stairs — itself a form of selfish labour—rather than use their energy to work, they will find themselves in a projection room, which captures their own likeness and projects it onto the façade of the building. Regardless of whether the person is a tireless worker, or a selfish artist, the misdirection of their labour is memorialised in the process. Here the nature of the worker is irrelevant, as it is in Rancière’s analysis of the Republic, what is more important is the visibility of the labour required to cross between the street (and the socialist work ethic it represents) and the sky. In this etching, the individual is not only flouting his labour in the face of the city state, but he aggressively gestures towards the state that has previously denied him any capacity to question, or redistribute, the police order.

Brian Hatton proposes that “[i]f there is one factor which links these young Russian fantasists with their utopian predecessors, it is a recurrent theme of the infinite.”22 According to Hatton the infinite and the complex are unifying motifs in the works of the paper architects. One of the key icons Hatton employs to describe the character of their work is “that most Russian symbol, the holy, magic Egg”23 along with the works of the Faberge company. Returning to the start of this paper, what then is it that allows a Fabergé Egg to be interpreted as socially and politically normative while Fabergé’s Nightmare is provocative?

At its peak, the Fabergé company employed more than 500 craftspeople including a number of master craftsmen. While the latter group were allowed to place a tiny, almost invisible inscription on the completed object, the majority of the jewellers remained anonymous. There is neither dissent nor dissensus in the example of the Fabergé Eggs; the objects, their component parts and the workers who created them were either invisible or they conformed to the police order of the era. This is why the Fabergé Eggs were normative in their day. No crossings are inspired by, or represented in these objects, they are exquisite examples of the jeweller’s craft. While the trained eye may discern the labour involved in their manufacturing, they conform to, and maintain, the distribution of the sensible and thus this labour is also normative. In contrast, for Brodsky and Utkin the egg is often used to signify the complexity of Russian society and its history. Some of their images of eggs are cut in section, revealing complex layers of structure or scaffolding often supporting smaller structures and surfaces.24 Other eggs depict entire interior worlds or enigmatic objects in an urban cityscape.

Importantly, there are multiple instances wherein eggs are depicted being supported by an individual.

A conventional interpretation of Carl Faberge’s Nightmare, which was outlined at the start of this paper, views the individual as a symbol of the faceless worker and the egg as a representation of Russian society. If this is true, then the project may be attempting to disturb the police order of the Soviet state as the standard reading suggests. However, by considering this work from the point of view of Rancière, and in particular has reducing of the value and visibility of labour, a stronger case can be made for the work being a political provocation. What is often overlooked in the sculpture is the canopy above. A close analysis of the vaulted structure above the egg shows an audience leaning casually against the raft of the vault, looking down at the individual, who is also seemingly looking back up at them and not at the egg. Some members of the audience are waving, some applauding and others are just observing. If the individual was simply a representation of soviet work, even the impossible or daunting nature of it, it might suggest dissent within the police system. But the presence of an audience changes this. Here hidden labour is placed on a public stage and the worker is transformed into a political anarchist. Dissensus is at the heart of this work, even if we cannot make such a clear determination of its actual affect.

Whereas Brodsky and Utkin’s sculpture is concerned with making things visible and public (the value of soil, the fragility of the state and the complexity of the world), Fabergé Eggs are associated with the invisible and the private (with hidden toil, concealed worlds and established orders). The former of these works renders labour apparent or sensible while the latter does not. Brodsky and Utkin’s project involves the crossing of disciplinary boundaries while the jeweller’s craft remains firmly embedded within its discipline.

Endnotes

3 The egg is a recurring motif in Brodsky and Utkin’s work. See, for example, the Island of Stability (1989) project which features, as a central image, the same lone figure supporting a large egg that is found in three dimensions in Carl Fabergé’s Nightmare.
12 Tarkhanov, “Post-Modernism on a Scale of 1:666”, 123. [Tarkhanov is paraphrasing the communist manifesto of 1957]
13. Nesbitt, Brodsky and Utkin, unpag. ["Man in the Metropolis"]
15. For the next five years they were either placed or awarded honourable mentions in the same competition.
24. Brodsky and Utkin’s Wandering Turtle (1984), Diomede II (1989) and Dome (1989) designs have these similarities.