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Myths and misses: making art in Moscow

Ihor Holubizky

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[See table of contents](#)

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Arkadi Petrov Studio, Moscow, April 1988.
Photo : Ihor Holubizky

First observation: The U.S.S.R. is this seasons hot media item. A day does not go by without some revelation concerning Soviet life, politics or culture. Second observation: Every article I have read, concerning the contemporary art scene in the Soviet Union, during the past eight months, emphasizes an ideological subtext.

Ideology (i.e. Soviet Socialism) is an undeniable fact of life in the Soviet Union. But most accounts interpret this presence, the hegemony of Communist Party, as a set of political blinkers, restricting what we in the West have come to accept as an inalienable right, the "freedom of expression". In spite of abuses, this "right" is rarely challenged and is the distinction we make between democratic and autocratic systems. It has also become a kind of universal salve, to be applied when needed regardless of social, political, cultural or religious history.

The Iron Curtain looms as indisputable evidence of a totalitarian system. Ironically, the "curtain" is as much a Western invention (Curchill's infamous metaphor which was introduced in a speech in the

United States) as it is a deliberate construction of Soviet policy. And, any sign of weakness is interpreted not only as a conscious move towards the Western ideal of democratic capitalism but also as a victory over communism. This notion was played out in a Doonesbury cartoon series at the time of the Reagan-Gorbachev Moscow Summit, where the Soviet "embrace" of certain capitalist belief, economic incentives for production, etc., was seen as a Western victory in the Cold War. But this interpretation assumes that there is only one historical path, the Western model. Russian history and culture has developed separately from European and New World history and culture, but because of a geographic proximity to Europe, we assume there is some common ground. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Russian "monolith" existed before the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Peter the Great attempted to "westernize" Russia in the 17th century, going as far as to construct a "European" city, St. Petersburg, now Leningrad, as a symbol of his "window to the west". To say that his efforts met resistance, would be an understatement.

Another irony is that Russia is the birthplace of

what is arguably the most significant movement in modern art... Constructivism. But that mythology, and its cast of characters, which includes Rodchenko, Popova, Tatlin and Malevich, has become so engrained in Western cultural history that its cultural source and political nature is often forgotten. The fact that many of these artists returned to a representational style later in their careers is rarely discussed.

The Italian critic, Bonito Oliva, wrote recently in *Flash Art* (May-June 1988) that the officially sanctioned art, the socialist-realism style institutionalized by Stalin in the 1930's, eliminated the avant-garde, in effect to stunt "the natural evolutionary process". Again, this assumes that the history of art-making follows the contemporary Western model and that somehow art can have an autonomous existence from any political system. The history of art-making in the Soviet Union, since Stalin's time, appears to reinforce this idea of political intervention; the Moscow exhibition of 1957, when Khrushchev denounced abstract art as degenerate; the "bulldozer" show, in an open field outside of Moscow in 1974, which was destroyed by the authorities as it was being set up (it is rarely mentioned in Western accounts that the authorities subsequently backed down and allowed the exhibition to take place a few weeks later); and the escape of Komar and Melamid in 1977, bringing the gospel of Sotsart to New York.

Since the late 1970's, there have been enough exhibitions of Soviet art (the so-called "unofficial" variety) from Soho to Milan, to make one wonder if there is a back door in the Iron Curtain. Or is this activity merely a cover for KGB operatives? Events have moved rapidly since I visited Moscow in mid-April; the "historic" Sotheby's auction of contemporary Soviet art in Moscow, setting astounding market prices; the revelations made during the recent "historic" Soviet Party Congress; the anticipation of the Big Mac on Gorky Street (one Moscovite told me that "you can buy anything on Gorky Street") It can only warm the cockles of the capitalist heart. But again, nothing could be further from the truth.

Gorbachev's policy of *perestroika* and *glasnost* has undeniably captured the imagination of the Western press, with what appears to be a clear indication that "freedom of expression" and "freedom of business" is just around the corner. However, *perestroika* the restructuring of the Soviet economy, means very little to the Moscovites I spoke to. Like any clever Western politician, Gorbachev has invented a catch-phrase (remember "The Just Society") which, on the surface reinforces our belief in a political renewal, but in reality may be nothing more than an inducement for Western journalists to spend hard currency at Intourist Hotels. I asked one Moscow artist his thoughts on Gorbachev and *perestroika*. He replied that it was not Gorbachev, but the next person who would prove or disprove the

sincerity of the reconstruction. I was, at the same time, reminded that these conversations would not have been possible a few years ago. That is not to say that a climate of criticism did not exist before, but that contact with "white foreign devils" was not encouraged. That in itself is another cultural smokescreen. Appearances are deceiving in Moscow and therein lies the trap in attempting to construct some critical overview of the contemporary art scene.

It must be noted that there is little distinction between what is official and unofficial art in the Soviet Union. The distinction, as it exists, through the various artists' unions, is one of privileges... having access to real studio space and a source of income through art-making. But like any state-supported granting system, it merely distinguishes between a "have" and a "have-not" class. The reality for all artists in the Soviet Union is that there are no public collections of contemporary art, no contemporary art galleries, no art dealers, no art magazines and no artists' bars. Yet the images which have been reproduced in the Western art press have a familiar look about them. Attributed to artists, whose names all seem to end in "ov", Bulatov, Petrov, Kabakov, Zacharov, etc., the content has the "right" mixture of irony, text and appropriation, as well as a distance that we have come to associate with our post-modern revisionist simulacrum sensibility. How can it be, that a political system which has denied artists the joys of commodification, can produce work which would not look out of place in the world of New York smart art. It's young. It's fresh. It's hip. It's Sotsart.

The fifteen or so "unofficial" artists I saw hardly constitutes an accurate representation, especially when you take into account the 12,000 members of the Union of Soviet Artists, but it is sufficient to suggest a model for evaluating the scene in Moscow. I have focused on the work of three artists in particular, Yury Albert, Arkadi Petrov, and Nikolai Ovchinnikov.

Of the three, Petrov is the oldest, at 42, and unknown even in the "unofficial" circles. Petrov is the most mature painter, having developed a distinctive style, a kind of post-naïve urban surrealism, which he uses to explore aspects of the Soviet "bourgeoisie". Loaded with Soviet kitsch references, the paintings have a laconic wit. While the works are not overtly political in content, they depict a contradiction between the aspirations of the individual and the Party view of the "people". One major work shows three young girls dressed in Young Pioneer outfits. The image has been taken from a forties photograph and rendered in the sepia-toned awkwardness of a vernacular snapshot. Attached to the upper right hand corner of this canvas is a small black and white painting of Stalin waving. The entire painting is framed in an immense gold-coloured picture frame which follows the perimeter of the two paintings. This is not Stalin the dictator, but Stalin as "Uncle Joe". Through its understatement



Nikolai Ovchinnikov Studio, Moscow, April 1988.
Photo : Ihor Holubizky

and juxtaposition, it serves as a poignant reminder of their own history.

Albert, who is ten years younger than Petrov, is by comparison, an iconoclast. He has a vocal disdain for style and consequently has avoided the strategy of a "signature". A series from 1982 serves as his declaration of independence. Each of these paintings contains an appropriate symbol/motif, reinforced by a text which has been incorporated into the work; "I am not Jasper Johns"; "I am not Baselitz"; and "I am not Kabakov", referring to one of the senior Soviet artists. Another series from 1987, entitled "Neopseudoart", looks for all the world like neo-geo exercises, but is in fact based on nautical semaphore flags. One of these geo-triptychs 'reads', from the left, "I am changing course to the left"... from the right, "I am changing course to the right"... and in the centre, "I am lost".

Most recently, Albert has completed a series of black on black "braille" paintings. When I inquired as to the meaning of the braille text, Albert replied that it was an elitist painting and that you had to be blind to understand. I did not pursue the line of questioning. Albert's indifference to painterly concerns, either as a medium or in terms of pictorial space, may appear to align him with the Russian avant-garde, but even that history is too far removed for him. Where Petrov's wit operates on an emotional and humanist level, Albert's commentary is both dry and erudite, operating in a rarified atmosphere of political, social and personal concerns.

Nikolai Ovchinnikov is the youngest of the three. He is much more orthodox than Albert, re-stating some of the socialist-realism strategies of the Sotsart movement from the 1970's. His current work has developed from this poster-pictorialism and is posi-

tioned between abstraction and cultural reference. These paintings appear to be black and white geometric motifs, but are in fact abstractions of birch tree trunks. In one of these works, the tree trunks form a Byzantine cross on a ground of wider vertical trunks. The birch tree is to Russian popular literature and song, what the "lonesome pine" is to Canadian mythology, loaded with a cloying sentimentality, but Ovchinnikov has stripped away the nostalgic obvious and rescued its cultural meaning.

"It ain't no mystery, we're making history"
(Linton Kwesi Johnson, 1984).

What these three have as a bond, and what was evidenced in much of the other work I saw, was not necessarily a solidarity based on practice or mans, but what might be understood as a conscious effort to reclaim their own cultural history. And that may be of paramount importance at this point in time, since they do to some extent see themselves as martyrs for a cause. The importance of history was evidenced in the cancellation of this year's history examinations for students in the Soviet Union, by the admission that perhaps some aspects of Stalin's regime were not accurately depicted. While the present may be uncertain, even through the perverse mechanics of Russian pessimism, there is a belief in a future. The influx of Western money and attention only serves to distort the process. To place it in a Russian perspective, if it's not this generation of artists, it will be the next.

Ihor Holubizky