

Myths and misses: making art in Moscow



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