

Boris Groys
**Dmitri Prigov:
Haunted
Spaces**

Don't start from the good old things but the
bad new ones.

– Bertolt Brecht

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In the 1970s Dmitry Prigov became known in Moscow's literary and artistic milieu mainly as a poet. However, from the beginning of his career he demonstrated a somewhat unusual type of poetic behavior – unusual for the time in which he started his poetic readings and the public he was appealing to. These readings were actually performances, situated in a still-not-well-explored zone between literature and visual art. The texts of the poems that Prigov was reading were important in their own right – witty and precise in their diagnosis of the cultural situation in the Soviet Union at that time. But for Prigov, the *figure* of the poet was much more important than his poetic production. The poetry that the poet writes is only one of the components of his poetic image. The poet is also looked at by the public – not just heard or read. He is not completely hidden by his poems but rather visible, present as a body. And his public behavior and political stance are also looked at and taken into consideration. What people see when they look at the poet also forms their perception of his writings. During his performances Prigov embodied the figure of the poet – playing it out in front of the public, while at the same time creating a certain effect of estrangement, of inner distance between this role and his own “profane,” merely human mode of existence. If Prigov's performances had been filmed in the 1970s they would be regarded today as belonging to the domain of contemporary visual art. Unfortunately, at that time, poetic performance was not seen as an art practice in its own right because reading and writing poetry was not seen as a unified body of practice. But Prigov saw poetry precisely in this way. His cans, described as containing words and poems, remind one of Manzoni's cans labeled *merde d'artista*, so that poems become equivalent to other secretions of the human body.

This shift of attention from the production of poetry towards the figure – the body – of the poet was of course not accidental for Prigov. Thanks to his professional training Prigov was a sculptor. And during Soviet times he made his living by producing monumental sculptures in public spaces. This kind of activity unavoidably leads to the following question: How might one *become* a sculpture, a monument – instead of merely producing sculptures and monuments? Undoubtedly, poetic recital is the most obvious form of self-sculpturization, or self-monumentalization: the poet positions himself in the center of a public space and is seen by the

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Dmitrij Prigiv, *Russian Snow*, 1990. Installation at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Photo: Natalia Nikitin.



Dmitri Prigov, *Winter Russian Travel*, 1995. Installation at the Kunstmuseum Alte Post, Muelheim-an-der Ruhr. Photo: Natalia Nikitin.

people from all sides, as Prigov notes in one of his poems. In his poetic texts, Prigov often refers to the monument of Pushkin in Moscow. Nor could he overlook the monument to Mayakovsky in one of the squares of central Moscow where poetic readings took place during the 1950s and '60s. The public success of poetry readings by Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Andrei Voznesensky, or Bella Akhmadulina that took place in the late 1950s and '60s brought the figures of contemporary poets into the public arena. However, in the 1970s the voice and figure of the poet were seen as less relevant than the poetic texts. Poets such as Joseph Brodsky in particular created an abstruse type of poetry that had to be read from the page to be really enjoyed. Only a reader – and not a listener – could play with the many levels of meaning that this poetry suggested.

In fact, Prigov saw the written word more as an image than as a text in the traditional sense of this word. He experimented with typography and used written words as elements of a textual image that was itself mute. Following Guillaume Apollinaire or also, perhaps, Ilia Zdanevich, he used typography to create image-poems. At the same time, for Prigov it was obvious that Pushkin and Mayakovsky were monumentalized primarily not because of the quality of their poetry (there were many good, deceased Russian poets who received no posthumous monuments) but because of their propensity to self-monumentalization – to exposing themselves as public figures. Prigov constantly compared himself to Pushkin – or rather he compared his own public figure to Pushkin's. Thus, one can say that for Prigov, poetry was from the beginning inscribed into the field of visual art – and into the strategies of self-sculpturization or self-monumentalization that were designed to create the fullest possible visibility of his own figure in public space. Indeed, the scene of the perfect visibility is a recurring topos of Prigov's poetry.

This ideal of total visibility, of a human being turned into a monument that can be seen from all sides and at all times, is very powerfully expressed by Prigov in his famous poem about the policeman:

When the policeman stands here at his post
 He can see all the way to Vnukovo
 The policeman looks to the West, to the
 East –
 And the empty space beyond lies open
 And the center where stands the policeman
 –
 He can be seen from every side
 Look from anywhere, and there is the
 policeman
 Look from the East and there is the

policeman
 And from the South, there is the policeman
 And from the sea, there is the policeman
 And from the heavens, there is the
 policeman
 And from the bowels of the earth ...
 But then, he's not hiding.¹

It is obvious that here Prigov identifies himself with the figure of the policeman. He also usually carried a policeman's hat when he read this and other poems from the cycle of his poems about policemen. When once he read his poems to me in his own apartment, he also put this cap on his head – a sign of the public relevance of this private event. At the same time, this comparison with the policeman indicates the central question that was the actual inner mover of Prigov's art: To what extent is an individual artist able to create his own public figure – to secure, stabilize, monumentalize it? Here the question of the power of art emerges. Prigov, being a sculptor, knew only too well that any monument is subjected to the forces of erosion, entropy, and dissolution. The order that art, including poetry, tries to impose on life and the state that ultimately secures this order should be defended against the powers of Chaos that permanently endanger, undermine, and try to dissolve this order. During the time of the Soviet Union, Prigov felt that the figure of the poet he had created remained protected. The Soviet Cosmos was a well-defined space with a high visibility and recognizability of all the social roles possible within it – from Party administrator to anti-Soviet dissident. It was an Apollonian space well secured against all the intrusions of the dark, Dionysian, demonic forces of Chaos. Perestroika and then the dissolution of the Soviet Union opened this Cosmos to Chaos. At this point, a certain shift takes place in Prigov's work – from poetic performance towards image production. This image production consisted mostly of drawings and installations. So one can say that it was the moment of Perestroika that brought Prigov squarely into the field of visual art.

The shift from poetry to visual art is a very characteristic move for many modern and contemporary poets. This shift has mostly very practical reasons. Marcel Broodthaers famously wrote that he shifted from poetry to visual art just to make money. In the case of Prigov this shift was partially dictated by the quite practical necessity to present his work to international audiences that could not appreciate his poetry because they did not speak Russian. Prigov's poetic readings at that time increasingly assumed the character of sound poetry, one that was more accessible for the non-Russian public. Still, there was a deeper reason for this shift.

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Dmitri Prigov, *Untitled*, 2002. Performance, Tanzquartier, Vienna. Photo: Natalia Nikitin



Dmitri Prigov, *Untitled*, 2002.
Performance,
Tanzquartier, Vienna. Photo:
Natalia Nikitin

Since Roger Caillois and Jacques Lacan, if not earlier, we have known that image production primarily serves the goal of self-protection.² By producing images the artist diverts the evil eye of the Other (and as Lacan says, the eye of the Other is always an evil eye³) from his own body to an image that functions as a trap for this evil eye. The gaze of the Other becomes caught by and *in* the image – and, thus, neutralized, paralyzed. One can argue that the growing importance of visual art in Prigov's work had to do with protection against the dark, demonic forces of Chaos that destroyed the Soviet Cosmos. As long as this Cosmos still existed, Prigov placed his body in the center of public space – or at least in the center of performance space. But the moment this Cosmos collapsed, Prigov's art took a self-protective turn.

Now for Prigov, the best way to protect himself was not self-isolation but communication. He wanted to be able to address Chaos, to name it, to let it speak – to involve Chaos in a dialogue, to begin to communicate with it. The poet Alexei Kruchenych entitled one of his books *Playing in Hell* (*Igra v adu*). Late visual art by Prigov could be entitled "Playing with Hell" (*Igra s adom*). In Prigov's art the image of Chaos takes the form of an irregular black blob. It seems to be left as a stain made by a black liquid that was accidentally poured onto the surface of the image. The blackened area has no clear borders, no geometrical shape. This lack of a regular form symbolizes the destructive intrusion of dark Chaos into the regular order of things. However, for Prigov, Chaos was not mute: it spoke in the mode of the writing – "Mene. Mene. Tekel. Upharsin." – that appeared on the wall during Balthazar's orgies, according to the Book of Daniel. This inscription became an inspiration for the majority of Prigov's works of that period. We see the words "Perestroika" and "Koshmar" written in white letters on the dark surface of the black stain – this stain itself often being painted on the surfaces of newspapers. One such inscription is "Kvadrat Malevicha." Malevich's famous square is, of course, also black. But in Malevich's painting this blackness is enclosed within a regular geometrical form corresponding to the form of the painting itself. One can say that here Chaos is under the control of the artist – and so the artist can use the eruption of Chaos as a starting point for his own artistic activity. But the irregular black stain that is produced by Prigov cannot be used as a foundation for a new construction. Here the black Chaos becomes informal; its eruption seems to be accidental and uncontrollable. "Kvadrat Malevicha" becomes a white text on the black surface. The black square is what announces the Chaos but it is not the

manifestation of Chaos itself. The formless Chaos is hidden within the overall form rather than revealed by it. Prigov's images are haunted by Chaos – but do not manifest it. Chaos conceals itself in dark corners, in abandoned, empty spaces – but then suddenly erupts inside the image, leaving a black stain on it.

Increasingly, all the images that Prigov produced became haunted images. The appearances of black Chaos became more and more insistent – and the work of the artist more and more obsessive. At the same time, these black stains of Chaos changed their character from one image to another. In some images they look like liquid stains, in others like dirt, in others like clouds, or then again like a spider's web. Thus, in one of his visual series Prigov shows us the dark clouds – or, rather, the dark holes – that endanger the course of ordinary life (being placed on reproductions of well-known works of Russian Realist painters). The black clouds are named after Russian and international avant-garde artists. These artists are re-presented as facilitating and at the same time barring Chaos from invading the whole living space. Even if they can only announce the danger, at least the dark Chaos does not remain nameless. The same role is obviously played by the monstrous figures that represented Russian Conceptual poets and artists on the drawing created by Prigov around the same time – members of the literary and artistic circle to which Prigov also belonged. These are creatures of the night, monsters who came out of the depths of Chaos, demonic animals that can live only in the darkness. They are chimeric. They are living collages – unnatural, inhuman. Still, they demonstrate that one can survive in the dark Chaos beyond any order. These monsters are sacral because they are at the same time inhabitants and inhibitors of the dark forces. That is why similar monsters were revered in medieval churches. They embody the principle of hope – even if this hope is a hope beyond hope, even if this hope is paid for by their loss of human form, by the dehumanization of art and self-dehumanization.

Prigov was, in fact, not the first poet-performer who began to be interested in demonology. Hugo Ball, whom one can see as the first poet-performer in the contemporary sense of this word, remarks in his diary:

The human organ represents the soul, the individuality in its wanderings with its demonic companions. The noises represent the background – the inarticulate, the disastrous, the decisive ... In a typically compressed way the poem shows the conflict of the *vox humana* within a world that threatens, ensnares and destroys it, a

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world whose rhythm and noise are ineluctable.⁴

Nevertheless, about three months later Ball writes in his diary that he has invented “a new genre of poetry – namely, *Lautgedichte* [sound poetry].” Sound poetry, as described by Ball, can be interpreted as the self-destruction of the traditional poem, demonstrating the downfall and disappearance of the individual voice. Ball describes the effect of the public reading of his first sound poem at the Cabaret Voltaire in the following way: “Then the lights went out, as I had ordered, and bathed in sweat, I was carried off the stage like a magical bishop.”⁵ The reading of his sound poetry was experienced and described by Ball as an exhausting exposure of the human voice to the demonic forces of noise. Ball wins this battle (becoming the magical bishop), but only by allowing these demonic forces to reduce his own voice to pure noise, to nothingness. Ball also writes that during the performance he began, almost against his own will, to imitate Church litany. At the end of his life Ball became interested in exorcism – and hoped to write a book on the history of exorcism.

These descriptions of poetic performances by Ball strongly remind one of late poetic performances by Prigov. During these performances, Prigov forced his voice up to an extreme pitch to overcome, to “over-sound” so to speak, the demonic noise. These performances also seemed to be exorcist rituals of a kind. One could detect Christian and Buddhist incantations – the overall impressions was of a ritual of an unknown religion. At the same time it remained unclear who was the exorcist and who was possessed – or rather, one had an impression that the possessed was an artist himself, or maybe both possessed and exorcist at the same time. It is an ambivalence that creates a distance not only between Prigov and Ball but also between Prigov and Malevich. Like Malevich, Prigov visualizes Chaos as the black form on the surface of the image. However, this surface is never totally purified of the vestiges of good-old realism. Accordingly, the black Chaos does not take a rectangular form but begins to unevenly spread on the surface of the image or text like a dirty stain.

Here an act of complete exorcism and self-purification becomes impossible, because one should ultimately purify oneself from oneself. The contemporary artist is from the beginning demonic: he is possessed by himself and cannot be relieved of his demons.

This impossibility of ultimate (self-)purification, of achieving true inner purity, became the central topic of Prigov’s art in his late period. The duty of total purification and, at

the same time, the impossibility of achieving ultimate purity is already propounded in a relatively early poem by Prigov – a poem that at first glance sounds completely trivial but in fact already formulates his later metaphysical concerns. The poem is entitled “Poem about Freedom” and contains the following lines:

But here, from God knows where, they come
Complaining the dishes haven’t been done
So where, then, is there room for Liberty?

The duty to eliminate dirtiness, the work of cleaning, is what prevents us from being free because it subjects us to the infinite process of (self-)purification that never can be fulfilled. Who dictates this requirement for ultimate purity? Well, it could be friends, family members, other people. But, ultimately, at least according to Christian and Kantian traditions, this requirement has its origin in one’s own soul that desires to purify itself – and everything around it. The soul is represented in Prigov’s late work as a plumber who tries to repair the cleaning system, or as a cleaning lady who fulfills her duty of cleaning a space. The iconography of the scene in which the plumber or cleaning lady is shown refers in a very obvious way to the final scene of Wagner’s opera *Parsifal*. [Fig.8] This scene is described in the *Parsifal* libretto in the following way:

Parsifal ascends the altar-steps, takes the Grail from the shrine, and sinks to his knees in silent prayer ...
Voices from above: Highest Holy Wonder!
The Redeemer redeemed!

The scene presents the moment at which absolute purity is achieved. Parsifal is described as “*der reine Tor*” (the Pure simpleton). Being pure, he is able to stop the blood flowing from Amfortas’s wound (symbolizing Christ’s wound); he closes this wound with his spear. Only after Amfortas’s blood has ceased to flow – in other words, only after the purity and integrity of his body is restored – may the Grail be recovered. And once more: the Grail is nothing less than a chalice full of blood, the blood that is contained by form, put under control, integrated into the holy ritual so that it does not flow anymore. Parsifal wants to prove that it is possible to purify himself from himself and at the same time, in Wagner’s words, redeem the redeemer – stop the blood eternally flowing from Christ’s body and also, therefore, purify and redeem the whole world; redeem Christianity from itself. It is often said that Parsifal is actually androgynous. In *Parsifal* by Hans-Juergen Syberberg, Parsifal

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changes his gender a couple of times in the middle of the film.

Also in Prigov's drawings Parsifal is presented sometimes as a male and sometimes as a female figure. However, in these drawings one can see stains of blood and black dirt that remain nonpurified. And tears of blood continue to flow from the divine eye. The plumber is incapable of plugging all the leaks and capitulates in front of the darkness and Chaos, accepting the impossibility of achieving ultimate purity. The cleaning lady kneels in front of the images of eternal dirtiness that she cannot eliminate. Here again Prigov is close to the avant-garde, to its search for purity – yet at the same time he breaks with the avant-garde and its hopes to achieve a new purity and to start a new beginning. For Prigov the concept of purity is already compromised by the Stalinist purges. Blood streams on further – no holy Grail can contain it. Prigov repeats the last scene of *Parsifal* but at the same time deconstructs it.

This scene of the cleaning lady's ultimate capitulation is almost obsessively repeated by Prigov in his late drawings – in different variations, suggesting different possible interpretations of this scene. These drawings can be interpreted as embodying projects for forthcoming installations – and in a certain sense they are themselves such projects. They are projects in the same sense in which El Lissitzky's *Prouns* may also be interpreted as projects for installations or architectural constructions. However, *Prouns* were "projects for the establishing of the new." They announced not so much a future construction as a coming cosmic event: ultimate purity will come into the world and establish itself in it – become its law. In a similar way, Prigov shows how ultimate purity will fail to establish itself.

However, if the final, quasi-apocalyptic scene demonstrates the capitulation of the plumber/cleaning lady, it does not mean that the artist himself likewise capitulates, together with his female alter ego. To use Wagner's vocabulary once more, Prigov always tried to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Thus, the inclusion of impurity, black stains, and spider's webs in his drawings has also to do with a certain ambition regarding totality: to actually become a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or rather, to show oneself as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Every purification is a kind of exclusion – and Prigov tried to be as inclusive as possible. His orientation towards the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is especially obvious in his unwillingness to concentrate his efforts on only one or two artistic media. Prigov used almost all the artistic media that were accessible to him. He did not want to be only a poet, performer, or artist. He also wrote prose texts; he wrote

theoretical-critical commentaries to his own work; after Perestroika he appeared on TV and, generally, in public spaces. He tried all possible media – artistic and public. For him the goal of art was not to achieve virtuosity in this or that particular media, not to create a masterpiece, not to produce an especially valuable object. Rather, Prigov saw art as a specific mode of life, as an activity that manifests itself in all possible artistic forms and media without being confined to any of them.

As did Wagner, Prigov recognized the division of labor responsible for the decline of the arts: when artists practice only one specific genre in one medium, trying to achieve the maximum effect – to create a masterpiece. And when an artist thinks about his or her art as something better than the ordinary work done by other people. Wagner required that the artist lower his ambition in the name of uniting all the art genres and media into one work of art. In his treatise "The Artwork of the Future," Wagner stated that the typical artist of his time is an egotist who is completely isolated from the life of the people and practices his art only as a luxury for the rich; in so doing he exclusively follows the dictates of fashion. The artist of the future will be radically different: "Now he can only will the universal, true, and unconditional; he yields himself not to a love for this or that particular object, but to wide Love itself. Thus does the egotist become a communist, uniting all, the man-God."⁶

Prigov's art is governed by the same democratic impulse. Instead of celebrating the privileged status of artistic, non-alienating work, Prigov always stressed that he acted as a simple worker fulfilling a certain daily norm – producing a certain number of poems and drawings every day. These could be unevenly written or drawn – some could be better and some not so good – but in their mass they bear witness to the artist's life. And here one should not forget that Prigov's drawing technique was extremely labor intensive. Prigov made his drawings mostly with ballpoint pen. If one looks attentively at his drawings, one can see that the effect of darkness and danger is achieved by condensing hundreds of points or thin lines which converge towards the center of the dark, black blob that represents the intrusion of Chaos. Prigov spent one sleepless night after another drawing fine, almost imperceptible lines with a ballpoint pen. His labor seemed to be excessive, even unnecessary – but it served him as a means and measure of self-discipline. It is not accidental that he invested so much energy and labor into representing Chaos – the images of the Soviet Cosmos were widely quoted, appropriated. Unlike Wagner, Prigov started not with the Holy

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world of the past, attempting to restore its wholeness, its purity. Rather, he started with the impure, chaotic things of the present – trying to find a precarious balance between tradition and its destruction.

And the mass of images produced by Prigov in this way is extremely impressive indeed. Prigov was a walking *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In the world that he depicted, the blood was still flowing. And the ink from Prigov's pen was flowing too. These flows are unstoppable – even if death could stop the efforts of the artist to keep on producing these two potentially infinite flows.

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Translated by Charles Rougle in Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 95–96.

2
Roger Caillois, *The Mask of Medusa* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1964), 119ff; and Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1998), 95ff.

3
Lacan, *ibid.*, 96.

4
Hugo Ball, *Flight out of Time*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 57.

5
Ibid., 71.

6
Richard Wagner, *The Artwork of the Future and Other Works* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).