

Preamble

Dmitri Alexandrovich Prigov was a poet: “the last great poet of the Soviet era.”*¹ But his true significance is greater, far greater, than that. Which is not to say that Prigov isn’t interesting as a “Soviet phenomena”: in the way that his undertakings’ multifaceted, all-encompassing, titanic universalism enables a clarification, perhaps even a wholesale reconceptualization, of the “Soviet era,” and of the “Soviet” itself. In my view, however, Prigov’s most interesting features lie altogether elsewhere.

*Prigov carried out a revolution in the poetic means of production comparable to the industrial revolution: his logico-poetic machines displaced the “human labor” of traditional lyric expression—of handmade lyricism, so to speak. (Prigov himself liked to call it “artistic handicraft.”) Prigov’s work presented not just a new form of poetics—it gave us a new form of poeisis. It was founded on an instrumentalization of poetic technologies in order to reroute them towards extra- or meta-poetic tasks—for instance, investigation of the logical construction and formal premises of various categories of utterance (artistic, scientific, religious, theoretical, ideological, etc.). In effect, the text was transformed into a kind of logarithmic table.*²

To approach Prigov in this way is to position him in global historical context. This is a crucial step. It also explains his violent rejection by those who view poetry as the

* This was the title of one of the first published reactions to D. A. Prigov’s death.

self-expression of a lyric subject identical with itself, of a deep “I” with privileged access to true being. That conception of poetry corresponds to a preindustrial era—one that hadn’t yet experienced the alienation, objectification and automatization of labor processes. To my mind, in Prigov these “machine bottlenecks” and the “logistics” of their management are the crux of the matter. That is: this is not simply the poet’s comic, deflationary play with ideological and/or poetic clichés, nor even his (de)mystification of “the Russian religious-apocalyptic consciousness.”

Of course, it’s impossible to overlook carnival laughter in Prigov’s work. And it, too, provoked misunderstanding and hostility. “A rampaging graphomaniac,” “sacrilege,” “insolence and Satanism”: these are the defensive reactions of a *unidimensionally serious* cultural consciousness, dogmatically defending the “miracle and authority” of the elevated tradition against any overly presumptuous commerce with it.³ Nevertheless, this indisputably important aspect of Prigov’s activities must be seen as secondary in relation to his truly subversive industrial-serial technology of cultural production.

A few more preliminary remarks: don’t let the title of this work confuse you. I certainly don’t want to propose that Dmitri Alexandrovich Prigov (DAP) just adapted or appropriated Brecht’s and Warhol’s techniques. To the contrary, I will demonstrate that DAP, in classic manner, absolutely *à la russe*, synthesized their (obviously, completely distinct) strategies, applying them to poetic construction. Why “*à la russe*” and why “in classic manner”? Because in Russia, at least since Peter the Great, imported Western cultural models have consistently assumed unrecognizable, altered

forms. Furthermore, one may propose that it is precisely this deformation of foreign “originals” that constitutes the primordial—and much pursued, since it lies on the very surface—content of “native Russian culture.” Primary examples in this regard include Lomonosov, who installed our versification system according to German models, and Pushkin, who consecrated our modern national tradition by grafting on French and English literary forms. And didn’t the authentic, “great and mighty”^{*} Russian language itself arise thanks only to translation?

The parallels with Andy Warhol are obvious. I’m thinking not only of his serial method or of the Factory, which resemble DAP’s “Stakhanovite,” production-line assembly of poetic texts (36000 poems is an absolute world record!),[†] but also of the overall transformation of the aesthetic paradigm that is rightfully attributed to Andy Warhol.⁴ To be precise: Warhol shifted the center of artistic activity from the work of art to artistic behavior as calculated strategy.

^{*} Ivan Turgenev eulogized the “great and mighty, righteous and free Russian language,” in one of his 1882 “poems in prose.” Subsequently, the phrase “great and mighty Russian language” became proverbial (in other words, a cliché).[KP]

[†] Even if the figure, which was calculated by Igor Smirnov, is exaggerated, possibly the only rival to Prigov in the field of poetic shock-work is Evtushenko, who was also a personality of truly multifarious talents, a pop-figure of the preceding era, although he was admittedly distinct from Prigov in his “savage seriousness” and utter lack of a distanced vantage point on his own socio-cultural role. (Compare, for instance, Baudelaire, situated at the origins of European modernism, who wrote slightly more than 200 poems in all.)

Prigov's adaptation and reconceptualization of this epochal transformation enabled him to assume a meta-poetic, meta-aesthetic position in any field of creativity, rendering it a consciously articulated cultural politics. Warhol's serial method (*Triple Elvis*, *80 Two-Dollar Bills*, *Front and Rear*, *White Car Crash Nineteen Times*, *Four Jackies*, and so on) first demonstrated with absolute lucidity the paradox Walter Benjamin sought to grasp in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility." The contemporary Russian poet and critic Dmitry Golyenko-Wolfson evokes this same paradox with his assertion that "Prigov proved that today, original utterances arise primarily out of the principle of serial repetition."⁵

Things may appear less obvious regarding Brecht. Yet on closer examination Prigov and the German poet and reformer of the theater share at least two foundational principles (attentive study yields many more). First of all, there is the *Verfremdungseffekt*, the "Alienation Effect," derived from the Russian Formalist idea of making-strange or *ostrananie*.^{*} Yet in distinction from the Formalists, Brecht's Alienation Effect was directed not just toward deautomatization of perception, but also toward the interruption of aesthetic illusion as a form of "false consciousness." The actor in Brechtian theater, rather than being transformed

* Brecht's term "Verfremdungseffekt," commonly translated as "Alienation Effect," should not be associated overly closely with the Marxist conception of "alienation," corresponding to Marx's etymologically related, yet distinct German term "entfremdung. A more precise translation might be "Estrangement Effect" (evoking the Russian Formalist influence on Brecht's thinking) or "Distancing Effect" (that echoes the common French translation of Brecht's term).

into one of the play's characters, presents the character from a position of critical distance. Similarly, in his texts DAP continuously "steps out of his role," baring the artificiality, the fabricated nature of textual construction, along with the lyric subject's constructed nature (its "character-ness"). Both Brecht and Prigov rely on the audience's rational, analytical capabilities, rather than methods of suggestion, hypnosis and empathy. When identification and hypnosis do occur, they are deployed in an exaggerated, parodic key (as "theater in theater").

Furthermore, for Brecht and Prigov alike, this self-reflexive analytical technique becomes a tool for the presentation and crystallization of dominant ideology, insofar as it speaks through conventional artistic forms and discourses. In Brecht's case, of course, this was a bourgeois ideology that was diffused into "aesthetics," whereas it was primarily communist (utopian, messianic) for Prigov. Nevertheless, given that we are witness at present to a capitalist cultural industrialization and the triumph of a new utopia—the utopia of consumption—DAP's synthesis has vital contemporary significance.*

* Let us note here one additional, not insignificant distinction between Prigov and Brecht. The former's strategy closely approaches what is referred to in the contemporary art world as "subversive affirmation": an undermining support (or a dethroning confirmation), based on hyperidentification with the form of discourse that is reproduced. This grants Prigov's poetry a certain additional equivocal charm that Brecht lacks. So in the cycle about the "Policeman," DAP "enters into" his character to such a degree that his exaggerated identification (hyperidentification) is practically impossible to distinguish from the author's sincerest admiration and even love for him.

Warhol, or Apology for the Machine

Warhol: Someone said that Brecht wanted everybody to think alike. I want everybody to think alike. But Brecht wanted to do it through Communism, in a way. Russia is doing it under government. It's happening here all by itself without being under a strict government; so if it's working without trying, why can't it work without being Communist? Everybody looks alike and acts alike, and we're getting more and more that way. I think everybody should be a machine. I think everybody should like everybody.

Swenson: Is that what Pop Art is all about?

Warhol: Yes. It's liking things.

Swenson: And liking things is like being a machine?

Warhol: Yes, because you do the same thing every time. You do it over and over again.⁶

The chief thing is to learn to think bluntly. Blunt thinking is great thinking. Politics is the pursuit of business by unbusiness-like methods.

—Bertolt Brecht, *Threepenny Novel*⁷

In his innumerable lectures and interviews, as well as in the “advisory notes” that preface many of his works, DAP never tires of emphasizing the priority of the mode of artistic behavior over the work of art or the text. His final interview before his death (April 16, 2007) is titled “Art today is concerned not with content, but with new forms of artistic behavior.”⁸ I’ll cite two characteristic statements: “Let’s note once more that poetry is not only texts, but also a particular mode for construction and presentation to society of significant forms of cultural behavior—poetic behavior, in the present case”;⁹ “It’s precisely on

the level of behavioral models that fundamental problems are resolved and something is affirmed. And what is affirmed is, of course, freedom. Indeed, our times and this kind of culture have rendered the problem of freedom crucially important. The problem of human rights can be reformulated as the attempt to free the personality from collective dictates. The same thing is happening in art. It addresses the possibility of the artist's freedom from the languages looming over him, which represent collectivities and nothing else—the collective experience of the past.”¹⁰ DAP worked with historical epochs, socio-cultural paradigms, and forms of consciousness. His terminology recalls least of all the language of a poet (as it is usually understood) or even a literary scholar. Instead, Prigov's language is the scientific sociolect of a student of social processes—one who, on the basis of objective regularities, makes conjectures and articulates an understanding of art and his own place in it. The poetic *function* is radically historicized, placed in a broad socio-cultural, political context (e.g. the problem of freedom). Indeed, it is *derived* from this context.

DAP consistently identified visual art as the center of both contemporary cultural production and of his own development. To Sergey Shapoval's question, “What has influenced you most in cultural life?” DAP answers without hesitation “Visual art. I was far more advanced in visual art than in literature. At some point I just began wondering: is there a version of the Sots-Art* and

* Sots-Art was a mode of unofficial conceptualist art that appeared on the Soviet underground scene in the 1970s. It was oriented on the parodic deflation of official Soviet culture and political language. The term is a mash-up of “Pop Art” and “socialism.” [KP]

conceptualist mentality in literature? I began to search for analogues.”¹¹

I set out in search of analogues, too, and couldn't not think of Andy Warhol. Warhol might well have reformulated the assertion of Brecht's character, included above as an epigraph, as something like “Art is the pursuit of commerce by other means.” That might sound blasphemous. But isn't it true that Warhol's stenciled serial works blaspheme against the great artists of the past—Leonardo da Vinci, but also, in a different way, Marcel Duchamp—eliminating or obviating the border between original and copy, unique and mass produced, avant-garde and kitsch, and ultimately between artworks and consumer goods? As Harold Rosenberg noted, not without sarcasm, “The innovation of Andy Warhol consists not in his paintings, but in his version of the comedy of the artist as a public figure. ‘Andy’ [...] has carried the ongoing de-definition of art to the point at which nothing is left of art but the fiction of the artist.”¹² Actually, it was Duchamp who began the process of the “de-definition” of art, also not without notes of comedy, as early as his Dada period, when he moved from easel painting to his quasi-scientific experiments (“stoppages”) and “ready-mades” (mass consumer goods, which, transported into the exhibit space, acquired a novel non-utilitarian function). Nevertheless, the new model of artistic behavior that DAP inherited was constituted by the founding father of “popism.” This model may legitimately be termed a “strategy,” since it presupposes the intentional articulation of interrelationships not only with a particular artform's dominant styles and movements, but also with their programmatic resources—in other words, with

the “superstructure”: advertisement, market, mass media, cultural institutions, the entire public sphere, including consumption. Put another way, activity in the field of art, with its immanent logic, hierarchy of names, balance of forces and so on, is supplemented by and enters into dependence on ostensibly extra-artistic factors. Linguists would say that the pragmatics of (speech) behavior becomes the dominant, leading to the radical reconstruction of semantics and syntax, which undergo deformation and are pushed into the background.

Warhol became a star of the first magnitude on the American art scene and the leading showman of art. For his part, Prigov was the one representative of uncensored, unofficial poetry of the Soviet era to achieve general recognition and popular adulation. In post-Soviet space he became a unique pop-figure, continuously present in mass media, like a show business personality, a movie star, or a politician. Prigov was interviewed and featured frequently on television as an “expert” on the most varied questions. No other artist or poet of his generation could boast of anything similar.

DAP and Warhol also converge in their improbable productivity. Just one example: in less than half a year, from August to December of 1965, Warhol created two thousand paintings and actively participated in the production of more than seventy films in the Factory. Prigov’s world record (36000 poems!) has already been mentioned; but additionally, he is the author of stories, plays, nearly a hundred alphabet books, novels, installations, and drawings. “I have a quota: I need to write at least two poems