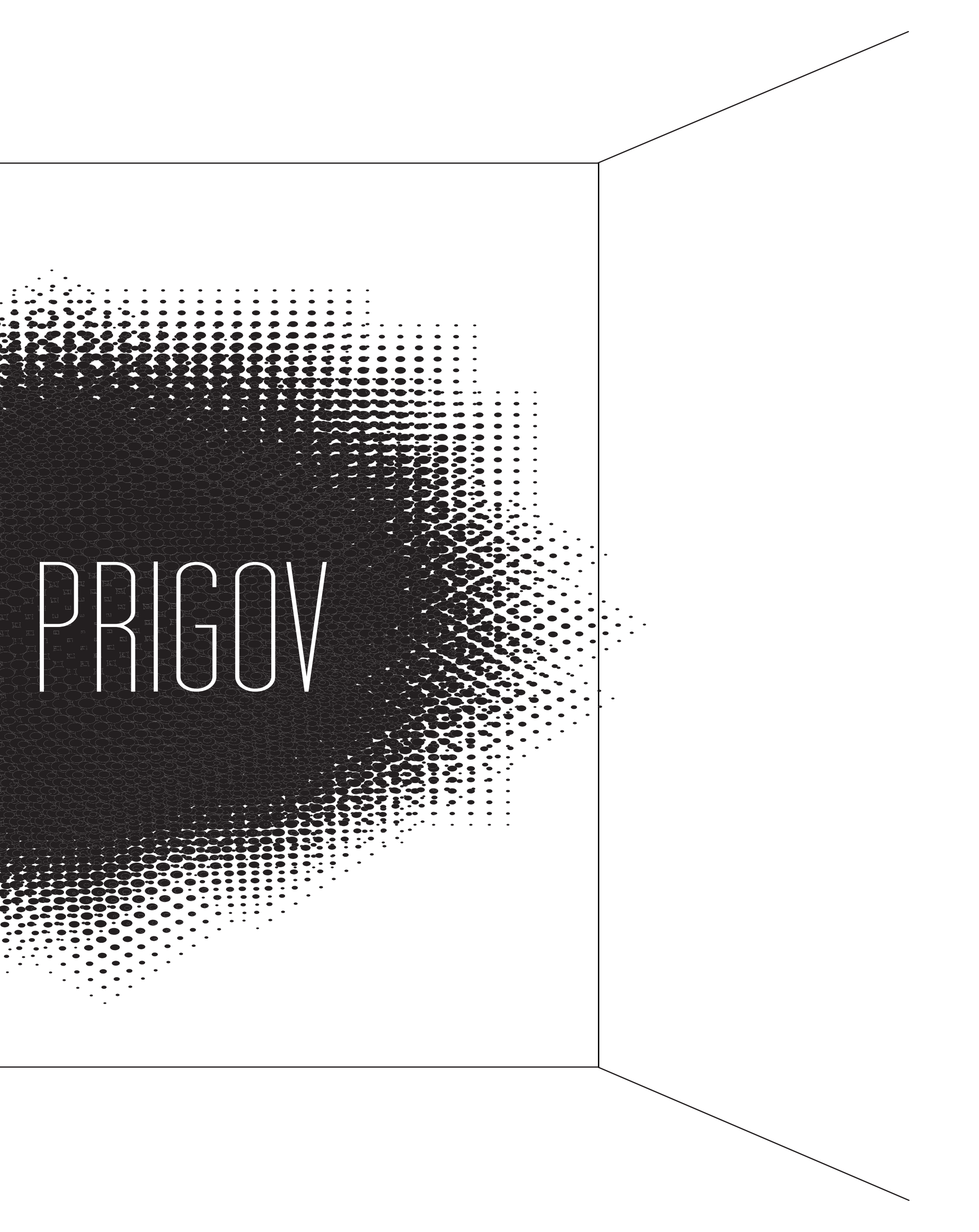




PRIGOV



Introduction:

Theatre of

Revolutionary Action

by **Elizaveta  
Butakova Kilgarriff**

**D**mitri Prigov afforded no particular special status to the events of 1917 within his oeuvre. He may seem a less than obvious choice, then, for an exhibition that marks the centenary of the Russian Revolution, and yet, through his work, we are able to look back lucidly at the hundred years that followed 1917. Not only did his art deconstruct the Soviet culture that was born of the Revolution, but it also revealed its mystical and mythical underpinnings. It allows us to partake of some of its aesthetic flavours – party slogans, “revolutionary red” – whilst connecting its mythology with other social orders and paradigms of oppression. It is this dual ability to communicate the fundamentals of what now is a long-gone Soviet totality, but without ever allowing us to succumb to (n)ostalgia for the period, that makes Prigov’s work so vital in 2017, this year of Revolution commemorations.

Conceived to accompany the exhibition *Dmitri Prigov: Theatre of Revolutionary Action* at Calvert 22 Space, this publication brings together a number of translations of key texts by Prigov about his own work alongside writing by young scholars on the subject: “Prigov on Prigov”, “Verbovisuality”, “On the Life of Installations”, “Conceptualism”. As a prolific maker, writer and commentator, Prigov’s own texts illuminate the philosophical position behind his life-long artistic project. Indeed, they can be considered an integral part of it, and they also reveal the context of his work in the 1990s and 2000s. Sam Goff’s text, first published online as part of *The Calvert Journal’s* Special Project dedicated to the work of Prigov, gives an overview and introduction to the artist’s work as a whole. Ksenya Gurshtein’s text “Spaces of Silence in D.A. Prigov’s Visual Art” delves deeper into the development of his visual art in particular, and Daniil Leiderman explores the uniquely Moscow Conceptualist term of “shimmering”.

*Theatre of Revolutionary Action* focuses primarily on works produced after 1989, when Prigov, along with other artists of his generation, was forced to reformulate his work to accommodate entirely new systems of display and distribution. The photographs from Natasha Nikitin’s work *Hommage to Dmitri Prigov* give a taste of this exciting period. The reason for this focus is that, looking back to 1917, Prigov’s work only makes sense if we simultaneously keep in mind 1991 – the Revolution’s less than glorious end point. 1989/91 is pertinent not only as a point of closure, but a point of comparison, for Prigov’s generation of neo-avant-garde artists lived through their own experience of the world turned upside down. Prigov successfully made the transition from the Soviet context that fed his earlier work into an international one, and retained his interest in never “getting stuck” in any one discourse.

The exhibition is built around the installation *Heavens (Series with Brooms)* (2000s), the first ever realisation of this particular work. From the late 80s, exhibitions such as that at the Stedelijk in Amsterdam (1989) and the Kunstverein in Mülheim (1995) afforded Prigov the opportunity to realise installations that previously had existed only in “phantom” forms. Yet, if these aspects of his work fitted seamlessly into a museum context, his emphasis was always, as ever, on the contradictory ephemerality of the installation format, even in its institutionally sanctioned and financed form. Having achieved this level of superficial artistic success, far from capitalising on the formula, Prigov continued to expand his means of expression. The show therefore encompasses not

only works on paper, installation and sculpture but also his media works, made in collaboration with other artists and musicians.

The title of the exhibition, *Theatre of Revolutionary Action*, serves to highlight the way that performance and performativity is at the heart of Prigov’s project as D.A.P., or Dmitri Alexandrovich Prigov. The theme is already present within his earlier poems from the late 1970s, as the *Stikhogramms* (concrete poems) included in the exhibition can be interpreted as scripts ready for performance or lines to be read aloud, as much as visual texts. Similarly, Prigov’s *Addresses to Citizens* coax their projected interlocutor to act, or at least take notice. The space of the installation can also become a stage for action, ripe with possibilities. The title is a play on the Russian military term for “theatre of operations”, and of course the theatre itself was an important part of Prigov’s writing.<sup>1</sup>

The “revolutionary actions” that Prigov undertakes are sometimes startling, as his voice was protean and could travel from a shout to a whisper to a scream; but just as often he appears as a figure that is absent and inscrutable (*Evangelist*), or quite the opposite – familiar and fallible (*Russia, Sisyphus*).<sup>2</sup> In the same way, Prigov’s relationship with the Russian avant-garde of the early 20th century can be superficially read as one of bathetic and humorous homage. In his “phantom installations”, Malevich’s *Black Square* is transformed into myriad forms, including teddy bears and vaginas.<sup>3</sup>

But just as Prigov’s amorphous black shapes at once undercut Malevich’s sincerity and zeal, and are a truly foreboding presence (see Ksenya Gurshtein’s essay), Prigov’s red – ostensibly the colour of revolution – is equally impossible to pin down. It is a mark of vitality – VITA, according to Prigov, but it is never celebratory. It trickles and pools like blood; it sits in goblets like wine, but it is neither blood nor wine. The overlaying of mystical symbolism with Soviet iconography again reveals their common source: the phrases “God is Dead” and “Lenin” are of the same order.

Prigov has finally received significant institutional attention in Russia in the past decade, with large-scale solo exhibitions at the New Tretyakov in Moscow (2014) and the addition of the Prigov Rooms in the new wing of the Hermitage, the General Staff building (2012). The State Hermitage, partners for this exhibition, have the most important museum collection of works by Prigov and led the way in exhibiting his work internationally with the collateral exhibition *Dmitri Prigov: Dmitri Prigov* at the Venice Biennale in 2011. It is intriguing to consider how the artist himself would have reacted to this increasingly “museified” version of his works.

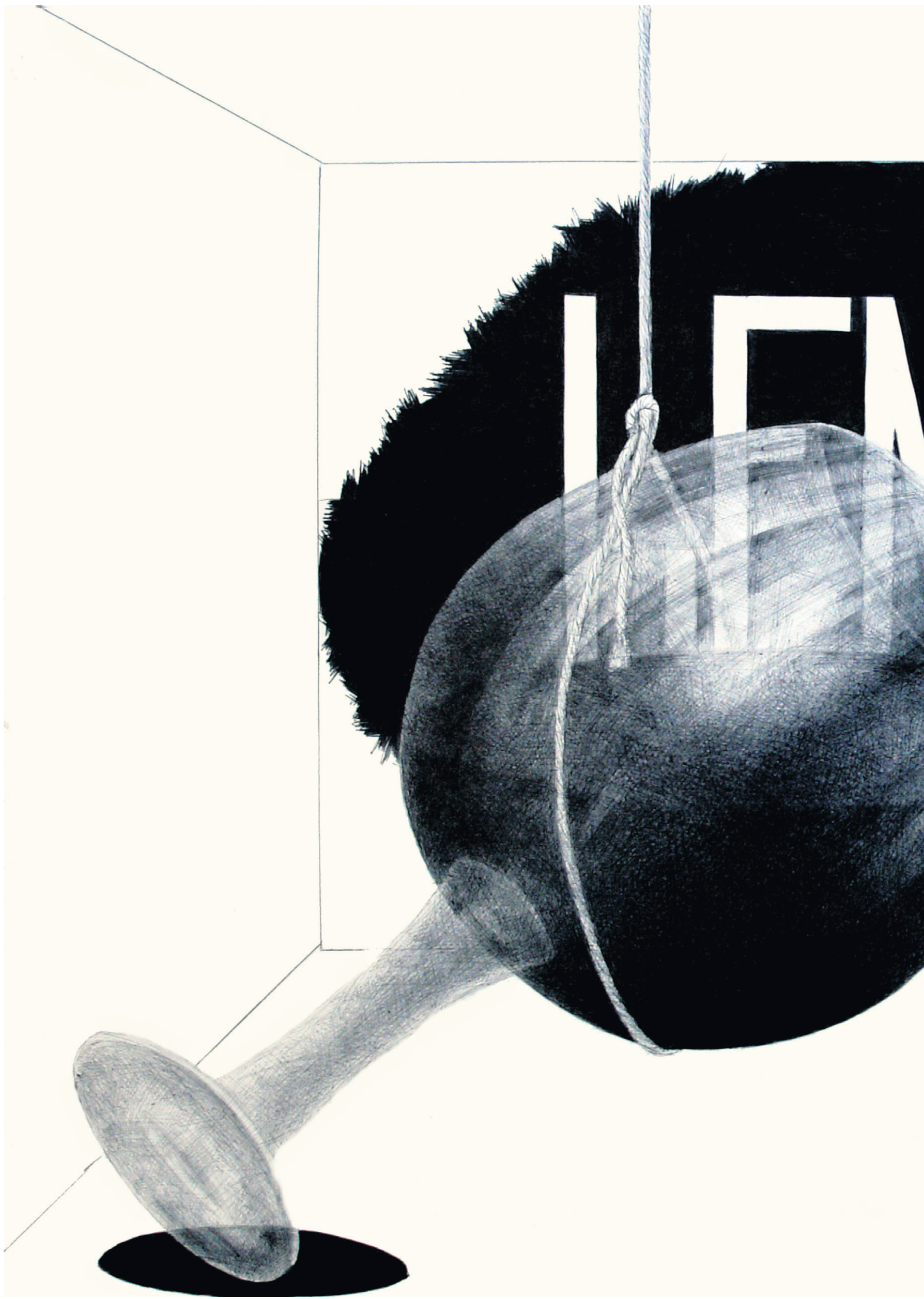
Prigov was always interested in the future. The “new anthropology” he often discussed and referred to in interviews leading up to his untimely death in 2007 foresaw humanity exceeding its own boundaries. The exhibition opens with “God is Dead” and closes with an image of Prigov as a fallen angel, wrapped in gaudy gold cloth. His influence on the work of young artists today is significant, his final, unrealised work being a collaborative performance with the group Voina. The revolutionary potential of his approach to all discourses and styles, as an artist “making raids” on all spheres of creativity, lives on.

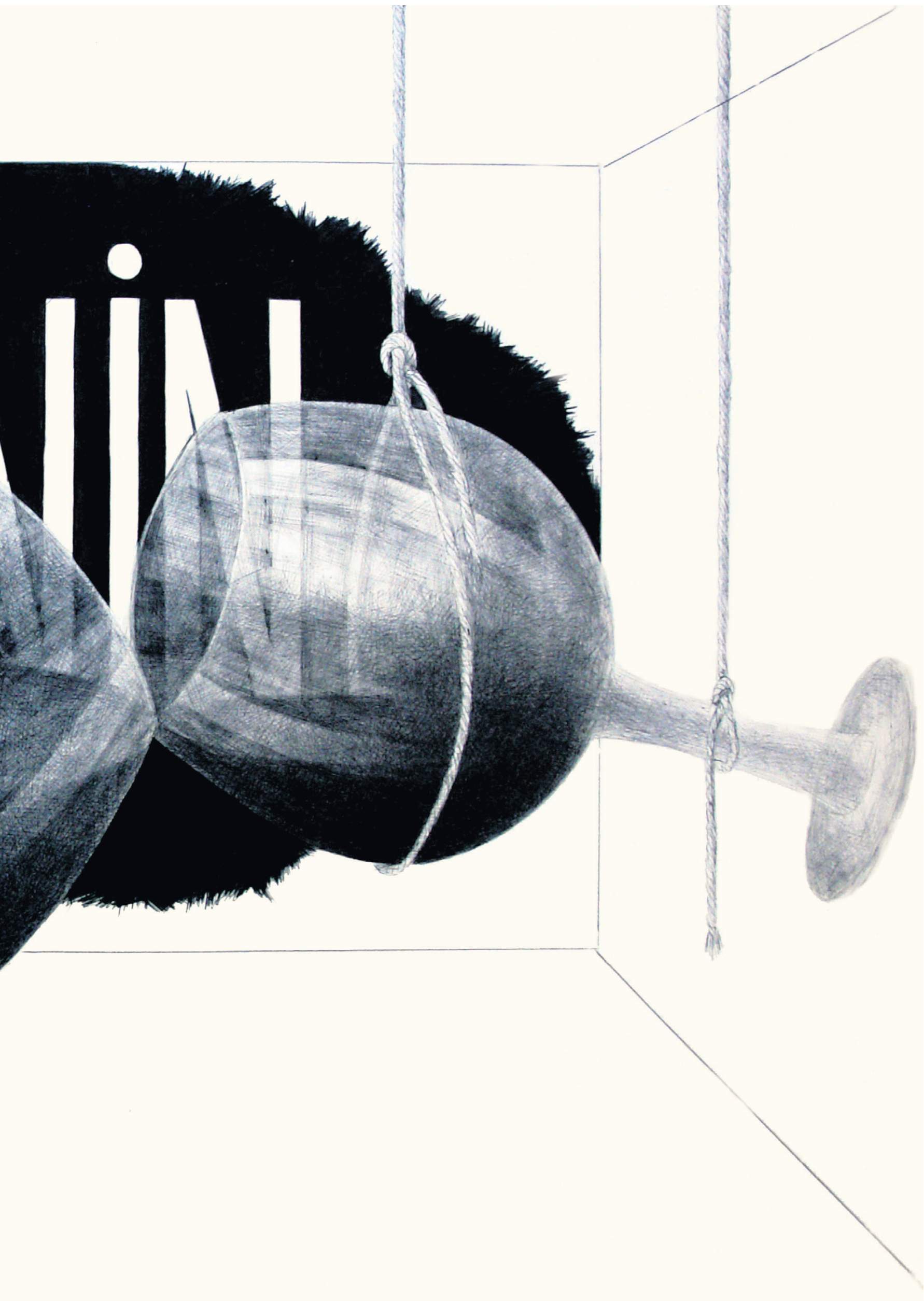
**Curator: Elizaveta Butakova Kilgarriff**  
**Curatorial advice: Ekaterina Eloshvili, Dmitri Ozerkov, Andrey Prigov**

**1 - See Ekaterina Degot’s ‘Meat of Space’ in Dmitri Alexandrovich Prigov, *Ad Marginem*, Moscow, 2014 for more on Prigov’s use of theatrical space in his works.**

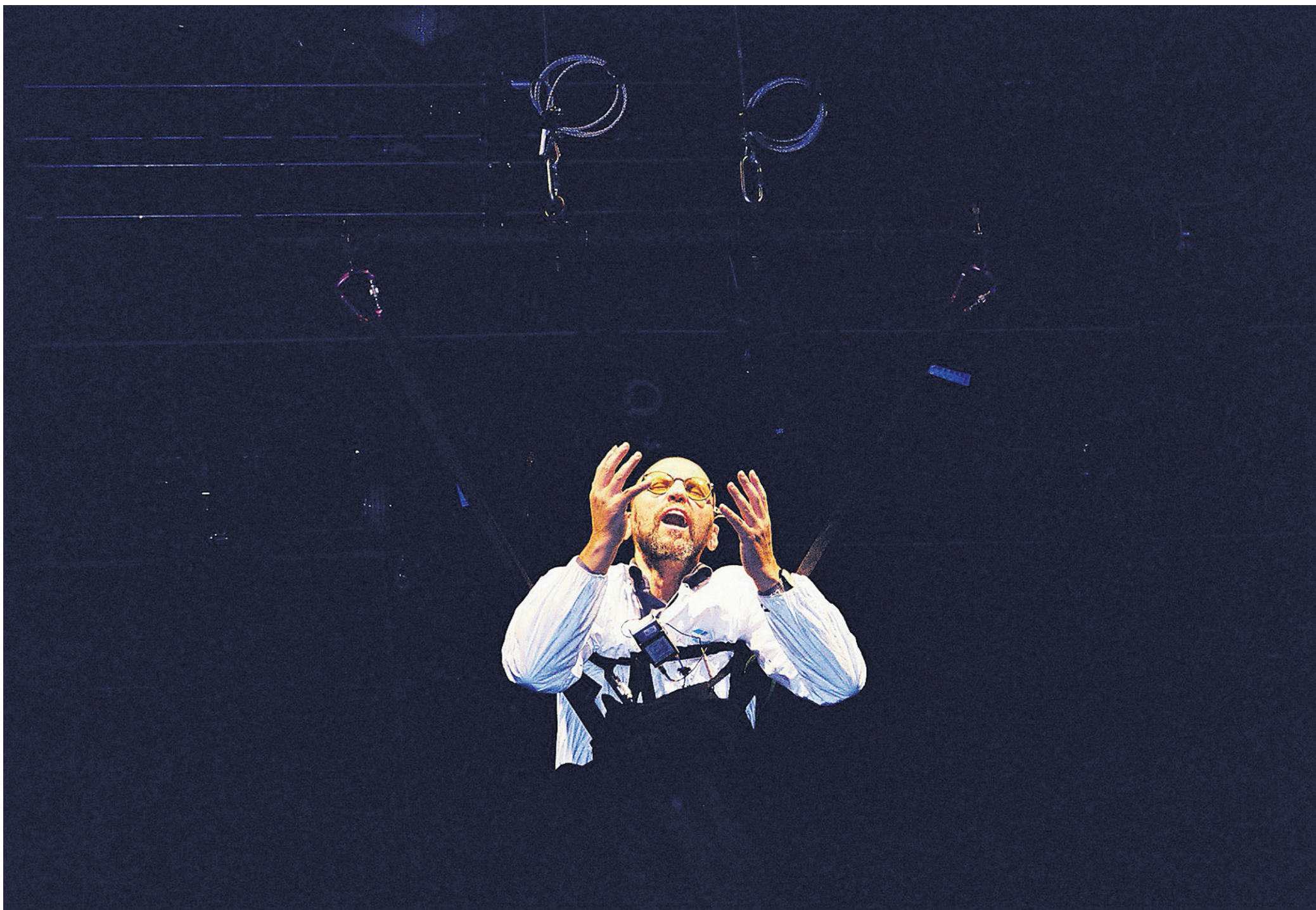
**2 - On the roots of Prigov’s glossallalia and live performances, see Sabine Haensgen, ‘Poetic Performance: The Script and the Voice’, lecture delivered at the Centre Georges Pompidou on 20th November 2017.**

**3 - Prigov’s relationship with Malevich was addressed in the exhibition marking the 75th anniversary of his birth, *Prigov in Dialogue with the Avant-Garde* at the Russian Museum, St Petersburg (October-November 2015).**





**Dmitri Prigov, *Lenin*, 1995**



# Performance by Dmitri Prigov. Tanzquartier Vienna, 2002

NATALIA NIKITIN

HOMMAGE TO DMITIRI PRIGOV. 1989-2003.

COURTESY OF NATALIA NIKITIN AND KRINGS-ERNST GALLERY

# Prigov on

For every artist, the number of simultaneously exhibited works, or works that have long been known to the public, is very important. In other words, the context of creativity, its evolution and artistic surroundings are important for the understanding of each separate work.

For the understanding of Prigov's work, this is all the more relevant because he, strictly speaking, works and consciously correlates with the cultural and social context; with the image of the artist and the poet; with the constituted forms of behaviour of the viewer, artist and writer in the sphere of culture. And he works in such a variety of genres and manners, that only through knowing their totality, uniting them or, at least, through studying one, taking into account all the others, can we isolate the meta-level at which they come together, or rather at which the artist and poet emerges as an integral, single figure of an author-creator. Otherwise, knowing Prigov through individual manifestations, taking them, according to the usual model, as the only manifestation of an artist or writer, we might erroneously identify him as a sociological poet, or satirist, or an author of avant-garde texts, or an artist in the tradition of Bosch or Breughel, or a participant in the rock movement, or a traditional writer, and so on. Prigov does not work with paintings, with styles, with polystylistics, but with images, forms of artists and poets. It is exactly for this reason, therefore, that the social theme, that dominates in, for example, the *Newspapers* cycle or the poems of a certain period, might sit alongside the topic of traditional art in the *Bestiary* series, without being reflected or appearing there at all.

Prigov belongs to a generation of artists who entered the arena of Soviet culture at a time when, after the Thaw of 1956, Soviet visual art concertedly (over a period of ten years) covered the development of global culture from the beginning of the century to the present day. It was at the end of the 60s/beginning of the 70s in the USSR that unofficial art definitively established itself, with its rules of how to live and behave, within the sphere of culture. It was unofficial art that, for the first time in many years, at that moment coincided with the cultural mentality and style of international art. This moment came about during the period when conceptual ideas proliferated within culture. Two main tendencies defined the new generation of artists: the understanding of all styles and directions in the sphere of culture as descriptive languages, and the turn towards contemporary Soviet language in all its manifestations as a material for fine art.

It was in this way, understanding each language as being a true language within the confines of its axiom, becoming untrue at the moment it puts forward a claim to a total description of the world (of course, understanding every language, its layers and hierarchical steps as representatives of ideas, cultural traditions and social groups within the sphere of art), Prigov brings together in his literary works the languages of the everyday, official documents, culture, religious and spiritual writings not as textural layers, but as the heroes of an ideological drama, working out reciprocal relationships and ambitions. Thanks to the considerably larger movement and mobility, of literature, it is in Prigov's poems that these ideas first became apparent and in a purer form than in the works of visual art, both in his own and those of other artists.

In his visual works of art, Prigov does not repeat the results of his activity as a poet, but develops the idea of the word in visual art as the "Name of that Space". Using any particular style, Prigov is not trying to stylise, but is replicating the structure of that style. Hence his meticulous pages from the *Bestiary* series, executed with the use of all the methods of academic and classical drawing, drawn in detail, do not carry the features of stylisation. Beyond the exterior, almost kitsch expressiveness of their monstrous characters, a deeper dramaturgy of geometry and tone emerges, of the symbol and the living form, of the word-idea and its embodiment (all the characters of the series are absolutely real individuals, existing in this reduced form in the metaphysical space of the graphic page). And the last and most global, dramaturgical conflict plays out between this series, with its stylistic particularity, and the context of the rest of Prigov's work; indeed, that main dramaturgical conflict, reveals the meta-level of the existence of the author already no longer as an artist, but rather a demiurge, creating not individual works, but whole dimensions, worlds.

Many of Prigov's works are connected with the use of direct textual material – newspapers, paper production, his own typewritten texts. They, these works, are located on the border between literature and visual art. They sometimes take on the forms of three-dimensional or manipulative textual objects (*Cans, Windows, Telegrams*), where the metaphorical spaces of language take on the spatial reality of a three-dimensional object.

In the series *Newspapers*, the words, written with the help of fine graphic hatching, i.e. words, drawn on the background of the standard newspaper text, look like words that are alive, imbued with vital energy, swimming out from within the conventional text, like "Mene, Tekel, Upharsin" on the wall of a Babylonian temple.

In this sense, Prigov's fixed focus is remarkable; he constantly emphasises it himself in his articles and essays, in the pre-poetic, pre-painterly stage of creation, when the penetration into the logos of language or style takes place, and it is only later that its deployment begins, a concrete materialisation into concrete works or series.

This is probably why, in the works of Prigov, we can trace so clearly, almost visibly, how the ancient culture of myths, incantations and conspiracies germinates in contemporary slogans, verbal and visual clichés, exhortations and appellations and so on, and how the age-old heroes of myths and poems are present in contemporary pop favourites.

In the series of ecstatic cantatas, designed to be performed by the author – quite apart from the fact that the image of the storyteller-cum-rhapsode of those times is invoked, from before the division of syncretic action into poetry, prose, singing and theatre – the characteristics of the contemporary pop and rock movement appear in their links to ancient shamanism.

Despite all of this, however, of course Prigov nevertheless never completely "gets stuck"<sup>4</sup>; never disappears into any one of the styles or forms, languages or images used by him, but somehow soars above them, flickers<sup>5</sup>, is fully identifiable as the author only on a meta-level, from which it is as if he undertakes raids into all of the above mentioned spheres.

Prigov  
(1993)

by D.A.P.



**Ilya Kabakov, Boris Groys  
and Dmitri Prigov in  
Kabakov's installation  
Noma, Kunsthalle  
Hamburg, 1993**





**Boris Groys and Dmitri Prigov in Kabakov's installation Noma, Kunsthalle Hamburg, 1993**

# Dmitri Prigov:

From 13 October, Calvert 22 Foundation will play host to *Dmitri Prigov: Theatre of Revolutionary Action*, the first posthumous solo exhibition in the UK dedicated to one of Russia's most prolific, playful and profound artists. Ten years after his death, the time is certainly ripe to revisit a figure whose seemingly endless creativity when it came to the narratives and iconography of power seems as relevant as ever in the age of fake news and other public mendacities.

Prigov's career stretched almost equally across the late and post-Soviet periods, and *Theatre of Revolutionary Action* is primarily focused on his work after the collapse of the USSR had opened him up to the world at large: the *Cleaning Woman and Angels* installation (2000s), the photography of *1907* (2002), the video series *Evangelist* (2007). But where did Prigov the artist/performer come from? How did his Soviet upbringing and artistic education influence his work?

Born in 1940, Prigov was a member of the first generation to come of age after the war – one that would go on to define Soviet culture for an international audience (think of poet Joseph Brodsky (b. 1944), director Kira Muratova (b. 1934) or songwriter Vladimir Vysotsky (b. 1938)). It's perhaps no coincidence that Prigov later claimed to have started writing poetry in 1956, the year of Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" denouncing the personality cult of Stalin and kick-starting the period of relative cultural licentiousness known as the Thaw. The sense of an artistic generation coming of age is reflected in the fact that Prigov's classmates at the Stroganov Industrial Art School included several other key figures in what would become Moscow or Russian Conceptualism: Boris Orlov, Komar and Melamid, Leonid Sokov.

The Thaw was a contradictory period, one of simultaneous possibility and disillusionment. Western and Russian avant-garde art was (re)discovered and punishments for creative heterodoxy were softened, but artists also began losing faith that the state might eventually support their work, especially when Khrushchev savaged "modern" art after a visit to an exhibition at the Moscow Manege in 1962. Rather than simply acquiescing to or opposing official demands, so-called "non-conformist" artists began to ironise and reappropriate the rhetoric and imagery of the state. Four years after Khrushchev's outburst, Prigov graduated as a sculptor. For a few years he worked as a building inspector and sculptor for public parks.

Prigov was at the centre of Conceptualism from its emergence in the early 70s, alongside Ilya Kabakov, Erik Bulatov, Komar and Melamid, Ivan Chuikov and others. More a loose grouping than a strict school, Conceptualism was multifaceted: in the 70s, Kabakov was constructing elaborate installations while Bulatov and Komar and Melamid were subverting Socialist Realist tropes in their classically trained painting. At its heart, Russian Conceptualism was self-reflexive, ironic, fixated on verbal and visual "codes" and their subversion. It would take Soviet orthodoxies and reconfigure them, exposing rather than denying them; official slogans and imagery would be repeated and twisted until they lost all meaning, recreating for the audience their own experience of living with rules and received wisdom which they knew to be hollow. Bulatov would recreate scenes of fresh-faced young things in idyllic settings, and then insert thick, disruptive blocks of colour or text; Komar and Melamid painted Stalin next to Hitler and E.T.. And

Prigov, perhaps more than anyone else, took the verbal tics of official "Soviet-ese" and ran with them, creating in the process something unnerving and invigorating.

This Conceptualist context is crucial, because the central concerns of Prigov's career derive from his ideological and artistic education in 1970s and 80s Moscow. Like its "Western" counterpart, Russian Conceptualism wanted to break with and break down grand historical narratives – whether these were political or artistic. But in the late Soviet Union, artists were confronted with a very particular set of circumstances. There was a real, monolithic state discourse that impinged on everyday life and could, if needed, be violently enforced; at the same time, many people knew this to be an illusion, hollow and lacking in meaning. Mikhail Epstein, one of the great theorists of late Soviet culture, once wrote that, "in the West, conceptualism substitutes 'one thing for another' – a real object for its verbal description. But in Russia the object that should be replaced is simply absent."

This is why, when we look at Prigov's works themselves, they strike us as simultaneously detached and warm, ironic and sincere, fun and austere. Playing with the emptiness at the heart of the Soviet "message" allows for an endlessly varied range of expressions. As Kabakov himself said, "this contiguity, closeness, contact with nothing [...] is like something that hangs in the air, a self-reliant thing, like a fantastic construction, connected to nothing, with its roots in nothing."

Prigov worked in poetry, graphic art, sculpture, installation and performance art, cultural theory, film, TV and music. He adopted a similarly broad range of characters or "personages" and rejected the label of "poet", insisting on the importance of the figure performing the words rather than the content of the words themselves. He once said of his method: "I take a certain image of writing and collide it with another image." As befits a trained sculptor, he cited Henry Moore and Alberto Giacometti among his formative influences (along with Warhol, Beuys and Fluxus), and he was concerned throughout his life with the question of monumentalisation: how the artist and their work become set in stone through public appreciation.

The "collision" between image and writing is there in Prigov's "stikhograms" or picture-poems, reminiscent of earlier 20th-century typographical experiments by the likes of Guillaume Apollinaire. Prigov takes fragments of recognisably "Soviet" speech (one example: "Comrade, I cannot abandon my squadron!"), replicating and manipulating them on the page. In this way, Prigov divests the weighty pronouncements of official culture of their power – he is a fundamentally *democratic* artist, less interested in creative genius than in personal response. He once described postmodernism as "an exploration of the possibility of individual expression"; his installation at the Hermitage in St Petersburg invites the viewer to take a seat alongside empty frames labelled "Malevich", "Rembrandt", "Leonardo" and so on, suggesting that these lofty names are simply convenient labels onto which we project our own interpretations.

In common with many of the Conceptualists, Prigov focused with particular intensity on the mundane, seemingly trivial aspects of Soviet life – another aspect of his democratic approach. Many of the "heroes" of art are

everyday workers, and he described himself as a labourer, more concerned with the quantity of words he produced than their quality (late in his life he claimed to have a quota to fill of 2,000 poems a year). But this focus on the quotidian was also another part of his spoofing of Soviet power: his everyday heroes become mystical figures, inhabiting a phantasmagorical version of the Soviet world. One recurring character in his Soviet-era poems is the Policeman, who becomes, in the words of Yelena Fedetova, “a kind of ideal embodiment or avatar of the Soviet power structure”.

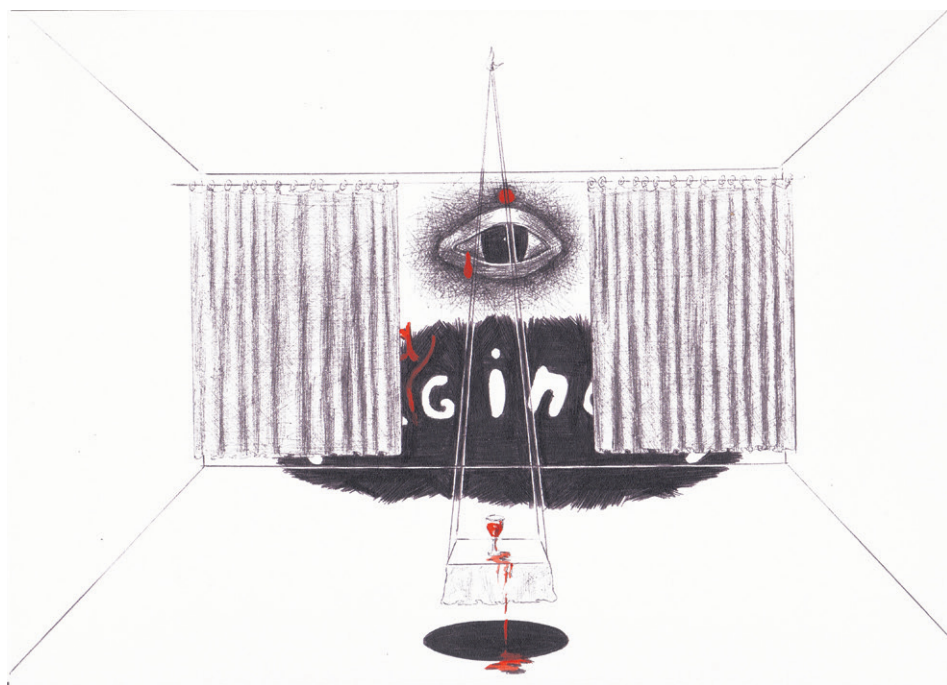
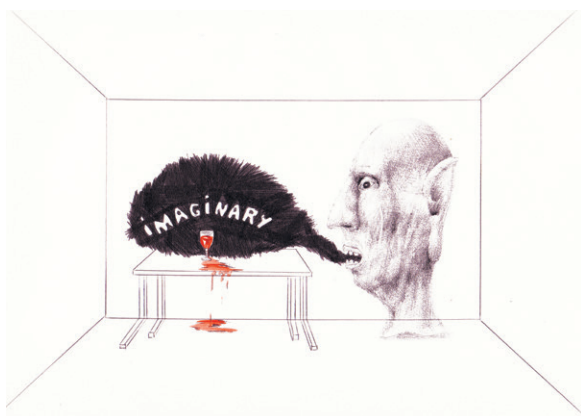
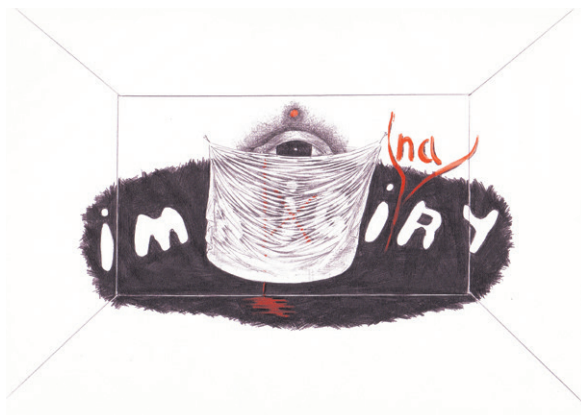
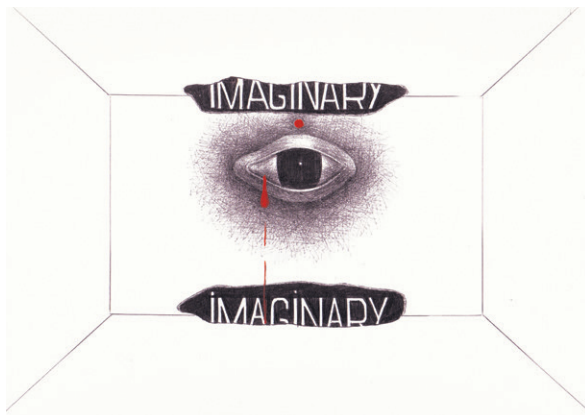
The policeman looks to the West, to the East –  
And the empty space beyond lies open  
And the centre where stands the policeman –  
He can be seen from every side  
Look from anywhere, and there is the policeman  
Look from the East and there is the policeman  
And from the South, there is the policeman  
And from the sea, there is the policeman  
And from the heavens, there is the policeman  
And from the bowels of the earth...

Uncovering the uncanny nature of Soviet life also meant exposing its ritualistic, quasi-religious underpinnings, and Prigov has often been described as a kind of holy fool or shaman. When performing his poetry he would often adopt a growling, hooting, almost musical tone, like an unhinged monk – as in his famous *Alphabet* series, an extended deconstruction of the Russian alphabet into something nonsensical and unsettling.

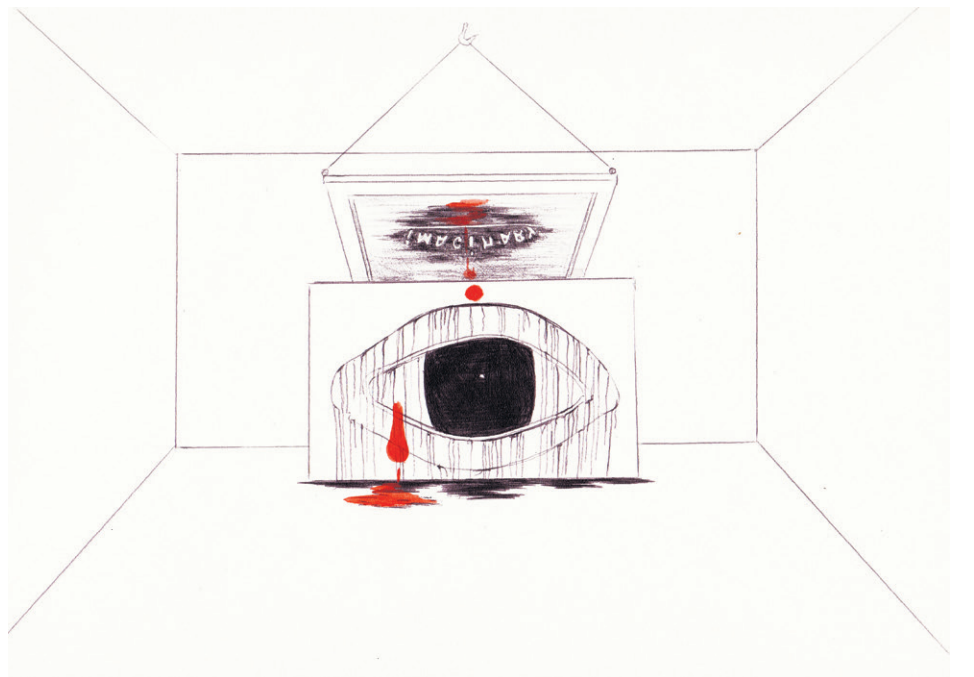
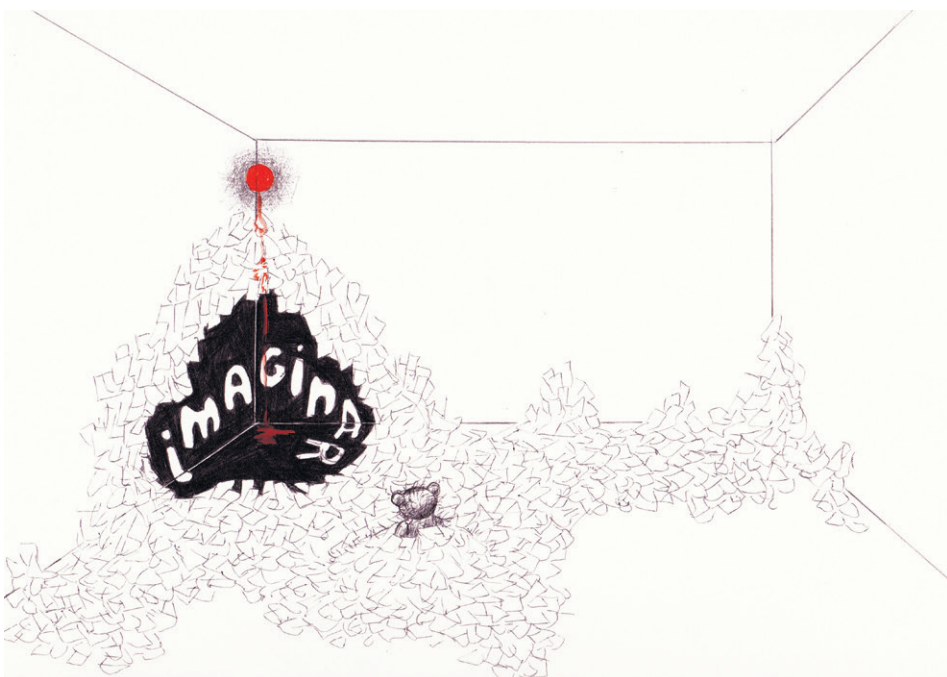
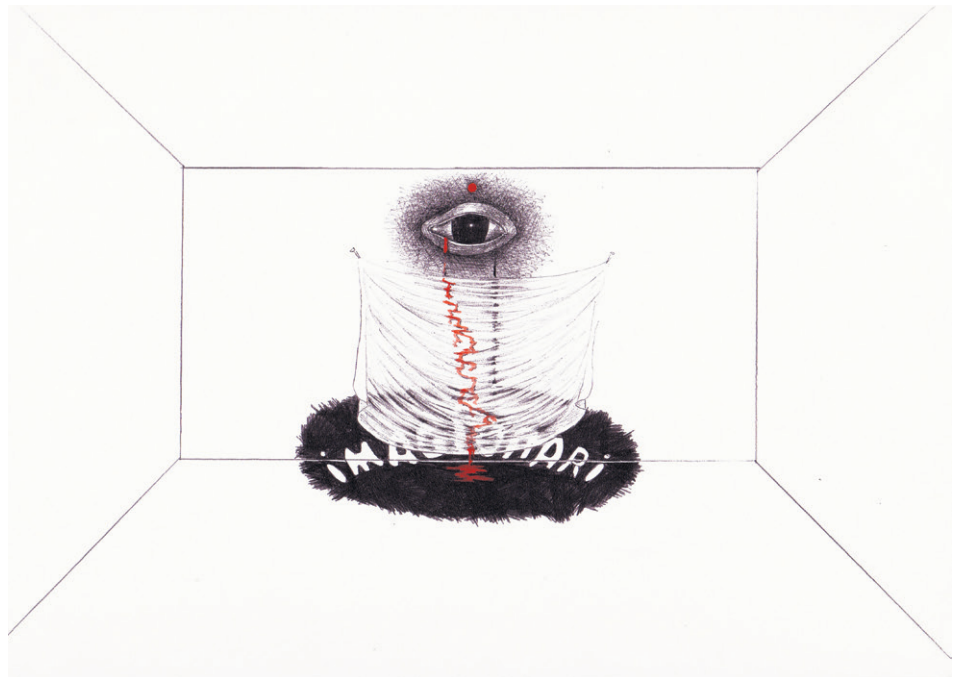
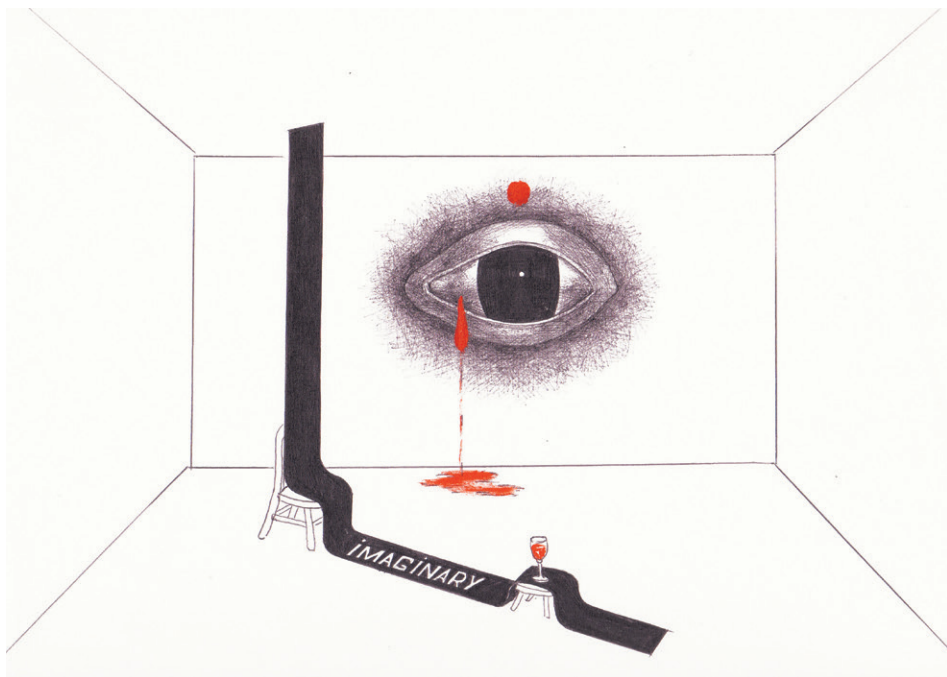
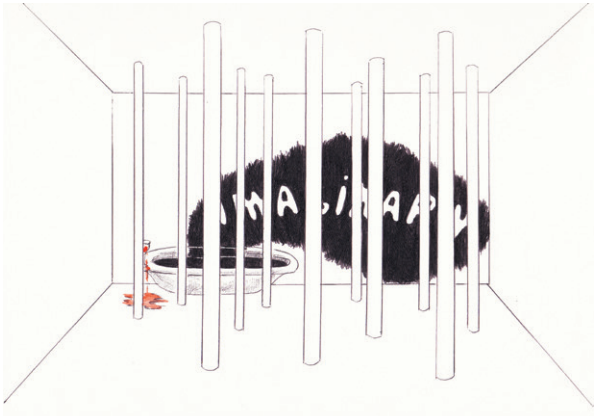
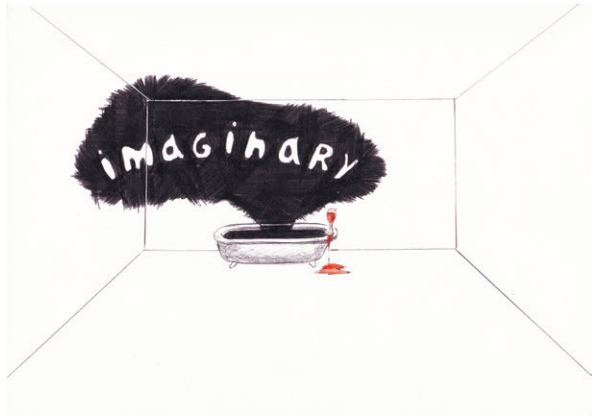
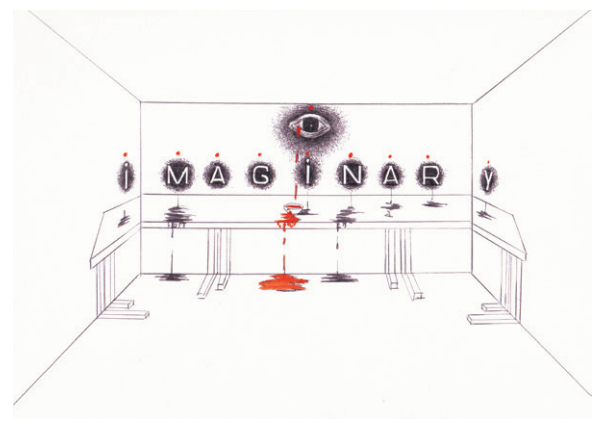
Of course, Prigov was never officially exhibited in the Soviet Union. His reputation, fostered in émigré journals before perestroika, went from strength to strength once he was able to travel and perform for foreign and domestic audiences in the 90s. But the formative experiences of coming up in the stagnating late USSR cannot be forgotten. The philosopher and art theorist Boris Groys wrote earlier this year that for Prigov, the “Soviet Cosmos was a well-defined space with a high visibility and recognisability of all the social roles possible within it. Perestroika [...] opened this Cosmos to Chaos.” For Groys, Prigov’s work post-1991 – the work at the heart of *Theatre of Revolutionary Action* – is an attempt to deal with the chaos not just of dysfunctional Soviet society, but of the world as a whole: a much more terrifying prospect: “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. [...] 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.”

In the works on display at Calvert 22 Space, then, we see an artist coming to terms with the death of the system against which he had set himself, and abandoning the idea of identity altogether. Peter Metres once asked Prigov whether his art was a “mask” behind which he hid. “An image is a kind of existence,” Prigov replied. “I must, first, understand it, then enter into it and live. A mask, generally speaking, implies that another person exists behind it. But I, as a person, cannot exist.”

how the  
Soviet Union  
produced a  
genre-defying  
artistic mystic



**Dmitri Prigov,**  
***Imaginary series, 1994***



# From the life of installations

(2004)

by D.A.P.

In accordance with and in relation to its English root – instal, install – an installation is a kind of structure. In visual art, unlike an environment (a structure within an open space) and land-art objects in a landscape, an installation is something that is constructed within an enclosed space. The size of the latter varies from the extremely small, so that you can only look into it with one eye, to a number of rooms within a substantial museum. Installations, unlike flat paintings and individual objects, place an accent on the organisation of interior space.

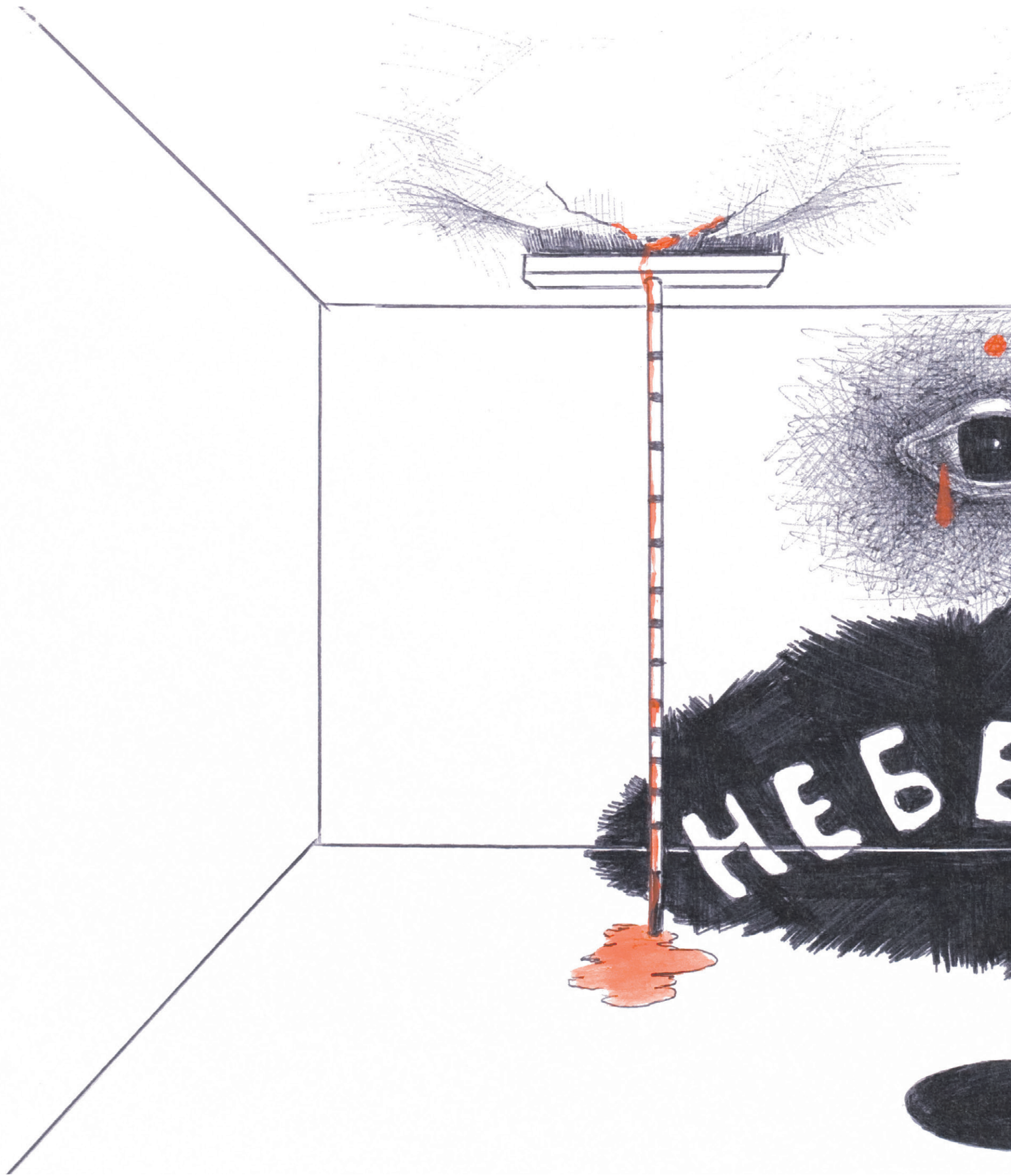
One might consider the most ancient forerunners of installation to be altar-like structures within religious buildings. There were many installation-like trends throughout history and particularly in the Baroque and Rococo periods. However, installation as a genre took on meaning and became a recurring theme only in very recent times, when the generic and specific borders between art forms began to collapse. Alongside objects, performances, happenings, actions and the aforementioned land-art and environments, installation, in both its plastic and generic aspects, is something of a floating kind of activity, where the dominant factors are the wider context of projection and the appointing gesture of the artist.

Installations can be divided into three main types, notwithstanding the conventional nature of these and the existence of many in-between and hybrid forms. The first type is characterised by the dominance of a scenic and narrative (or quasi-, or pseudo-scenic) premise. An example

of this could be the many installations by Kabakov and some by Komar and Melamid. The second type we might call objective and presentational. For example, all kinds of imitations of scientific laboratories, real and pseudo-real domestic and museum interiors. And the third is visual and visionary, placing an accent on the contemplation of a certain image or structure. As an example, I can point to those of my own installations that are for the most part related to the use of newspapers and drawn images.

With an installation, its meaning before content lies in its fragility, its temporariness, its short-livedness. In other words today, for a week, for a month (or rather the designated time of exhibition) it exists, and then tomorrow – not a trace. In short, as they say about people: you lived, lived, then were gone. In spite of the whole extensive and developed infrastructure of museums and collections, only a handful of installations end up on permanent display. And, in fact, having ended up there, they lose this vivifying aura of theirs, turning out to be like eternally-living dried-up butterflies. It is their ephemerality that is the primary function of installation, as with performative genres, which become definitively fixed only in some form of posthumous reconstruction-documentation. Hence their pathos is not in being a masterpiece, which survives through the centuries and conquers time, but in their almost ritual suggestiveness. That's how it is. Generally any parts, details or documentations of vanished installations that are accessioned into museums and collections have the form and essence of holy relics of art, or material traces of the miracle-artefact that took place.



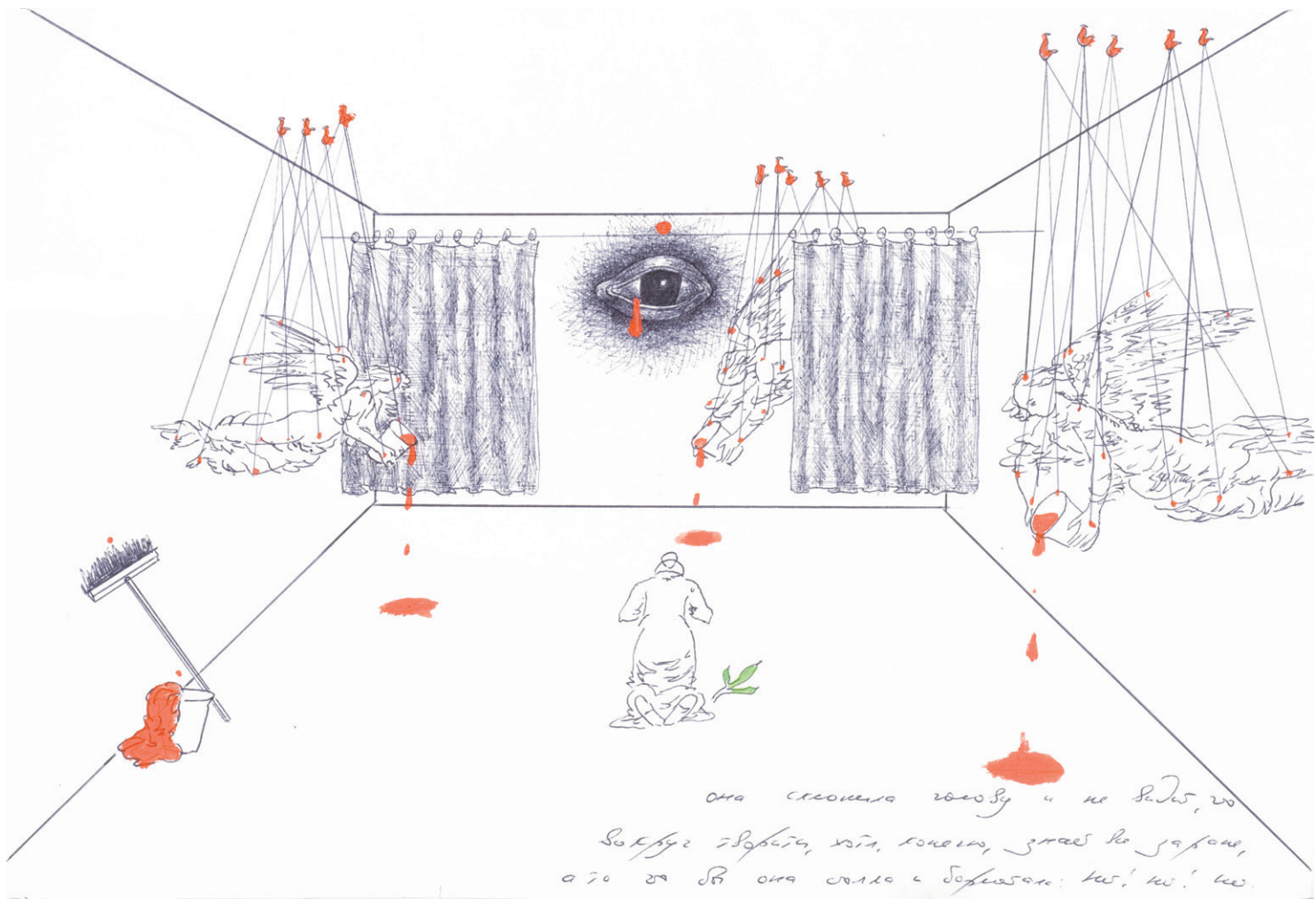


**Dmitri Prigov, *Heavens (Se...***  
**Courtesy of the State Hermitage**



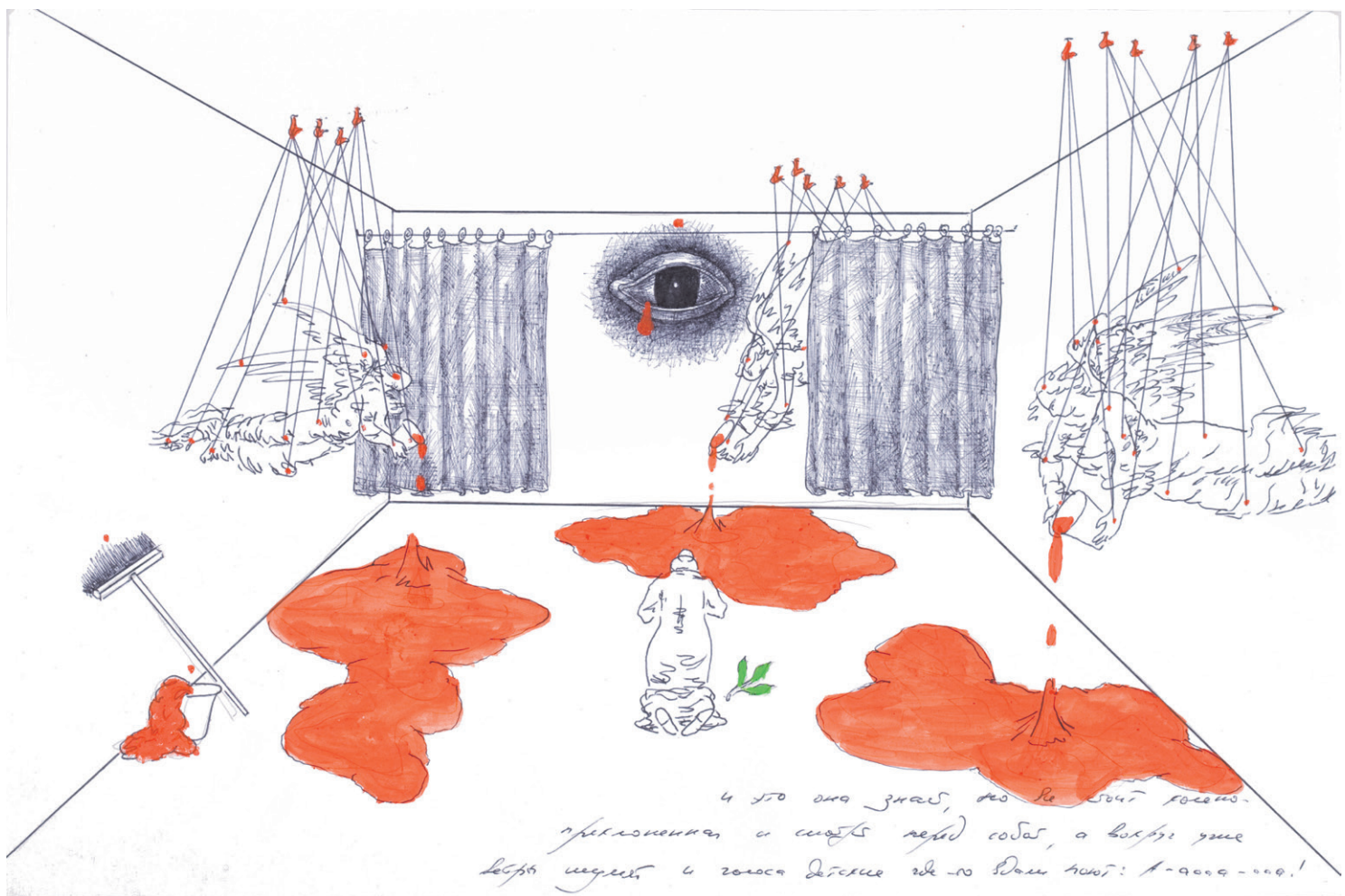


***Series with Brooms*), 2000s.  
Heritage Museum, St Petersburg**



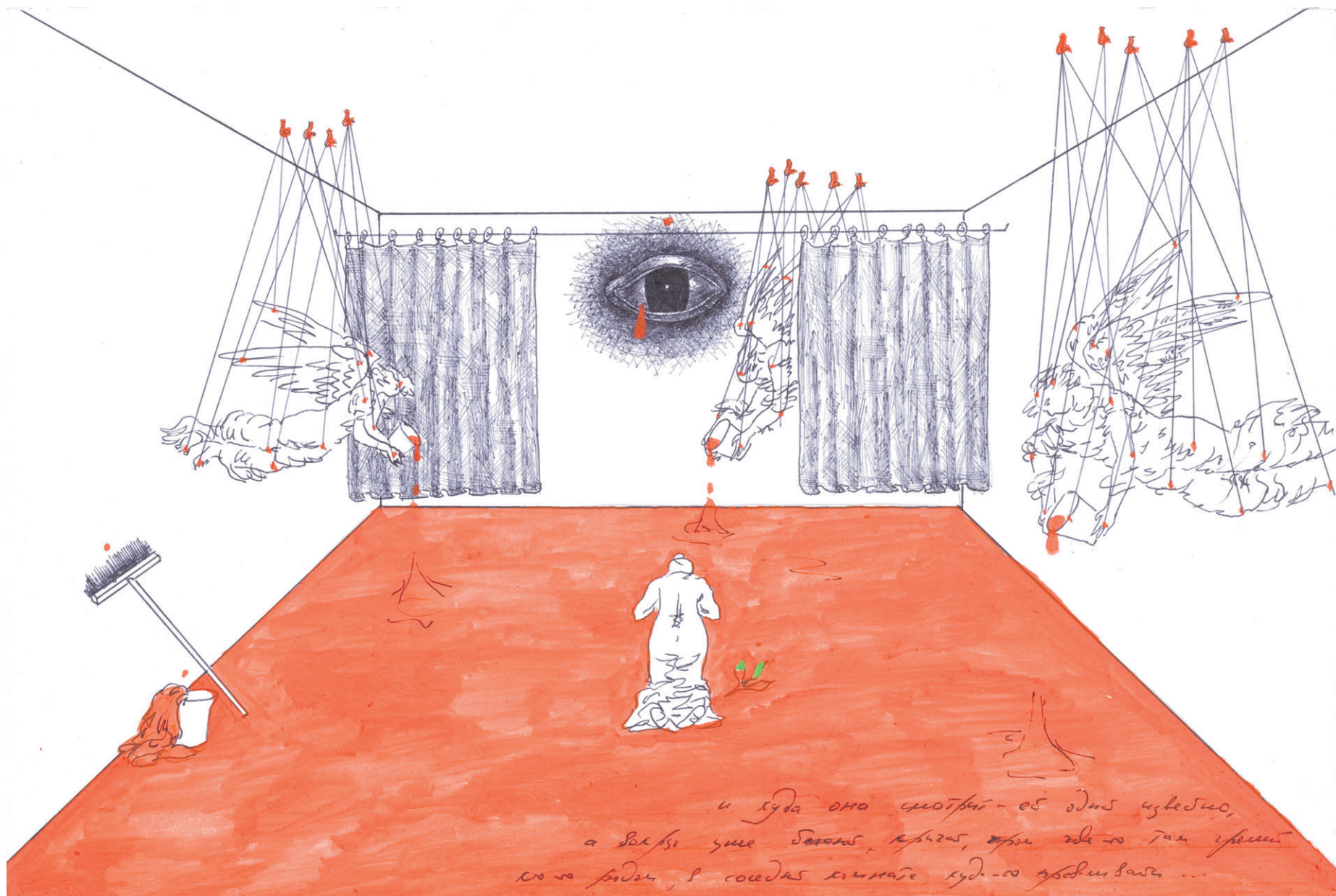
**Она склонила голову и не видит, что вокруг творится, хотя, конечно, знает все заранее а то что бы она стояла и бормотала нет! Нет! Нет!**

**She has bowed her head and does not see what is happening around her, although, of course, she already knows it all, otherwise why would she stand and mutter no! no! no!**



**И это она знает, но все стоит колено-приклоненная и смотрит перед собой, а вокруг уже ветра шумят и голоса детские где-то вдали поют: А-аа-ааа!**

**And she knows this, but still stands bowed down on her knees, and looks ahead of herself, but all around the winds are already blowing and children's voices are singing somewhere in the distance: A-aaa-aaa!**



И куда она смотрит – ей одной известно, а вокруг уже бегают, кричат, гром где-то там гремит, кто то рядом, в соседней комнате куда-то пробивается...

And where she is looking, only she knows, and all around they are already running, shouting, thunder is thundering somewhere, someone nearby in the room next-door is breaking through somewhere...

# Dmitri Prigov, *Cleaning Woman and Angels*, 2000s. Courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Conceptualism is a movement, defined in any of a number of different ways, but, at the same time and even maybe to a greater degree, it is names. Especially in Russia, where under this title we encounter a relatively large and varied group of artists and writers, many of whom, strictly speaking, in places with more correct definitions and terminological strictness, could not be identified in such a way. Well, whatever. What we have is what we have, and that's what we're discussing.

Of course, as with any other artistic direction, conceptualism had a period of birth and vague self-identification that is now hidden from researchers (if such people might now be found), followed by a period of heroic flight and then, subsequently, a period of retreat into the cold, almost coal-like layers of cultural and artistic history. In other words, it is already an object or rather should be an object of cultural and artistic history. In other words, it is no longer recruiting new forces into its ranks, although its heroes and founders are still full of energy and function within the limits of their own elaborate individual myths. Obviously, these individual syndromatics, ironed out in a period of group existence and functioning by the pressure of their near surroundings and divisionist ardour, with time take on more obvious characteristics and distort individual myths, moving away from the general line of any tendency. It all depends on the power of that same myth, which is the thing that determines its relevance or irrelevance within culture. Moreover, within the limits of cultural ages, which have become reduced to a 5-7 year period (almost tragically departing from biological ages and the incredible lengthening of life expectancy), it is an almost unavoidable situation for relatively young artists to outlive their styles and tendencies and to exist within the limits of those of others, or moving between them. I repeat, it is all in the power of the individual myth. Moreover, the specifics of a local cultural situation and the ways of being of the underground provided conceptualism with the opportunity of passing almost undamaged through three real (and not only cultural!) generations of its representation.

Now let us look at the present situation here, naturally bearing in mind the abovementioned universal rapid and short-lived cultural processes (which to a certain degree corresponds with Warhol's statement that in the future everyone will be famous for five minutes). Judging by the results of the Art Moscow\* that has just finished, and in general, from just scanning the situation, in Moscow, in any case, one can sketch a certain picture of the local artistic life, in which one notices the obvious disappearance from exhibitions and the current horizon of discussions around practices and names the more pure and subsequent representatives of our Russian conceptualism.

In principle, of course, within the global context in general we can also observe radical conceptualist practices naturally retreating into the shadows, in view of the impossibility of recruiting new proponents into its camp. (However, we should note the legacy and interpretations of all manner of conceptualist practices and aesthetics seen today). However, the developed and powerful system of cultural institutions and museums in the West has long since consolidated and approved both the practices themselves, and many names. They are valorised, established, have a price on the market and are absolutely current on the wide horizon of contemporary culture and art. In Russia, however, the picture is more or less the exact opposite, both with the institutions and the names and with cultural memory. This is

true not only of conceptualism and of past names, but also all current, and indeed perhaps future names and movements. Of course, that is unless the situation changes. Otherwise there exists another, more problematic exit for Russian artists – a direct one, bypassing the existing and non-existing cultural institution, and becoming part of global art history. Some have managed it. But not many.

That's how it is. But even very recently, the more radical Russian conceptualists were fully understood and their practices and names were even very influential within the confines of Russian visual art (although, considering the aforementioned radically reduced timeframes within the limits of culture and art, this everyday "not long ago" might well be understood as a complete and concluded aeon). It's not my role to remind you of this and remind you of these names.

And now, there is what there now is.

Without further returning to the problem of the natural process of the blooming and conclusion of styles and the natural reaction to it by those who inherited and followed, let us try and understand the broader local socio-cultural context, which is reflected in this narrow internecine battle and to some extent generates it. First of all, we should note that as a result of everything that has taken place in this country over the past 15 years (and, in a broader sense, over hundreds of years), we have been left with no other zones of prestige, apart from money and power, which, in the end, are one and the same thing. For our discussion about conceptualism (especially in its Muscovite expression) with its characteristic critical tendencies, it is significant that in this country the spheres of academic prestige, civil society and any more or less influential left opposition movement are not present, as these things also form the main breeding ground for consumers of critical tendencies in culture and art.

Of course, with the absence of the aforementioned positions or niches of critical reflective thought, the pressure from the market and mass-media is very significant, with their overbearing colourful, almost hallucinatory visuality, appealing to sensuality and anaesthetising any reflexive impulse.

(It is interesting to note that, again, the claimed experience of certain sots-artists\* is interpreted only through its decorative and entertaining show-like brightness. If the self-same Lenin with the Mickey Mouse head by Kosolapov in this context produces some kind of horrifying effect, then it is more likely in the form of Hollywood horrors.)

As a result of all kinds of perturbations that took place in Russia, in general we can see the growth of anti-intellectualism, which corresponds completely to the traditional cultural situation in Russia, where the influence of the reflexive and intellectual coincides with moments of radical breaks within political and social life and the turn towards Western social and cultural models. And, accordingly, the rollback on all fronts is accompanied by an ardent and ideologised anti-intellectualism.

And in the end, if one imagines certain prospects, where conceptual and any post-post-post-conceptual experience could be in demand, then, perhaps, one could imagine two fundamental social projects. The first is the development of a civil society, the formation of a zone of academic prestige and the emergence of serious left opposition. The second is a radical strengthening of the regime (with the appropriation of the main cultural institutions and cultural space in general that naturally accompanies it), pushing the majority of the cultural elite into opposition, which will become the breeding ground for and consumer of the critical movement in art.

# Conceptualism.

**(2003)**

Lecture delivered at the

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Spaces of  
Silence in  
D.A. Prigov's  
Visual Art

**by Ksenya Gurshtein**

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## Introduction: Free to Not Be Me

Poet; novelist; playwright; social and cultural commentator; draftsman; sculptor; installation, video, and performance artist; musician – Dmitri Alexandrovich Prigov was all these things, and he was more than the sum of his parts. Like Walt Whitman, another larger-than-life poet, he contained multitudes and consequently defined the goals of the life-long artistic “Project D.A.P.”<sup>1</sup> broadly enough to encompass every aspect of his activities. “I am put here,” he said, “so as to present freedom in its ultimate meaning in this particular moment,”<sup>2</sup> adding that the ability to represent “absolute Freedom” is what separates being an artist from other kinds of activity.<sup>3</sup>

But what did freedom mean to Prigov? Two key terms that the artist had articulated by the early 1980s define the philosophical underpinnings of “Project D.A.P.”<sup>4</sup> The first is the Duchampian “naznachayushchii zhest” (appointing gesture), which denotes “the appointment of phenomena or objects in the surrounding environment as works of art by transferring them into the exhibition, magazine, or book space.”<sup>5</sup> Prigov took this idea to its logical conclusion when he conjectured that “recognition and nomination” would eventually become the primary functions of an artist, as opposed to the creation of objects in any particular style, which Prigov dismissively called “artisanal craft.”<sup>6</sup>

The second concept crucial to understanding the freedom Prigov found in Project D.A.P. is “mertsatel’nost” (flickering).<sup>7</sup> This behavioral strategy vis-à-vis one’s work existed for Prigov as an alternative to “vlipanie” (getting stuck), a condition wherein an artist is embedded in one discourse to the point of full identification with it. A “flickering” artist, by contrast, allows himself to temporarily “get stuck” in a certain type of text, gesture, or behaviour, “but his task is not to get stuck in it for so long that he can’t jump away. Jumping away to a certain distance, however, he also shouldn’t stay there for long so as not to be completely separate from the text, [gesture, or behavior]. Thus his strategy is a constant ‘flickering’ [...] [and] neither the text, nor the author independent of the text is the object of close observation, but this dynamics of movement.”<sup>8</sup>

These two terms set up certain expectations of Prigov’s body of work, and in the thousands of poetry and prose texts for which he was best known in his lifetime, Prigov fulfilled them brilliantly. As Vladimir Sorokin has observed, Prigov’s readers recognised early on his talent for moving mundane speech into the realm of art, channelling voices (such as those of Soviet everymen, among many others),<sup>9</sup> and being in character, starting with the character of Dmitri Alexandrovich Prigov, the eccentric poet who addressed others and himself by his full name.<sup>10</sup> Prigov shared these artistic strategies, moreover, with other Moscow writers – most notably, his friends Lev Rubinstein and Sorokin – whose works form the core of Russian literary post-modernism. For all three, the philosophical position that insisted on the writer’s right to write about

anything he chooses while asserting his separateness from his texts was essential. It wrested away from the State – the ultimate arbiter of both aesthetics and ethics in the USSR – the prerogative to name what could be art, i.e. protected speech, while simultaneously expanding the realm of unofficial discourse.<sup>11</sup>

In theorising Project D.A.P., Prigov simply extended these ideas logically beyond strictly literary boundaries: “text” for Prigov would be understood broadly as any cultural artifact. And instead of being a creator who “dies in the text”, i.e. identifies totally with its ideological position, he would let any and every “text” “die” in himself by holding, at least temporarily, every ideological position possible.<sup>12</sup> This approach to cultural production would, paradoxically, accomplish a similar result to the one Barthes sought in “The Death of the Author”, while still keeping the author very much alive as the centre of discussion and interpretation.

If the interpretive framework described above can help make sense of Prigov to his readers, what about his viewers? Straddling the underground worlds of literature and the visual arts, Prigov moved in the overlapping Moscow Conceptualist and *sots-art* circles, some of whose best-known members, including Ilya Kabakov and Komar and Melamid, relied heavily in their work on “personazhnost” (characterhood), an approach in which the artists channelled borrowed voices and visual idioms in paintings and sculptures in the same way Prigov’s poetry did. Yet, paradoxically, Prigov’s visual art did not follow the same logic and defied the expectations one might have of it. He did not, for instance, invoke the appointing gesture to justify using unassisted readymades in his art – even when he integrated found objects into his drawings, sculptures and installations, they were always extensively reworked. Nor did he seek the freedom of renouncing traditional skilled artistic labour. He spent hours drawing painstakingly with ballpoint pens to achieve remarkable verisimilitude in the representation of volume, perspective and the play of light and shadow. He even reached the apogee of skill in rendering in ink diaphanous cloths and objects behind them. Most significantly, the visual world Prigov created was no analogue of the “heteroglossia” of his literary universe – if the latter had an ever expanding cast of characters and forms, the former remained remarkably stable in its iconography and style from the early 1980s until the artist’s death in 2007.

What I want to explore in this essay, therefore, is the way in which the sphere of visual art – the least verbal realm of Prigov’s work – held a special place in Project D.A.P. and played a different role in his oeuvre to the literary output with which it is often conflated. This goes to some extent against the artist’s intentions, since Prigov himself wanted every manifestation of his creativity to be seen as an equal contribution to Project D.A.P. and rarely discussed the disparities between works made in different media. Yet he did describe himself as a worker in both “the literary realm and that of visual art, on the border between them,” adding once that, “My work consists in increasing the permeability of this border, but simultaneously I have to take care that it is not wholly eroded since then the tension of my activity would dissipate.”<sup>13</sup>

1 - Prigov articulated the idea of his life as an all-encompassing project numerous times. Its most clear definition can be found in Andrei Monastyrski (Ed.), *Slovar’ terminov moskovskoi kontseptualnoi shkoly*, Moscow, 1999, p. 193, where Prigov notes that the idea became relevant for him in the mid-1990s. In the 1990s, however, Prigov also post-dated the beginnings of his “project” to the late 1960s.

2 - D.A. Prigov and Sergey Shapoval, *Portretnaya galereya D.A.P.*, Moscow, 2003, p. 107. The text of this interview between Shapoval and Prigov can also be found online at <<http://www.intelros.org/drevo/prigov2.htm>>

3 - D.A. Prigov, *Raznoobrazie vsego*, Moscow, 2007, p. 77.

4 - Andrei Monastyrski (Ed.), *Slovar’ terminov moskovskoi kontseptualnoi shkoly*, Moscow, 1999, pp. 192, 59.

5 - *Ibid.*, 192.

6 - D.A. Prigov, ‘Gde ty, gde ty, matushka-sovremennost’!, in *Khudozhestvenny zhurnal*, 64, February 2007, p. 13 and on-line at <<http://xz.gif.ru/numbers/64/prigov/>> and Monastyrski *Slovar’ terminov moskovskoi kontseptualnoi shkoly*, p. 193.

7 - The full definition of “mertsatel’nost” can be found in *Monastyrski Slovar’ terminov moskovskoi kontseptualnoi shkoly*, pp. 58-59. The term was sometimes used by other members of the Moscow Conceptual circle, but was of greatest importance to Prigov. It can alternately be translated as “shimmering”.

8 - D.A. Prigov and M. Epstein, “An Attempt Not to Be Identified: A Conversation between Dmitri Alexandrovich Prigov and Mikhail Naumovich Epstein”, *Nekanonicheskii klassik*, Moscow, 2010, p. 55.

9 - Mark Lipovetsky, a foremost authority on Prigov’s literary work, has argued that despite the apparent variety of voices that Prigov channels in his poetry, all of them ultimately enact two foundational but diametrically opposed archetypes of Russian literature: the “little man” with his banal, everyday struggles and the “Great Russian Poet”, perceived to have God-like powers. (Mark Lipovetsky, “Kak chestny chelovek”, *Znamia*, issue 3, Moscow: 1999), retrieved from <<http://magazines.russ.ru/znamia/1999/3/lipoveck.html>>.

10 - Vladimir Sorokin, “Prigov and His Universe”, unpublished.

11 - The degree to which the Soviet state demanded to be the arbiter of aesthetic matters was made most evident in the post-Stalinist period by two infamous cases of writers being put on trial in the 1960s: Joseph Brodsky in 1964 and Andrei Siniavski in 1966.

12 - Andrei Monastyrski (Ed.), *Slovar’ terminov moskovskoi kontseptualnoi shkoly*, Moscow, 1999, p. 192.

13 - Günter Hirt and Sascha Wonders, “Dmitri A. Prigov – manipulator tekstami”, in: Ekaterina Degot (Ed.), Dmitri Aleksandrovich Prigov. *Grazhdane! Ne zabyvajte! pozhaluista!*, exh. cat., Moscow, 2008, p. 142.



**FIGURE 1. DMITRI PRIGOV, APERTURE, 1974. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST'S ESTATE**

Prigov, I would argue, was more successful than he would acknowledge in retaining this tension. Recent exhibitions have brought together large groups of his work and have made it possible to see that, at a certain crucial moment, his work in visual media started down a parallel but separate track from his literary work. Over time, the visual became a means to render visible that which lay beyond articulation even for a man of his formidable powers of speech. This was accomplished through the repeated depiction of black space – readable as both absolutely flat and infinitely deep – that I will discuss as the artist’s “eloquent abyss”.

Precisely because the visual allowed Prigov to figure – i.e., make visible – a realm beyond articulation, it is hard to guess its exact meaning. The only thing that the eloquent abyss announces certainly and insistently is its existence. The iconographic signs of mystical knowledge surrounding it might suggest that it is an ecumenical realm of spiritual transcendence – something that numerous world religions have imagined through spatial metaphors. An existentialist reading might see the realm Prigov conjured in his visual art as a void of non-being that continuously has to be given meaning. Indeed, the artist himself described his artistic motivation as rooted in part in the fear of a person who is standing in front of an abyss that he has to fill up with something. “So long as you are throwing something into it [...] you are staying afloat over the abyss. As soon as you stop trying to fill it up, you fall in.”<sup>14</sup> Finally, the relationship in Prigov’s images between the black space and everything else in, on or near it can also support a post-structuralist reading, as would befit a conceptualist. The void might be the realm of non-signification, the pre-verbal darkness which reminds Prigov, the consummate theoriser, of the ultimate hollowness at the heart of all of his constructs. (The seriality of Prigov’s images as variations on a given theme would then suggest the arbitrariness and slippage of meaning in any given picture.)<sup>15</sup> Knowing Prigov, it was likely all three and more.

What matters more for my argument is Prigov’s obsessive need to visualise a realm that conjures such readings. The existence of this realm sheds light on the meaning of freedom within Project D.A.P. The visual offered Prigov a way to account for – without verbally acknowledging them – the unknowable things that lay outside *all* the discourses that his “flickering” hypostases inhabited. More importantly, the visual – with its images that recur over and over through the years – allowed Prigov to hint at the possibility of a single, authentic vision within his oeuvre, a vision which promises (though never fully delivers) access to intense personal feelings (such as fear, hope, and yearning for both transcendence and escape). Prigov thus incorporated into his post-modern persona one activity – visual art making – that returns his viewers to the sphere of sombre spiritual sincerity. This, I believe, became Prigov’s ultimate conceptual move.

## Prigov’s Early Visual World

A few biographical facts about Prigov’s early life can help shed light on the evolution of his visual art. Prigov received his earliest artistic education as a teenager at the sculpture classes at the House of Pioneers and subsequently became a professional sculptor, graduating in 1967 from the Stroganov School of Art and Industry.<sup>16</sup> Upon finishing his studies, however, he, by his own account, moved away from visual art, returning to it only around 1973.<sup>17</sup> It was also around that time that he both started working as an official sculptor decorating children’s playgrounds and began to participate actively in the life of the artistic underground by reading his poetry. He had started writing poetry in his teens, but for a long time treated it as just a pastime.<sup>18</sup>

What changed his literary practice was a job overseeing the painting of Moscow facades that he took after leaving the Stroganov School, which gave him ample free time and reading privileges at the otherwise restricted Humanities Library of the Russian Academy of Sciences. This led to several years of intense self-guided study of topics ranging from social and literary theory to the history of philosophy and religion, both Western and Eastern. The education Prigov thus obtained profoundly reshaped his literary ambitions, and by the mid-1970s he began to emerge as a major voice on the unofficial scene. Even though his writings, of course, appeared only as *samizdat*, his reputation as a writer from that point on tended to overshadow his many other creative projects. It was only as a writer, for instance, that Prigov was described by Boris Groys in 1988 in *The Total Art of Stalinism*. Groys called Prigov a poet with a “radically postutopian position” who “openly maintains and thematises the kinship between poetic and political ideology and between the poetic and the political will to power”.<sup>19</sup>

What Groys did not note is the way in which some of Prigov’s best-known early iconic poems offer their insights not only through a pastiche of borrowed voices and cultural icons that suggest the poet’s overidentification with them. They also rely on tropes that are vividly visual and spatial, and it is often the descriptions of space that allow the poems’ “author”, characters, and readers to inhabit metaphor or discourse in a literal way. Thus rendered visible, they do not, in Prigov’s mind, require further explanation.

Clearly present in Prigov’s poetry, the idea that complex cultural constructs and deeply held beliefs can be silently explained by simply being made visible is absolutely central to Prigov’s visual art. And in thinking about Prigov’s recurring visual tropes, it is worth noting that even the earliest examples of his mature work – a series of drawings titled *Apertures* and dating to 1973-1974

**14 - Prigov quoted in Mark Lipovetsky, “Kak chestny chelovek”, *Znamja*, issue 3, Moscow: 1999, retrieved from <<http://magazines.russ.ru/znamia/1999/3/lipoveck.html>>.**

**15 - Mark Lipovetsky offers a reading along these lines of Prigov’s enormous poetic corpus, arguing that Prigov’s writing of his innumerable texts “[paradoxically] [...] affirms the impossibility of an intellectual or spiritual ordering of reality and the futility of all the various attempts to overcome the chaos of life through the creation of ideal constructs within one’s conscience, within language, or within culture.” (*ibid.*)**

**16 - The most helpful chronology of Prigov’s life currently available can be found in Degot, *Grazhdani! Ne zabyvajte, pozhлуйста!*, pp. 9-12. All biographical information in this article is drawn from this source.**

**17 - According to the account of Prigov’s close friend Boris Orlov, Prigov continued to draw throughout the period between 1967 and 1973. Based on the 2008 retrospective curated by Ekaterina Degot, one can conclude that at least some of his works from that period were colourful abstract (half geometric, half biomorphic) gouache and ink drawings (1967-1974) (*ibid.*)**

**18 - The earliest poems that Prigov included in D.A. Prigov, *Sobranie stikhov*, Vol. 1-5, Vienna: *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, 1996-2009 date to 1963, but according to the chronology cited above, Prigov first began writing poetry in 1956.**

**19 - Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, London, 2011, pp. 95, 98.**



(Fig. 1) – already announced the artist’s interest in images of openings onto an unknown and invisible place that lies beyond the picture plane. The strange spaces with a highly ambiguous sense of scale depicted in *Apertures* appear to be tunnels formed by holes drilled into a hard surface and opening onto another side that remains incomprehensible but enticing. This series, however, remained a singular one in Prigov’s oeuvre. His work during the 1970s was marked by an intertwining of the visual and the verbal that produced a remarkable body of concrete poetry unparalleled in Moscow Conceptualism. These works also became his first forays into multimediality – as manipulable objects, they bore some relationship to sculpture and existed, according to Prigov, on the boundary between text as immaterial ideas and text as material object.<sup>20</sup>

Prigov made several different groups of these objects, but the use of words, combined with an irreducible visual component, united them all. Many of those words, like the words of his changing poetic practice, were borrowed from other contexts and rearranged on the page and in space. The resultant objects thus give literal physical form to the assumptions that language in general and Soviet language in particular otherwise kept invisible. The form of the objects – which referenced conventional ways of organising information – could include a seating chart, a table of ranks or a desk calendar, a series of which Prigov started to make around 1980.<sup>21</sup> A series of empty cans whose “contents” were announced by small plaques sticking out of them also belong to this period.

In its use of space, the most interesting series of works was one called *Little Windows*, which Prigov used to literalise such metaphors as an inner essence uncovered by lifting a “veil” or a deep underlying meaning revealed by opening a window onto a new layer of reality. Thus, one work from the series makes visible a transcendent ontology hidden underneath a schematic representation of an official Soviet meeting room. Three words are layered on top of each other beneath flaps that one opens consecutively, uncovering such sequences as: Portrait / Law History Language / Breath; Chairperson / Accomplishments Circumstances / Mystery; and Window / Enemy / Non-Being. This schematisation is neutral in its appearance (one hardly expects to receive great revelations upon first seeing this piece of paper), and Prigov-the-maker leaves few traces of himself here. Yet it is notable that the work offers the ability to see beneath the surfaces of reality and intimates a world laden with metaphysical meaning, where the simplest objects stand for something else. Importantly for his future work, Prigov also conflates here discursive space with literal space, as if to draw an analogy between the ways that borrowed ideological language visibly takes material shape on the page or pages and the way it shapes the material reality of the society that lives with it.

Here it is important to note, once again, that Prigov was not alone in his interests. These works belong to the heyday of Moscow Conceptualism’s exploration of Soviet patterns of engrained ideological thought, and they are related to the uses of speech, ideology, and imagery that artists such as Ilya Kabakov, Érik Bulatov, and Komar and Melamid were also borrowing from the world around them. What is distinctive about Prigov’s work, however, aside from the elegance of its minimal means, is how explicitly and insistently his objects – the *Telegrams*, *Calendars*, *Little Windows* and *Stikhogrammy* which dominated his visual output in the mid-1970s – were already pointing to an existential or metaphysical Beyond. Consider, for instance, another “Little Window”, which entices the viewer to open a flap that addresses him with “Attention, citizen!” only to tell him, “Do not lift the veil over the mystery – for you will know horror.” Indeed, Prigov added a metaphysical note even in a piece like “In Our.../In Their...”, a work from the *Little Windows* series which satirises the rhetoric used in the USSR during the Cold War to describe the glories of “our” (Soviet) life and the horrors of “their” (capitalist) one. Surrounded by all the other flaps that reveal what happens in socialist and capitalist countries, there lies at the centre a black space that Prigov describes as “the point of absolute non-being, the metaphysical starting point from which life begins”.<sup>22</sup>

Already in the 1970s, moreover, when Prigov borrowed texts to visualise and literalise in his objects, the sources could include The Book of Genesis or the Gospel of John as easily as the icons of Soviet culture, such as the writings of Maxim Gorky and Mikhail Bulgakov or the announcements in the Moscow metro. One sees this especially in Prigov’s *Stikhogrammy* (i.e., “poetry-grams”) – pieces of paper with the same words or phrases typed out over and over again so that the words make visual shapes, or turn into jumbles of conflicting, indistinguishable characters, or both. While some show specifically Soviet rhetoric collapsing in on itself and being rendered meaningless through reiteration, others question the capacity of language as such to hold meaning securely, to say exactly what it means, and to be as exhaustive as it claims. Several of these works contain the Russian words for “no”, “nothing”, and “never” typewritten dozens of times until they turn into splotchy messes, rendering visible through “mistakes” in reiteration the material supports that language normally renders invisible. Even more poignantly, the works show that the claims of language to describe abstract nothingness inescapably require a physical (and for Prigov, visual) form in order to be comprehended.

## Into the Abyss

In the late 1970s, Prigov’s visual idiom began to shift again and seemed to bifurcate as he both drew remarkably naturalistic and sensitive still-lives of everyday objects and started to make drawings that consisted of individual words (carrying over from the earlier word-based series) enveloped by meticulously rendered abstract textured space. Prigov himself analysed this moment in his artistic development in the following way:

*In 1977-78 I started to draw various objects (cans, Keds, shells, flowers, etc.), then the problem arose of organizing space around these objects not as a real surrounding, but as an environment, a force field. [...] Gradually, the space began to consume the objects from the depiction of which everything had originally started, which at one time got compressed down to a ball in my drawings and then simply to a word-name. For a couple of years I worked with this magma-like space until it gave birth to the creatures which I’m currently discussing.<sup>23</sup>*

I will return to these creatures shortly, but it is worth first pausing to consider the space Prigov describes here, since it would become increasingly central to his visual work.<sup>24</sup> It is with the appearance of this dark, dense space of indeterminate depth, largely by itself in his drawings, that the visual and the verbal start separating in his art, though in a subtle way. Words remain a recurring motif in many (though certainly not all) of Prigov’s drawings, installations, and even videos, but it is the black space that becomes the most consistent protagonist of Prigov’s visual work. In one of his interviews, the artist seemed, in a deliberately convoluted way, to say as much, contending that the power of the appointing gesture made it possible for him to make any word have a deep, essential connection with the dark space.<sup>25</sup> Thus, when words appeared in this space, they acquired, regardless of their apparent meanings, new metaphysical ones, as if they all belonged at the bottom layer in one of the *Little Windows*, and that layer was now the only one on view.<sup>26</sup>

The tension created by black space enveloping words was central for one of Prigov’s best-known series – the works on newspapers, some of them large in scale, produced in the late 1980s (Fig. 2). “In these works,” write Günter Hirt and Sascha Wonders, “Prigov materialises virtual ‘super-images’ or ‘super-words’: covering [newspaper] pages in black paint, he leaves a portion of the surface untouched, thus forming words that seem illuminated from within.” In this way, the authors argue, Prigov explores how in Russia, “Relics of a sacral understanding of writing continued to survive in secularised form.”<sup>27</sup>

**20 - The description is drawn from a video of a personal interview recorded by the then curator at the State Tretyakov Gallery, Andrei Erofeev, during the 2005 group exhibition *Co-conspirators (Soobschniki)*.**

**21 - Deconstruction of the ways language organises knowledge and thus creates culture remained a staple of Prigov’s literary practice throughout his career.**

**22 - Andrei Erofeev and Dmitri Prigov, personal interview during the *Co-conspirators (Soobschniki)* exhibition, 2005.**

**23 - D.A. Prigov, “O bestiarii”, published originally in Cologne, Pastor #1 (January 1992), reprinted in *Pastor: sbornik izbrannykh materialov opublikovannykh v zhurnale “Pastor” 1992-2001*, Vologda, 2009, p. 27.**

**24 - Mark Lipovetsky notes that images of “metaphysical chaos [...] form the space-time coordinates of the world which [Prigov’s] ‘authors’ inhabit”. (Lipovetsky, ‘Kak chestny chelovek’).**

**25 – Prigov described the assignment of “the name” using “the appointing gesture” as: “The dynamic of the interrelationship of essence and name accessible to comprehension within our limitations or, in any particular case, some word, which is connected to its referent in a congenially essential way. The dramaturgy of these relationships is seemingly personified in the zone of visual art. [...] (In my own visual art [...] I was always interested in the transposition of any (any!) word [...] extracted from any arbitrary context (with no possibility of reconstructing it) into an abstract-visual space in such a way that it, the word, is perceived only as the name of that space and not only as the name of that space, but as some creature-inhabitant of this space, which it itself engendered. (“O bestiarii”, pp. 25-26)**

**26 - Curiously, with these works Prigov remained unique in Moscow Conceptualism, but not entirely alone. The art he made from the 1980s onwards moved away from the interests he shared with *sots-art*, but developed a greater affinity for the space of the empty white fields – the physical embodiment of the “polosa nerazlichenia” (zone of indistinguishability) – that was explored for years by the Collective Actions group.**

**27 - Hirt and Wonders, “Dmitri A. Prigov – manipulator tekstami”, pp. 141, 142.**



**FIGURE 2. DMITRI PRIGOV, AGROPROM, 1989. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST'S ESTATE**

Prigov's choice of actual newspapers to bear his drawn words atop them suggests that Prigov's growing interest in the metaphysical did not immediately take him away from the social. In this series, he created on a larger scale than before a metanarrative commentary on the workings of Soviet ideology. For Soviet citizens of Prigov's generation, newspapers represented sites of propaganda at its densest, and Prigov's interventions revealed them as such. The works suggested a deep level on which the newspapers presented not secular facts, but sacred truths – something that, like the Scripture of yore, demanded to be taken on faith. To intensify the effect, Prigov frequently set his drawings atop *Pravda* – the official daily of the Communist Party with its name meaning “truth” – and occasionally wrote the floating words using *titla* – the over-text abbreviation marks reserved in Old Church Slavonic for writing sacred names and concepts.<sup>28</sup> Occasionally, Prigov also took letters (usually vowels) out of words altogether, without re-inserting them using the *titla*. Thus, he not only alluded to older Russian forms of orthography, but also, as with the *Stikhogrammy*, defamiliarised language as such, pointing to the arbitrary and tenuous connection between written signifier and its usually multivalent signified.<sup>29</sup>

The degree to which Prigov's canonical works emerge out of his embeddedness in his cultural environment can be highlighted through telling comparison with another well-known series involving newspapers, namely Joseph Kosuth's germinal *Art as Idea as Idea* (1966-1970). Created in an effort “to avoid the reification of the art object as a thing, even if an immaterial one”, the works consisted of text published in advertising space that Kosuth purchased in newspapers and periodicals. In that space, “he [...] printed without explanation a list of synonyms for an abstract term.” Three of the earliest terms for which Kosuth reproduced the thesaurus entries were “existence, time, and order”. Later, when Kosuth was asked to participate in an exhibition in Bern in 1969, he also published synonyms for “space” in the city's newspapers.<sup>30</sup>

I mention this particular series of works because, as Kosuth's choice of terms suggests, he and Prigov clearly had shared interests, both in the use of the Duchampian “appointing gesture” to decide what could become art and in the concepts they wanted to explore. Against this background of shared interests, the contrast between Kosuth's purist preoccupation with the maximally dematerialised and demystified idea and Prigov's much messier artifacts reveals the degree to which cultural context could inflect equally conceptual practices. For Kosuth, who could freely publish his entries in *The New York Times*, *Artforum*, and *London Times*, the newspaper page was a welcome alternative to the gallery. It served as a transparent support for a mechanically produced public announcement of his refusal to materialise abstract ideas. None of this was true for Prigov – disrupting the art market or the ideology of the white cube was a non-issue

in Moscow and the only way in which he could intervene in the newspaper was manually. Rather than being a transparent support, the newspaper was so layered with meanings that focusing on any given word would result in plumbing great cultural depths.

Given these differences in their circumstances, it is unsurprising that an artist like Kosuth and an artist like Prigov would respond differently to the common goal that Kosuth articulated when he proclaimed that “the only role for an artist in 1969 was to investigate critically the nature of art itself.” For Kosuth, this led to the next conclusion that “One cannot do this through painting and sculpture [...] because as particular forms of art they assume the validity of a general conception of art.”<sup>31</sup> Yet for Prigov, free from the demands of an art market for paintings and sculptures, what made equal sense was not an ascetic disavowal of traditional media (even though he created no paintings and relatively few sculptures), but a maximalist gesture of embracing as many media as possible and working across them in a way that dramatically amplified the latent metaphysical dimensions of terms like “existence”, “time”, “order”, and “space”. Indeed, in the spirit of his life-long expansion into ever new media, over time Prigov also started to use newspapers to make installations. He began these projects in the late 1980s, often while working abroad, notably in Germany. While many of the newspapers used in these often room-sized works were merely arranged in large mounds on the floor, the installations inevitably centred on the depiction (in some form) of Prigov's black space, as well as the other evolving elements of his personal iconography, which I discuss below. Some of the most elaborate of these installations include *Russian Snow* (1990), *Snow Space* (1991), and *Winter Russian Journey* (1994).

The newspaper works were novel in the way they brought together in Prigov's work the metanarrative with the metaphysical, giving a new prominence to the latter. On the one hand, they were undeniably of their time and showed the artist's specifically Soviet path to the post-modern insight that any discourse is self-serving, self-enclosed, self-sustaining, and historically contingent, its axioms not tied to any essential, universal, eternal Truth.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, they also transcended the present as Prigov's black dense space signified and invoked a timeless realm of inchoate forces that took the viewer to a pre-Enlightenment world where simply naming things still held the promise of revealing their true essences and defeating chaos.<sup>33</sup>

Looking across the whole series, one can also easily see that this visual component was primary to the works' meaning. As Prigov made scores of drawings on newspapers, the words and objects in them changed, but the dark space remained the signature element. It was the abyss that Vladimir Sorokin describes when he writes:

*The abyss, the abyss [...]. Every poet has his own special relationship to it. Prigov used to say that he always felt*

**28 - The discrepancy between *Pravda's* name and its contents was also thematised earlier, in 1975, by Komar and Melamid in their performance and resulting installation titled *The Essence of Truth*.**

**29 - This defamiliarisation is something that Prigov also practiced in his oral performances, where his readings of his poetry and prose often morphed into glossolalia, which similarly offers both a semiotic insight about the instability of meaning in language and an allusion to older spiritual practices.**

**30 - Bruce Altschuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century*, Berkeley, 1994, pp. 241-242.**

**31 - *Ibid.***

**32 - In a 2004 radio interview with Pavel Lembersky, Prigov articulated his oft-repeated position on truth: “There is no Heavenly Truth, only limited, conditional truths, each of which is the truth within the boundaries of its own axioms.” Available online at <http://www.metpo.com/articles/detail.asp?iData=123&iCat=852&iChannel=2&nChannel=Articles>.**

**33 - Prigov was very aware of the importance of periodisation to historical metanarratives, and he also addressed in interviews the issue of multiple temporalities existing simultaneously.**

himself falling into the abyss and would try to stem the free fall by pelting it with art. Everything he dashed down into it would cause a reactive jet stream to shoot back up, buoying its creator in the air.<sup>34</sup>

Paradoxically, though, the more Prigov filled his abyss with work, the more the abyss also showed up in them like an ever-expanding black hole. This happened throughout the 1990s: in his *Plaques* series<sup>35</sup>, Prigov plunged found phrases, random concepts, and the names of his contemporaries into/out of the darkness. In the *Untitled (Chairs)* series (1996), chairs holding Prigov's symbolic objects float atop circular abysses while smaller black openings appear above them. The same can be seen in the *Stylites* series, where spheres of various sizes become strange "pillar saints" hovering above and below the abyss. In the 1990s and 2000s, he yet again contrasted timely found images with the timeless abyss by appropriating with his drawings the pages of glossy magazine ads, as well as reproductions of Old Master and historic Russian paintings.

Not only words and objects, but also fantastical beings inhabited Prigov's abyss. These are found in the *Bestiary* series, which depicts the "creatures" Prigov referenced in the quote above when describing their emergence out of the dark space. Painstakingly rendered, usually with nothing more than a pen; fleshly yet ethereal, floating in dark space and holding mysterious objects; surrounded by cryptic initials and partial, usually incomprehensible utterances, the creatures of *Bestiary* were said by Prigov to be "spirit-portraits" of his friends in the literary and artistic underground, as well as of important figures from cultural history. The emergence of the series in the early 1980s marked the point at which Prigov further turned away from exploring the forms of thought particular to the Soviet "aeon" – away from what Andrej Zorin saw in Prigov's poetic *Soviet Texts* as "the pleasure [...] found in the game of domesticating a monstrous system".<sup>36</sup> Instead, the interest in taming systems by seeing to their inner essences remained, but turned now to deeper historic time. Hence, *Bestiary* is full of new "monsters" whose chimerical appearance and surrounding world seems cobbled together from conventionalised symbolism traditionally associated with depictions of a metaphysical "reality".<sup>37</sup>

From around the mid-1980s, Prigov's dark, otherworldly space began to be supplemented by a personal iconography, heraldic notation, and colour symbolism with a strange feel to them: they are almost "medieval" in the rigidity, elaborateness, and the obscurity of their codification of meaning. The colour scheme consists of black, white and red, with the occasional later addition of green and blue. "Black is the colour of concealment, metaphysical mystery, and magical impenetrability," Prigov explained. "White is the colour of energy and streaming. Red colour [is] life, *vita*," and Prigov usually depicted it as a red liquid filling up a wine glass.<sup>38</sup> Black, white, and red, of course, were, as Prigov noted in the same text, also the colours typical of both Russian icons and the early 20th century Russian avant-garde (particularly Suprematism and Constructivism). In his late works, Prigov explored this connection to the Russian avant-garde even further, invoking Malevich's name as a mantra. He also mythologised Malevich's *Vagina*, in numerous drawings and installations proposing an affinity between Malevich's *Black Square* (which "birthed" both pure abstraction and "modern" art in Russia) and his own black abyss. Indeed, Malevich, who wanted to distill the essence of the Russian spiritual tradition into pure form to make a utopian modern art, was the perfect forefather for Prigov's own mixed artistic temporalities.

Other iconographic tropes that Prigov used to describe the relationship between this world and the otherworldly included an egg – "a symbol of the primary cosmological substance" when unbroken and of "personal shelter and the privatisation of the cosmos" when empty; a drawn back or transparent curtain as a cipher for a revealed or concealed mystery; the ever-watchful eye, standing in for "superhuman vision [and] the presence of a higher power";

balls and spheres of various sizes, which seem to represent self-enclosed, opaque individual entities; and black and white squares as "symbols of the structural and intelligible force of a cosmos that is material and spiritual".<sup>39</sup>

Aside from the chimeras that populated the *Bestiary* series, the subjects of Prigov's other series of installations and drawings frequently included the plumber and the cleaning lady – humble people who devote themselves to service and unsung struggle against entropy in the name of a divinely sanctioned order. Just as frequently, hagiographic inscriptions of names, particularly those of Wagner and Malevich, became protagonists in their own right, mythologising the heroic period of Western artistic modernity.<sup>40</sup> In later years, a teddy bear often showed up, seemingly as a stand-in for childhood and youth. Prigov's symbols, moreover, also made frequent references to non-Western cultures. Some of the creatures of *Bestiary* have chakras marked on their bodies; in the 2000s, Prigov occasionally used Chinese characters to write words in his drawings and made a video that depicts a pair of hands opening up, one after another, a series of transparent sheets of plastic until a drawing of the word "Tao" (transcribed in Russian as "dao") floating on a black background comes into view, is revealed and then covered up again.<sup>41</sup>

## Metanarratives and Metaphysics

It is important to clarify at this point that in the context of his work inside the Moscow Conceptualist circle, Prigov's visual art made from the 1980s onwards could – and to some did – easily appear to be in questionable taste. Prigov was no stranger to aesthetic animosity – his introduction of the Militiaman (i.e., policeman) and other profane Soviet topics into poetry in the 1970s scandalised older members of the cultural underground to whom all things Soviet were anathema and the spiritual in art was sacrosanct. Yet with his visual work – with its suggestions of transcendence and a codified visual language that replaced Soviet mystification with a global pastiche of older symbols – Prigov stood to be misunderstood not by those with whom he disagreed, but by his own cultural milieu.

The poet Lev Rubinstein, one of Prigov's closest friends, has described how within the Moscow Conceptualist circle, talk of the spiritual was seen as painfully embarrassing and was referred to only as "dukhovka" – the Russian word for "oven", which reduced the lofty "dukhovnost'" (spirituality) to a domestic appliance.<sup>42</sup> Prigov too could be flippant on the subject, acknowledging, for example, that, "[O]f course, [the works in *Bestiary*] do have a certain hint of kitsch (which I aim for, having a reasonably broad array of means of mystifying not only the viewer, but also myself)."<sup>43</sup>

In interviews, he also downplayed the iconographic significance and aesthetic qualities of his works by focusing attention on the time-consuming, meditative process by which he made them.<sup>44</sup> The process of creation mattered more than the product. People who knew Prigov do note that he drew obsessively and constantly – for hours – when watching television and even when carrying on conversations, so that the movement of the hand was, indeed, an incessant part of his life. The works thus could be seen simply as traces of the artist's need for activity that became art thanks to his appointing gesture within Project D.A.P.<sup>45</sup>

This, though, is what one might call a conceptualist's way of having his cake and eating it too. It allowed Prigov to hold on to the dense metaphysical meanings he insistently conjured up in his visual art and disavow these meanings at the same time, citing as justification, paradoxically, the intense, obsessive labour he put into materialising them. Yet this explanation does not answer the pressing question of what drove the artist to make this particular kind of work, not to mention make it consistently over decades in media where the artist – despite his attempts – could not insert and foreground the metatext that would alert viewers to his desired interpretation of Project D.A.P. This, perhaps more than anything, differentiates Prigov's art from his poetry,

**34 - Vladimir Sorokin, "Prigov and His Universe", in: Alla Rosenfeld and Kirill Svetlyakov (Eds.), *Dmitry Prigov. From Renaissance to Conceptualism and Beyond*, exh. cat., Moscow, 2014.**

**35 - The Russian name for the series – *Tablichki* – can also be translated as "signs" or "little tablets".**

**36 - D.A. Prigov, *Sovetskie teksty 1979-84*, with an Introduction by A. Zorin, St Petersburg, 1997, p. 12.**

**37 - For more on this, see Dmitriy Golyenko-Volfson, "Chitaia Prigova: neodnoznachnoe i neochevidnoe", in: E. Dobrenko, I. Kukulin, M. Lipovetsky and M. Majofis (Eds.), *Nekanonicheskij klassik: Dmitri Aleksandrovich Prigov (1940-2007)*, Moscow, 2010, pp. 145-180.**

**38 - Vitaly Patsyukov (Ed.), *Posredine Mirozdaniya*, exh. cat., Moscow, 2008, p. 46.**

**39 - For an extensive explanation of his heraldic system, see Prigov, "O bestiarii", pp. 29-31.**

**40 - "Hagiography, new hagiography – that is what I have a fuzzy vision of as the true answer to the call of history," Prigov wrote in a 1984 text (Patsyukov, *Posredine Mirozdaniya*, p. 11.).**

**41 - The scope of this essay does not allow me to discuss Prigov's performance works in addition to his work in the more traditional visual arts, but it is worth noting that parallel to developing his elaborate visual language, Prigov also moved beyond performing readings of his own poetic texts and started staging more elaborate performance art events. Even though Prigov's performances were clearly related to his visual art (in their interest in ritual as an older form of knowledge, for instance), they were also notably different. They were more aligned with Prigov's "flickering" literary persona, which also explored the possibilities of order and chaos in language through the extremes of both highly convoluted and very elemental speech. More importantly, the performances were fundamentally inflected by the assumption that the performer was temporarily embodying a character – a quality that, as I have been arguing, is not true of Prigov's visual art.**

**42 - For Prigov's own explanation of his circle's dismissal of "dukhovka", see Shapoval and Prigov, *Portretnaia galereia D.A.P.*, p. 80.**

**43 - Prigov, "O bestiarii", p. 28.**

**44 - In the same interview as the one cited in the previous note, Prigov reflected, "Making art for me is a kind of meditation. When I draw for five or so hours in a row, after an hour, I simply disappear, and then, after coming out of this state, I look at the drawing and cannot remember how some parts of it were drawn." (Ibid., pp. 107-108)**

**45 - The obsessiveness expressed in the drawings through evidence of extended, ceaseless motion can also be found in many of Prigov's prose texts, such as, for example, "Open Letter" (1984), republished in *Posredine mirozdanija* (pp. 8-15).**

which was always prefaced by his signature Forewords, now anthologised in their own right.<sup>46</sup>

Instead, Prigov's visual work was left to its own devices when facing the public eye, vulnerable and exposed to the interpretation it so readily invites that its maker is sincerely making metaphysical claims and asking metaphysical questions. And it is in this way that it made visible, without having to articulate verbally, the full extent of the tension in Prigov's work between the metanarrative and the metaphysical. It was in Prigov's visual art that the power of the two interpretive forces was acknowledged as that of equals. Rather than treating the metaphysical as yet another kind of metanarrative, another story Prigov dredged up and channelled from different layers of Culture, his art pushed to the limit his own and his circle's ability to accept the metaphysical as an alternative mode of knowledge – or, perhaps more accurately, not-knowing, which, as Prigov showed, escaped his abilities to describe it. "Culture," said Prigov, "unlike religion, understands exactly what it is concerned with: it is concerned with penultimate truths. The ultimate ones are dealt with by religious teachers, founders of schools and esoteric systems. Art is a school of appointment and preparation, opening eyes and raising awareness. Any further steps are to be taken on one's own account."<sup>47</sup> In his own art, Prigov seemed to want to take steps – temporarily but frequently – into the territory of ultimate truths, but did so, given his self-proclaimed title as "culture worker", in conspicuous silence.

This idea is also supported by Prigov's complicated views on aforementioned "self-mystification", which he at once avowed and disavowed by disparaging it in others but recuperating it for himself as part of a self-conscious practice. Prigov the rational thinker claimed not to object to mystification so long as it was done with self-awareness and in a controlled way in the realm of art and culture. To this he added:

*Rationality is easy for me precisely because I know the sphere [i.e., art] where I disappear completely. This problem is very relevant for Russia. Here, there is a passion for mystifying everything that should be clear. There does, indeed, exist a level of mystery, but one has to have the honesty to figure out everything that should be figured out. We constantly observe attempts to move to the level of mystery things that are as simple as hammering a nail [...] The mystical fog, which gets sprayed onto even the simplest of actions, gives man the right to become spiritually and intellectually lazy. And this constitutes the great dishonesty and fatal flaw of [Russian] culture.<sup>48</sup>*

What seems to remain unspoken, undescribed, and passed over in silence here is the nature of the mystery Prigov mentions; crucially, though, he does aver its existence and seems to suggest that exploring it in a private sphere where one "disappears completely" – the phrase evokes a meditative or spiritual experience and clearly describes the role that visual art played for Prigov – is an act of great personal honesty.

The seriality of Prigov's work further complicates matters; numerous reiterations of the same motif can point to the arbitrariness of each individual image. Yet it seems significant that in the group of works where Prigov's seriality went into overdrive – whole rooms can be filled with these particular drawings – there is one element that unites almost all the works: it is still the gaping black abyss, now more prominent and clearly defined than ever. I am speaking of the vast corpus of Prigov's *Phantom Installations* – sketches for possible installations of which Prigov made seemingly hundreds before his death, even though only a handful were ever realised as actual installations.<sup>49</sup>

All of the works share the same starting point – they depict a room with blank white walls, three of which the viewer can see (while the absence of the fourth invites one to imagine standing in the room or, at least, to witness what is happening there the way one does in the theatre). The rooms contain arrangements of structures and objects, many of which are familiar from Prigov's earlier works: there are balls, teddy bears and glasses of liquid sitting

on chairs; piles of papers covering the room, much as newspapers in Prigov's earlier installations did; plumbers and cleaning ladies having visions; and the names of Malevich and Wagner slithering across the walls in black areoles. There are also new motifs, like the square beams that prop up the ceiling in one sub-series but also collapse, taking the room down with them. Rope also features frequently in these drawings, often disappearing into unknown spaces above the ceiling or below the floor. Yet the one common element that defines the series consists of gaping black holes that rend one or more of the pristine white surfaces. Collectively, the rooms are "an entirely Platonic model of the world, the white dream of existence rent by a black abyss" as Vladimir Sorokin has put it.<sup>50</sup> They are thus the perfect visual distillations of the metanarrative – the endless elegant mental constructs about the inner workings of culture, which Prigov so often proposed himself – being mercilessly intruded upon by the black void of the metaphysical.<sup>51</sup>

Its meaning remains as obscure as ever, but its presence is at its most insistent. It is also so clearly rendered in *Phantom Installations* that they take us, surprisingly, right back to the beginnings of Prigov's artistic career, suggesting that this tension in his art was a life-long one. Now that the void becomes defined as part of three-dimensional space, these works echo the *Apertures* series from the early 1970s, intimating that Prigov's interest in passages to the "other side" predated or arose simultaneously with his conceptual practice, though the other side seems to have become much darker over the years.<sup>52</sup> Even more interestingly, the *Phantom Installations* drawings bear an uncanny resemblance to the description of the stage that appears in an unpublished play Prigov wrote c. 1977.<sup>53</sup> In the play, Prigov-as-director describes the actor he needs for his play:

*I need a quite particular kind of actor for all this [...] I need him to jingle, clown around, and joke, listening all the while to something inside himself, something not quite understandable and light, or, I would say, light-sounding. So that, rapt by this something, he might freeze in the middle of a trick, and only one finger on, let's say, his left hand, not having yet heard this emanation, soft as bells in a blizzard, would alone continue performing the trick by inertia. This is the actor I always need.<sup>54</sup>*

When we consider that Prigov was not only the director of the life-long Project D.A.P., but also its only actor, this description seems to be an intimate glimpse into the inner workings of Prigov's "flickering" and suggests that he always had a need for a silent space in which he could listen to an inner voice even while performing the "tricks" of channelling the voices of others. Within his oeuvre, it is Prigov's visual art that provided that silent space and allowed for the "listening [...] to something inside himself", in contrast to his poetic and performance-based heteroglossia. One sees this, finally, in the video art works made late in his career, in the 2000s, most if not all of which are silent save for music and include such meditative pieces focused on repetitive action as *Triptych*, *Evangelist*, and *Sisyphus*.

By way of conclusion, I would like to introduce the reader to what is probably Prigov's most peculiar contribution to the lexicon of Moscow Conceptualism – the phrase "proiti bokovym gitlerom" ("to sneak in through a sideways Hitler"), which Prigov coined in the late 1980s and which denotes bringing an idea into culture obliquely and in "low doses" because it would never be able to get through if presented in its full force.<sup>55</sup> That Prigov needed a term for such an operation strikes me as incredibly revealing about his artistic project, since he himself had for decades been sneaking a belief in the possibility of an unfathomable, metaphysical Beyond into a heavily theorised conceptual practice. This, in fact, was Prigov's ultimate conceptual move – to include in his body of work images that one would not expect from a conceptualist and that give the "flickering" artist a way to speak to the private and the incomprehensible, which lay beyond description, through visions of the silent yet eloquent abyss.

**46 - D.A. Prigov, *Sbornik predvedomlenii k raznoobraznym vescham*, Moscow, 1996.**

**47 - Quoted in Dmitri Ozerkov, "Where is Prigov?", in: *Dmitri Prigov*, exh. cat. for the exhibition *Dmitri Prigov: Dmitri Prigov*, organised as part of the parallel programme of the 54th Venice Biennale, co-produced by the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, the Ca' Foscari University, Venice, the Dmitri Prigov Foundation, and the Barbarian Art Gallery, Zürich, 2011, p. 211.**

**48 - Shapoval and Prigov, "Portretnaia galereia D.A.P.", p. 108 and available online at <<http://www.intelros.org/drevo/prigov2.htm>>.**

**49 - The earliest of these were made in the 1990s, but it was in the 2000s that Prigov really delved into their creation on a massive scale.**

**50 - Sorokin, "Prigov and His Universe".**

**51 - In relation to Prigov's installations, Ekaterina Degot has argued that what Prigov so often reveals in them is the "meat of space" – the kind of other-worldly magma which I have also described that oozes out of the hatches that the artist opens up for it. (Degot, *Grazhdane! Ne zabyvajtes, pozhalusta!*, pp. 53, 59).**

**52 - Dmitri Ozerkov makes a similar suggestion in Ozerkov, 'Where is Prigov', p. 87.**

**53 - The play was first published in the catalogue of Prigov's first posthumous retrospective, curated by Ekaterina Degot in 2008. It is Degot who tentatively dated the manuscript, titled *A Play on Stage*, to 1977. (Degot, "Grazhdane! Ne zabyvajtes, pozhalusta!", p. 52).**

**54 - Ibid., p. 16.**

**55 - Monastyrski, *Slovar terminov moskovskoi kontseptualnoi shkoly*, p. 194.**

# Verbo- visuality (c.2007)

The binding together of the verbal and the visual came about, it would appear, with the very first ritual practices of humankind, when they served a single goal – to transport a person into a transformed state of consciousness (akin to other hallucinatory, performance-based, meditative practices). Later, their connection changed its form according to concrete cultural and historical traditions, with this connection almost completely interrupted when book printing came about. Here verblivity gained almost complete priority, as it was within the confines of the verbal that key ideas, utopias, ambitions for power, philosophical systems, along with legal and civil institutions were formed. It must be noted that the archaic connection between the verbal and the visual, which for an incredibly long time existed in the form of hieroglyphic calligraphy, is undergoing a serious crisis within the limits of informational culture.

The new spark of interest in the interrelation and interpenetration of the verbal and the visual was notable at the beginning of the 20th century, when within the limits of a precipitously urbanising culture, city space became unbelievably populated and clogged with billboards, announcements, slogans and so on, which became an essential part of the city environment. Accordingly, there was a turn towards the old traditional examples of similar symbioses – *luboks*\*, pub signs, inscriptions on walls and on fences. But, on the whole, these were of either a decorative or propagandistic and agitational character. The latter, aimed at stirring the vast uneducated masses to social action, amounted to the visualisation of a verbal space.

It wasn't until the 1960s, in the wake of the criticism of social utopias and ideologies, that this problem returned, this time in the highly segmented and thematised conceptualism, which subsequently proliferated and definitively established itself in all its various postmodernist dialects\*. It was the critique of language that became the overarching reason for testing visual languages by introducing verbal elements into the visual space. Actually, the verbal, as the principal carrier of narratives and utopias, was also tested and critiqued. Of

course, the use of any material cannot happen without a certain (and sometimes very meaningful) admiration and love for it. So, in fact, the works were always located on the border of ambiguous interpretations. Moreover, it is impossible not to mention that undoubtedly the magical aura of the written and, in fact, the spoken word, endured within the very same performances, actions and installations.

I must note that it was visual art, rather than literature, that became the active testing ground for various kinds of languages and ideologies. This was perhaps because it was precisely the writer's word that had been the carrier of heroic and ideologised statements par excellence. I won't discuss the problem of the domination of visual art within the sphere of the radical, and its particularly successful market integration via such radical practices.

Basically, the ways of using the verbal within visual spaces are well known. These are titles, commentaries or quasi-commentaries, sometimes completely replacing the visual object and occupying its place and status. In other cases, words are placed on the painting, entering into complex relationships with its space and image. Words could also appear in their separateness, severed from the context and the possibility of narrative deployment as self-existing beings, names, logoi. They might have imitated certain slogans, mottoes and advertisements.

Following this, with the general mixing of genres and even forms of art, the practice of using works within visual objects became self-evident. But, in general, it took on a decorative character. This is particularly true of our time, given the weakening critical tone and desire for experiments and radicalism. In its appearance, this form of symbiosis of the verbal and the visual is read as an appellation to the so-called phenomenon of the "gesamtkunstwerk", from which we can read the Wagnerian meaning of the anthropological unity of the cultural gesture, the particular components of which are allocated into different areas only because of specific cultural and historical traditions.

by D.A.P.

Citizens!

You understand perfectly what I have been  
telling you here over and over again -  
it's all true!

Dmitry Aleksanych

Граждане!

Вы же отлично понимаете, о чем я вам  
здесь беспрерывно твержу - все прав-  
да!

Дмитрий Алексанч

Citizens!

After all, what weirdos we all are,  
you and I!

Dmitry Aleksanych

Граждане

Чистота намерений порождает и чис-  
тоту окружения нашего!

Дмитрий Алексанч

Citizens!

A tree is innocent and pure, it doesn't  
even anticipate evil!

Dmitry Aleksanych

Граждане!

Дерево невинно и чисто, у него даже  
нет предчувствия зла!

Дмитрий Алексанч

Citizens!

A cat may cross your path, but surely  
you are also crossing its path!

Dmitry Aleksanych

Граждане!

Кошка перебегает дорогу вам, но  
ведь и вы пересекаете путь ее!

Дмитрий Алексанч

# Dmitri Prigov, *Addresses to Citizens, 1985–87*

Citizens!

The sky is sparkling, whilst you walk with  
your heads bent to the ground – wake up!

Dmitry Aleksanych

Граждане!

Небо сверкает, а вы идете, голову к  
земле пригнув – очнитесь!

Дмитрий Алексанч

Citizens!

Citizens, my beloved citizens!

Dmitry Aleksanych

Граждане!

Граждане, граждане вы мои любимые!

Дмитрий Алексанч





Citizens!

Love and the bustle of life have kept  
sickness at bay!

Dmitry Aleksanych

Граждане!

Любовь и суета жизненная болезнь  
оттянули!

Дмитрий Алексаныч





# SISYPHUS

(2004)

**It is common knowledge that a perpetual motion machine is possible only in a space that is unaffected by any force and that exerts no force of its own. I don't know whether such a thing is possible. Other than in heaven. But there, it is common knowledge who the Perpetual Machine Machine is.**

**Any considered and unconsidered action, in the end, takes place under the influence of multiformed backgrounds, fields, particles and noises. And in our case, it is enough to take the pointless and endless pouring back and forth of water into and out of a cup, for in the end, a meaning is found, which lies in the discovery of the meaninglessness of any ambitions and hopes of eternity.**

**by D.A.P.**

Dmitri

Prigov's

“Shimmering”:

**Daniil Leiderman**

# Within the Image

# and Without it

**D**mitri's Prigov's concept of "shimmering" is one of the many terms developed in the course of his collaboration with the Moscow Conceptual circle during the 1970s and 80s. The circle sought and created many such terms to describe their activities with specificity. "Shimmering" was used fairly widely, occasionally appearing in different formulations, such as Kabakov's "Not-Getting-Stuckedness", but with a consistent meaning.<sup>1</sup> It describes a strategic counter-ideology for evading and preempting authoritative discourse. It is a strategy of principled tergiversation between irreconcilable artistic and ideological discourses, such as the Russian avant-garde and Soviet Socialist Realism. Shimmering moves from profound investment in an artwork, or thorough identification with a given political position, to utter detachment, critical distance, and merciless analysis; from an earnest investment in a given position's binary opposite, and then back again. It is a trajectory intended to prevent or preempt the consolidation of an authoritative voice or artwork.<sup>2</sup> In his artworks of the 1990s, Prigov frequently effected shimmering between political, artistic and especially, as an added twist, metaphysical discourses.

Prigov's 1990s series of untitled works often called "drafts of installations" and identified by a significant detail ("with a cleaning lady", "with an eye", etc.) offers an example of this metaphysical shimmering. These works represent a ritualistic space which is occasionally attended by a cleaning lady, who seems to participate in the rituals. This space sometimes contains glasses of wine, curtains, altar-like forms, floating eyes and other paraphernalia associated with religious imagery in Western art. One consistent factor is the presence of a solid black form, which takes on different shapes, most of them openings of some sort, allowing egress or ingress into the space. In several works, this black form shapes the pupil of the floating eyes; in others it is a literal opening, such as a hatch or hole. In others yet it is a floating formless shape or a blackboard, both containing a word. Numerous critics have noted that Prigov created these black shapes with individual strokes of the pen, representing an enormous investment of time and energy.

It is with these black forms that Prigov introduces shimmering into a transcendental discourse. The surrealist or metaphysical imagery within these works prompts ambitious interpretations, which the various signifiers of Western religious imagery prime into overt anticipation of the sacred. The role of the black forms within the images as

venues or gazes out of the image explicitly offers them up as signifiers of the sacred, and Prigov's obvious investment of time and labour in making them bolsters this interpretation. The works thus make a two-fold claim: that they clearly hold some metaphysical meaning, and that this meaning is somehow within the dark forms. It is these claims that create the red herring upon which the shimmering relies.

Inevitably, it becomes clear to the spectator that the mystery is fundamentally closed to them, that no image in the series reveals anything final about any other image. Inevitably, too, the black form shifts from the ultimate signifier of the hidden, revelatory truth, and becomes a literal representation of murk, of the absence of clarity, of a splatter of ink blocking meaning. But then it becomes obvious that it is not a splatter at all, but the slow and methodical work of Prigov's pen, and again the blackness necessitates a graspable but eliding meaning. Boris Groys directly described this process in his article "Dmitry Prigov: Ghosts of Chaos", where he interpreted the images as representing a negotiation with an essential existential chaos.<sup>3</sup> I fully follow Groys' interpretation, but for me what is crucial is not the content of the negotiation itself, but rather the shimmering structure of the works: the effort to mislead the audience into meaningful revelation, which sabotages itself for obfuscating nonsense, which sabotages itself for meaningful revelation, and so on in perpetuity. Similar formal structures hedge Prigov's numerous portraits from the series *Bestiaries*, by simultaneously prompting the spectator to try to find reasons for recognising the portrait as a given individual (facial features, meaningful objects), only to inevitably conclude that the strange, long-snouted creatures don't depict the people they represent at all, before inevitably again trying to find the thread of meaning which is obviously there or must be, given the unity and consistency of the images and Prigov's project as a whole.

It is this effort to trick the audience in finding and losing meaning, into convincing them that the author holds the truth, betraying this conviction, and betraying the betrayal, that constitutes shimmering. And, in all cases, shimmering serves both to disarm the discourse it both produces and evades, and to disarm the author of any claim to ultimate authority and power. It is only here that the discourse is that of contact with the sacred as a whole, and here the ultimate authorial authority is disarmed through an insistent and willfully impotent quest to represent it as divinely omnipotent.

**1 Ilya Kabakov "Not-Getting-Stuckedness," in *Dictionary of the Terms of the Moscow Conceptualist School*, 62-3.**

**2 Dmitrii Prigov, "Shimmering," in *Словарь терминов московской концептуальной школы* (Dictionary of the Terms of the Moscow Conceptual School), ed. Andrei Monastyrsky (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 1999), 58-59. Hereafter, if not indicated, all translations from the Russian are mine.**

**3 Groys, Boris. "Dmitrii Prigov: prizraki khao-sa," 2016, no. 97, *Khudozhestvennyi zhurnal*, <http://moscowartmagazine.com/issue/19/article/279>**



# Colophon

This publication accompanies the exhibition **Dmitri Prigov. Theatre of Revolutionary Action** at Calvert 22 Space in London, on view from 13 October to 17 December 2017. Curated by Elizaveta Butakova-Kilgarriff, the show culminates Calvert 22 Foundation's year-long season dedicated to marking the centenary of the Russian Revolution and is the first posthumous solo exhibition of Dmitri Prigov's work in the UK. Presented in partnership with the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, the Hermitage Foundation UK and the Dmitri Prigov Foundation. Supported by the Blavatnik Family Foundation.

Curator: Elizaveta Butakova Kilgarriff  
Curatorial advice: Ekaterina Eloshvili, Dmitri Ozerkov, Andrey Prigov  
Programme Manager: Will Strong  
Authors: Elizaveta Butakova Kilgarriff, D.A.P., Sam Goff, Ksenya Gurshtein and Daniil Leiderman  
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Credits: p. 4 – 5: Courtesy of the Artist's Estate; p. 12 – 13: Courtesy of the Artist's Estate and the Prigov Foundation; p. 15: Installation shot of *Heavens (Series with Brooms)*, 2000s/2017. Mixed-media installation built on site. Courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg. Photo credit: Nat Urazmetova; p. 16 – 17: Dmitri Prigov, *Cleaning Woman and Angels*, 2000s/2017. Triptych. Hand coloured etching, E.A. Courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg and the Prigov Foundation; p. 18 – 19: *Heavens (Series with Brooms)*, 2000s/2017. Hand coloured etching, E.A. Courtesy of the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg and the Prigov Foundation; p. 30 – 31, 33: Dmitri Prigov. *Addresses to Citizens*, 1985-1987. English translation by Elizaveta Butakova-Kilgarriff. Courtesy of the Artist's Estate and the Prigov Foundation; p. 32: Installation photos. Photo credit: Stephen White; p. 34 – 35: Dmitri Prigov, Iraida Yusupova, Alexander Dolgin. *Sisyphus*, 2004. Media-opera, 13'4"; p. 38: Private view photos. Photo credit: Nat Urazmetova

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**Calvert 22 Foundation is a not-for-profit organisation whose mission is to nurture and celebrate the contemporary culture and creativity of the New East – eastern Europe, the Balkans, Russia and Central Asia – enriching perceptions of the region and furthering international understanding.**

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