

# Prigov and the *Gesamtkunstwerk*

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I have entitled my article “Prigov and the *Gesamtkunstwerk*” with conscious reference to Boris Groys’s famous work *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin*.<sup>1</sup> For Groys, however, *Gesamtkunstwerk* was more of a metaphor than an operational category. Not by chance did he retreat from this key concept in the Russian edition of the book, entitling it *The Stalin Style*.<sup>2</sup> *Gesamtkunstwerk* is not, of course, a style. And the difficulty of translating this German word into Russian is far from the only problem.

Richard Wagner’s original concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* was articulated in his essays “Art and Revolution” and “The Artwork of the Future” (both written in 1849), which had laid the foundation for the epic operatic genre, vigorously promoted by the composer. However, these attempts at definition already contain diverse, if not self-contradictory, features. A contemporary interpreter isolates the following four: an “inter- or multimedial union of different arts in relation to a comprehensive vision of the world and society”; an “implicit and explicit theory of the ideal union of the arts”; a “closed worldview, combining a social-utopian, historical-philosophical, or metaphysical religious image of the whole with a radical critique of the existing society and culture”; and a “projection of an aesthetic-social or aesthetic-religious utopia, which employs the power of art to articulate its premises and as an aesthetic means of social transformation.”<sup>3</sup>

The given definitional heterogeneity allows scholars to detect reflections of Wagner’s aesthetic utopia in such dissimilar phenomena as Stéphane Mallarmé’s poetry and Antonin Artaud’s “theatre of cruelty,” Alexander Scriabin’s *Mysterias* and Vasily Kandinsky’s “symphonies,” Bakhtin’s theory of carnival and Junger’s theory of the state,—all along with the totalitarian art.<sup>4</sup>

In Russia, the notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* is usually associated with the Silver Age (primarily with the names of Viacheslav Ivanov and Andrei Bely), the avant-garde (primarily

This research carried out in 2015 was supported by a grant (project, “Political, Philosophical, and Literary Constructs in the Past and the Present”) from The Tomsk State University Academic D. I. Mendeleev Fund Program.

<sup>1</sup>Boris Groys, *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin: Die gespaltene Kultur in der Sowjetunion* (Munich, 1988).

<sup>2</sup>Boris Groys, *Utopia i obmen (Stil' Stalin. O Novom. Stat'i)* (Moscow, 1993).

<sup>3</sup>Roger Fornoff, *Die Sehnsucht nach dem Gesamtkunstwerk: Studien zu einer ästhetischen Konzeption der Moderne* (Hildesheim, 2003), 20–21.

<sup>4</sup>See Anke Finger and Danielle Follett, eds., *The Aesthetics of the Total Work: On Borders and Fragments* (Baltimore, 2011); and David Roberts, *The Total Work of Art in European Modernism* (Ithaca, 2011).

with Nikolai Evreinov), and with Stalinism, which is what Groys wrote about.<sup>5</sup> It has also been suggested that the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* itself perished because of the emergence of the cinema, which effectively became its ultimate realization.<sup>6</sup> The fact that experiments in the area of cinematic language in early Soviet Russia comprised a true laboratory for modernist art, that what Nikolai Marr called a “semantic cluster” of indivisible, primitive labor-magic action (composed of light, color, the sounds of speech and music, the mimicking art of actors, gestural expression, and ultimately of cinematic montage) was fixed in cinematic language, suggests that in this period Russia temporarily overcame its literature-centeredness and aesthetic conventionality.<sup>7</sup>

But the fact that the practice rather than the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* was given birth in Russia by Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov (who knows whether this was a response to the “German part” of his nature?) needs more interpretation than it does explanation. Explanations lie on the surface. Ultimately, everything is easily reducible to a trend of contemporary art that tends to reject a single medium and is instead oriented toward installations, performance, multimedia practices, and the like.

True, practically all the artists of Prigov’s circle made drawings and sculptures, wrote, appeared on stage, and indulged themselves in theory. But none of them did this simultaneously, with the same level of intensity, and with striking productivity, as did Prigov. Only professional visual artists produced more drawings than him, only professional critics and theorists engaged more in theory, and only professional actors participated in more public performances. It is not only notable that he was *simultaneously* a poet, painter, sculptor, performance artist, and theorist (and it is difficult to say more of which), nor that he experimented with all possible materials, forms, genres, and types of art. It is also remarkable that the described openness and cross-media intersections permeate all of his work: text in painting, a visual quality and theatricality in text, text as a score for performance (of the alphabet), philosophizing as an artistic text (premonitions), and so forth. Accordingly, Wagner’s “syntheticism” penetrates the core of Prigov’s creative process: it facilitates the media interaction on a “molecular” level of poetics, rather than on the macro-level of art forms. While telling a story about Evgenii Popov, Prigov resorted to a comparison characteristic of the types he made: “There is a mythological animal with eyes on all sides, but he is one with a tongue on all sides.”<sup>8</sup> Prigov himself can be compared to this mythological animal—with eyes, ears, a tongue, and hands on all sides—a certain postmodern single-person orchestra.

Though the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* was, after all, completely avant-garde, it would not be difficult to find some sort of palliative explanation for this phenomenon that would unite classical art and the non-classic. Ultimately, any work of art reveals an infinitude of meanings and possibilities of interpretations. Structurally, this sort of openness of meaning

<sup>5</sup>See Anatolii Mazaev, *Problema sinteza iskusstv v estetike russkogo simvolizma* (Moscow, 1992); Irina Azizian, *Dialog iskusstv Serebriannogo veka* (Moscow, 2001); and Vladimir Sarychev, *Estetika russkogo modernizma: Problema “zhiznetvorchestva”* (Voronezh, 1991).

<sup>6</sup>See Evgeny Dobrenko, *Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History: Museum of the Revolution* (New Haven, 2008).

<sup>7</sup>Nikolai Ia. Marr, *Osnovnye voprosy iazykoznaniiia* (Leningrad, 1936), 193.

<sup>8</sup>Dmitrii Prigov and Sergei Shapoval, *Portretnaia galereia D.A.P.* (Moscow, 2003), 154.

finds its expression in a so-called open form that transforms works of art into modules, so to speak, in a constant state of formation and development, which ought to be conceived of as spaces of the possible. Classical art and the non-classic are in this respect akin. The poetics of the *non finito*, an increased attraction to which was already observable in classical art, has now taken on the role of an almost self-sufficient principle of creative work: the devices of bricolage, the role of improvisation and coincidence, textual interweaving, and the accent on readers' and viewers' co-creation, are becoming a leitmotif of varied experiments in the newest art in painting, sculpture, architecture, music, theater, poetry, prose, and in theory. This is true for Prigov to a huge extent: these devices became programmatic for him. There is nothing new about this. What is new is the actualization of these practices, which did not begin in postmodernism, but in the most classical modernism. Let us recall that Victor Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose* began with an analysis of Laurence Sterne's novels, these probably most famous exemplars of *non finito*.<sup>9</sup>

This structural openness was conceived by Prigov not as a "device" but as a symptom of a wider openness. Furthermore, Prigov's emphasis on openness structures radically refocuses the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Openness is not only shaped formlessness, but also a sort of opposite to syntheticism. Thus, in the twentieth century we witnessed the highest achievements of *non finito* in Russian literature, from Velimir Khlebnikov and Isaac Babel to the Oberiuty and Andrey Platonov. Simultaneously, one could witness the degradation and loss of the traditional epic novel—from Fyodor Panferov and Vsevolod Kochetov to Petr Proskurin and Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

It is noteworthy that the idea of the total work of art reflected this contradiction between openness and syntheticism in its very author. On the one hand, Wagner regarded his art as a synthesis and as a means of expressing a certain philosophical concept, to a much greater extent than did all of his European contemporaries. Wagner's concept of music as the embodiment of constant motion, of the development of feelings, led him to the idea of merging different leitmotifs into a single stream of symphonic development, which he called the "endless melody" (*unendliche Melodie*). This determined the structural peculiarity of Wagner's operas: the absence of tonic support and the incompleteness of each theme enable an uninterrupted buildup of the emotions that does not achieve resolution, which allows the music to hold the listener in a constant state of tension. On the other hand, the more synthetic they were, the more fragmentary and discrete Wagner's operas became. From one perspective, they were like open modules, and from another, like an endless quasi-epic Solzhenitsyn's *Red Wheel* in musical notation.

Although *Gesamtkunstwerk* as an idea of shaped formlessness became irrelevant with the loss of traditional conventions and the crisis of modernist strategies of subversion, its practices, since it was itself the product of a modernist breakthrough, proved themselves to be extraordinarily fruitful. Thus we can easily find those very same structural elements in Prigov's texts and visual works, where functionally they are completely reinvented and form part of a completely different—"de-totalizing"—aesthetic strategy.

<sup>9</sup>Victor Shklovsky, "The Novel as Parody: Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*," in his *Theory of Prose* (Elmwood Park, IL, 1990), 147–70.

The idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* itself was the product of the peculiar “artistic utopia” (*Künstlerutopie*) described by Wagner in his *Art and Revolution* (1849), which might rightfully be called the first totalitarian utopia.<sup>10</sup> Wagner viewed a revolution dedicated to a paradise of art as the completion of the cycle of history. In fact, Wagner’s revolution was meant to destroy the spirit of the New Age, and as a result of the synthesis of Hellenism and Christianity—of total freedom and beauty—to achieve worldwide harmony. In this Wagner combined his notions of the ideal society with the question of the place of art in a future worldwide harmony. *Gesamtkunstwerk* is the quintessence of aestheticism. Within it, revolution is consecrated by art, which endows it and the person it creates with true beauty. Ethics, just as it was supposed to do in the tradition of German romanticism, grew directly out of aesthetics, and nourished a glorious new world.

This utopia was in fact embodied in the totalitarian revolutions of the past century, conservative-utopian in content and nationalist in form—from fascist Italy and Nazi Germany to Franco’s Spain and Stalin’s Russia.<sup>11</sup> This was the uprising of the patriarchal-communal man, armed with the modern technologies of war, against bourgeois individualism. But the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the modernist era was the *building of life*. In this capacity it acquired a personal dimension.

With the destruction of the totalitarian utopias, *Gesamtkunstwerk* could not be reborn as an idea, but only as a dualist practice. Prigov combined syntheticism and openness with life-building. One aspect, the structural-synthetic, he transformed into a device; the other, that of life-building, into an aesthetic strategy. The Wagnerian utopia was cleansed of both its totalitarianizing content and its exalted idealist-romantic passion. The first of these took shape in Prigov’s constantly proclaimed battle against the totalitarianizing pretensions of language; and the second, in the anticanonical bent of his texts.

All of the preceding is crucial to an understanding of Prigov’s “relativism.” *Gesamtkunstwerk* assumes a synthesis of the arts; that is, an “outsideness” of the artist in one particular art, medium, or space. The main thing required of the artist is a great degree of adaptability. And, in fact, with Prigov we constantly encounter these transitions, even at the level of creative introspection. For example, when asked what had exerted the strongest influence on him, he replied: “Visual art. I was much more advanced in visual art than in literature. But once, I was struck by a thought: Might there be a variation of the sots-art and conceptualist mentality in literature? I started to look for an analogy.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, Prigov asserted that the coincidences between his style and the Oberiuty, for example, were purely superficial. And, in general, he explained that any sort of literary echoes in his work were no more than “unnoticed peripheral influence.”<sup>13</sup> He did not consider himself a writer, and he maintained that the “nutrient medium” for him “was always visual art. To this very day. No, there was no influence [from literature itself]. It was always the characters in literature

<sup>10</sup>Richard Wagner, “Art and Revolution” in his *The Art-Work of the Future, and Other Works*, trans. W. Ashton Ellis (Lincoln, 1993).

<sup>11</sup>See Jeffrey Schnapp, *Staging Fascism: 18 BL and The Theatre of Masses for Masses* (Stanford, 1996); Nil Santiañez-Tió, *Topographies of Fascism: Habitus, Space, and Writing in Twentieth-Century Spain* (Toronto, 2013); and Richard A. Etlin, ed., *Art, Culture, and Media under the Third Reich* (Chicago, 2002).

<sup>12</sup>Prigov and Shapoval, *Portretnaia galereia D.A.P.*, 20.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

for me. I worked with a mass of literary images, facts.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, literature remained as one of his practices. However, he understood it in a completely non-writerly way: “Generally speaking, for me literature is what is poured out in the air: somebody said something—that’s literature, or rather at the level of a quasi-literary phenomenon.”<sup>15</sup> Essentially, the writing process, as he described it, was a process of “dividing a sort of Logos of a particular type of writing and creation” and of “modification of the material.”<sup>16</sup> What Prigov calls “literature” would more accurately be called a “philological” approach to art/culture.

Apparently, literature as such recedes to the background. Comparing himself to Evgenii Popov, Prigov said,

I didn’t get my start with literature; for me it is one of the languages that it is easy to rescind, [but] Popov was completely immersed in language. In this respect, he is from my viewpoint a continuation of the archaic- bombastic line that goes back to Leskov. ... This material is too limited for me, but it has its readers. And then he works up this material precisely and meticulously. Figuratively speaking, you can own fields and work them with a tractor, but something inevitably remains unplowed. Popov has a small plot, but nonetheless it is precisely worked and fertilized. The harvest is gathered and well packaged.<sup>17</sup>

This “limited” plot of land, although it does provoke professional envy with the way it is tended, nonetheless fails to satisfy. But this dissatisfaction is not only professional. It is linked to the specifics of the Prigov project, which had to be a total thing, since the object itself demanded that: it was impossible to work otherwise with the Soviet world. Completely saturated by ideology, fused by the universality of language, and permeated by a ramified mythology that held it up, it demanded a corresponding totality.

In turn, this totality was locked in a clinch with the ramified division of labor in art (or rather, in the arts). Curiously, when Prigov talked about his relationships with music, literature, sculpture, or painting, he constantly referred to his supposedly belated development in each of these arts, to the accidental nature of his association with them. He said, for example, that he began to understand music very late, although he had been taken to concerts; that he ended up in the sculptors’ group in the Pioneers’ House completely by chance, since enrolment in the other groups was closed; that he heard the names of Anna Akhmatova and Boris Pasternak for absolutely the first time at the age of 24; and so on.<sup>18</sup> Notwithstanding, his observations about each of the types of art are grounded on a precise distinction among them. No matter what type of art he talked about, he would point out what distinguishes this art from another: “For me, music is not a mood, but a developing structure. That is why any kind of scripting is less interesting to me.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 154.

<sup>18</sup>Prigov spoke about this in length; and not only about Akhmatova and Pasternak but how he “discovered” impressionism at the Stroganov Art Institute and OBERIU even later (ibid., 58, 54, 76).

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 40.

Although literature in the perspective of his personal experience was secondary, it was of primary importance in the perspective of his creative behavior, since it was the premise and the device for this behavior, and thus it defines quite a lot in his daily conduct of life.<sup>20</sup> “If I were only an artist,” he once said,

faced with such changes I would emigrate to the West, because it is impossible to function here like the type of Western artist I’m already accustomed to being: exhibits, installations, and such. That process exists there, but not here. But since I am also a writer, tied to language, especially in such a refined substance like poetry, with a well-defined behavioral model based on a multiplicity of allusions, statuses, and images that are fixed in local mythology, culture, and poetry, it is hard for me to count on being easily understood in the West. I arrive there as a representative of the literary process here, and a quite small number of people understand me.<sup>21</sup>

The statuses of different practices end up in a complex interaction: secondary in one sense, they become key in another, and, beyond this creative plane, they become defining elements in the sphere of real-life behavior. Nonetheless, in Prigov’s own interpretation, it was precisely visual art that piqued his special interest by virtue of its elaboration of what he called “creative behavior”:

Visual art in particular, as distinct from the literature that is archaicized worldwide, has taken steps to reconstruct the behavior of the artist, putting the emphasis precisely on him. In visual art, pictures have become a particular incident, and instead of them, texts have been able to appear, performances have turned up—theatricalized actions are enough; the behavior of the artist has become more important than any specific text. It is precisely at the level of the behavioral model that fundamental problems are being solved, and something is being asserted. Freedom, of course, is being asserted.<sup>22</sup>

The life-building experiment of the Russian avant-garde was precisely the foundation for not only Prigov’s aesthetic “outsideness,” but also for his personal experience of that quality. This is especially apparent when studying the verbal portrait gallery of his colleagues, where the most interesting thing is not the content itself, not the impressions or even the facts, but rather the strategy—one and the same as carried out among very different personalities—of a demonstrative division between personal and creative behavior. One is struck here by the amazing discipline of expression: although Prigov talks about personal and creative relationships with people with whom he was closely associated for decades,

<sup>20</sup>Mark Lipovetsky and Ilya Kukulin interpret Prigov’s emphasis on creative behavior as the core element of his all-permeating performatism. See their article in this cluster, “‘The Art of Penultimate Truth’: Dmitrii Prigov’s Aesthetic Principles.” About performative aspects of Prigov’s life-long project and poetics see also Dmitrii Prigov, Alena Iakhontova, “Otkhody deiatel'nosti tsentral'nogo fantoma,” Mikhail Ryklin, “Proekt dlinoi v zhizn': Prigov v kontekste moskovskogo kontesptualizma,” Sabina Hensgen, “Poeticheskii performans: Pis'mo i golos,” and Catherine Ciepiela and Stephanie Sandler, “Telo u Prigova,” all in *Nekanonicheskii klassik: Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov (1940–2007)*, ed. Evgeny Dobrenko et al. (Moscow, 2010), 72–80, 81–95, 451–68, and 501–12, respectively.

<sup>21</sup>Prigov and Shapoval, *Portretnaia galereia D.A.P.*, 120.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 117–18.

not once does he allow himself to confuse personal and creative behavior, to cross over from one level to the other, which was often interpreted as aloofness, indifference, and even contempt for those around him.

On the other hand, when he attempted to explain his creative behavior, he often resorted to personal arguments. For example, he attributed his simultaneous presence and non-presence in the various arts to

childish and communal and social fears: persecutions, mimicries, the effort to be inconspicuous. Afterwards it was just this mimicry, so far as I can reconstruct it and explain it to myself, that became articulated into personal behavior, which is of course psychotherapeutic sublimation. For example, people come up to me and say, "Oh, you're a poet," and I answer, "No, no, I'm an artist." Or vice-versa: "Oh, you're an artist," and I go "No, no, I'm a poet." A sort of desperate attempt, as it were, to avoid identification—almost a clearly expressed "syndrome."<sup>23</sup>

A syndrome that was reduced and thematicized in policemen and monsters. Or, as Prigov stated more succinctly elsewhere, "In Japan I would be Catullus / But in Rome I would be Hokusai."<sup>24</sup>

Again and again Prigov insists on the right (he never insisted on duty) of the artist to this "outsideness":

At the heart of it lies a general unreflective fear of society, of the necessity of being recognized, of being a party to something, of being somehow defined, fixed, and caught. After all, the whole system of local unconscious communal behavior has developed by starting out with these defining principles. If these fears intensely overpower a person, and he is unable to sublimate them, they will progress into a purely clinical syndrome. But the ability to project them onto great cultural themes creates art in which one can discern the features of Grand Style or the style of the age.<sup>25</sup>

Clearly, we are seeing the opposite of Wagner.

Interestingly, this strategy of "outsideness" was extended not only to his art, but to his philosophy:

I liked all German philosophy because there is a definite type of intellectual passion present in it. Schelling and Hegel were more to my liking than Kant, though. But as a whole, I liked this mighty intellectual system. I must say that I read, with equal passion, the Russian religious philosophers, the Germans, and the Greeks. This was not artistic reading, where one I like, and another, not. I liked it all. The principle of "like/dislike" comes into play when you become an adept of some specific philosophical system and method of thinking. I had a practical interest: what I had read, I later deflected into some sort of pan-cultural literary formulas. For me, it was neither a combat zone with anyone nor a zone of self-affirmation.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 28.

<sup>24</sup>Dmitrii A. Prigov, *Moskva: virshi na kazhdyi den'* (Moscow, 2014), 179.

<sup>25</sup>Prigov and Shapoval, *Portretnaia galereia D.A.P.*, 28.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 70–71.

But Prigov would tell exactly the same story at another time, about his reading of literature:

My strategy is not to prove that Egor Isaev is equal to Anna Akhmatova, but to point out that as soon as these names begin to aspire to complete power, they become equal. Within the confines of their own axioms, of course, they are incomparable. I don't describe Akhmatova, or Isaev; I try to determine the limit beyond which their language and behavior become totalitarian, and they turn into monsters.<sup>27</sup>

This strategy would be impossible outside a "neutral" position. It was appropriate only for the stated aesthetic task:

I insist on the possibility of not submitting to any all-encompassing ideas and ideologies. Any viewpoint aspires to truth, and my task is to reveal any viewpoint not as truth but as a type of conventionality. In this respect, of course, to people who prefer all-encompassing ideologies, systems of generality, I am dangerous, since I regard them as a sort of convention and not as truthful expression. ... I believe that at the limits of cultural contact, there does not exist any superiority of any idea that could force everyone to believe it, because any idea is more or less a convention. I am a person of linguistic behavior, although many consider me an agnostic.<sup>28</sup>

Or, as Prigov stated elsewhere: "By habit, attention is focused on a text, but in reality, fundamental problems are solved at the level of the behavioral model of both the artist and the writer, which [that is, the model] at present is fundamental in the world."<sup>29</sup> This formed the basis for Prigov's interpretation of postmodernism as an instrument for "problematization of the personal utterance"; he considered all other definitions to be imprecise.<sup>30</sup>

This position of free choice of means, media, arts, and genre forms (which was the premise of Wagner's aesthetic utopia) was precisely what became Prigov's source of aesthetic variety:

For me, all types of activity are separated. If as a writer I profess a particular type of behavior, then as a citizen I practice another, as a family member a third, and so forth. In his life a person identifies with different collectives, where he manifests as different entities. And this is exactly the possibility of being the same, but also different.<sup>31</sup>

The universality of Prigov's project was not only that he perfected himself as the complete personification of the total work of art, transforming D. A. Prigov into such cultural heroes of the Soviet world as Pushkin or Militsaner, but also that he absorbed and practically usurped the discourse itself about him. Prigov was, without doubt, the most theoretically

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 96.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 104–5.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 117.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 115.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 116.



advanced and articulate representative of Moscow conceptualism. The conceptualist strategy of swallowing up discourses and others' words irritated and disarmed many, even such steely-nerved critics of sots-art as Viktor Erofeev, who began his article on Prigov with an irritated observation: "The conceptualists have monopolized the right to the truth about themselves. Any discourse constructed in relation to them is regarded by them as a discourse of a lower order, level, and variety. This is a very Soviet viewpoint."<sup>32</sup> I think Erofeev did not even suspect how right he was and how truly Soviet this viewpoint was. It was Soviet not in the behavioral sense but, as Prigov would say, "in a higher sense." It was not merely a gesture, but a most important final element of the totality of the work of art constructed by Prigov.

In a radical way, Prigov embodied the idea of the total work of art by creating the image of a universal artist-demiurge, and he over-embodied it by making himself practically the fundamental object of deconstruction. The latter was best manifested in Prigov's special interest in the problem of canon, in the functioning of culture as a system of institutions, and in art as a selection of strategies, techniques, and devices. This is what the majority of his texts, both prose and poetry, are about (among which are "The Captivating Star of Russian Poetry," "And he scorned his enemies with death," "Pushkin's *Evgenii Onegin*," and many others). Prigov's "Game of Ranks" is interesting in this respect: in it, he establishes a direct link between the totalitarianizing practices of the language of description, the institutionalized canon, creative behavior, reception, and what he called "cultural reflexes."<sup>33</sup>

For this game, four short texts are used, the heroes of which are well-known persons: Pushkin, Tolstoy, Gorky, and Mayakovsky, respectively. Each of them is described with a school textbook's characterization: the first "is the pride of Russian and world literature"; the second is "a titan of Russian and world literature"; the third is "a classic writer of Russian, Soviet, and world literature"; and the fourth is "the standard of Russian, Soviet, and world literature."<sup>34</sup> Following two lines of description of each one is a conclusion that the said figure "will live forever in the hearts of ...": for the first, this is "grateful humanity"; for the second, "the better part of humanity"; for the third, "progressive humanity"; and for the fourth, "advanced humanity."<sup>35</sup> Thus, they are constructed according to a gradual diminution of superlative characteristics. The rules of the game are laid out on five pages, in detail, and in an incredibly confused fashion. They begin by stating that the game is played by six people who are divided into two teams that choose a leader and his/her deputy. The whole game revolves around the order of reproducing the texts. All of this is repeated in ten turns, after which the combination of the reproduction of the first text is called Generalissimo; of the second, Marshal; of the third, General; and of the fourth, Colonel. Then, a combination is made of a repeat of the sentences from each text, which, like modules, can be varied, and the "leaders" have a ranking from Minister of War to Militsaner. Thus, all the players receive different military titles. Their quantity grows. Complex relationships between them and disturbances in the order of pronouncing the

<sup>32</sup>Viktor Erofeev, "Pamiatnik dlia khrestomatii," *Teatr*, 1993, no. 1:136.

<sup>33</sup>Dmitrii Prigov, "Igra v chiny," in *Moskovskii kontseptualizm*, ed. Ekaterina Diogot' and Vadim Zakharov (Moscow, 2005), 397–400.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 397.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

texts create various options for the players. A Military Coup, for example, is possible. The description of the classic writers merges into military-bureaucratic descriptions of procedures such as the following:

The initiator of the Military Coup may choose any four people and challenge the Head. The Head appoints the team, which must be led by an officer one rank higher than the leader of the Military Coup. A condition of victory of the participants in the Military Coup is the sum of the ranks acquired as the result of one turn, greater than that of the regular team. In case of a tie, the participants of the Military Coup are demoted to rank-and-file, with a prohibition from participating in any further advancements whatsoever in the scale of ranks. After repeated participation in an unsuccessful Military Coup, the participant is transferred to a penal battalion, and under particularly aggravating conditions is sentenced to execution.<sup>36</sup>

The makeup of the participants grows in geometric progression. Thus, at the end of the description, the social organization of an entire state is discussed. The number of ranked leaders grows at even faster tempos. Thus the rules are in fact discarded, and the language describing them, at first precise and dry, takes on the characteristics of bombastic Soviet bureaucratise:

In their appointments and decisions, they must be guided exclusively by the public benefit and the common good. They must seriously, attentively, and honestly examine all the economic and social needs and select the most appropriate candidates for filling the leading posts. If these measures are enacted in accordance with the above-stated principles and with the unanimous support of the masses, then undoubtedly all of this will facilitate the future welfare, prosperity, and progress.<sup>37</sup>

The universality and all-encompassing organization of the picture that grows out of the exalted harmony of the literary canon, with its ideal hierarchy of classic writers, grows into a practically ideal Constitution, transformed into a direct embodiment of the idea of the state as a total work of art. It is precisely through an allusion to this utopia that the whole arsenal of Prigov's devices is realized, and the whole system of his anticanonical strategy is made explicit. The utopia of "total art" is reduced to an extreme purity, inverted into an anti-utopia of endless state-led ideological production and perturbation and purification of "nomenclature cadres."

As Lenin said, "history is a stern mama": the cruel irony of history is that, as a fighter against the banality that he saw as the chief product of the New Age, Wagner turned out to be a visionary that spurred others to create truly indicative kitschy artifacts of the present. Fully in keeping with the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, post-Wagnerian kitsch was realized in the architecture of the famous castle of Neuschwanstein, built by Wagner's mad admirer, the "fairytale king" Ludwig II of Bavaria; in the music of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, the idea for which occurred to the composer precisely during his visit to this Wagnerian castle,

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 399–400.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 400.

and ultimately in the visual “arts,” since this castle became the source of inspiration for the creation of the fairytale castles of Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella in the Disneylands worldwide. The chief fighter against banality turned out to be its chief inspirer. Alongside this grotesque of history, Prigov’s irony should seem a childish prank.

On the other hand, these transformations of Wagnerian mythology became the only possible realization of the totalitarian romantic utopia in contemporary mass society. Prigov took up the idea of the total work of art after the collapse of the utopia, completing the ruins and reconstructing them into an almost “intact” state, like the Tsaritsyno Palace. But the main thing is that he constructed his total work of art not from different arts, but from a single subject—Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov. He did not create a synthesis of the arts, but rather a personality synthesis, by carrying out an experiment in the creation of a total work of art after the experience of modernism. Accordingly, we should regard Prigov’s texts not only as a new ideological construct that both defamiliarizes and makes explicit and thereby exposes the totalitarian aspirations of language and ideology, but also as the product of a unique experiment on himself, laying the headstone for not only the totalitarian utopia but also for its creator, the artist-visionary.