

A New Type of Subjectivity in the Works of Dmitry Prigov

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Abstract. The article dwells upon the issue of a subject intrinsic to the art of the 70s and 80s of the 20th century, it elicits the reasons determining the problematization of “the Self” category inherent in the aesthetic program of the Moscow Conceptualism, preeminently with regards to the works of Dmitry Prigov. “The crisis of the language describing “the Self”” has been considered as discrediting the dominant discursive models, disabling the possibility of individual expressing. Within *the first part* of the article we problematize “the Self” category inherent in the aesthetic program of the Moscow Conceptualism, examine the dominant discursive models and denote the crisis of the language describing “the Self.” *The second part* is devoted to the issue of “the personal consciousness” coming into being within the aesthetic program of Moscow Conceptualism. The Self is considered as a “category of categories” in dichotomy between “the collective” and “individual” ones. Finally, *the third part* represents the analysis of a subject of the aesthetic activity. “An imaginary personality” intrinsic to the works of Dmitry Prigov is considered as a subject of “a gnoseological game.”

Keywords: aesthetic experience, Dmitry Prigov, identity, the Self, polysubjectivity, Moscow Conceptualism

Naujas subjektyvumo tipas Dmitrijaus Prigovo darbuose

Santrauka. Straipsnyje analizuojama XX a. 8-ojo ir 9-ojo dešimtmečių menai būdinga tema ir įvardijamos priežastys, lemiančios savasties kategorijos problematizavimą, būdingą Maskvos konceptualizmo estetinei programai ir visų pirma Dmitrijaus Prigovo kūrybai. Buvo manoma, kad „savastį aprašančios kalbos krizė“ diskredituoja dominuojančiuosius diskursyvinius modelius ir užkerta kelią individualiai išraiškai. Pirmoje straipsnio dalyje problematizuojama savasties kategorija, būdinga Maskvos konceptualizmo estetinei programai, analizuojami dominuojantys diskursyviniai modeliai ir aptariama „savasties kalbos krizė“. Antroje dalyje susitelkiama į „asmeninės sąmonės“ problemą, atsirandančią Maskvos konceptualizmo estetinėje programoje. Kategorijų „kolektyvinis“ ir „individualus“ dichotomijoje savastis laikoma „kategorijų kategorija“. Trečioje straipsnio dalyje analizuojama estetiškos veiklos subjekto tema. Dmitrijaus Prigovo darbams būdinga „vaizduotės asmenybė“ traktuojama kaip „gnoseologinio žaidimo“ subjektas.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: estetiškas patyrimas, Dmitry Prigov, tapatybė, savastis, polisubjektyvumas, Maskvos konceptualizmas

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Concept of “The Self” Inherent in the Aesthetic Program of the Moscow Conceptualism

It is worth noting that in recent years researchers have come to refer to Dmitry Prigov’s¹ concept of “the Self” more and more frequently. Whereas once the “traditional reader” would see an Author as the “author-creator of certain texts,” today an Author is becoming a creator of “new subjectivities” or of a “new type of subjectivity.” *The lyrical it* (M. Epstein), *the fluid identity, the displaced identity, the false identification* (D. Golyenko-Wolfson), *the de-identification* (I. Smirnov), *the meta-artist* (M. Berg), *the double and triple splitting of a subject, mirror splitting* (M. Iampolski), *the surgeon’s method* (A. Yurchak) – that is a non-exhaustive list of concepts arising from attempts to comprehend the complex structure of Prigov’s “Self” manifested in his texts, as well as the correlation between an author’s “Self” and the “Self” of a subject of consciousness. It is these complex correlations that we will endeavour to trace here.

Mark Lipovetsky determined the following curious paradox in his article on “Prigov’s Practical ‘Monadology’”: “The more ‘sincere’ an author becomes in the revelation of his personal <...> experience, the less individual it turns out to be” (Lipovetsky 2013: 43). According to Lipovetsky, any increase in (quasi-) biographical elements in a text erodes the subjectivity of that text: “The larger the number of these elements becomes, the less semantically significant the role they play, and the more indefinite the image of the subject they ‘signify’ becomes; <...> Cataloguing elements of subjectivity results in the exposure of the absence of the subject itself <...>” (Lipovetsky 2013: 42).

The special nature of art within the sociocultural environment of the second half of the 20th century lies in its attempt “to find some new wholeness” (Prigov & Shapoval 2003: 134). It is beyond any doubt that such understanding of the duty of art was caused by the understanding of a subject and the structure of the subject’s experience different to the concepts intrinsic to the turn and the middle of the 20th century, i.e. “wholeness” itself becomes problematized; moreover, the idea of a personality being able to remain whole, complete, and self-equal at every instant is generally questionable.

The very possibility of personal individual expressing turns out to be problematic, i.e. as long as it constantly *eludes* itself, the very idea of a word, which would possibly keep its “genuineness,” authenticity at every moment of time, gets destroyed. Prigov describes the innovation of his creative method in his own words as “manifesting a new type of the technology of consciousness” (Prigov & Shapoval 2003: 96). The desired “wholeness” is not so much found as constructed, i.e. the “new wholeness” must be constructed in such a way that it gives the subject “the ability to be entire, yet diverse”

¹ *Dmitry Prigov* (1940-2007) began writing poetry back in 1956, but was not officially published in Russia until 1986. Prior to that, from 1975 his work began to appear widely in Russian-language publications abroad. The first exhibition in which Prigov participated took place in the USSR in 1987: his works were presented as part of Moscow projects of Unofficial Art and Contemporary Art. In 1988 he held his first solo exhibition in the USA, at the Struve Gallery in Chicago. Subsequently, his works were frequently exhibited both in Russia and abroad, in particular in Germany, Hungary, Italy, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and Austria.

All the translations from Russian are mine, - N. A.

(Prigov & Shapoval 2003: 116). Remaining within classical aesthetics, an artist was striving after the authenticity of artistic expressing, implying an attempt to seek out the genuine authentic (hence, the stable and whole) “Self,” whose standpoint this expressing gets constructed from. An artist’s effort in this case were aimed at seeking out the means and types of expressing that would allow him to represent his own unique experience of this subject. In contrast to it, Prigov focused on representing the experience of a subject as the experience of “the Other Self” (“The Self which returned to itself as the Other”). In this way, it is not the experience as such (actual or not) that becomes really valuable, but the mechanism by which such experience is explained. It seems that Prigov’s poetry has reflected a certain new type of a subject arising from the specific understanding of “the Self’s” structure which led to changes in the subjective sphere of the poetic text.

In his interview with Irina Balabanova “Dmitry Alexandrovich Prigov in his own words” the poet defined his interpretation of the specific cultural *milieu* of the second half of the 20th century as follows: “Postmodernism in literary studies can refer to <...> a number of things. But they do not understand the main pathos of postmodernism—the difficulty of personal expression, its impossibility. And yet there are few who can be considered postmodernists under such a criterion. It usually refers to authors who toy with texts, yet they are quite sure that personal expression exists, only its type is different” (see Balabanova 2001: 119). At the same time, the works of Prigov display a radical rethinking of *what* can be considered “a personal expression,” “an individual expression,” and of the alternatives which the actual sociocultural situation was able to offer the artist.

We refer to “marking the world” through a set of binary oppositions applied for description of “a Soviet subject,” such as “the official culture and the counterculture,” “the totalitarian language and the counter-language,” “the public subjectivity and the private subjectivity,” “conformism and non-conformism,” “the actual behavior and the pretense,” “the true face and a mask.”

The connection between the problematization of “the Self” category and the tension of the “official-unofficial” boundaries was most clearly articulated by Ilya Kabakov. He gave the following definition of the difference existing between the official culture and the unofficial one, linking it to the presentation of a problem of a subject, “the official art differed from the unofficial one since it posed the questions of ‘What for do I draw? Why do I draw? How do I draw? What does a dot mean? What does a blot mean?’ while the official art was the traditional one thus it was not capable of posing such questions. It was that very posing of preeminently professional questions that as well gave the rise to <...> the practice of posing of the ontological questions such as, ‘What causes my paintings to emerge? What do I generally live for?’ That is, in this sense, artistic activities have turned into <...> the spiritual practice, <...> a journey to a country where I will learn who I am, what my name is and what I should do.” (Kabakov & Groys 2010: 296).

The problematization of the category of identity correlates with a crisis of the word applicable for representing the image of “the Self”. So what is this “language of self-description”? According to Ilya Kabakov, “it inevitably required choosing some already-existing language. Thus, it results in describing *oneself as a certain social type*” (Kaba-

kov 2010: 276). “Choosing an already-existing language” firstly meant choosing the obviously dominant language, gravitating towards authoritarianism, and secondly, something inapplicable to expressing individual experience: the artist can represent himself exclusively as a “type,” and what is more, a social type.

The “already-existing language” offered the artist a relatively narrow range of discursive practices. In his interview with Balabanova, Prigov described the situation in which artists were forced to work in the 1970s and 1980s as follows, “We were in a situation where the language or discourse we required to describe our practice simply didn’t exist” (Balabanova 2001: 40). The only languages at the artist’s disposal were Soviet-era language, the language of the “Russian classics,” including the language of the “Silver Age,” as well as a structural discourse hardly suitable for describing personal experience. The discursive models focused on the “Silver Age” were often referred to by Prigov as a *Pasternak-Mandelstam-Akhmatova-Tsvetaeva-Brodsky cocktail*. A poet who considers himself capable of individual personal expression that would represent the unique experience of “the Self,” turns out to be merely inscribed into the context of an existing cultural tradition, and the language chosen by the poet turns out to be one generated by that very tradition.

For instance, according to Mikhail Epstein, “Eugene Onegin,” “has long ceased to be poetic work of Pushkin’s authorship, but has turned onto the acoustic state of Russian culture,” (Epstein 2016: 263-264) getting more and more extraneous to its author-creator and becoming a part of the common sociocultural field. Prigov also refers to Pushkin as to “the communal body of Russian culture.”(Prigov 2003: 211).

According to Prigov, there were two large-scale discursive projects dominating art: “the Soviet-era discourse” and the discourse of “Russian classics,” which provided an artist with not just an “already-existing language,” but also with an “already-existing identity,” both of which were total in nature. Thus, the situation in cultural of the late 20th century contributed to erosion of the binary paradigmatic figure, a rough division into Soviet (official) literature and unofficial one, which inevitably led to reinterpreting of the category of a subject along with the structure of his experience as such.

The discursive models existing within the sociocultural situation of the 1970s and 80s didn’t meet the creative demands of artists. Working in a situation which made any personal individual expression impossible, an artist begins to problematize the “totality of language,” which allows him to consider *power as language* and *language as power*.

The artists of the Moscow Conceptualism are fully aware of the fact and, thus, articulate that different discourses, which serve different types of consciousness, reveal their violent desire for monopoly and turn out to be equally empty and merge into a single diffusive totalitarian discourse. The idea of the totality of any discourse, put forward long before by Roland Barthes, was naturally nothing new to the conceptualists. The novelty lay in the idea that the discourse of the Russian classics was expropriated by the “great” Soviet-era discourse, leading to their indistinguishability. Prigov problematized the fusion of language (as a discursive model) and power, and precisely Soviet-era power, as follows, “Any language can turn into Soviet-era power. This fact was revealed to me

all of a sudden by just one phrase <...>, ‘Stalin is the Pushkin of our time’” (Prigov & Shapoval 2003: 95). To define this fusion, Prigov used the concept of ‘coalescence’. The *coalescence* of the discursive practices of classical art and the Soviet-era discourse led to what was defined by Dmitry Golyenko-Wolfson as “the obscene marriage of Poet and State” (Golyenko-Wolfson 2010: 152).

For instance, passion for Pushkin is an ancient, sacred mystery that strives not for reflection, but for knowing of the only correct answer, meant to separate “us,” “those-who-know,” from “them,” strangers. Let us refer to Dovlatov’s *Pushkin Hills*,

“ ‘Pushkin is our pride and joy!’ , she managed to articulate. ‘Not only he is a great poet, but also Russia’s great citizen...’ ” (Dovlatov 2018: 28)

Pushkin accumulates the symbolic potential of power, which makes a subject form a complex of responsibility, imagining “our everything” seeing something unsightly, scares and shames at the same time,

“ ‘You’re a little prick!’ , Galina blurted. And the next minute she added, ‘It’s a good thing that Pushkin isn’t here to see it.’ ” (Dovlatov, 2018, 28)

“Existential guilt” (I. Yalom) felt towards the Absolute, the feeling of shame towards the figure serving the symbolic space of culture, with regards to the figure of Stalin Prigov recalls, “The characters of the Soviet films often used to ask, ‘And what would Stalin’s reply to that point?’ ”

On the one hand, the Russian classics represented a natural default mechanism for constructing an identity model, but on the other, they rapidly lost their ability to become a language for representing individual experience by being included in the speeches of party leaders, and penetrating all spheres and areas of life. By being expropriated by an alien, extraneous sociopolitical context, “native poetry” was losing the potential that allowed it to become the language of its “own.”

The desire for power and authoritarianism of signs is so great that one power is capable of getting self-legitimized through another one. In the fourteenth fragment of his literary cycle of *Twenty Stories about Stalin*, Prigov actualizes the derivability of one simulacrum of power from another:

“One day, in the presence of Joseph Vissarionovich the conversation turned to Pushkin. Budyonny remarked, ‘After Stalin, I gained a better understanding of Pushkin.’ Stalin looked at him closely, smiled tiredly and then replied, ‘But you also cannot understand Stalin without Pushkin.’ ” (Prigov 2016a: 477).

For culture, the idea that language is power is nothing new. And yet, the works of the Moscow conceptualists achieved its re-accentuation, i.e. henceforth not only should language be understood as power, revealing its desire for authoritarianism and subjection (this idea had been elaborated long before by poets belonging to the Association for Real Art), but also power came to be understood as language. As Mikhail Iampolski noted,

“Prigov regarded it as a merit of his cultural community that its members learned not to hate power, but to understand it as a language” (Iampolski 2010: 216).

It follows that striving for the deconstruction of a discourse represented an aesthetic and psychological reaction to perceiving power as language, and language as power. It made it possible to see the linguistic reality as “the conventional reality” and not the metaphysical one and, at least, to gain “freedom from,” i.e. freedom from language. The desire to find a non-total type of writing led to rejection of any stable model of identity and attempts to find a language which would not appeal to discursive models. Since any “totality,” by virtue of its etymology, required integrity, any subject attempting to overcome that totality asserts the absence of such integrity. “Dissimilation” and “disidentification” with all social, cultural and other roles, discourses, etc. determine the possibility of an “empty”, “zero” identity, which becomes productive for creating “the Self” model, which would be free from the previously specified identification vectors.

The works of almost every artist of the 80s of the 20th century, who positioned himself as part of the Moscow Conceptual School or was simply involved in the literary process of the 80s of the 20th century, are marked by the deconstruction of some classic “textbook piece.”

Thus, the cultural situation which developed by the 70s and 80s or 90s of the 20th century can be defined as some communicative crisis, i.e. a crisis of language, discursive models and, therefore, types of representation, ways of “speaking of oneself.” To quote Michel Foucault in a speech he delivered at a meeting of the French Philosophical Society, “What is an author?”, “It is, rather, a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears” (Foucault 1996: 13).

Whilst Russian literature was able to provide a stable identity model, the loss of faith in *the Word* inevitably led to a crisis of this way of identification. It was necessary to find, firstly, *the Word* that would not be discredited by being a part of the “power discourse” and, secondly, that very “Self” model that would be free from previously plotted vectors of identification.

According to Prigov, one can either express oneself (or manifest oneself) by fighting through the debris of the conventionality of the verbal environment, being aware of its conditionality and, thus, resorting to being mediated by “the Other,” or remain innominate and unmanifested.

At its extreme, searching for the word which would “differ from discursivity” leads to the aesthetization of silence, and the actualization of such themes as Nothingness and Emptiness, which partially correspond to the “empty canvases” and “white works” of Ilya Kabakov and others in fine art. The possibility of finding a “genuine”, authentic word, capable of expressing the genuine individual experience of a personality, becomes problematized. Thus, the following remark made by Boris Groys seems absolutely crucial, “A modern artist strives <...> for silence in order to create something truly individual out of this absolute silence. He’s afraid of being guided by other people’s voices so as not to lose himself” (Kabakov & Groys 2010: 17). If silence itself, as an escape from speech, turns into a form of expression, then it also possessed the corresponding “elusive” subject of expression.

In his “Introduction to the Collection of Appeals Made by Dmitry Aleksanych,” which comprises 341 messages, Prigov noted that “flickering, hard-to-reach-fixedness and hard-to-do-identifying became the main intonation of that time for him” (Prigov 2016b: 206). It was in the 1980s that the problem of “identification” (and, accordingly, the word itself) became one of the central issues for Prigov,

<...>

*Assuming first a lion's shape
One second it's a raven and the next—a coyote,
An elder one
And then, just ready to escape,
Rising high, it turns into someone
Totally unidentifiable*

(Prigov 2016a: 168, translation – N. A.)

This eluding from name, social role, and this desire not to be identified was the life mode for a number of the Moscow conceptualists. The artist occupies the space somewhere “among others,” walking along the perimeter, without being completely identified with any “names” or social roles. Striving to “elude interpretation,” a name or any sociopolitical identifier is characteristic of the strategy Prigov applied for constructing his model of “the Self.” Prigov has termed such chameleonism as “a saving attempt made to avoid identification,” the fear of “being identified, involved with something, defined in any way, fixed and captured” (Prigov & Shapoval 2003: 28).

However, the absence of “one’s own place” leads not to an acute sense of the drama of atopy, but to comprehension of looseness as freedom, i.e. it is given by the “peeling off” all signs, trait, identification modes, which makes it possible to elude the topos,

*And all the sudden for a moment I obtained the freedom that was endless
Although, I did not seem to die and did, not even took sidestep
I guess
Yet now there is no more greatness or littleness in me
<...>*

So it turns out that I am deprived of any sorts of features.

(Prigov 2016c: 63, translation – N. A.)

Subordinated to the rigid binary oppositions, the structure that defines the ideas about the aesthetic and the unaesthetic, “the Self” and “the Other,” “us and them,” is collapsing along with the simultaneous destruction of the elements of the opposition of “official and unofficial” which results in the destruction of established models of the artist’s identification. “Eluding the word” used to correlate with the epoch-symptomatic “eluding the image,” any ready-made models of identification.

However, without being able to solve the problem of demarcation of “the personal”, “the individual one” and, on the other hand, “the collective one,” an artist was incapable of constructing a personal, individual expression. Which leads to the next problem, i.e. the demarcation of the personal one and the collective one.

“The Collective One” and “The Individual One”: the Problem of Development of “Personality Consciousness”

In a number of *Alphabets*, numbered texts opening with a letter “A” and ending traditionally, like any other Russian alphabet, with “Ja” (a letter which also stands for “I” or “the Self” in Russian), Prigov gives his interpretation of the peculiarity of consciousness that explains the loss of “the Self” in the universal.

The very first Prigov’s *Alphabet*, ending with the widely quoted phrase, “There is no such word as I / I gave to everything reply,” (Prigov 1980) problematizes the relationship between the individual and the collective ones. “Collective consciousness” deals with the very ready-made set of senses, which provides it with definition,

*An American means an enemy.
An Englishmen is enemy as well
But a Bedouin is not an enemy
A Bulgarian is even a friend and younger brother
<...>
The State is us
<...>
Ovid is the first century man
Onegin is a superfluous man
Pushkin is a pure genius
<...>
A homeland is clearly a mother
<...>
The USSR is a bastion of peace
<...>
Happiness is struggle and labor*
(Prigov 1980, translation – N. A.)

The sacred purpose of the alphabet as a model of the world is leveled to the alphabet being comprehended as an entertaining mnemonic technique, whilst the world is given to a human in “a ready-made form.” The alphabet turns into a machine of ready-made senses, closed for reflection and demanding to be laboriously memorized “on the trust,” but not comprehended critically.

If “the collective one” replaces the “the Self,” then “the Self” is able to see himself in “the Other,” if “a ready-made word” is “a universal word,” representing a single consciousness, it doesn’t make much difference *who* this word is articulated by. In formal terms, it leads to Prigov’s texts being organized in an extremely bizarre subjective way.

For instance, “The 50th Alphabet” focuses on the problem of “the Self’s” identity and the boundaries, refracted in different ways at all levels of the poetic text. The text opens with the remarks of its characters, with each of them asserting, “Here I am!”, than the fifth character says that, “There is no such word as I.” The twenty-first character explicates that very understanding of “I” (“the Self”), which simultaneously can be interpreted as

the loss of the individual principle in the universal one, “the collective one” and as the ultimate expansion of the boundaries of the individual identity, “I am you as well as he/she and they.”

Within the text of “The 50th Alphabet” “I” (“the Self”) gets burdened with “the Others’ Selves,” diffusely passing into “the Self” or “I” (“I” with an added dash). Such diffuseness is confirmed by functioning of “the intermediate people,” i.e. some subjects are names involve lettering. For instance, when The 52nd character gets out, his place gets taken by The A-52nd. The proliferated variety of “the Selves” is summarized by the 237th character,

The 237th, “Get out of my Self (my I)!” The 238th comes out.

Some other “Selves” refuse to do so:

The 238th, “I WON’T get out.” The 239th comes out.

The 239th <...> “Won’t get out!”

(Prigov 1986: 342, translation – N. A.)

The aphoristic “Get out of my Self (my I)” turned into a formula of consciousness striving to oppose the individual, personal principle to the deindividualized and collective one.

In this way, in his exploration (primarily in the 1980s) of the reasons for the non-manifestation of a personal individual principle and its dissolution in the “collective” one, Prigov saw its possible source in “an already-existing model of the world,” which becomes assimilated through a “common language.” An individual principle, as previously noted, is incapable of development until the boundaries between the “the Self” and “the Other” (“the Self” and “the Others”) are drawn. The deconstruction of the undifferentiated, diffused consciousness of a subject marked by blurred, suppressed subjectivity (“we think”) is seen as a necessary step in the development of such a “Self”.

The texts which follow thereafter present “the Self” turning into “a category of categories” i.e. an aesthetic centre, intensely striving for its own expression. “The Self” seeks to break free from “Us” and affirm an individual principle. “The Self,” being suppressed by “the collective Self” captured by “Us,” that is to say, captured by “the Other,” still retains its autonomy. The “indestructible” “Self” exists as a constant of being even in the environment of such “ontological vortices” as “the end of the world” and “perestroika.”

I am proceeding from the necessity to distinguish two aspects inherent to the consideration given to the problem of identity, i.e. “the Other as the Self” and “the Self as the Other.” The analysis of the latter aspect requires that we refer to the concept colligated by Paul Ricoeur in his work *Oneself as Another*. Omitting the specifics of the problems actualized by Ricoeur, it should be noted that the distinction between “*idem*-identity” and “*ipse*-identity” which he put forward allows us to describe the type of solution to the problem of constructing an identity model posed by Prigov. “The ability to be entire, yet diverse” which is postulated as *a priori* for a subject who is aware of his wholeness as well as his simultaneous variability can be described through the dialectic of “same-

ness,” “Self-identity” (*idem*), Self-consistency existent at any given time and, on the other hand, of “selfhood” and “otherness” (*ipse*). This allows us to consider individual expression as the result of some complex epistemological game, enabling the subject to explore the boundaries between the experience of “the Self” and the experience of “the Other.”

And it is only this kind of game that can result in what is often referred to, with respect to Prigov’s poetry, as “polysubjectivity,” which in this case can be understood as the opportunity to feel “the Other” as “the Other Self,” to simultaneously “play” all other identities, adopting the experience of “the Other Self.” In this respect, the subject becomes a special case of a tendency to structure its identity through many other “identities.” So Prigov is Pushkin, as well as Lermontov and Suvorov. Women passing by are loved by Prigov’s “inner Pushkin” but by no means by his “inner Lermontov,”

*So, I'm Pushkin, sitting here
I'm Prigov, sitting by the sea
I'm Lermontov, sitting by the mountains
This conversation with myself I hold
<...>
I meet a lot of passing strangers
Being Lermontov I loathe the passers-by
But being Pushkin I love the women passing by*
(Prigov 1989, translation – N. A.)

The identities of the “Pushkin-Self” and the “Lermontov-Self” do not coincide with “Pushkin-within-himself,” or “Lermontov-within-himself,” or even with Prigov himself, and yet the subject of consciousness manifested in the text glides easily from one experience to another.

According to Igor Smirnov, who studied Prigov’s poetics in the light of Jacques Lacan’s theory, this is evidence of “schizo-narcissism, detecting ‘one’s own’ in any given ‘Other’” (Smirnov 2010: 104), although such a way of identification implies that one’s own and someone else’s own are indistinguishable. I think that it is this conscious distance between “the Self” and the “the non-Self” and their discursive models which allows Prigov to implement a *flickering* strategy, accumulating all kinds of experience—the experience of “a low ranker” of “Soviet-era consciousness,” the experience of a man in love with another man (the cycle of *My Dear Affectionate Friend*), the experience of Lermontov and Pushkin, the experience of relatively obscure poets (the cycle of *The Non-false Motives*), etc.—and such experience appears to be genuinely “non-false.” In order for it to “flicker,” any discursive practice must be seen as a discourse from a certain distance. Similarly, in order to experience someone else’s identity, this identity must be seen as “the non-Self.” “The Self” is always presented to “the Self” as “the Other.” The otherness of “the Self,” taking himself for “the Other,” is capable of capturing the poet’s imagination precisely due to the fact that it is merely a game of Self-identity: “the Self’s” self-rejection actually belongs to the modes of “the Self’s” self-identifying, as stated by

Emmanuel Levinas. To paraphrase Levinas, a subject identifies himself in that which is different just the same as he does in that which is identical. It is necessary to become “the Other” in order to avoid eternal self-repetition.

In summary,

1. The actualized “ready-made word,” which accumulates “ready-made senses,” same for everybody, nonreflexive, taken “on the trust” as the absolute, paved the way for the extinction of the individual, personal principle. As “the collective identity” is disintegrating, there is an attempt made in order to form a personal consciousness which would be an alternative to the “collective” one;
2. Prigov (practically in every cycle of his corpus) problematizes the dramaturgy (in Prigov’s own words) between “the Self” and “the non-Self,” while deconstructing both limits and both extremes of a possible solution to this problem, starting from the complete non-splitting of “the Self” and the collective up to the radical solipsism;
3. “The Self” becomes a meta-category; “the Self” resists “the Other’s” urge to fix and to anchor “the Self,” and to endow it with a set of ready-made assigned meanings and roles, a desire to perceive the “the Self” as something that always remains self-identical. “The Self” is looking for an identity model in the complex game of self-identity, in the space between “the Self” and “the non-Self.”

It is into this very space that the intermediary between “the Self” and “the non-Self” – the *artist-character*—emerges into the world.

The Aesthetic Depersonalization: “The Self, Who Has Returned to Himself as The Other”

The situation of problematized personal expression assigns the opposite task to an artist, i.e. the artist strives “for self-alienation, self-personalization” and “alienation acts both as a positive value and a source, generating the *artist-character* (*художник-персонаж*)” (Kabakov & Groys 2010: 28). The artist-character appears in the gap between “the Self” and “the non-Self,” and represents a certain meta-personality, accumulating the experience of “the Other Self” in relation to this subject.

The artist-character is not focused on creating a “masterpiece.” It is he, himself, his total activity as a character, perceived by himself as a single whole, as a single product of his entire life, which represents his key work, and the object with which he remains constantly preoccupied. Prigov was evidently the first to absolutize the artist-character to such an extent that the subjectivity of the real author, lying behind him, began to erode. The subject’s “Self,” being fluid, agile and variable, lacks constancy, although all these qualities are possessed by the artist-character’s “Self,” which is artificially supported by the writer. Whereas the genuine “Self” is internally contradictory, “the created Self” is stable; whereas “the Self” is never complete for himself, it is always ready for “the Other.”

An artist-character does not represent his own unique subjective experience, but remains in a situation of “an epistemological game,” manipulating the experience of “the Other Self,” that is, “The Self which has returned to itself as the Other.”

However, “reality” can be presented not only as bifurcated, but also as arbitrarily multiple. “The Self” is capable of self-manifesting through many other “Selves” from external realities and identities. In his book *Prigov: Essays on Artistic Nominalism*, Mikhail Iampolski examined the specifics of the subjective sphere inherent to the works of Prigov and Fernando Pessoa. The similarity between the concepts posed by Prigov and Pessoa allows us to conceptualize and comprehend the process of alienation which the author’s “Self” undergoes, from a subject of consciousness manifested in a text in which “the Self” becomes alienated into “an imaginary personality,” which is crucial to Prigov’s poetry (Iampolski 2016).

According to the theory put forward by Pessoa, the result of the process which the author’s “Self” undergoes, alienating from a subject of consciousness manifested in the text, within which “the Self” becomes alienated into “an imaginary personality,” is referred to as “depersonalization.”

For Prigov, whose concept was similar to Pessoa’s ideas, this meant working with himself as “an imaginary personality,” a certain type of artistic behavior, that is to say, working with an acquired quasi-personality, which results in “a character author” acting as a character, without any intention to coincide with the identity of the biographical author. At the centre of the aesthetic event of Prigov’s project is the detection of a certain mechanism which is involved in the construction of the identity model of a subject of consciousness manifested in the text, along with a correlated mechanism of text-generation, the “speaking voice” of this subject. The “imaginary personality,” the artist-character, the “image”, as figures occupying the gap between the “the Self” and “the non-Self”, integrate these mechanisms as a “point of self-identification.”

The “epistemological basis” of Prigov’s work becomes evident through the fact that Prigov does not expose his own immediate experience, but instead enters into the space of some gnoseological game with the experience of “the Other Self” or, to borrow Pessoa’s concept, disassembles the mechanism of “the Other Self’s” experience and displays the results of this game as a text-object.

Prigov’s works (from 1985 onwards at least) resulted from epistemological procedures, and on the whole the entire project represents an explication of some cognitive experience, which can be regarded as a gnoseological experience. In this respect, the similarity to Pessoa in describing the representation of certain experience and certain “feelings”, which the artist expresses “not because he experiences them, but because he is capable of deconstructing the mechanism of experiencing,” is obvious.

The crucial point of Pessoa’s aesthetics is that it presumes the potential double and or even triple splitting of a subject that seems to separate out from itself and to start watching itself from an external standpoint. Prigov’s subject is one which has undergone the “multiplication of ‘the Self,’ the separation of one ‘Self’ from another.” Such a “multiplication of ‘the Self’” is present in the texts of Prigov’s *Alphabet*. It would seem that every subject

of consciousness which is characteristic of Prigov's poetry (from "a low ranker" all the way up to "a great poet"), which literary studies often refer to as Prigov's authorial mask, is isomorphic to Pessoa's heteronym (Pessoa 2002).

Thus, Prigov's subject possesses a flexible, agile identity: the boundaries between the "the Self" and "the Other" are constantly problematized, the subject aspires not to explicate its own individual experience, but rather, by analyzing its mechanism, to express the experience of "the Other." The possibility of identifying "the Self" with any other "Self" (the "Selves" of Pushkin, Budyonny, Lermontov—"The Self which has returned to itself as the Other") allows for the explication of someone else's experience as one's own, and vice versa.

As stated by Igor Smirnov, "the death of the subject" proclaimed by early postmodernism was transformed by Prigov into a *polysubjectivity* which was unaware of the last frontier (Smirnov 2010: 103). Each cycle of Prigov's poems represents a performative act of a subject re-creating itself; moreover, the subject moves easily from one identity to another, i.e. "a low ranker," "a great poet," "a female poet," "a homosexual poet": depersonalization becomes personification.

In order to glide easily from one identity to another, "sticking" and "unsticking" (Prigov), manipulating them in such a way that expression remained sincere and the experience of someone else's identity was able to be authentically translated as the experience of "the Other Self", it is necessary to possess a certain "zero," "empty" identity, which can "accommodate" any other one.

Mikhail Epstein noted that "Perhaps the main project for Prigov was his work to disincarnate himself, to disidentify himself from all his roles and 'Selves' as such, the art of 'unsticking' from selfhood" (Epstein 2016: 218). According to Epstein, "it was an experience of falling into a pause, into a gap between all possible identities, through their intentional testing and their reflexive rejection from themselves. Such an existential attitude to the self-deconstruction of a personality also determined the professional excitement with which Prigov, as an artist and theorist, constructed many personalities, creating illusions of himself solely in order to demonstrate their illusory nature, and to eradicate yet another non-genuine 'Self' within himself. Moreover, it was supposed *a priori* that there could be no genuine 'Selves,' that the genuineness of 'the Self' is always an imitation, that the very trust in it is false, and that it is only the labour of the rejection of these 'Selves' from oneself that reveals the nothing, the unknown, the unnamable" (Epstein 2016: 218).

"The Self" becomes detached from itself, and sees such a detachment as productive work for finding himself. The inexactitude of the phrase "the Self, getting detached from itself" can be corrected by quoting Emmanuel Levinas. In his work entitled *Totality and Infinity* (in the chapter *The Breach of Totality*), Levinas formulated a definition for the subject's identity which differed from that given in classical metaphysics, and reasoned about "the Self, which repels itself" (Levinas 2000, 77).

Prigov wrote as follows, "I defined my search of that time as a New Sincerity, which back then was unambiguously understood by everyone as opposition to brutally detached

and structural writing” (Prigov 2016a: 206). Sincerity is ensured by constant “eluding,” flickering, disidentification with one’s own “Self” and identification with “the Other Self.”

The terms “flicker” and “flickering subject” were widely used by the vast majority of the Moscow Conceptualists. For instance, Sergey Rubinstein pointed out that “he could hardly imagine the communicative element of his life ‘existence’ without specific role-playing ‘flickerings’” (Ioffe 2004).

“The Other” does not become an object to be parodied and, perhaps, not even a creative impulse. “The Other” turns into a point for the constructing of the “Self.” “The Self” acquires itself through “the Other” as “the Self which has returned to itself as the Other”: it is in the game of self-identifying, in a situation of self-cognizing, achieved through “the Other.”

It is important that “the Self” constantly remains on the border, on the verge of being completely dissolved within “the Other”, yet it preserves both selfhood and otherness. “The Self” observes “the Other” through the eyes of “the Self,” and observes itself through the eyes of the “the Other.”

Thus, the identity of the subject is formed on the border between “the Self” and “the non-Self”, while “sincere expression” is formed on the border between the Self’s own and the Other’s own intonation, while the centre of the aesthetic act is always occupied by the transgression mechanism.

Identity constitutes itself within flickering in a complex way, i.e. any “Self” is presented as “the non-Self,” meanwhile any “non-Self” is also presented through the eyes of “the Self.” The subject (“the Self”) “gets stuck in” the Other’s “Self,” in the Other’s experience, which can be observed only through the eyes of “the Self,” constructs through cognizing the subject and the object of cognition and, at a certain point, becoming a subject-stroke, “unsticks itself” from this identity, showing the conventionality and relativity of each of them, including its own. “Sincerity” of expression is possible only within the space of constant transgression, within the dialectic of ipse and idem (Ricoeur). Indeed, as Prigov remarked, “Where have you ever seen a whole personality?”

Conclusions

- Artists of the Moscow Conceptualism theoretically substantiate the need for a special figure acting as a mediator between “the Self” and “the non-Self,” an *artist-character*. Such a simulation of the author’s personality made it possible to present in a literary text an integrative, consistent identity, equal to oneself at every moment of time, external the author’s identity;
- Prigov’s “Self” is located in the space of a complex gnoseological game within the different identities. The “epistemological” basis of Prigov’s works manifests itself through approach to solving the problem of the status of a thing, but mainly through the fact that an artist-character does not represent his own unique subjective experience, but remains in a situation of “the gnoseological game”, manipulating the experience of “the Other Self,” that is, “the Self, who has returned to himself as the Other”;

- “Dissimilation” and “disidentification” with all social, cultural and other roles, discourses, etc. determine the possibility of an “empty,” “zero” identity, which, strange as it may seem, becomes productive for creating “the Self” model.

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