Dmitri Alexandrovich Prigov occupies a special place in contemporary Russian art. Formally a member of the Moscow conceptual school which has gained international renown especially over the past decade, Dmitri Prigov invented and brilliantly practiced his own methods of artistic work. I am not referring to the now well-established genres of contemporary art in which he chose to express himself, be it visual poetry, performance art or installation. Instead I am talking of a life-long project focused on its main persona known precisely as Dmitri Alexandrovich Prigov or, more compactly, D.A.P. Of course, one may think that the creation of artistic personae is not new in the domain of art. With Dmitri Alexandrovich the case is not as simple as it would seem. His persona that tautologically bore his own name, patronymic and surname was not only inseparable from the artist’s daily life that, while remaining unobjectified, had nothing valuable about it; by the same token it was dramatically and specifically immersed in the surrounding social context. It is my intention here to indicate the nature of this immersion or this connectedness to the social forces that have invariably invested Prigov’s work with their affective and, as we shall

see, irreducible presence.

I do not wish to treat Prigov and his work from the perspective of art history. It would be pointless for my undertaking to establish influences or to indulge in a comparative analysis. Speaking of the social dimension of Prigov’s project, I mean to highlight what in his work is relevant today, providing guidelines for the understanding of the current moment. In brief, I am interested in Prigov’s conceptual endeavor as being essentially open, that is, avoiding the logic of closure provided by the very concept of a work (of art) and even that of an aesthetic program. Indeed, one should focus on the non-aesthetic aspect of this art in order to better appreciate it. The famous British theorist of culture Raymond Williams speaks of forms and conventions in art and literature as “inalienable elements of a social material process.” For him, however, they are not derived from other social forms or pre-forms, but are “social formations of a specific kind,” in other words, articulations of “living processes,” which he also refers to as “structures of feeling.”¹ I would like to emphasize this basic insight: just as Williams, we will be concerned with “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt,” that is to say, with experience as opposed to the finished products into which it is conversed.² By saying that experience is social Williams is suggesting that it is a priori shared. By using the word “feeling” he is implying that this sharing has a certain emotional tone. It is this subtle social matter that I will try to address in my paper.

Dmitri Prigov was a student of the social context. He witnessed the Soviet time, a painful period of transition to the post-Soviet and finally the post-Soviet as an independent mode of life. And he never stopped being an anthropologist, whose relation to his social milieu was more complicated than that of distancing and/or simple opposition. Instead he was some sort of fine instrument that detected the invisible fluctuations and hum of the social body. Of course, Prigov’s statements

² Ibid., pp. 132, 128.
were ironical, especially when he mocked official language in his poems or other serial works. And yet they were open-ended in the sense that the absurdity of content was intrinsically wedded to reality or, in other words, that it bore the imprint of experience. Thus, in 1986 Prigov stages what may be called a public (urban) performance. He writes a series of appeals to the citizens and pastes those leaflets all over the city – on phone booths, walls and water pipes. “Citizens! Behave yourselves, please! / Citizens! We have never seen this, and it is seeing us for the first time too! / Citizens! The sun is covered by the clouds, and you’ve already bought that! / Citizens! The burden of the soul is beautiful, it makes it hard proof, so to say! / Citizens! I wouldn’t bother you, if I didn’t believe in you!”

Prigov was punished for his seemingly playful performance – he was taken to a mental institution, a correctional practice widely spread at the time. However, isn’t this artistic action a presentiment of public art? And isn’t it not only a way of inviting people to participate, but also a peculiar reflection of those “living processes” which embrace the artist and his potential audience alike? My contention is that Prigov’s verbal and visual statements are a transcript of the structures of feeling typical of his contemporaries, of “thought as felt and feeling as thought,”

But how can we make sense of something that remains essentially intangible? If Prigov succeeded in responding to the very transience of social being, which I think he did, then he can be seen as a cartographer of the social body. This definition will have serious consequences for the


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understanding of his art. It will then be possible to reinscribe his work in the context of the contemporary protest movement in Russia. However, this doesn’t mean that Dmitri Prigov managed to predict the course of political events or that he had his finger on the pulse of social life as no one else among the artists. (Although I must note in passing that it was precisely Prigov who was the first to discover the potential of the art group Voina (War) and therefore, indirectly, of the future members of the internationally famous Pussy Riot.) Rather, defining Prigov as a cartographer allows us to uncover an ethical dimension in his art, if by ethics we understand the absolute priority and the exigency of collective, i.e., connected, existence. This initial connectedness is immediately given over to political division and the play of political interests. But it remains the condition of all social forms and formations, including art and politics itself. Artists such as Prigov (and they are not many, to be sure) help to rearticulate the hidden sources of our being. I will return to this point. For the moment suffice it to say that the protest movement of 2011 and 2012 also focused on this fundamental condition of human existence and its total corruption by the existing system of power.

But to return to our question. How is it possible to account for that intangible substance that Dmitri Alexandrovich Prigov detected and expressed in his work? Given that he was a cartographer of the social body, let us try to formulate a system of coordinates within which he existed and which he revealed in his own inimitable way. Those coordinates are not thematic blocks, however. That is to say, they do not reflect what may be called the predominant motifs in Prigov’s works. On the contrary, the very idea of introducing this system serves the purpose of exploring the fluctuations of that social body that Prigov himself was attuned to so well. Moreover, by speaking of the former in terms of coordinates (instead of trying to name it), we may hope to retain this substance in its raw state, so to say, before it becomes translated into and thus neutralized and distorted by the symbolic language of art. I am referring to the dynamics of the social body that
unfolds independently of our capacity to represent it in any coherent or definitive way. Indeed, this capacity is often challenged by the evasive content of lived experience itself.

I will call the first of these coordinates intrusion. Undoubtedly Dmitri Alexandrovich was a performance artist in the highest sense. But I think he falls under a slightly different rubric, namely that of action art. If we look for recent eloquent examples, public interventions are the closest to what I have in mind. In fact, intervention art is nothing other than the art of intrusion. Speaking of social interventions as a form of present-day artistic practice, I would highlight the insignificant role assigned in them to artist as creator: he or she becomes the catalyst of unpredictable social processes, be it a spontaneous probing of public opinion, sometimes affecting the work of municipal bodies, a search for group identity among previously alienated city-dwellers or peaceful struggles for the reappropriation of public spaces first of all by the displaced. In each of these cases the artist provokes certain social developments which probably wouldn’t have taken place at all without his or her participation. But once they are under way, the notion of artist as creator becomes absolutely meaningless: if it happens that the events are documented and put on display after the fact, it is simply a weary tribute to the society of the spectacle, to use Guy Debord’s memorable definition.\(^5\) Or again, a tribute to the classical model of art wholly based on the supreme value of (re)presentation.

But let us complicate things a bit. In discussing intrusion as the first of our coordinates I would like to briefly recall the thoughts of Jean-Luc Nancy, a contemporary French philosopher, from his essay L’Intrus published in 2000 (its English translation is also available). In this short but penetrating piece Nancy reflects on his own experience of receiving a heart transplant. Of course, the transplant, according to Nancy, serves only as a metaphor: it accounts for the transformations of what we have thought of as “natural” and what now enters under the reign of so-

Dmitri Prigov, *Tree of Rejected Poems*, 1997
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Centre Pompidou, Paris
called “echotechnics.”

But what is a heart transplant, especially if it designates intrusion? Clearly, this is a situation when another’s organ is grafted on. The body keeps rejecting it and yet it alone allows for the body’s survival. It is the stranger in me, in what appears to be the most proper and familiar. But one’s own body is likewise subject to alienation: in order that the heart transplant could be sustained, the immune system should be suppressed. The surgery itself is a “gaping open” (béance) that cannot be closed: “I am closed open [Je suis ouvert fermé].” Through this opening, remarks Nancy, “passes a stream of unremitting strangeness…” (étrangeté).

In “Vers Nancy,” a film-interview by Claire Denis from the collection “Ten Minutes Later” (2002), Nancy addresses the same topic, but by focusing on foreigners this time. A foreigner (étranger) is someone who carries the very idea of intrusion. All conventions of receiving foreigners that impose forms of accepting difference as well as of respecting it are simply so many ways of normalizing the stranger. A stranger must remain a stranger, otherwise he stops being one. A foreigner is by definition l’intrus, that is, an intruder. (It is interesting that Nancy’s translator Susan Hanson has refused to provide an English equivalent for the word “intrus”; she mentions standard translations including “intruder,” “intruding,” “gate-crasher,” “unqualified […],” “trespasser,” but seems to be unhappy with them all.) Old political models, continues Nancy, such as assimilation (the melting pot) and integration (the European Union), have proved ineffective when confronted with inassimilable differences. Intrusion is essentially a

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8 Ibid.

reaction to homogenization (i.e., globalization) and immunization in politics. As such it carries disorder, confusion and, most importantly, a threat. The intruder remains unidentified: he cannot be conceived as a separate entity, therefore, he is a challenge to thinking itself. However, identification happens precisely by way of accepting elements of intrusion. Nancy insists: there has to be reception and rejection, and not simply the reception of rejection (or what I would call “receiving away”).

In philosophical terms the appearance of l’intrus is connected with the anonymity and passivity of the I. The other comes ahead of my self-consciousness and does so by suspending it. However, l’intrus is none other than me, myself, “the same, always identical to itself and yet that is never done with altering itself.” Therefore, l’intrus is the other within me. Nancy admits that his book of the same name is an exploration of the contemporary consciousness of identity. L’intrus stands for irreducible alterity which is nonetheless incorporated in identity. Going back to our theme, it would be no exaggeration to say that intrusion is the hallmark of Dmitri Prigov’s entire artistic project. Prigov’s characters, including his main persona, D.A.P., are all uninvited guests or intruders: their relationship to the material they deal with, which is social, as we know, is intimate to the point of an almost incestuous fusion. Yet they present that other that inhabits the social body, a transplant or prosthesis of sorts. Prigov’s characters create new communicational channels, they undermine that which seems identical to itself, natural or homogeneous. Tactically, they perform a seizure from the inside – thus official language closes up upon itself, having undergone an inconspicuous but fatal transformation.

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12 Jean-Luc Nancy: L’Intrus selon Claire Denis, op. cit.
Dmitri Prigov, Shar Malevicha, 1990s
© Nadezhda Bourova & The Dmitri Prigov Foundation
Our second coordinate will be resistance. The first thing that comes to one’s mind is organized resistance which manifests itself most readily in political forms. It is true that many of Prigov’s poems, especially those that were written in the last years of his life, are overtly critical of the local state of affairs, which reflects both his social temperament and his political stance. However, I am thinking of a different type of resistance. Rather, it is something that may be described as resistance of the forces of life (we may turn to Gilles Deleuze for an elucidation of this concept\(^\text{13}\)). Forces of life are nothing other than the movements of the social body, its sway and undulations, if you will. Among other things this is the locus of bad poetry, unlike good poetry which is always endowed with cultural value. Dmitri Prigov wrote poems on a regular basis (in fact, he stuck religiously to a daily writing routine), but was indifferent about purely formal perfection. Still, Prigov presents a paradox of sorts. Deriving his strength from the formless, he did spend his time and energy on trying to achieve a certain level of completeness. Often he would discard his poems, throwing them in the wastepaper bin. But then the defective poems, as if contesting their creator’s verdict, would become a conceptual object like the contents of a tin can (and Prigov has left a whole collection of them) or just another “little coffin of discarded verses.”

Of course, one may take up the point of Prigov’s “graphomania,” but only if we understand it in the literal sense of “useless writing.” What is at stake here is real passion, something with regard to which any given form is arbitrary and inadequate by definition. Prigov’s “graphomania” consisted in the perpetual movement of his hand that would alternately give rise to poems (especially visual poetry), drawings, installation sketches or marginalia depicting scribbled monsters that Dmitri Alexandrovich would willingly hand over to his friends. But graphomania is also a form of compulsion. Therefore, we may speak of

that which guided the hand of the artist and put pressure on his imagination in an absolutely unavoidable way. It is precisely this pressure, this compulsion, this “I cannot not (write, draw, etc.)” that is the presence of forces which remain beyond our control, which challenge and undermine the authorial I. Yet we are not dealing with a conceptualization of something that has no cultural value whatsoever (most notably, Ilya Kabakov has developed a whole conception of “trash”); instead, those are traces left by the forces of life, which no independent – finished – form is capable of holding or retaining.

Finally, let us call the third coordinate dissent. Again, this has nothing to do with what is normally and respectfully associated with political dissent or the activity of dissidents. Dissent before politics is, strictly speaking, action art itself, and, as I have tried to point out earlier, Dmitri Prigov is indeed an action artist. As we already know, it is a way of intervening in, i.e., intruding on, the realm of social relations. And an alternative mode of thought emerges not as a set of some basic demands or an articulated form of disagreement. It springs from the artist’s very action that necessarily embraces other people. Immanuel Kant has a term “mode of thinking of the spectators.” It is that which overtly manifests itself in the “game of great upheavals,” revolutionary first of all, and which proves, according to Kant, that the human race has a moral predisposition. But how exactly can one discover this mode of thinking? It turns out that it is essentially affective: the response that the event evokes in the spectators watching it (in Kant it is the spectacle of the French Revolution) borders on a full-fledged and even dangerous affect such as enthusiasm. Being a modality of the feeling of the sublime, enthusiasm carries with it a potential universality. Moreover, it calls upon a consensus which, in the words of J.-F. Lyotard, is nothing other than a sensus, that is, a “sentimental anticipation of the republic.”

We may use this argument to account for the specific kind of dissent produced by an artistic action. The action changes the mode of thinking

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of the spectators and does so on the level of what Kant calls sensus communis (common, or communal, sense). Again, we are unable to think of the performer as author, and if we insist on calling him or her that name, then it would be possible only on the condition that the performer’s gesture affects the spectators as his or her co-authors. Actions are not addressed to expert audiences. Instead of curators, critics and artists they are addressed to simple people lacking expertise. Having ultimately lost their anchorage in the art institution, actions are staged in an open public space and, if successful, they change the very contours of that space, including the mode of thinking of their numerous spectators. Actions operate like viruses, their scope may be compared to that of an epidemic. (Note that if in Kant’s time aesthetic categories were the privileged tools of art criticism, today quasi-medical metaphors are coming to the fore.)

I hope that by now it has become clear in what sense one may be talking of Prigov’s Utopia. His art has always been – and remains – art of the passing moment. Here I must add that Dmitri Alexandrovich was so attentive to his medium, which, to quote Williams once again, boils down to “social experiences in solution,” that he boldly experimented with forms which marked the shifting vectors in contemporary life itself. Thus he actually produced mockumentaries of the Soviet past, paid tribute to multimedia experiments and even sang in a postmodern opera. I remember him excitedly discussing the possibilities of a new anthropology that would explore the blurring of boundaries between humans and their environment (suffice it to think of the advent of biotechnologies). But how exactly does Utopia come into the picture? It is obvious that we no longer think of Utopia in terms of a totalizing transformative project. Or, to put it another way, we no longer trust

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Utopia as a program. Instead, according to Fredric Jameson, a brilliant theorist of Utopia, all that is left after the collapse of fulfilled communist Utopias are Utopian impulses, that is, fragmented but necessarily collective desires that, however disguised or distorted, may be found in a vast array of cultural texts. The Utopian impulse, suggests Jameson, calls for a hermeneutic: “for... a theorization and interpretation of unconscious Utopian investments in realities large or small, which may in themselves be far from Utopian in their actuality.”

Dmitri Prigov was totally immersed in that landscape. His art is Utopian precisely to the extent to which it deals with desires that remain essentially hidden or latent. Being a conductor and cartographer of such collective desires, including dreams of a better collective, Prigov has also challenged the very notion of contemporary art as an autonomous aesthetic program. It is at this point that I would like to return to one of the most memorable episodes of the recent protest movement, namely, the performance of Pussy Riot in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. It was staged almost exactly one year ago from this day. As you all know, it was a “punk prayer” with clear political and anticlerical implications. (In their song the members of the feminist collective pray to the Holy Mother, the Blessed Virgin, “to chase Putin out.” Their protest was directed at the Orthodox Church leader’s support for Putin during his presidential election campaign.) Today two of the women are serving two-year sentences in penal colonies, while one of them was freed on probation, her sentence suspended. Of course, retrospectively this action can be seen as heroic. We all remember how quickly it was appropriated by local politics and in a most repulsive way. Indeed, this was very revealing. But in and of itself the band’s action is rather on the side of basic human needs and has no claims to heroism in this capacity. I would say that Prigov’s lesson is precisely this type of actionism. He taught us to intrude in order to destroy ostensible homogeneity. He taught us to resist so that we shouldn’t become anyone’s prey or

possession. This ultimately leads to dissent that turns into a way of living – neither program nor manifesto, it persists as ordinary daily life.

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**Abstract:** Art of the Passing Moment: The Anti-Projective Nature of Prigov’s Utopia

The paper deals with the artistic project of Dmitri Alexandrovich Prigov, an artist belonging to the Moscow conceptual school. Unlike his friends and associates, Prigov developed an attitude to the Soviet and post-Soviet social environment that was not reduced to the clear-cut gesture of opposition and/or non-involvement. His own project, which included visual poetry, installations, performances, multimedia experiments and even opera singing, gives expression to the hum of collective voices that have always affectively invested Prigov’s work. In this sense he was a cartographer of the changing social context, and the basic coordinates within which he operated as an artist might be described in terms of intrusion, resistance and dissent. All of them, however, have little to do with a subject-position. Instead, they are various articulations of the forces of life or the presemantic – transient, emergent – state of social being. It is in this perspective that we may begin to think of Prigov’s utopianism as art of the passing moment. No longer linked to large-scale political projects, Utopia nowadays takes the form of fragmented collective desires. Being a conductor or medium of such desires, Prigov has thus also challenged the notion of contemporary art as a fixed aesthetic program.

**Key words:** D.A. Prigov, Utopia, social anthropology, intrusion, resistance, dissent, J.-L. Nancy.
Résumé: L'art du moment qui passe: la nature anti-projective de l'utopie de Prigov

Cet article traite du projet artistique de Dmitri Alexandrovich Prigov, artiste appartenant à l'Ecole conceptuelle de Moscou. Contrairement à ses amis et associés, l'attitude que Prigov développe par rapport à son environnement social soviétique et post-soviétique n'a pas été réduit au geste d'opposition et/ou de non-implication. Son projet propre, qui mêle poésie visuelle, installations, spectacles, expériences multimédia et même le chant d'opéra, est un fredonnement de voix collectives qui ont toujours investi affectivement le travail de Prigov. Il était, en ce sens, un cartographe du contexte social changeant, et les coordonnées de base dans lesquelles il fonctionnait en tant qu'artiste pourraient être décrites en termes d'intrusion, de résistance et de dissidence. Mais ces termes ont peu à voir avec une position de sujet. Au lieu de cela, ce sont des articulations diverses des forces de la vie ou de la présémantique – transitoire, émergente – état de l'être social. C'est dans cette perspective que nous pouvons commencer à penser à l'utopie de Prigov comme art du moment qui passe. Comme elle n'est plus liée à des projets politiques à grande échelle, l'utopie prend aujourd'hui la forme de désirs collectifs fragmentés. Passeur ou médium de ces désirs, Prigov a également contesté la notion d'art contemporain en tant que programme esthétique fixe.