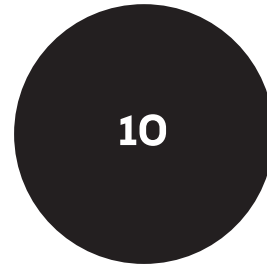




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## **View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture.**

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## **Walls**

They describe their field of activity in broad terms, as stretching from “the west, with the former Berlin Wall and east to the Great Wall of China, called Eurasia.” They conducted studies in Chinese (or rather, Uyghur) Kashgari and in the post-imperial archives of Petersburg, Ankara, and Białystok. They examined the microhistories of Jews from Bukhara and tracked the fates of letters and ideas traversing the central Asian steppes and crossing the peaks of the Caucasus. They have exhibited the results of these queries all over, from New York to Abu Dhabi, in the salons of the art world and in modest provincial art galleries.

They stubbornly dismantle calcified historical divisions and ignore trendy categories and motifs – instead of using the language that “one uses nowadays,” they create their own idiom, sometimes crude, but always expressive. They call themselves Slavs and Tatars, referring to long forgotten geographies and collectives, to temptingly dated borders of yesteryear that predate the era of nationalisms and modern identity narratives. The group persists in its anonymity – they appear as a collective using recognizable a language and aesthetic, created by artists, researchers, and designers somewhere between European, Asian, and American metropolises. From this cosmopolitan position they look at borders and peripheries – most often casting their gaze to the east.

For the last ten years they have used the same, complementary, media: objects, books, and performative lectures. Designer objects, sometimes elegantly minimalist, other times obnoxious kitschy – ranging from oriental rugs to glass sculpture, from pulpits serving as stands for the Koran to aggressively colored plastic signs, from books skewered like kebabs to swings reminiscent of Islamic prayer beads – are arranged in exhibits and galleries, creating spaces that make their viewers pause,

converse and read. In the end, individual series of works are presented in a published form – thus far there have been ten, and all of them are somewhat crazed collections of texts and images loosely based around the evolving theme, occasionally blossoming in unexpected directions and intensely worked over in inscriptions, signatures, margins. Slavs and Tartars develop these primary themes in lectures, a gesture which allows them to introduce these subjects into spaces beyond the art gallery. Karl Marx and Beyoncé appear in neighboring slides, along with sheikhs, imams, and Azeri caricatures from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This characteristic mish-mash punctuated with paradoxes and “troves” discovered in the course of research, quotes from the classics and self-quotes results in a hybrid that does not lend itself easily to simple classifications – it remains “too artistic for the academics, and too academic for the artists.”<sup>1</sup>

Despite the relatively open character of gradually developing projects, the members of the collective create such a rich narrative around their works, that it becomes almost isolated – they themselves suggest interpretive directions and formulas for defining key concepts; they draw the connections between objects, figures, and themes circulating in their studies. Naysayers claim that Slavs and Tatars are “intellectuals who possess a priceless ability to produce objects that ideally suit the tastes of artistic institutions,”<sup>2</sup> others add that, “situating themselves in opposition to the avant-garde, they deploy history as a worked over, neatly packaged product ready to be consumed by the Western viewer.”<sup>3</sup> This strategy has worked so far, and not only among Western audiences: it took them to New York’s MOMA, the Manifesta in St. Petersburg, and the Berlin Biennale, and their works have been purchased for collections in the United Arab Emirates and London’s Tate Modern.

## Backwards

One of their mascots is Nasreddin Hodja – the crazed wise man (or wise fool) known in many Muslim cultures from Kashgari to the Balkans, the subject of jokes and anecdotes, whose unique brand of stoicism offers simple answers to the most difficult matters and eagerly, seemingly naively asks questions about things ostensibly banal. Nasreddin is often portrayed riding a donkey – except that,

instead of facing ahead, he is seated backwards on the saddle, looking out at what the donkey leaves in its wake. He moves forward, but faces the past.

This figure brings together several important threads. Firstly, the turn to history, which remains an endless field of exploration for the collective, with a simultaneous constant movement forwards, towards a modernity discernible at the very least in the form selected for many of their works. The group defines its stance as anti-positivistic – instead of arrogantly looking at the future, treating it as foreseeable and subject to manipulation in the present, they look back and seek out the margins of official history in search of overlooked threads, discontinued or suppressed thoughts, or signs bearing witness to them.

Secondly, the turn to the East and the overall poorly explored wealth of its stories and figures, among which only a small portion has made it into Western narratives. They seek out rarely trod paths: studying Russian orientalism, fundamentally different from the British and French models, tracking the first European researcher who studied at the famous Al-Azhar university in Cairo, and fantasizing about the similarities between Christian and Sh'ia iconography.

And further: they turn to fringes, borderlands, places in which syncretism emerges. To unearth, and intellectually and artistically work through these treasures, comes with a necessity of finding subsequent translations: letters, languages, and symbolic codes. The results of these translations are sometimes puzzling, and the Slavs and Tatars will undertake this arduous task over and over, examining what emerges with each new change of alphabet, system of meaning, field of reference. Language is the central category in many of their projects, language understood and seen in a specific light – not only as a rational and organized system of signs serving to communicate content, but as an element able to transcend political lines and cultural divisions, which cannot be reined in by alphabets, and may serve as a tool of emancipation and resistance.

They move comfortably between these various registers – high and low, official and private. They circulate between classical texts by Eastern and Western intellectuals, between sacred books, folk culture, and even vulgar pop. In the books and lectures of Slavs and Tartars, a picture of Miley Cyrus sticking her tongue out may be just as

serious a point of reference as the iconography of Imam Ale; punctuated with inscriptions, erudite chapters accompany explosions of baroque style, academic definitions alongside satirical memes.

This is how the “metaphysical split,” as the group named their working technique, functions: it is based on placing elements emerging from different systems into a shared space (texts, images, a gallery room), and then studying the tensions between them, discovering possible analogies, parallels and hybrids. The greater the contrasts and the friction between the intermingled elements, the more interpretations they spark. The point here is not to catalogue curiosities – rather, it is to methodically comb through archives, volumes, and pop-culture networks in pursuit of elements useful for the creation of further intellectual collages.

The oscillation between various aesthetics and valuation of the figure of *coincidentia oppositorum* has yet another dimension: Slavs and Tartars rarely select the first, most obvious association, seldomly choosing to follow already-beaten paths. Instead, as they explain, they prefer to travel from Point A to B via intermediary points, sometimes very out-of-the-way ones, which requires laying additional tracks and making further cognitive efforts. In order to understand the phenomenon of the Polish “Solidarity” movement, they examine the Islamic Revolution in Iran; in order to explain the intricacies of Velimir Khlebnikov’s theories of language, which are located at the interstices of linguistics, mysticism, and the artistic avant-garde, they listen to the rhythms of Biggie Smalls, aka Notorious B.I.G. The premise is rather straightforward: to bring together things that are culturally, geographically, and temporally distant, placing them alongside things that are well known, in order to pry open the obviousness of firmly rooted fantasies, using unfamiliar objects as a counterpoint.

According to tradition, Nasreddin Hodja was a master of recognizing and dismantling paradoxes, and his favorite way of transmitting such lessons was through jokes. Slavs and Tatars repeatedly evoke this figure, their “retroactive mascot,” and mobilize the force of the joke, used to break through the gravity of narratives inherited from ancestors – intellectuals and artists, politicians and mystics.

## Lips-lips, tongue, throat, nose

They compare their tactics of working with the past to resuscitation: to bring history back to life, they try to breathe their own breath into it. This metaphor has another layer: it evokes physicality, sensuality, direct physical contact. The members of the collective treat their subject in a stubbornly literal way – they examine the tongue as a potent muscle, capable of resisting political projects and linguistic reforms, they look at the movement of the lips that accompanies the pronunciation of particular sounds. They look into the throat, in order to investigate the phenomenon of a specific phoneme, which appears in different alphabets and cultural contexts, a phoneme tenderly dubbed “*The [Kh] aka x aka П and its Bitch ass Crew: da q aka κ [gh], and Of Course: da One, da Only H.*”<sup>4</sup> (The phoneme is extremely difficult to pronounce for people from contemporary civilizational centers – it subjects Anglo-Saxon throats to severe gymnastic trials on the level of bodily cultural training).

Slavs and Tatars see the speech organs as erogenous zones – and they use this libidinal aspect, in order to explode entrenched narratives about languages as organized systems of sound, governed by rules. They explain: “In order to escape the cold, clinical approach to linguistics and the hard hangover of language politics, we decided to seek warmth and refuge in the darker, carnal, or even cartilaginous, corners of language: more sybaritic than semantic.”<sup>5</sup>

In *Naughty Nasals* they concentrate on the nose – on the cover of the [book](#), accompanying a 2014 exhibit organized in the Arsenal Gallery in Białystok, it takes the form of a large wooden sculpture, which is then described as “a particular site of resistance in Slavic and Turkic languages.” This is the point of departure for studies of the intricate relationships linking languages, politics and erotics, and concentrated on sounds “lost” from majority of Slavic languages in the course of their historical development, but preserved in Polish and written in the form of the letters *q* and *ę*.

From here, the road winds its way towards the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “that fated century when nationalism was not only invented but it took linguistics as its bride.”<sup>6</sup> It was also a time of intensive activity connected to the territorial and cultural expansion of empires – the golden age of, among others, Russian colonialism. Subduing newly

conquered lands involved the necessity of creating numerous translations – from local languages into the language of the metropole, from provincial idioms into a code legible to the center. A powerful tool for exercising power, language became a field of intensive measures at the boundaries of politics and linguistics. One such measure was a project of rendering the Polish language in Cyrillic, unsuccessful for a number of reasons, among them the resistance posed by the intractable letters *q* and *ę*, which could not be transcribed into the alphabet of the Eastern empire.

Slavs and Tatars go further down this path, in their own way: they produce confessionals in the form of the unrealized additional letters *ж* and *л*, elegant wooden blocks, which could serve for the confessions of uncommitted historical sins, and place them alongside older works from the cycles *Long Legged Linguistics* and *Love Letters*. Among them are glass sculptures, reminiscent of erotic toys, of tongues and tonsils, and rugs with paraphrases of drawings by Vladimir Mayakovsky, such as a comic satire about the intentions of politicians messing with linguistics: imprisoned in the alphabet a meaty tongue presses through the bars of letters, not submitting to attempts to restrain it – beloved by imperial and Soviet administrators, as well as other modernizers, possessed by the desire to discipline a reality that carries syncretic traces of the past.

A story developing in parallel – this time with a happy ending – is the reform of Turkish, which, involuntarily submitting to the constraints of the Latin alphabet imposed by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, “lost” a nasal sound [*ŋg*], an inheritance from Mongolian and Altai ancestors of modern Turks. This in turn opens up the field for wordplay and visual games, and to studies more serious in tone, examining successive layers of what the collective calls a politics of the alphabet – an effort to rein in language with the assistance of arbitrarily imposed collections of signs.

The Slavs and Tatars pair these attempts with a concept of infrapolitics drawn from James Scott, referring to the emancipatory potential of a private, oral communication, able to evade repressive regimes.<sup>7</sup> In this field the erotic force of language, also highlighted by the artists, emerges as a medium of intimate exchange, the bearer of words whispered by moist lips directly into the conch of the yearning ear. And here they lean (not the only time) towards the aesthetics of kitsch: in one of the works from the cycle *Long Legged Linguistics* a blood red,

silicone tongue is wrapped around a three meter metal rod used for pole-dancing and striptease. All moves allowed.

## Homo, hetero, trans

In the course of their paralinguistic studies, Slavs and Tatars enjoy following in the tracks of empire – Latin Christianity and Islam, Eastern Orthodox and Communism – and investigating what happened on the peripheries of mighty powers and collectives during political upheavals. They dust off etymologies, map out the wanderings of phrases, letters, and sounds in languages and alphabets. They unveil microhistories of rebellions and revolts, victories and defeats in the field of language, being on the one hand a tool of political change and expressing official contents, on the other hand the medium of private conversations.

They seek out similarities between heterogeneous systems – tracking down cases of homophony, and among these unexpected coincidences, they find pearls. Occasionally they flirt with Gnosticism or the Kabbalah, other times they play with slang, and then construct, on this basis, particular case studies. They look for alphabetical bifurcations by examining language reforms, common in the last 150 years, which led to the same words being written in different ways in various historical and political contexts. They overlay authentic examples of heterography with their own attempts to transcribe words from one code onto another: in the cycle *Tranny Tease* they test out meanings unveiled in processes of transliteration and transcription, being the “poor ugly stepsisters” of the noble practice of translations, and unearth cases of unexpected shifting of contents.

Maneuvering between historical, geographic, political, and cultural contexts, they play with their findings and subject them to intellectual and artistic transformations. The association with the world of drag queens turns out to be apropos – words and phrases, dressed in the strangest alphabets, decked out in someone else’s feathers, glow with bright neon lights in their installations, from time to time winking at the audience.

## Maps

Reading the collective's texts and listening to their lectures, once sometimes gets



the impression that the reception of the works of Slavs and Tatars is dependent on what they have said about it. Themes excavated from distant archives are so marginal, the maneuvers undertaken on words and images so precise, that without guidance from the authors, a viewer lacking knowledge that is both deep (because it delves into local particulars) and incredibly broad (because it requires familiarity with dozens of iconographic traditions and alphabets – from three to four versions of written Azeri to the details of the Hebrew Kabbalah, to the changes from Ottoman to modern Turkish, and more), can feel helpless.

One can stop at the strictly aesthetic level, become captivated by the melodies generated by a simulation of the call to prayer in the installation *Ezan Çılgınlıqları*, pet the leather tails of the nasals *q* and *q̇* or sit on a *takht* platform covered in a carpet like the ones seen in homes and tea-houses from Ashgabat to Bishkek. If you decide to delve in deeper, a map awaits: in the act of “popularizing” a non-obvious and rather ex-centric knowledge of Eurasia, the artists make all of their books accessible online, and recordings of most of their lectures can be found on YouTube. Slavs and Tatars explore the hidden nooks and crannies that few have the energy or motivation to look into, and the arrangements, in which they present their findings, although they remain coherent in the context of their own idiom, are rarely intuitive. The auto-commentaries generously formulated by the collective are thus necessary, however, occasionally one can have the uncomfortable feeling, that in terms of the hermeticism of these works, it is hard to escape this narrative.

## Footnotes

- 1 Max Cegielski, “Slavs in Tatarstan, Tatars in Slavdom,” trans. S. Gauger, in *Niesforne nosówki / Naughty Nasals*, (Białystok: Galeria Arsenał, 2014), 15.
- 2 Karolina Plinta, “Slavs and Tatars. Długonoga lingwistyka, Niesforne nosówki,” *Szum 6* (2014): 118–120.
- 3 Karolina Majewska, “Slavs and Tatars w Gdańsku,” *Obieg*, <http://www.obieg.pl/felieton/23383>, accessed December 16, 2011.

4 Slavs and Tatars, *Khhhhhhh*, (Brno: The Moravian Gallery-Mousse Publishing, 2012), 31.

5 Slavs and Tatars, *Niesforne nosówki / Naughty Nasals*, 51.

6 Ibid., 72.

7 Ibid., 78.