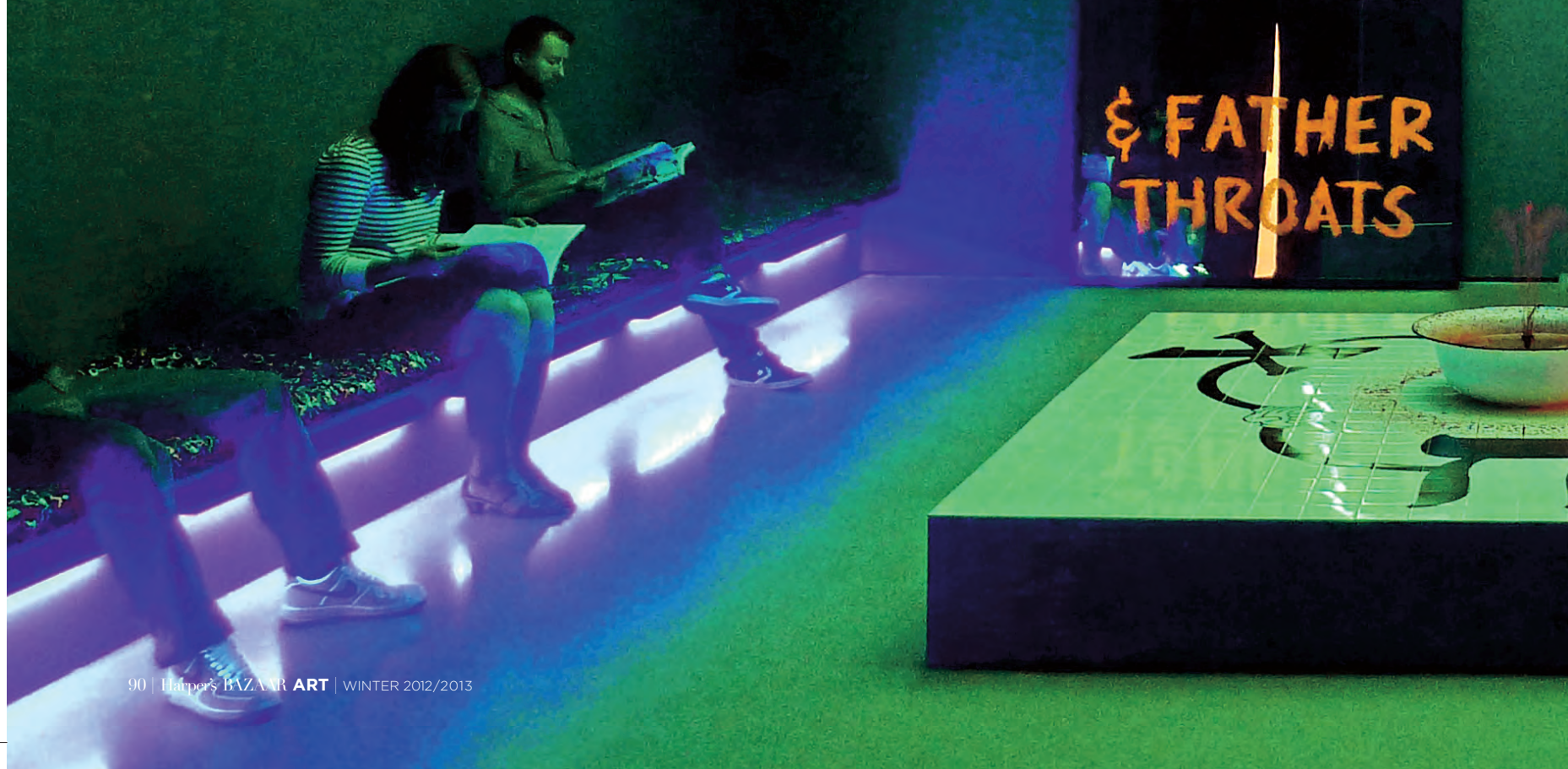


'Beyonsense' (installation view)  
(2012) 'Projects 98' Museum  
of Modern Art, New York (all  
images courtesy Slavs + Tatars)

# SLAVS *AND* TATARS

*Mythical texts mingle with contemporary narratives, skewed histories meet polymath 21st century media randomizers. Bouncing between Central Asia and the wider world, Slavs And Tatars' multicolourprachise weaves unique perspectives*

BY JESI KHADIVI









## SLAVS AND TATARS



Like the elusive Chinese Encyclopedia Celestial Empire of Benevolent Knowledge that Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges mentions in his text 'The Analytical Language of John Wilkins', Slavs and Tatars' expansive approach to understanding the complex cultures of Central Asia through

text, images, and shared reading spaces revels in the very ambiguities, redundancies, and deficiencies that Borges describes in his essay. Borges claims that every classification of the universe is somehow arbitrary and full of conjecture because we 'do not know what thing the universe is' and that we classify as a way of creating our universe. Likewise, Slavs and Tatars' works examine the multiple constellations that comprise Central Asia, a region that is historically invisible (or at the very least hazy) from the perspective of both the MENASA region and the West. This investigation does not attempt to simply reveal a hidden culture, but to create and share a dynamic, pluralistic vision of culture that spans multiple registers of space and time through the auspices of geographic inquiry. The collective themselves sum it up best: 'Flung back and forth a couple more times, we throw up our hands, give up on finding a happy medium and settle for asymmetry, for occupying the ends, the macro and the micro, the near and the far at once, to hell with the middle ground.'

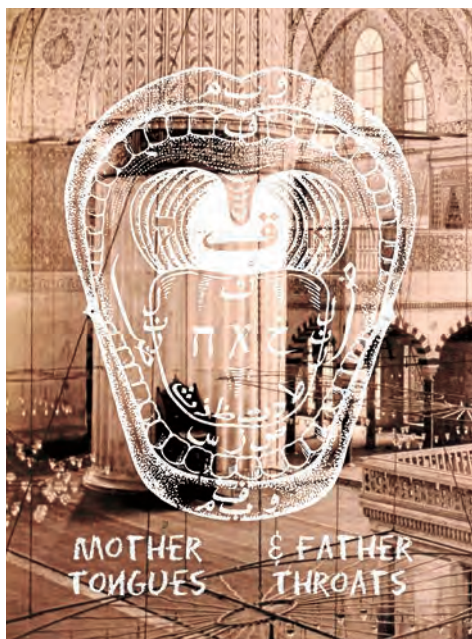
Founded in 2006 as a reading group, Slavs and Tatars turn a parabolic lens on Central Asia's commonalities and dissonances through polemics, associative propositions and misreadings that take the form of books, lecture-performances, sculptures, and interactive installations. Through their roots as artists, writers, designers, and linguists, Slavs and Tatars have developed an intricate and interlocking system of mediation to display their rich research-based practice. Eschewing the format of discrete art works, the collective works in cycles, slowly building an inter-connected discursive eco-system with each project. 'In fact, these cycles are like cultures of yogurt,' they claim, 'In the way that one culture becomes another.'

Since garnering attention for '79.89.09' a year-long project for the German fashion and cultural magazine 032c that proposed an archeology of the year 2009, the prismatic bookends of the rise of political Islam in 1979 and the collapse of Communism in 1989, the collective has developed distinct formal and linguistic lexicon that blends pop visuals and language with ancient traditions. 'We're



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(Opposite page, clockwise from top left) Slavs + Tatars: 'Long Live The Syncretics' (2012), 'Gastham Nabood Nagard' (2011), 'The Dear for the Dear' (2012)

definitely interested in these complete swings of the pendulum that go from medieval to contemporary and back to ancient, non-legendary, and fairy tale like things,' Slavs and Tatars explains, 'for us it conveys a maximalism of registers, but also it is something that is somewhat representative of a non-linear, non-positivist way of approaching time.' Different stratae of time and space intermingle in both the form and content of Slavs and Tatars' work.

The collective's cyclical approach to art-making allows book projects to inspire spatial works, which in turn serve as platforms to develop ideas for subsequent books and lecture performances. This tentacular approach to research also attracts the collective to such figures like Khizr, the founder of mystical Islam, and the satirical sufi figure Nasreddin. 'Khizr is the Sufi saint, if you will,' Slavs and Tatars explain, 'For us, we talk about him as being the temporal equivalent of Nasreddin, who was our geographic mascot. You can find Nasreddin from Croatia to China and Khizr you can find from Solomon and Abraham all the way to today.'

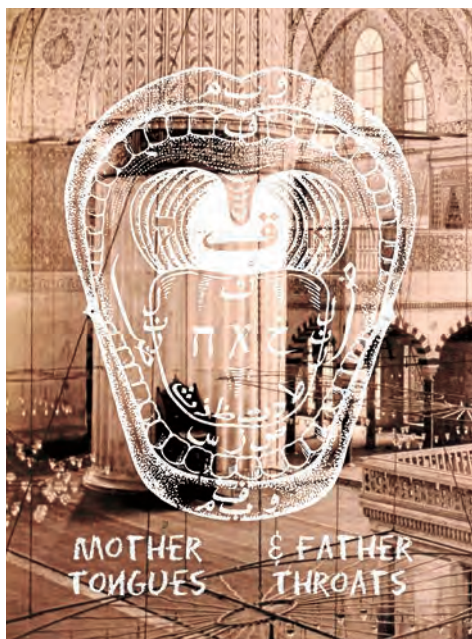
The notion of reading one specificity through the lens of another runs throughout Slavs and Tatars oeuvre: earlier works like 'Kidnapping Mountains' investigate the linguistic complexity of Azerbaijan through syntactic devices borrowed from advertising and sloganeering, while the collective's most recent cycle of work, 'The Faculty of Substitution' explicitly hones in on substitution as a cerebral and metaphysical act.

A recent lecture performance at the Institutions by Artists conference in Vancouver asked how the collecting practices of the de Menil Family or Dan Flavin's minimalist light sculpture might help us understand mystical Islam. 'Khrrrrrrrr', a book and reading room, investigates a single phenome found in Semitic, Cyrillic, Turkic, and Arabic alphabets as a means to reconsider 'pedagogy, progress, and the sacred role of language.' While their practice has grown beyond the page, Slavs and Tatars claim that their work in other mediums, particularly their sculptural and installative work function as a premise to pull people back to the space of the

(Clockwise from far left) 'Mother Tongues and Father Throats' (2012), 'Beyonsense MoMA' (2012), 'Wheat Mollah' (2011)







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book. And like many aspects of the collective's multi-faceted practice, this pull between the object and the word moves in and out of stark relief.

Three vitrines stand at the entrance of 'Beyonsense', Slavs and Tatars' current exhibition at New York's MoMA, each arranged in a spare, modern museological display. Inside the centre vitrine, a kebab skewer diagonally pierces texts on philosophy, Sufism, and language. One of the vitrines flanking 'Kitab Kebab', or 'Book Kebab' as the title of the sculpture roughly translates, contains a wheat turban and brick, another a wooden carving of a shrivelled brown wooden cucumber, perched upon a small lectern draped with a small swathe of brightly patterned fabric. A striped steel sculpture resembling a mulberry branch hangs above, festooned with dangling red ribbons.

At first glance, these objects are mute and mysterious, which is only heightened by the enclosure under glass. Yet, as is often the case with their work, Slavs and Tatars unsettle the obscure without denying it its mystery through colour, comfort, and humour. Just on the other side of the wall of overlapping, hanging carpets behind this collection of small sculptures lies a decidedly more convivial, black-lit lair.

If the first room exuded formal restraint, than this one oozes a strange brand of tripped-out Islamic psychedelia. Here, the walls glow a greenish-black, illuminated by a suspended light fixture inspired by a work created by the American artist Dan Flavin in 1982 for the Masjid al-Farah mosque in downtown New York. In the middle of the room, a miniature fountain sputtering red liquid rests on a tiled plinth where encircled by cartoonish renderings of three iterations of the phenome 'Kh' - in Hebrew, Arabic and Russian - shaking hands.

Benches line the walls of the room and, the artists tell me, visitors sit on them for ages reading the collective's many publications. As both a space of exhibition and an environment for reading, 'Beyonsense' articulates many of the challenges inherent in how Slavs and Tatars position themselves discursively, particularly as it relates to working with their intensely variegated cultural, historical, and spiritual remit: how can knowledge move between the sensual and cerebral? How can the space of the word complicate the space of the image or the object? What does it mean to do the splits outside of a gymnastics studio?

'We've really looked to text as Sufis do in the sense of how to convey the contradictions beyond the rational' Slavs and Tatars explain. 'Beyonsense' comes from the Russian 'zaum' - beyond sense. It's beyond rationality. How can we retrieve a use of language for those purposes and not simply be dogmatic, or even pedagogical? Which again, presumes, 'I know, you don't' - it's a road we go down together. There is something sacred to the word. There is nothing more key to our existence than words and language.' ➔

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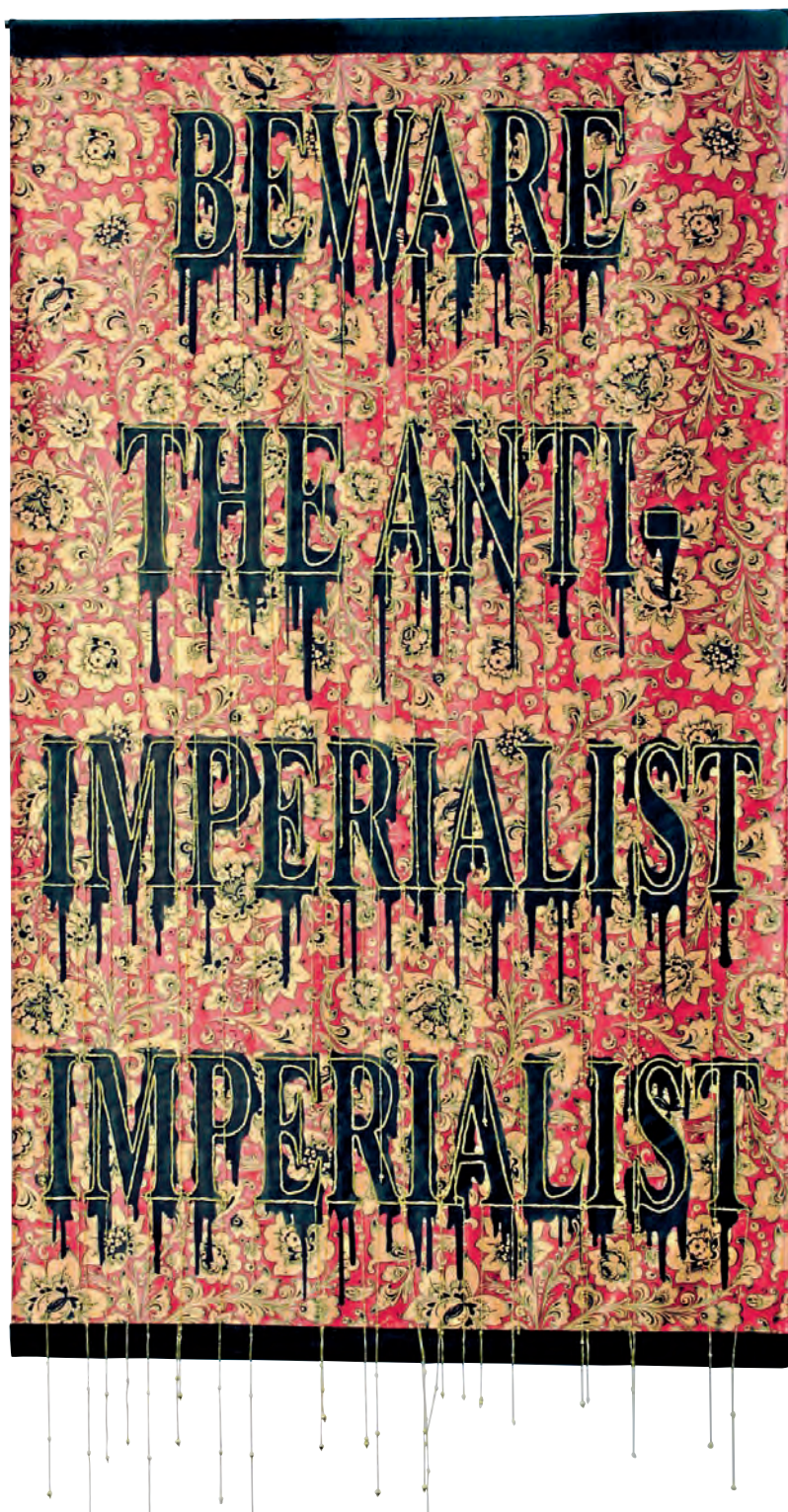


## GLOSSARY

Between the layers of Slavs + Tatars work, one finds a certain Eurasian Encyclopedia in which it is written that the people inhabiting the area east of the former Berlin Wall and west of the Great Wall of China can be divided into:

1. those that were once ruled by the Soviets
2. mystic ones
3. those with monobrows
4. polyglots
5. Muslims
6. fabulous ones
7. nomads
8. those included in the present classification
9. those that tremble as if they were mad
10. innumerable ones
11. those drawn with very fine pop cultural references
12. others
13. those that have just broken an icon
14. those that from a long way off look like flies





(Clockwise from far left) Slavs + Tatars 'Quince' (From 'Not Moscow Not Mecca') 'Mystical Protest' (2011) (SALT Istanbul) (Left and above) From the series 'Friendship Of Nations' (Kiosk Gent)



## SLAVS AND TATARS



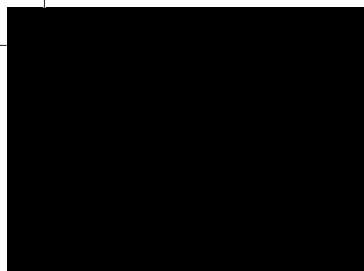
(Above) 'PrayWay' (photo: Patrick McMullan) (Right) 'Reverse Joy' (Installation view) (Jerusalem, 2012), (Below) 'Reverse Joy' (Installation View) (Prague, 2012)

This begs the question: can one spatialise what is beyond sense? Surely this is a question without a concrete answer and one that is intrinsic to any artist whose practice trucks with the slippery notion of helping the world by revealing mystic truths. Slavs and Tatars grapple with this legacy of the avant-garde through a kind of warm post-conceptualism that posits intimacy as the intercessor between the head and the heart.

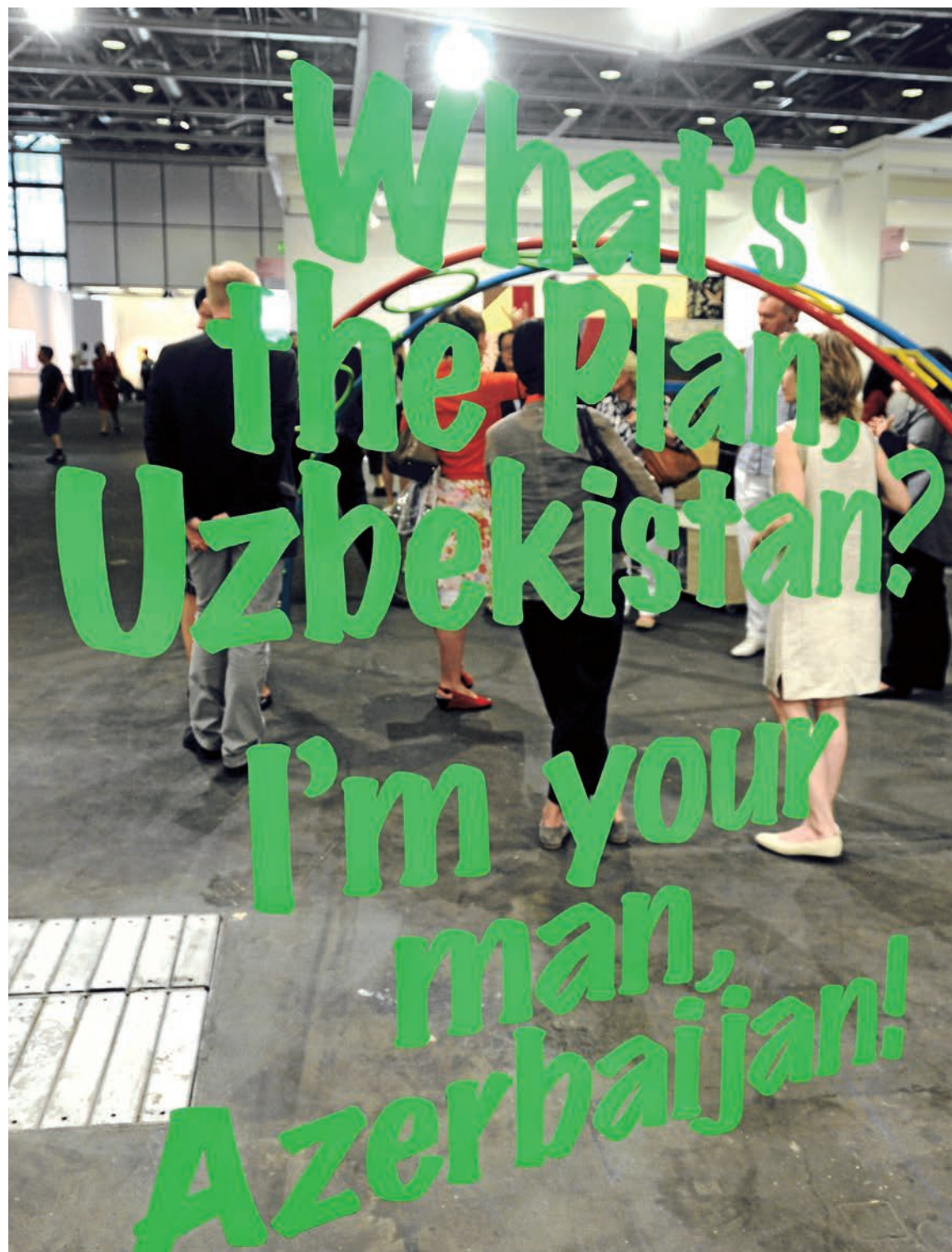
'Because modernity has secularised us, these spaces of culture become receptacles for the sacred,' Slavs and Tatars explain 'The problem is that museums haven't lived up to that. They try to approach only with the head. Instead of trying to convey effective meaning like through the shrine or the church, we're interested in a local kind of ritualistic aspect than religion itself, whether it is the shrine or the ziggurat, the church or the mosque or the temple, the space of contemporary art, with few exceptions, like the Dia Sufi Mosque or the installations at Dia, that embrace that responsibility. We're not trying to resacralise space, but we're trying to show a different idea of modernity: a modernity that is collective, which is warm, that is textured, not steel and glass, quiet not loud' ➔











The fragrance of this warm, delicate modernity pervades the collective's recent exhibition 'Not Moscow, Not Mecca' at the Vienna Secession. Two outsized watermelons flanked the entrance of Joseph Maria Oblrich's Art Nouveau building perched in Robert Oerley pots on the staircase. Inside, a sensuous array of fruits fashioned from blown glass and fibreglass is strewn across a low-lying mirrored platform. When taken in from the comfort of one of the Uzbeki mattresses lining the walls, these enticing watermelons, pomegranates, quince, apricots, and cucumbers might call to mind a fruit bowl laid out to welcome guests. Flip through the pages of the artist book made for the exhibition, however, and readers will find something resembling an early edition of famed culinary

encyclopedia Larousse Gastronomique. Only instead of poems and aphorisms about brie and other cheeses, one learns that the cucumber - that salty dog - has a trans-cultural provenance as a fertility (or virility) symbol, as well as the story of Xian Fe, the musk-melon loving concubine and kidnapee from which Slavs and Tatars sculptural send-up 'The Fragrant Concubine' derives its name.

Although the sculptural works presented in 'Not Moscow, Not Mecca' may seem like simple fruits, those familiar with Slavs and Tatars researched-based practice will know that there is a world of historical significance and visual wordplay that lie behind these beautiful, yet seemingly uncomplicated objects. The ambiguity of





(Far Left) 'Nations' (mirror edition) (2012). 'Art Statements,' Basel. (Above) 'Resist Resisting God' (2009) (version 2) (Photo courtesy of Netwerk). (Left) 'Monobrow Manifesto' (2011) Neuer Aachener Kunstverein, Aachen. (Below) 'Not Moscow Not Mecca', 2011. Commissioned for 'Station,' at Konsthall C, Stockholm.



their-object based work can lead one to wonder whether the object is illustrating the text, or vice versa. Because of this, their work in this realm occupies challenging territory, especially as it relates to the role information plays in contemporary artistic and curatorial practices, which some claim actually dulls the transformative capacity of art.

Many post-conceptual practices elicit a kind of nervousness around the act of looking and its not uncommon for audiences to turn towards text as something that can validate and direct their experience, rather than expand or complicate it. In the often rigid and uncomfortable exhibition spaces of many contemporary museums text can be both a crutch and a source of anxiety for the viewer, this kind of text seems to presume finite interpretations and you either 'get it' or you don't. Because these spaces are often physically uncomfortable, viewers are prone to read wall labels and keep moving quickly, digesting without contemplating. However, Slavs and Tatars refuses this didactic relationship to text.

'I think for us we're always quite keen on cultivating this sense of uncertainty or also showing to what extent that text can be as concealing as it is revealing,' the collective explain 'It's not just about reading intellectually, with your head, but reading with your heart, your stomach, your gut - reading physically as much as cerebrally.'

Slavs and Tatars cultivate their affective research by adopting forms that mirror their research methodology, always emphasising the interplay between the known and the unknown, the near and the far, the intimate and the anonymous.

'Intimacy is kind of like an electrical rod,' the collective told me, 'It's something that you want to touch, but there is a lot of responsibility that comes with the question of intimacy. Going again back to the idea of mixing registers, intimacy is something that is personal and we've chosen a region that it is impossible to be personal about because it is half of the earth's landmass. How can you be surgically honed in on one relationship and have bitten off more than you can chew? It's a swing of the pendulum from the macro to the micro—the macro-scale of politics to the micro-scale of poetics.' **HEA**

'BEYONSENSE' IS AT MOMA UNTIL DEC 10TH.  
WWW.SLAVSANDTATARS.COM