

# ArtReview



The Body and the City in Brazil

## Slavs and Tatars *Afteur Pasteur*

Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York 8 September – 22 October

A butcher's curtain quarantines the entrance to Slavs and Tatars's *Afteur Pasteur*. The curtain implicates viewers as pathogens. Like microbes through a membrane, they pass through the vinyl strips, which are printed with images of bacteria and horses, a banner displaying the words 'milk champagne' and the Cyrillic spelling of *kumis* (a fermented dairy beverage). On the other side of the screen, everything is bathed in pink and lime fluorescent lights. The disco hues glimmer off mirrored pedestals, six copper-framed military cots topped with woven rugs and the exhibition's centrepiece: a 'bacteria bar' from which a bacteria barista will serve gallerygoers copper cups full of *ayran*, a Turkish yogurt drink. In this gesture of thoughtful interaction, participants can consume the briny froth that brims with probiotics. And so the contagious cycle continues.

*Afteur Pasteur* is an ambitious and sportive outing for Slavs and Tatars. For this exhibition, the Berlin-based collective researched the processes of souring and fermentation as catalysts of, and metaphors for, geopolitics and transcultural dynamics. Indeed, much political discourse today seems to concern itself with stopping the 'spread' of something, be it refugees or Western hegemony. They termed it 'Pickle Politics', and the research cycle manifests in a variety of polyglot word games (à la

Mallarmé and Broodthaers) and aesthetic conundrums. A banner titled *Hammer and Nipple* (2016) depicts pickle breasts lactating language. The nipples drip Polish words that translate to 'sour on power, the government provides only kefir'. Next to the banner rests *Szpagat* (2015), a forked tongue, cast in bronze. Enacting a gymnast's split, the piece suggests the type of linguistic acrobatics and doublethink that state apparatuses regularly deploy. By setting up such object-relations as *Szpagat* and *Hammer and Nipple*, Slavs and Tatars inaugurate morphological fallacies. Things ontologically hop between being tongue or breast, phallus or abstraction; the slippage never yields.

Contemporary art is expected to perform ambiguity. All too frequently, gallery press-releases frame works of art as being neither this nor that. Slavs and Tatars dig beyond this well-trod ground to embed their work with misunderstanding. Without the proper codes for reading, vacuum-formed plastic pieces like *Kwas ist Das* (2016) gleefully confuse or outright confound. *Kwas* (spelled in the piece in German as Quaaß), a Polish fermented rye beverage, doubles as a homonym for the German word *was* (or 'what'). The other two German words, written in Cyrillic, are combined to propose the question, 'What is that?' Through the process of transliteration, incomprehension is carefully

designed. Because of such erudite reliance on circuitous wordplay, the two sculptures from the ongoing series *Kitab Kebab* beseech to be understood as an anomaly. In *Kitab Kebab (Zombie Microbes)* (2016), a metal skewer lances philosopher Henri Bergson's book *Laughter* (1900), as well as texts about flesh-eating bacteria and other tomes. In one sense, the *Kitab Kebabs* function as utilitarian research maps to the ideas that underpin *Afteur Pasteur*. Yet these works also feel pedagogic, as if the viewer cannot be trusted to establish such theoretical and historical connections autonomously.

The individual works of art in *Afteur Pasteur* are like the bacterium of the *ayran* consumed in the exhibition: protean entities whose meanings adapt and morph depending on their environment, context and percipient host. Before we are able to resolve the works of art in this exhibition, these carriers of multiple languages and ideas inevitably mutate and become something else, which, in turn, produces a need for such works as the *Kitab Kebabs*. Slavs and Tatars recognise that fermentation is a precarious undertaking. It can go both ways. That which is being fermented can, without care, spoil. If we are to trust in the work of Slavs and Tatars, then ideology circulates like bacteria. And so they seethe and spread.

Owen Duffy



*Stongue*, 2015, resin, 10 × 27 × 9 cm.

Courtesy the artists and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York