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## SLAVS AND TATARS LANGUAGE ARTS

REVIEWS BY KEVIN JONES FROM NOV/DEC 2014

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SLAVS AND TATARS, installation view of "Language Arts" at The Third Line, Dubai, 2014. Courtesy the artists and The Third Line.

Slavs and Tatars have a way with words and letters. For their first solo show in the Middle East, the research-driven collective directed their language-focused lens on the slippery workings of alphabet politics. In the regions covered in Slavs and Tatars's geographic purview—"the area east of the former Berlin Wall and west of the Great Wall of China"—languages have been shaped and reshaped through various political attempts, leading to a parade of extinguished and evolved letters and sounds. Far from simply documenting the Latinization and Cyrillicization campaigns wielded against Arabic-writing, Turkic-speaking Muslims of the Caucasus and Central Asia, "Language Arts" literally reveled in the vagaries of tampered-with tongues. Aided by their signature mashing of high-brow scholarship and low-brow zingers, Slavs and Tatars toyed with phonemes, graphemes and the very organs of language production in a rousing, thought-provoking show.

"Language Arts" built on Slavs and Tatars's recent reorientation of their language-politics research to include Western and Eastern regions of their geographical remit, namely Turkey and Xinjiang, China. Yet the show's interest was in how it spoke volumes about single letters. Like their 2012 book *Khhhhhhh*—a sharp-tongued examination of the phoneme "kh" in Semitic, Cyrillic, Arabic and Turkic scripts—"Language Arts" put graphemes front and center. Depicted on a carpet-clad plinth, elevated to perfect sitting height (installation-cum-lounging-facilities are a Slavs and Tatars mainstay), was an eyeless man seemingly having letters forced out of his mouth (*Love Letter No. 9*, 2014). These various graphemes all correspond to a single sound and are the fruit of a Soviet-led, linguistic divide-and-conquer tactic of varying Cyrillicization by region, to thwart intercommunication between Turkic speakers and potential Pan-Turkism. In another carpet piece, *Love Letter No. 4* (2014), a hijab-wearing woman reveres an oversized hand bearing Arabic letters representing Turkish phonemes that have been lost following the language's Latinization, including the nasal "n" sound (represented by the tri-dotted Arabic "k" letter).

While the carpets read like satirical political posters, a group of wall-hung panels packed a more raucous sting. "The Trannie Tease" series (2014) equates transliteration with transvestism and delights in its very campiness. In transliteration, a word or phrase becomes "dressed up" in the letters of another language, but its original meaning remains. Slippages abound: a change in a single letter provokes radical shifts in meaning. In *Holy Bukhara* (2014), the epithet for Islam's fourth holiest city—*Bukhara yeh sharif*—is transformed into a homage to Bukharan Jews (who read and write Farsi using Hebrew script) with just a simple letter-swap. One letter alters the Hebrew word *Bukhara* ("sacred city") to *Bokhori*, the common name for the Bukharan Jews. In another work from the series, *To Beer or Not to Beer* (2014), a transliteration of an American frat-boy quip into Arabic script somehow reactivates the existential gravitas of the quote's Shakespearian inspiration: a Muslim's choice to drink (or not) cuts to the quick of his very being.

Other works seemed somewhat weightier. *Never Give Up the Fruit* (2013) counterpoints the Muslim doctrine of *taqiyya* (or dissimulating one's faith if threatened with danger) with the importance of maintaining an identity, as told through the tale of a virtuous Uyghur concubine/resistant bestowed to a Qing Dynasty

(1644–1912) emperor. Honey melons made from hand-blown glass hang from wooden slats, which form the Chinese characters for the word “dissimulation.” In the exuberant *Rahlé for Richard* (2013), a bright-orange tongue slithers out of a book-lectern-turned-gaping-mouth, juxtaposing the orality of language with the authority of the printed word—the very crux of modernization debates that still resound today.

Most of us are unaware how scripts taint our worldview, how our alphabets are stealthily wired to wider cultural-political programs. While “Language Arts” certainly foregrounded this notion, it also fit neatly within Slavs and Tatars’s broader practice of interpreting the world’s complexities via juxtaposition and substitution—which, in itself, seems like one big, never-ending artwork. “It’s like yoghurt,” they muse. “You have to make the next batch. Or else you run out of bacteria.” A way with words indeed.

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