

Interviews.

Slavs and Tatars

Interview

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Cultural polarities that stretch the continental mass of Eurasia might indeed work as exo-gravitational centers, tampering the global attention economy assets away from the physical center to well-saturated cartographical peripheries. That is in the middle is no void: a multiplied ecology of practices (linguistic, artistic, religious, and political) that rarely enter Western or Eastern centers of cultural accumulation and exposure on the equal terms. But no man is an island, entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.

Slavs and Tatars (<https://www.slavsandtatars.com/>) is an artist collective based in Berlin but contextually situated in an expanse between the former Berlin Wall and the Great Wall of China.

Some would like to consider Eastern Europe and the eastness as terms and definitions of a theory; others as stereotypes or subjugating jargon. It seems that Eastern Europe becomes a figure of speech, a joke, a metaphor, an artistic form of language, an artificial linguistic item. Tropes, similar and different, mark Slavs and Tatars' work. What is your vision on/of Eastern Europe?

Slavs and Tatars:

Edward Said published "Orientalism" in 1978. In it, he corrects about two hundreds of years of a false narrative by analysing the power structures behind the knowledge production. Today, however, the pendulum has swung to the opposite extreme: there are endless funding structures, papers, and publications on the power structures, often at the expense of any actual knowledge production. So, instead of a legitimate study of the East, we have a proliferation of theories about a theory about the East.

It is unfortunate as the lessons of Said were understood, but have not been moved that far. As somebody who is interested in these regional identities, we are not looking for commentary on ways of constructions of these regional identities. Our interest lies in the actual subject matter itself.

So, for example, take the four-volume biography of a prominent Sufi mystic from the 10th century called Husayn Al-Hallaj (Arabic: ابو المغيث الحسين بن منصور الحلاج). It was written by Louis Massignon, a French Catholic who converted to Greek Melkite and some claim was a closeted homosexual. The rigor of the biography is incredible, tracing the intricate oral histories of Sufi genealogies, of remembering through repeating, over thirteen centuries and across the Muslim world. The last volume itself is exclusively bibliographic, that is, 400+ pages in 8 point type of references. Such a study of the saint has never been done in any language, not in Persian, not in Arabic, not in Turkish. Alas, today Massignon's biography of Al-Hallaj is often discredited because he is French, he is white, and he could have been gay. So, we throw the baby out with the bathwater. Of course, nobody can argue, he had a privileged position by being French, but was he instrumentalized as a colonialist? No, he was against the Algerian war, he supported Algerian independence, one can even say he was a counter-colonial thinker, yet his work has been refuted because of identity politics and its relation to the colonial past. I think there is no Saidian Russia for a related reason: Russia just does not digest Said. His study of English and French colonialism are not entirely applicable, so there must be room made for East Europe which itself was the first Orient of the West, via Rousseau's and Voltaire's respective studies of Poland and Russia.

چو پست بر سر انانکه قصد او کرد





The Execution of Mansur Hallaj.
Watercolor from Mughal India,
circa 1600

In a way, Russia and its colonial past have two dimensions. Russia was a colony and a sovereign, simultaneously.

S&T: Exactly, even in the city layers of Moscow one sees these antagonisms: each ring has the trappings of another territory of power, as many frontiers as suburbs. Things become even more complicated once European and Asian narratives interlace, like in the tension between Peter the Great's founding of St. Petersburg as a Western capital and Slavophiles who steered a regard towards Turkic or Persian origins. Here it is worth mentioning Velimir Khlebnikov. There is a significant difference between Russia on the one hand and England or France on the other, the two countries that gave a basis for Said's study. Unlike colonizing far off lands such as India or North Africa, geographies that had physical borders like oceans, Russia's expansion colonized those peoples who just four centuries earlier had ruled Russia.

Let's imagine Indians invading England in the 14th century, and England coming back in some vengeful scenario in the 17th century. Russia's case deflates the idea of a civilizing mission, of a Messianic role. You could not pretend to be a superior civilization if you were already colonized by the same people before.

There was a similar situation in East Europe too: the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth ruled over contemporary parts of Russia for centuries and became a part of the Russian Empire afterward. By the way, the Commonwealth is a very peculiar, interesting imperial phenomenon to look at, and it is a pity that few people consider it.

It still very much persists in current identity politics. However, the ethnic and religious tolerance, for instance, is put forth as an example for modern states. Nobody talks about the fact that mostly Orthodox communities compiled an amalgamated, diverse society of the Commonwealth – each one being orthodox in its way. Given the present rise of radicalism, one might find some lessons or food for thoughts in this historical co-existence of area powers.

S&T: The more I read about it, the more it seems that it was a relatively progressive form of governance at that time, having a representative government in the 17th century. It is not surprising that Orthodox communities could live in harmony because very religious societies often understand each other much better than secularized societies. For example, there were more Tatar representatives in the Commonwealth parliament than Muslims in any current government in Europe! In the 16th century, they had more Muslim representatives in a government than four hundred years later. This question of faith is crucial to orientalist studies that try to grasp and understand the subject. One finds benefits of a similar approach in German scholars who looked at medieval Islamic texts, Jewish exegeses and so on in the 19th century. The secularization of German universities happened much later than their counterparts in France or England. As a result, these studies managed to bring together an analytical, Cartesian reading of a text with, say, an experiential, liturgical or affective one. If one reads scriptures of medieval Judaism in a purely analytical way, one misses so much that the study becomes distorted and very alien.



Reverse Joy,
Slavs and Tatars.
Sheraton Wall Centre,
2013

Your practice is research based – a study of historical matter. It is oriented backward to archives, more than it is speculating on future. The geographical plateau of interest is defined in between Berlin Wall and the Great China Wall. The two criteria become troublesome: in this particular region, archives were always an object of destruction, eradication, rewriting, of ever changing corrections, an extreme case of a history of the victors. The area is full of simultaneous winners and losers entrapping the archives in this tumult. How do you work with the archives of East, how do you approach and read them?

S&T: We do not consider archives to be crucial to our practice. At least in so far as the archive is imagined as a pre-articulated set of resources. We follow the Menil's mantra: to do what others don't. We seek historical materials that are much more scattered, or tentacular in nature, as opposed to an old-fashioned view of an archive as an order.

Methodologically, our cycles of work necessitate a couple of years of bibliographical research, the gathering of articles and information, to be followed by field research. As an example, our recent work on Turkish language politics.

First, we read about the topic, not so much in Turkey as much as in Western China, which is the most Eastern Turkic language region and the only place where a Turkic language continues to officially use an Arabic script. We went to Xinjiang, but not to test the bibliographical research. The field research provides an opportunity to read and expand sources: there is much scholarly work that does not exist in a traditional database. To combine two pieces of knowledge is risky. How do we not replicate or illustrate what was already done? What are we, as artists, bringing to the field? It is important for us to work in limbo: to respect and disrespect sources at the same time. We think that to comply with a source you find interesting is to disrespect and break or crack it. The artist's task is to disrespect the source in this way. Otherwise, it is too easy and too literal. We never put research material in an exhibition space, for instance. We consider it somewhat lazy.

You have to work with it to disrupt it. Research underpins the three axes of our work: lectures, books, both articulating something, and then artworks that have to convey this articulation in a reappropriation, or disarticulation. In the fabric of research, books and lectures are sewing seams

together, and an artwork pulls a thread loose so that everything loses its shape again, its pretense to a clear, linear understanding. One can imagine scrambling ideological positions or conclusions that can be recognized in work.

In the 8th Berlin Biennale in 2014, we presented a work (Ezan Çılgınlığı) ⁽¹⁾ where the azan, the call to prayer, was translated to Turkish. Between 1930 and 1950 in Turkey, the call to prayer was officially broadcast in Turkish, and it was very controversial: how do you translate Allah into the Turkish language? They had recourse to a pre-Islamic Mongol term 'tanrı', meaning 'the great sky'. It loses the primary point of Islam: tawhid, or the emphatic insistence on the unicity of God. You can do anything else – eat pork if you have to, drink beer theoretically, but you have to insist on the unity of God. So this was the first reform of Atatürk that was rolled back. Some people (read: Kemalists) who worry about Turkey's slip back to Islamism, often trace it back to this concession.

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Ezan Çılgınlığı,
Slavs & Tatars,
Mixed media, sound 750 x 900 x 100 cm,
8th Berlin Biennale, 2014

We devised this piece as a digital acapella using a computer-generated voice. We worked on the piece for almost three years, did research, deliberated the articulation of the work, and yet we were still unsure about where we stand regarding this issue. On the one hand, sure, I can effectively argue for the indigenisation and thus translation of Scripture; on the other, we believe in securing a non-hermeneutic role for language. Languages are not just forms of understanding. They embody, carry a different relationship, which appears if you do not approach it as something to understand or decrypt, as an epistemological object. We argued both extremes in the work, what we call the metaphysical splits, and this interests us greatly.

Slavs & Tatars go to look for sources and references outside the academic comfort zone, in an attempt to battle with an intellectual canon that predominates speaking and writing not only about art but also about society in general.

These efforts recall thinkers working in Latin America or Africa, the decolonisation theory, and a quest for new vocabulary. Our research has sparked out of the interest in the current postcolonial condition, one that might be much more spread and "domesticated" than one can observe. Does the collective think this shift and the work of thought coincides in different places simultaneously?

S&T: Absolutely. When we take those writers like Al-Hallaj, we realize that 600 years ago thinkers were exploring and working on ideas very similar to Deleuze's, like his becoming-wolf, or the body without organs. When I encountered Deleuze for the first time, it blew me away: I could not understand what he meant by "a body without organs" or "becoming-imperceptible". My professor Michael Taussig, an anthropologist with a lived approach to anthropology, said: "Don't worry about it, it is not about understanding it. You cannot read Deleuze and try to understand it, and it is not literal becoming. Suspend this belief, and think about it as a kind of potentiality, of what it is possible."

That brings me to a fascinating scholar that Maria Lind recently referenced in her concept for Gwangju Biennial, 12th-century Persian mystic and philosopher Sohrevardi. He has the idea of "the imaginal world." Now in Sufism, imagination is not something fake and non-existing. Sohrevardi claims that imagination is an equal reality, it is just without the material form, but it exists and has its language and tectonics of imagination.

It opens up the array in which we work. We must find alternative approaches to knowledge. Other than through a paradigm of rationality. Today, universities throughout the world all tow an Enlightenment editorial line, whether they are in Tehran, Cambridge, Heidelberg or Moscow, no matter the location. However, we are convinced that there should be hundreds of different schools of thought. This situation pushes us to look outside of them and propels our interests in other organs of language, food, and domesticity, bacteria. How to approach a Kitab Kebab not through I think therefore I am, not through the separation of body and thought but through its synthesis?



Kitab Kebab (Sage Rage),
Slavs & Tatars.
Books, metal kebab skewer, 50 x 50 x 50 cm,
2014

Let's think about other knowledge entering a western museum from a historical perspective, shows like Primitivism (Museum of Modern Art, 1984), or Les Magiciens de la Terre (Centre Georges Pompidou, Grande Halle and Parc de la Villette, 1989) or more recent – Il Palazzo Enciclopedico (Venice Biennale, 2013). These shows were different and received differently, but in reception, there was an ethnographic moment, the critique of exoticising. Is it something you take into account, and deliberately place in your exhibitions, as a challenge to Western museological models, including textual matter as well?

S&T: There is an element of self-othering. One of the phenomena we have been interested in is the idea that people devote themselves to regions that are not their own to reflect upon or critique better their own regions of being.

So in one of the Prophet Muhammad's Hadiths, it is said "Blessed are those who exile themselves," there is this idea of expatriation. This idea goes somehow against Western psychology and its questioning: "look at yourself," "understand who you are" and so on. Muslim, Islamic, Asian or Confucianism psychology is much more about the proliferation of oneself, a creation of many sides of self, or going somewhere only to come back to oneself.

Considering the architecture of our exhibitions, we are aware of when exhibiting a Persian bed with a carpet on top, that people will regard it exotic. However, this is almost a red-herring, there's also the use of vernacular or sacred idioms within the secular, rarefied space of the art institution, or the scenographic instrumentalization of such vernacular to esoteric ends such as reading. So there are many other different layers and entry points. We present objects like beds or a library of books, as the selection about Iran and Solidarnosc for instance, not as artworks. For us, they help to create spaces of comfort, to offer visitors a seat.

Our institutions are woefully and extremely uncomfortable: sterile lighting, white walls, one feels like a rat in a laboratory. Is that a symptom of 400 years of Cartesian reign? Maybe, it is a simplistic deduction, but it is related – when we started to do exhibitions for the first time, we were surprised by how long it takes to install. An immense amount of waiting time!

It is horrible to be in those places and just wait, so, we started creating places where we would feel a bit more comfortable – if we are comfortable, probably it follows that our visitors will be too.

So, it was not a decision of critiquing institutions or giving our exhibitions an exotic look. When we show these things, people ask us whether they can buy that carpet, but it is not an artwork, it is a scenography, which belongs to everybody. We are also aware that institutions might be motivated by some exotic agenda that we might bring inside, a sort of investigation of regional geography, that is inaccessible, to be honest, for most of the audience. The region that is often described as a buffer and a buffer is also a gradient. The region sandwiched in between three areas of economic attention: Middle East, Russia, and China.

It is highly important to understand that this geography is not only a political geography, but it is also an imaginative geography.

I agree with the previous remark that we do not think speculatively, but by looking backward, we always think of what it may become in the future.

There is an interesting fact about regions as areas in this geography. When Baltic states got accepted to United Nations in 1991, the region was officially geographically included into Northern Europe. So, now the three Baltic countries are not Eastern, but Nordic. This might be just a symbolic linkage, right? If one said to a Dane or a Swede that now two coasts of Baltic Sea are the same region, sharing the one geography, they would have a good laugh about it. Suddenly the aesthetic dimension becomes apparent. Scandic aesthetics prevail, taste as judgment gets reconfigured – chic, Noma-style restaurants pop up here and there. Still, the conceptual linkage of geography, a parallel drawn, might not necessarily seem obvious to ordinary people, neither Balts nor Scandinavians. Most people doubt about the potential of influence. In an everyday conversation, it is still regarded as a joke.

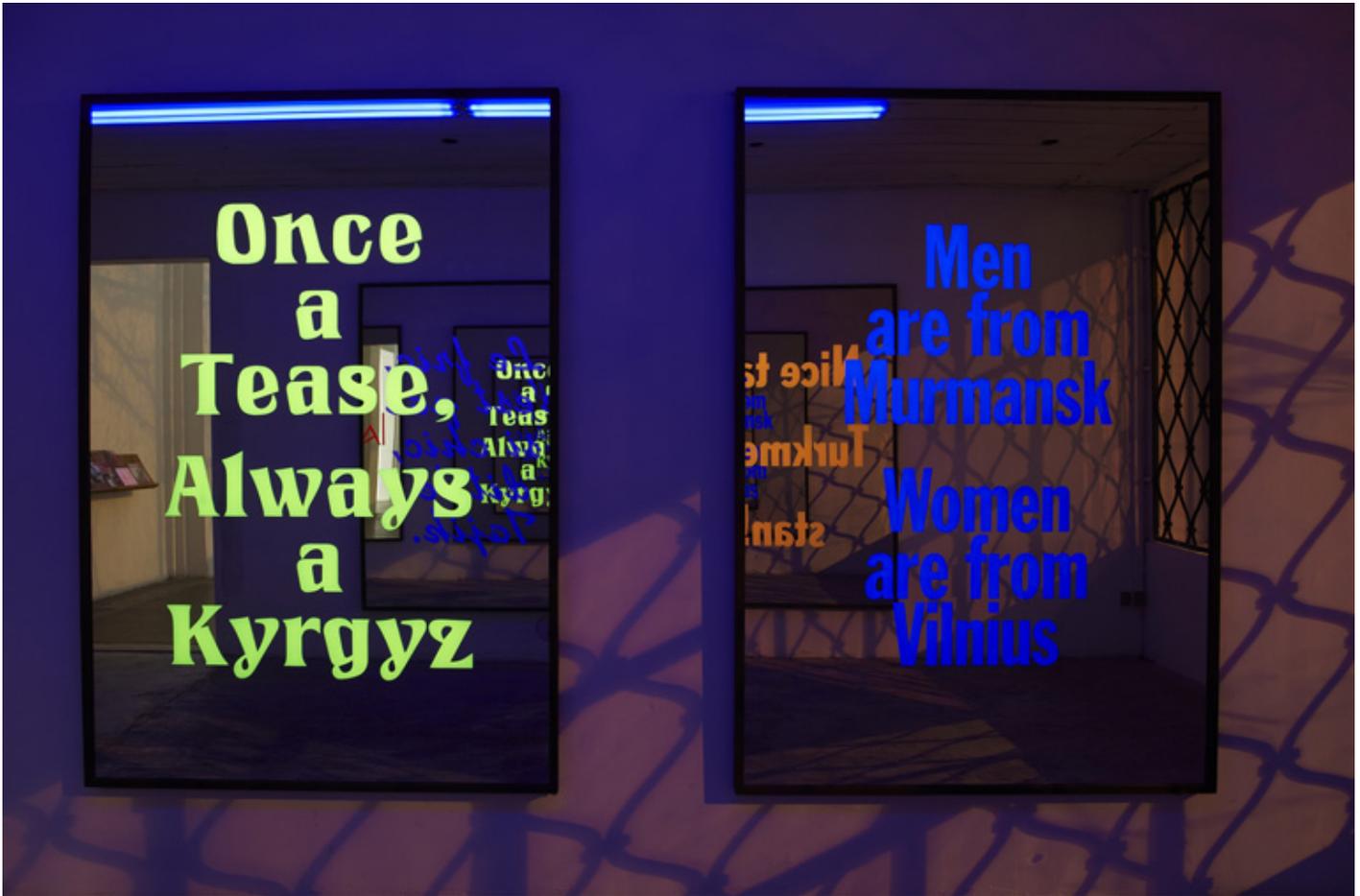
So then, after 25 years, we face not only very well furnished interiors but also all banks are Scandinavian. Since you mentioned that imaginative geographies are important to your practice, and these could also be Vilnius – Copenhagen or Riga – Stockholm hypothetical axes, we are tempted to ask: how important to you, besides imaginative and political, are economic geographies?

S&T: One thing that we learned with the crisis is that we all have to become much more economically fluent. The idea that as citizens we can trust corporates or large financial bodies went crumbling. Especially in our field, in the field of art, there is a tendency to ignore this subject from the personal and individual perspectives completely. On the other hand, there is something oppressive about economics: this inclination to explain everything by data, often exercised to dissolve complex issues in economics.

Ironically economic transactions are often quite complex. Economics underpin most of the politics that we are looking at. However, we try not to stop there. For us, we look to what James C. Scott calls Infrapolitics. He says that the way we observe politics is often exclusively from the perspective of the explicit political gesture: say, a protest movement, a march, an insurgency, a revolution. But there's a whole history of a society which could be told not through newspapers, legislations, photojournalism, but rather through rumors, whispers, and jokes. It is an underlayer of domestic or quiet politics we are interested in, which is equally economically determined.

We live in a challenging moment right now. If we had been talking ten years ago, in 2006, just three years after the Iraq invasion, and you had told me that it would get this bad, I would not have believed you. However, today 2006 seems to be relatively ok, sadly in retrospect. Now there is a natural pressure for us as artists to sharpen our language, but with some precautions, because the most efficient exercise of politics in art is not to speak confrontationally. It cannot be clear. If the policy of an artwork is clear, then you are just preaching to a choir. Maybe one has to stop speaking to her/his audience and start to speak with the audience. We live in a much more flattened world, or at least it appears to be flat.

Does this strategy also lie behind your jokes, puns and rhymes, and the shift of focus towards in a way equally profane agencies as fermenting bacteria?



Nations,
Slavs & Tatars.
Screenprint on mirror, florescent paint, 88 x 124 cm.
"Too Much Tiumacz," (installation view), 2012.
Raster Gallery, Warsaw, Poland

S&T: Sometimes our work challenges people to think we are stupid. Those puns, for instance, at times they are silly, like "Men are from Murmansk, Women are from Vilnius". Some might think this is a one-liner, taken from pop-culture or something. However, again, there are layers behind stupidity as such. The cities of Murmansk and Vilnius have to do not only with a frivolous joke, but also the relationship between the two countries that could be understood as a very gendered dynamic, especially in the post-Soviet context. We are always trying to present an artwork deliberately as a challenge to take it as a first layer content.

Much art tries to be smart; it takes a certain confidence to make work that tries to convince you it is silly, despite layers of reading. Now there is a risk involved. If you dare someone to think that you are stupid, there is a big chance that s/he will think so.

I do not see it as stupidity, but as a way of being, which is much more hospitable: one does not speak from above. Our humor is never about laughing at anybody, but at ourselves in the hope that others will join in. We did not plan it this way, but that happens when one deals with a field considered as remote as ours. Many people know more about the language of Star Trek than about the language spoken in Kazakhstan. In this case, we cannot grasp our audience's interest by speaking to ourselves. We have to find a way to be more immediate. Moreover, I think that some of the subject matter is not remote at all; on the contrary, it has been and continues to be very relevant to people in the US, Sweden, UK, China.

(1) Ezan Çılgınları—literally, the 'call-to-prayer crazies'— was the term used for those who defied the authorities' enforcement of the Turkish ezan by climbing minarets and performing the call to prayer in its original Arabic.

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