

# Art in America

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## Slavs and Tatars Bring Eurasian Transreason to MoMA

austin considine 10/16/12

"Beyonsense," the first US solo museum show by international artist collective Slavs and Tatars, at New York's Museum of Modern Art, thrives in the rich, unstable spaces where language, meaning and imagery overlap.

Founded in 2006, Slavs and Tatars—whose members asked to remain anonymous for this article, citing safety concerns and a desire to subsume its individuals to a collective spirit—dedicate its socio-historical explorations to Eurasia, an ambiguous region the artists define as "east of the former Berlin wall and west of the Great Wall of China." On view through Dec. 10, the exhibition provokes interpretations as shifting and ambiguous as the transcontinental region it explores. That ambiguity begins with the exhibition title, a translation of the term *zaum*—a concept introduced by early 20th Century Russian Futurist poets to describe their experiments in deconstructing language and meaning, alternatively translated as "transreason." (It is also, as the group has noted, a wink to Beyoncé Knowles.)



**VIEW SLIDESHOW** Slavs and Tatars. Gastham Nabood Nagard. 2011. Embroidered fabric. 78 3/4 x 47 1/4" (200 x 120 cm). Image courtesy of The Third Line, Dubai; Slavs and Tatars. Long Live The Syncretics. 2012. Painted steel. 145 11/16 x 74 13/16" (370 x 190 cm). Image courtesy of The Third Line, Dubai;



The work on view is emphatically textual, exploiting tensions between accepted history and counter-narrative, linguistic atavism and poetic disruption. *Kitab Kebab* (2012) (literally, "Book Kebab"), is a sculpture that involves several books on religion, philosophy and language, skewered with a flat, pointed metal shaft, like meat on a skewer, or a sword.

In *The Dear for The Dear* (2012), we see a brown, shriveled cucumber atop a *rahlé*—a small lectern used to hold an open holy book. An artist with the collective cites an Egyptian proverb to illuminate the latter: "Life is like a cucumber," the proverb goes. "One day in your hand, one in your ass." The image is irresistibly repulsive, begging psychosexual and scatological interpretation. Why is the

cucumber shriveled and brown? The artist cannot or will not say, except to note that it was carved from wood.

The physical and conceptual heart of the exhibition is the title installation, *Beyonsense* (2012), a calm, black-lit reading room, insulated from sound and light by dozens of hanging rugs, filled with several other mixed-media pieces. Inside, the group's myriad textual offerings lie scattered atop benches on either side in an array of languages and scripts. From the ceiling hangs an homage in green neon to an installation by Dan Flavin, commissioned in 1982 for a Sufi mosque in lower Manhattan. Slavs and Tatars were attracted to the original in part because of the "cognitive dissonance" it created, the artist said.

"Flavin is somebody whom we would consider kind of secular and minimalist," he added. "But at the same time, what's more spiritual than light sculptures?"

At the far end of the reading room, a screen-printed mirror, entitled *Kh Giveth* (2012), references an Arabic letter that serves as an "anti-imperial phoneme," the artist says, "because it's the one phoneme that Anglo-Saxons sort of have a difficult time pronouncing because it doesn't really exist." Beside it, another painted mirror, *Kh Taketh Away* (2012), locates difficult phonemes on a map of the throat and tongue, a space of tension between breath and glottal restriction. The phonemes, as such, become "an oppositional gesture," as the artist put it.

Gurgling placidly at the center, a fountain spews red liquid, which appears pink or black in places because of the unconventional lighting. *Reverse Joy* (2012) is a smaller version of a fountain installed by the group in Jerusalem, itself modeled after a fountain in Tehran's Behesht-e-Zahra cemetery, whose water was briefly dyed red in the 1980s to commemorate the martyrs of the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war.

Despite its heavy moral and political allusions, the fountain provokes diverging reactions among spectators, the unnamed artist insists: Children

who observed its larger iteration in Jerusalem, for example, often interpreted the red liquid as Kool-Aid, not blood. "It's really naïve and kind of festive on one side and, on the other end, it's, of course, extremely violent and politically manipulative—it's about blood and martyrdom," he says.

"It occupies two opposite ends of the spectrum at the same time," he added. "And that's what's quite interesting for us."

Of the texts and objects that make up the show, one might appropriately ask a question posed by several characters in *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie—another artist who nimbly, if perilously, straddles the shifting, uneasy territory where Europe meets Asia: "What kind of an idea are you?"

If the work could speak, it might reply as one of Rushdie's characters did: "What kind of an idea am I? I bend. I sway. I calculate the odds, trim my sails, manipulate, survive."

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