

The Children of Marx and Kumis¹

Philosopher Yoel Regev and artist Masha Shtutman
on Slavs and Tatars

Arming themselves with an acute sense of indeterminacy, the modern science of revolution and the materialist appropriation of mystical practices, the collective *Slavs and Tatars* is one of the principal factions in a struggle for a truly materialist, revolutionary art. In the company of minds like philosopher Reza Negarestani or artist Alexander Singh and his project *The Mark of the Third Stripe*,² *Slavs and Tatars* has landed on the surface of a planet whose name we still do not know. What we *do* know, however, is that the key to the future of radical, emancipatory politics—as well as knowledge—depends on its successful colonization.

At first glance, *Slavs and Tatars* can be slid easily into a category defined by Claire Bishop as “the social turn in contemporary art.” For starters, the group exchanges individual authorship for that of the collective; as we know, the collaborative nature of the work is one of the defining features of participatory art. The genre supplants the individual acts of the artist-virtuoso—who creates objects for an often sterile and anonymous gallery space—with collaborative actions intervening directly into the surrounding world, effecting change within it. This kind of process-over-product recurs throughout *Slavs and Tatars*’ work; their projects often consist of hanging posters, or conducting collaborative tours, lectures, group readings and discussions of texts. Also akin to participatory art, the central objective of their practice is the “creation of a new type of sociality,” forging their own *minority nation*—the yet-to-be-defined community of those who inhabit the space “between the Berlin Wall and the Great Wall of China.”

¹ *Editors’ Note:* Kumis is a fermented dairy product traditionally made from mare’s milk similar to kefir. The drink is common among the Huno-Bulgar, Turkic and Mongol peoples of the former Soviet Central Asian steppes.

² *Translator’s Note:* The name derives from word play that can either be translated as “The Mark of the Third Stripe,” or “The Label of the Third Stripe”, as it alludes to an advertising sign such as the Adidas logo

However, a closer look at these ostensibly similar goals reveals a deeper—if not as easily perceptible or formulated—difference. Perhaps we could see Slavs and Tatars themselves as a kind of *minor art* within participatory art, a subversive element, shaking it up from the inside and altering its trajectory. They are not about, as Bishop might have it, a “new sociality” aiming to institutionalize practitioners and advocates of participatory art. This kind of sociality turns out to be old news: the type of moral code that the “social turn” holds up as aesthetic echoes the liberal-bourgeois morality of democratic materialism as the modern world’s dominant ideology.³ These ethics of human rights—based on the precept that “nothing exists except bodies and languages”—characterize the human being as a mortal animal, striving to avoid suffering through all available means, and asserts that all cultures are different families within a common species. It is not by accident, for example, that participatory art manifestoes and government-sponsored cultural proposals both use the potential for rehabilitating socially weak sections of the population as a main criterion for evaluating and measuring efficacy. If indeed participatory art could change its bourgeois mentality into a revolutionary one,⁴ then it would follow that such an art could better prime the political situation for radical politics than what we’ve seen the last two decades. But the problem is deeper than that.

The rallying calls that urge us to take up art as a weapon for transforming reality are founded on the assumption that art can be effective only to the extent that it affects *people*. Let’s pause for a moment and meditate on the opposition between the world of nature—objective and unchanging laws and facts—and the world of man, consisting of wars of interest and power. According to Bruno Latour, the constant production of hybrid objects belonging to both these worlds leads us to deduce that modernity has never, in fact, existed. If this is the case, then certainly there could never have been modern art. Art has perpetually skirted the lines of the ethical and aesthetic, resulting in hybrids: sublime, awe-inspiring objects with guilty consciences; objects claiming to be purely plastic embodiments of the formal properties of the linguistic, audio or visual—and yet full of secret dreams of affecting the viewer and transforming the world around him; or actions aimed at education or enlightenment.

³As described by Alain Badiou in his book, *The Logic of Worlds: Being and Event II*

⁴ As artists Arseny Zhilyaev and Roman Osminkin propose.

The shift in art over the last decade from an actionist practice to what, borrowing from Jacques Ranciere, Bishop has called “the return of the aesthetic,” can be seen as just one swing in the “extravagant existence” of the manic-depressive.⁵ But even if we accept this, it is possible that, in the case of Slavs and Tatars, we are dealing not with modern, or as we now might call it, contemporary art, but with the **art of the future**—where contemporary art factors in only indirectly, through its constant misfires in one direction or another. Such an art of the future would provide immediate access to a field of revolutionary politics—which indeed is the most pressing task of the present. This field is one not limited to the sphere of man, but one where animistic mountain ranges, consonants, fruits, demons, historical figures, architectural ensembles, Latin and Cyrillic alphabets, and mirrors might take up arms as members of different factions, rising up against their own reactionary shadows, only to be forced into labor-camp-like installations...

The three distinct cycles of Slavs and Tatars’ research and practice can serve as signposts, or perhaps guiding lights, in the study of techniques necessary for achieving this art of the future. First, there was the **commitment to indeterminacy**: the group’s earliest cycle—“Kidnapping Mountains” or “a celebration of the Caucasus as a case study of complexity”—was connected with “the active choice of choosing not to choose,” whether the choice was between Western alienation and Eastern submission, between the affective and the intellectual, or between the modern and the anti-modern. The “Slav” and “Tatar” themselves were weighted as principal oppositions, explored through the specific analysis of specific circumstances, a series of conflicts embedded within the fields of culture, history, geography, and ethnography. Aesthetic objects became the means through which basic oppositions could be detected, materialized, and rendered transparent.

At the same time, it is still not enough just to identify the true nature of a given confrontation. It is not *just* about resistance to joining one of the camps while retaining a critical distance to them—even if this distance reveals what the conflict actually entails. Nonpartisanship

⁵ ... a condition that Thomas Mann’s devil considered to be absolutely indispensable for the artist of modern times

and disengagement may be the best position to take within an imperialist war, but any war can—and should—be transformed into a civil one, where there can be no question of passive observation. It is this transformation and the subsequent taking up of an active position that is the true goal of analysis. Potential fault lines between revolutionary and reactionary elements must be articulated on each side, as in the second cycle of Slavs and Tatars' practice, "Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz".⁶ Here, the act of **binding together** both the "Slav" and the "Tatar," and the commitment to indeterminacy between them—arguably an act of negation—was supplanted by a positive effort to pinpoint the isomorphic revolutionary origins of each side.

The question of revolution in its most immediate or literal form became the crux of the second cycle of the group's work and research: a long look at Poland and Iran's respective if turbulent quests for self-determination. The initial project 79.89.09 used a sort of calendar rhyme to isolate common features within two critical moments of recent history: the Iranian Revolution in 1979, and the overthrow of Pro-Soviet regimes in Eastern European countries in 1989. The dominant, formal shorthand for the group's work within this cycle became the monobrow, reappearing as a space for delineating polarities ("not... hot..."), or a mountain range that could hold together cities and their alphabets, though still at a distance—provided a type of closure. It was this type of closing-the-gap between the Socialist Realism of the Proletariat, and the magical realism of contemporary Iran (from Disneyland-like public sculptures to cosmic commemorations of Muharram), that was made possible by Похищение Гор (*Pokhishinie Gor*, or "Kidnapping Mountains") and returning them to Горы от Ума (*Gory ot Uma*, "Mountains of Wit").⁷

At this stage, Slavs and Tatars employed tape players and paper money as other instruments for **suturing the dividing ridges** between the ideological, the ethnic, the psychological, and the evaluative among revolutionary elements. This is what made a

⁶ *Editors' Note:* Begun in 2009, "Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz" examines the points of convergence between the respective economic, cultural and political histories of Poland and Iran from the 17th to 21st centuries.

⁷ *Translator's Note:* a play on the word горы (*gory*, "mountains") and Alexander Griboyedov's Горе от ума (*Gore ot Uma*, "Woe from Wit.")

genuine “Friendship of Nations” possible; after all, it was this new *internationale* which was the true victim of the kidnappings carried out by Slavs and Tatars—a deterritorialization of the Soviet “Third Rome”,⁸ or the deterritorialization of a new type of revolution, as distinct from the fundamentalism of the “Eastern Submission” as from the anti-Communist ideology of “Western Alienation.”

Indeed, if Slavs and Tatars’ first phase was one of specific analysis of specific circumstances—dealing with facts and figures—then in the second cycle, the conversation moved on to identifying the contours by which such elemental facts and figures could be transformed, though here, too, we are still dealing with research and analysis. This analysis is necessary for any subsequent impact on reality, such as the turning of an imperialist war to a civil one, mentioned above. But analysis itself cannot not stand in for this change—for such a transformation to occur, “Woe from Wit” would not be enough. Instead, there would have to be some kind of insight into the area “beyond sense,” an area existing outside meaning, which therefore can act upon it. This latter aspect means that we may have also found a weapon capable of shattering the monoliths of opposing forces.

The explosive power of the phoneme *Khhhhhhh* takes center stage in Slavs and Tatars’ third cycle, “The Faculty of Substitution”, or the ability to transform and alter a given set of boundaries. This latest phase not only explains the substance of a new understanding of revolution but also raises the question as to what extent a work of art can be used as a wedge driven in between the layers of reality, splitting the inner core of circumstance from within, sending fragments of mountain rock, splashes of fountains, the static of TV screens, alphabets and numbers all flying in different directions at once.

Without a doubt, the “The Faculty of Substitution” offers an entrance into the realms of the mystic, the numinous, and the magical, although this kind of invasion is always fraught with a two-fold danger of either turning into a romantic, non-committal game of “mysticism,”

⁸ The slogan “When in Third Rome, Do as the Third Romans Do” is something of a mantra for the group’s practice as a whole.

or collapsing into the yawning seriousness of the “beyond.” Similar to the prose of China Miéville and Pavel Pepperstein, the songs of Tsoy Korolenko, or the projects of Alexander Singh, Slavs and Tatars’ work in this third cycle is marked by a kind of balancing act on the borders between the serious and the not-serious. Not to mention a distinct humor that allows the group to advance into a space where ritual diagrams from Jewish, Arabic, and Persian mystical treatises can co-exist alongside black and white illustrations from a Soviet Agitprop brochure.⁹

Through this humor, the materialist conquest of the magical eventually results in the third cycle of their work collapsing into the first. We once more find ourselves confronted with the commitment to indeterminacy, with the refusal to state a preference for either of the sides in the war between seriousness and, for lack of a better word, not-seriousness. A similar kind of collapse suggests that the whole project of contemporary art is doomed to fail, as it succeeds only in its own breakdown—made clear on multiple occasions throughout the group’s various declarations. Indeterminacy transforms from one of the means into the goal itself, a kind of *causa sui*. But by taking it up, the revolutionary class transforms into what it has marginalized: a group of dreamers, plunging into a catatonic dream come true.

Catatonia in humor and humor in catatonia—is this an inescapable loop? It is precisely the resolution of this issue on which the fate of the **art of the future** hangs. At the very least, Slavs and Tatars’ humor provides a platform where this kind of question can be meaningfully formulated. Already in the group’s most recent projects, the dialectic methods of encounter, of rupture and suture, coming in and out of focus from a field “beyond sense”—all of these point to a potential resolution.

Translated from the Russian by Kate Sutton, edited by Mara Goldwyn.

⁹Mayakovsky’s agitprop stated that, “no sorcerer, no god, no priest can help us.” To borrow a term from Pepperstein, we could call this kind of humor—that is, a humor that paves the way for the materialist conquest of the occult—a “New Bulgarian humor,” which is delightfully in keeping of the Slavic theme.