These Artists Bring Pickles to the Party

In major museums, as well as at club nights and its own bar, the collective Slavs and Tatars casts a humorous eye over the region between the former Berlin Wall and the Great Wall of China.

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Slavs and Tatars' club night, "Sauer Power," came to the courtyard of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin last week. via Slavs and Tatars

By Valeriya Safronova

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BERLIN — Visitors who wandered into the Slavs and Tatars installation in the Arsenale at the 2019 Venice Biennale found a serenely bubbling fountain, a PVC curtain printed with bold graphics and a working vending machine stocked with bottles of sauerkraut juice. Each custom bottle label sported a picture of a cabbage chained to a foot, like a ball and chain, and the words "Brine & Punishment," a reference to Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment." The machine had to be restocked several times.

This type of humor — silly, playful, straddling the fine line between witty and corny — runs through the work of this Berlin-based collective. Its sculptures, installations and interactive performances, marked by clean lines, bright colors and Pop Art references, have appeared at major European museums.

But Slavs and Tatars do much more. The group publishes books; it puts on lecture-performances; it oversees a residency program for artists and curators; and it runs Pickle Bar, a Berlin space where artists and scholars stage events, and where guests can nibble on pickles and drink vodka.

A woven carpet in the shape of a two-headed horseradish on the wall of Slavs and Tatars' Berlin studio. Maria Sturm for The New York Times

The collective's activities are all rooted in the giant swath of land between the former Berlin Wall and the Great Wall of China, including countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Its work explores the languages, history, politics and religions of this area, with a focus on the legacy of Communism and on the evolution of Islam there. Its members do not consider themselves experts in the region, but rather, curious students of it. Everything they produce involves extensive research.

Slavs and Tatars has translated pages of an early-20th-century satirical magazine from Azerbaijan that was read across the Muslim world, and explored beauty standards across cultures with a series of printed balloons that show characters with a unibrow and ask "Hot?" or "Not?" Often, the group plays with transliteration and puns, freely combining languages including Georgian, Persian, Arabic, Polish and Russian.

"You kind of want to seduce people into this content, because it's obscure," said Kasia Korczak, a Slavs and Tatars founder. "One thing I always try to shy away from is the Soviet aesthetic. I'm generally not a nostalgic person and this is more about going forward than looking backwards."

Slavs and Tartars' "Monobrow Manifesto" on display in Regents Park, in London, in 2010. Slavs and Tatars

The work explores beauty standards across cultures, asking whether the characters depicted are "Hot?" or "Not?" Slavs and Tatars

The Pickle Bar, where speakers have covered topics like Soviet textbooks, Sufi folk tales and Arabic calligraphy, is based in the Moabit district of Berlin. It also travels as a pop-up, and has appeared in cities including Vienna, Tallinn in Estonia and Oaxaca in Mexico. In each iteration abroad, Slavs and Tatars works with local curators to choose a slate of performers; fermented foods and drinks are always on offer.

Last weekend, facets of the Pickle Bar journeyed across Berlin to the Humboldt Forum, to celebrate the dedication of a new wing, the final stage in a protracted opening for the museum. Slavs and Tatars organized a club night called “Sauer Power,” or “Sour Power,” which featured D.J.s, musicians and performances by artists from Kazakhstan, Armenia, Poland, Ukraine and Afghanistan. Above it all hung a 36-foot plastic pickle.

Pickles have recently become something of a calling card for Slavs and Tatars. “You can unravel or explain complex things through a seemingly banal or lowbrow thing,” explained Payam Sharifi, another founder. One principle of Slavs and Tatars’ work is to seek out contradictions that raise questions rather than offering answers. “A pickle is counterintuitive,” he said. “It’s preserved through rotting.”

He also described the bacteria that are a crucial part of pickling as a metaphor for Slavs and Tatars’ conception of migrants or foreigners: “They’re outside of us, and yet they’re good for us.” For the group, bacteria represents a truth about the world: that outside influence is necessary for change.

And of course, a bright green pickle with crunchy bumps is a memorable visual that draws attention. The only sign that marks the location of the Berlin Pickle Bar is an art work by the group called “Open Mic” that hangs near the door: a pickle-shaped lightbox on top of a rotund, upside down microphone, forming the shape of an exclamation point. “It’s an invitation to come in and participate,” said Stan de Natris, the collective’s head of design.

Julia Schreiner, one of the Humboldt Forum curators who invited Slavs and Tatars to stage the club night at the museum, said she was enthusiastic about the pickle’s appeal as an attention-getting comic object. “Everybody who sees the pickle will laugh, and I think that’s already a good start to a party,” she said.

In choosing performers for events, the Slavs and Tatars members Anastasia Marukhina and Patricia Couvet seek out performances that will work in a noisy bar, and which combine humor and references to the group’s region of focus.

When Slavs and Tatars started out, in 2006, Sharifi, who was born in Austin, Texas, and whose family is from Iran, was teaching architectural theory at the Royal College of the Arts in London, and Korczak, who is from Pabianice, Poland, was working on a master’s degree in design in the Netherlands.

Korczak and Sharifi, who are now married, wanted to combine their skills — research and design — to publish zines, books and other printed matter. They started by creating posters, pamphlets and small reprints of out-of-print materials, and mailing them to a circle of friends and colleagues. Collette, the now-closed French boutique, commissioned the couple to make a T-shirt print.

Korczak and Sharifi knew from the beginning that their work would look beyond the West. “I wanted to break out of that New York Review of Books world where everybody has read the same people,” Mr. Sharifi said. “I wanted to hear about and read things I’ve never heard of.”

Slavs and Tatars' studio, in the Moabit district of Berlin. Maria Sturm for The New York Times

In 2007, they made a series of posters for the New York Art Book Fair, with punning slogans like "What's the plan, Uzbekistan? I'm your man, Azerbaijan!" or "Men Are From Murmansk/Women Are From Vilnius." A curator from the Museum of Modern Art wanted to buy the posters.

"We were selling them for like $50 each," Sharifi said. "We had to jack up the price like 10 times to be credible. We didn't have a gallery at the time, so we didn't know any better."

From posters, they expanded into books, sculptures, lecture performances and videos, and the group grew to include two more members, who are no longer part of the collective. Slavs and Tatars now has five members and is represented by galleries in New York, Berlin, Warsaw and Dubai.

In a 2010 project titled "Love Me, Love Me Not," Slavs and Tatars collected the names of 150 cities within the group's zone of interest that have changed over time based on who was in power. One example was Donetsk, Ukraine, which was called Stalino for several decades under the Soviet Union. It published these names in a book and also created a complimentary art work, with the changing iterations of each city's name inscribed in black letters on a gold-tinted mirror.

As part of a 2018 retrospective at the Albertinum museum in Dresden, Germany, titled "Made in Dschermany," Slavs and Tatars turned metal barriers used for crowd control at protests into a sculpture with interconnected cushioned seats and attached book stands, like those used in to prop up religious texts during a recitation. The stands held "Wripped Scripped," a book about the politics of alphabets that Slavs and Tatars produced for the exhibition, and a couple of their other publications. "It's a reading bar," said Kathleen Reinhardt, that show's curator. "It invites people to sit down and read books and go deeper."

Aigerim Kapar, a curator from Almaty participating in Slavs and Tatars' residency program, preparing lunch in the collective's studio with Natris and Sharifi. Maria Sturm for The New York Times

By incorporating certain references into their work, like the book stands, which are common throughout the Muslim world, or the names of former Soviet cities, Slavs and Tatars speaks directly to audiences from countries like Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Ukraine, who have typically been ignored by Western European or American art institutions, Sharifi said.

"These cultural touch points might seem foreign to a traditional Western audience, but for people from our region, they're very familiar," he added. He mentioned a machine that refrigerates and pumps ayran, a salty yogurt drink popular across Asia and Eastern Europe, which the group installed at an exhibition in Hanover, Germany. "An ayran machine speaks to everybody from Kazakhstan to Turkey to Iran," Sharifi said. "They immediately feel welcome."

The collective works on many fronts and in many places. This fall, you can find their art in exhibitions in Helsinki, Istanbul, Tunis, Vienna and Tbilisi, Georgia; Pickle Bar's Oaxaca pop-up runs until December. But the principle Slavs and Tatars started with remains: to learn a lot about topics its members don't know much about, and to share that knowledge with others.

"I had this eureka moment when I realized that most people just go deeper and deeper into one subject," Sharifi said. "Your sphere of activities — where you summer, your favorite restaurant — becomes more and more narrow as you get older. And actually the challenge in life is to widen your scope of experiences." He added, "We're not interested in art as a personal subjectivity or as therapy. It's about looking outward into the world."

Valeriya Safronova is a reporter for the Style section. @vsaffron