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Slavs and Tatars, the irony of signs to thwart xenophobia

The works of the Slavs and Tatars collective analyse with great irony and humour the cultural hybridizations between Poland and Iran, in particular through the treatment of signs and symbols that pass from one to the other. But beyond these two countries, the positions defended by these artists are a challenge to all the myths maintained by xenophobic beliefs.

In discussions about how contemporary art relates to the issue of migration, we need to pay close attention to the sociological and humanitarian aspects of the issue. In relation to the politics of art, the symbols and references that appear in visual culture are very important. Signs and meanings are significant because they allude to unconscious contexts, often rooted in historical and linguistic contexts whose meaning is much greater than appears at first glance. The activity of the Slavs and Tatars artistic group seems to me a particularly interesting example of how art can talk about these very complex and politically difficult issues.

The therapeutic potential of the group's artistic work seems particularly relevant today given the shocking intensity of the Islamophobia and anti-immigrant xenophobia present in Central European societies. But the present phantasmagoric obsession with the threat from the east is not just a Polish or Eastern European specialty. In 1895, the Prussian Kaiser Wilhelm II commissioned Herman Knackus to draw "die Gelbe Gefahr", a literal illustration of a prophetic dream, in which he saw a storm approaching Europe in the form of a Buddha riding a dragon. In this drawing, we see the Archangel Michael, who has brought together on the shore of a rough sea a group of women representing the various European nations. An inscription at the bottom of the

This text is adapted from a lecture given by Marek Wasilewski during the 50th Congress of the AICA in Paris, November 2017, at the Palais de la Porte Dorée-National Museum of Immigration History. Under the title *Naughty meanings: about the works of Slavs and Tatars*, the lecture was part of a day-long event entitled "Everywhere and Nowhere: Migration and Contemporary Art" directed by Marjorie Althorpe-Guyton, General Secretary of AICA Int., and Mathilde Roman, Treasurer of AICA Int.

The AICA, International Association of Art Critics, was founded in 1949 under the aegis of UNESCO, and unites 63 sections and 6 000 members across the world. Each national section takes turns hosting the annual congress, and in 2019 it will be organized by AICA Germany. More information at <https://aicainternational.org>

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drawing calls out: Peoples of Europe, protect your most sacred possessions! The painting was a gift to European and American leaders and was meant to warn of a mortal threat faced by our civilization. The drawing quickly became a subject of caricature and of appropriations and inversions of its symbolic form. There is, for example, a version with Confucius calling on the peoples of Asia to protect their sacred possessions.



Hermann Knackfuss, *Perril from the East*, a painting made in 1895 from the inspiration of the German kaiser Wilhelm the 2nd.

Switch (on Paper) has already released last February 28th an essay by Kim Levin and will release one more text in the weeks to come from this event rich with diverse perspectives and debates on the situation of forced migration, whose roots and ripples in creation highlight the many issues at stake between art and politics. These three publications, coming from three critics based in New York, Poznan and Istanbul, testify to AICA's ambition of fostering dialogue between worlds of art that are as multiple as they are globalized.

Read Kim Levin essay :

Historical and geographical context Tangled symbols, migrating signs

The work of the Polish-Iranian artistic collective Slavs and Tatars is focused on the area between the former Berlin wall and the coasts of Asia, that is, the large intercontinental region called Eurasia. This realm contains a surprising mixing and migration of cultural identities, traditions, signs and meanings. The migrations to Europe from war-torn countries in the Middle East provide a poignant backdrop today for the work of Slavs and Tatars, founded in 2006. Yet, the most interesting aspect of their activities is the broad cultural and historical contexts that open up through overlap in the territorial range of Asia and Europe. Founded by a Polish woman and an Iranian man, the Slavs and Tatars collective draws heavily on the historical tradition of cultural hybridization, seen in the selective assimilation of words, everyday objects, behaviours and symbols. The Tartar light cavalry, which in the Middle Ages contributed numerous times to the devastation of Eastern Europe, was prone to switching alliances during these wars and often fought on the side of the Christians. Descendants of these warriors live in Poland today, preserving their religious and cultural identity.

The energy contained in the name "Slavs and Tatars" lies in a conscious game in which observations about contemporary life are interlaced with references to narratives deeply rooted in history. It is difficult to find two ethnic groups with more contrasting mythologies than Slavs and Tatars. Slavs are traditionally seen as a settled agricultural people, who adopted Christianity and became peaceable, gentle and hospitable. Tatars, in turn, are portrayed as militant nomads, Muslims from the steppes of Asia, whose incursions into the interior of medieval Europe left devastation and death in their wake. The name given to Mongol warriors comes from the word *Thartari*, meaning "from hell". As far as the origin of the name Slavs is concerned, two prominent Polish historians, Henryk Łowmiański and Aleksander Brückner, believed that the source was the Greek *sklavenoi* and the Latin *sclavus*, with the name initially being used only for the Slavic tribes that bordered the Roman Empire, and only later applied to the whole of the Slavs. Secondly, this name (due to the large number of prisoners of war in Rome, who were brought by the Slavs, who also

comprised a large part of this group the word "slave".

The tension between the two elements in the group's name results in an etymological and symbolic conflict between free, wild warriors and slaves tied to the land, yielding an explosive mix of opposites and paradoxes. However, the Slavs do not symbolise Europe, they live on its periphery, on the edge of Asia; the Tatars, in turn, invaded Europe long ago. Compared to events considered central to world history, like the Crusades or Charles Martel's victory at the Battle of Tours, the relations between the Slavs and Tatars are merely a peripheral footnote. The most traumatic of these footnotes was the Battle of Legnica in 1241, where Mongol warriors defeated a Polish-German force under the leadership of the Polish Prince Henry the Pious. It is ironic that during the Cold War Legnica became the main headquarters of the Soviet troops occupying Poland. Legnica derived additional symbolic power from the fact that, based on the principle of "divide and conquer," the Soviet army tried to place in its European garrisons soldiers from culturally distant Asian parts of its empire to prevent the army from fraternising with the locals. Thus, the descendants of Mongolian warriors walked the streets of the Legnica, which had been taken by the Tatars in the Middle Ages, thereby reinforcing unconscious historical resentments and adding a contemporary chapter to the pages of entangled signs and symbols. Another sign assimilated by folk culture in Poland is the popular Krakovian figure of Lajkonik, who is supposed to remind us of the Tatar invasion of Poland. Today, few people remember that this figure symbolizes the stranger, as it has become permanently inscribed in the landscape of this historic Polish city as something traditional and Polish.

At the beginning of 1943, Isfahan was home to about 2,600 Poles

The works of the Slavs and Tatars turns to histories both near and far. One of the most interesting topics addressed is the parallels between the situations of Poland and Iran during the Cold War, when each of the states was under the protection its respective big brother, with Poland under the control of the Soviet Union, and Iran controlled by the United States. It is no coincidence that in the group's publications we find mentions of the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the Solidarity Revolution of 1980, and that we find pictures of both Lech Walesa and Ayatollah Khomeini. Ryszard Kapuscinski's famous book on the Iranian revolution *The Shah of Shahs* was read in Poland as a *Roman à clef*, that is, a book containing veiled messages for the reader. The absurdities of the colonial relations described there, the superficial modernization, and the ruthless operational methods of the political police did not differ much from the realities of Poland in the late 1970s.

In the history of the relations between Poland and Iran, particularly interesting is an episode during World War II that is particularly inconvenient for all those who today in Poland refuse to help the victims of wars in the Middle East. In 1942, as a result of an agreement with Stalin, Polish soldiers and prisoners of war were released from camps in the USSR and allowed to evacuate. As a result, 116,000 Poles arrived in Iran, some 20,000 of whom were children. The Polish civilians in Iran were housed in refugee camps in Tehran, Ahwaz and Meshheda. Numerous care facilities were set up, and special "Polish" housing districts were built. In Isfahan, the third largest city in Iran, the refugees were mainly Polish children. At the beginning of 1943, Isfahan was home to about 2,600 Poles. They were provided with, among other things, medical care and access to education and culture. Nobody banned them from cultivating their faith or celebrating holidays, or forced them to renounce their traditions. Today, the Polish government is violently protesting against having to accept 7,000 refugees as part of the European Relocation System, believing that they pose a threat to security and cultural identity.

Provincialism and the little-known histories of Poles, Persians, Arabs, Turks, and the Balkan peoples are important contexts for the collective. These stories concern not only the military conflicts between Poles and the Turks and Tatars, but also the revolutions in Russia and Iran, and the modernization movements in Turkey and Central Asia. Slavs and Tatars, as Max Cegielski writes, offer

their viewers an ironic and humorous form of psychotherapy that allows them to reconcile themselves with their displaced cultural roots. From this perspective, what is today called "the migration crisis" appears not as a threat, but as a prospect for the future.



Slavs and Tatars, *Mother Tongues and Father Throats*, 2012.
Woolen yarn, ca. 500 x 300 cm.

One focus of the collective's activities is the problem of the letter as a graphic sign, as a medium of meaning that is also a medium for cultural imperialism. The artists ask in what way the power of the letter has contributed to the history of the West. In the group's works, we can see Latin letters intermingling with Cyrillic and Arabic script, just as cultures have intermingled in Eurasia. After all, Western culture, with its sophistication and technology, has not always been dominant. In this context, particularly worthy of attention today is the fact that some of the most luxurious and technologically advanced goods, such as steel and fabric, originated in Syria's Damascus. Today Syria is associated with war refugees and the tragedy of Aleppo, and not exports of valuable and highly sought-after goods.

In a street survey on Youtube that was once a hit among Polish viewers, a reporter asked passers-by if Polish students should learn Arabic numerals in school. Responses varied, from open and positive, with people pointing out that foreign cultures should be learned, to negative, with people stating that since Arabs don't want to assimilate into our culture, we shouldn't introduce foreign elements into our schools. These varied and conflicting answers shared one thing: Ignorance.

Go East

In 2009 the group performed a project under the ironic title *Go East*, which was accompanied by a billboard with the image of the popular American actor Charles Bronson, who on the poster is identified by his real Polish name: Karol

Buczyński. The title of the project refer:

artists organized a coach trip from Warsaw to Kiuszumiary, an eastern Polish border town where Polish Muslims live and cultivate their traditions. Charles Bronson owes his sharp features and oblique eyes to his ancestors who emigrated to the United States from eastern Poland. This trip to the nearest exotic orient made its participants aware that the alien Tatar is part of us.



Slavs and Tatars, *Idź na Wschód!*, 2009. Digital print on PVC, 750 × 100 cm. Installation view at Wola Art Festival, Warsaw. Photo Igor Omulecki

Kitab Kebab

The word 'Kebab' in Turkish means meat roasted on a rotisserie; it can be mutton or beef, but, due to Islamic tradition, not pork. It is reportedly the most popular type of fast food, and is more commonly eaten than hamburgers. Despite its origins, it enjoys enormous popularity among the most xenophobic and anti-refugee parts of Polish society. Stands offering "real Polish pork kebab" have even appeared recently. The objects in the *Kitab-Kebab* series, in which specially selected books are placed on a skewer, suggests not so much an analytical as a somatic approach to reading literature, which is aimed primarily at the stomach, rather than the head. In this case, the books presented were written by Ryszard Kapuściński, an iconic Polish reporter who described postcolonial transformations in Asia, Africa and South America, as well as the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani, a Georgian poet and traveller who described his travels through Persia and Western Europe, and is considered one of the most important Georgian scholars and co-founder of the modern Georgian language. In the foreground, we see a book by Kapuściński entitled *The Kirghiz Dismounts*, one of his early books, which describes the cultural and civilization transformations in Soviet Central Asia. These areas, in which the influence of Western civilization, mediated by the Russians, mix with Islam and the influences of Turkish and indigenous cultures, appear to be a particular field of interest for the Slavs and Tatars.

Tranny Tease

The *Tranny Tease* series is dedicated to the phenomenon of transliteration, which has been repeatedly experienced by the people of Central Asia, who are at a crossroads between Arab, European and Russian influences. For example, the Azerans switched from the Persian to the Latin alphabet in 1929, only to replace the Latin alphabet with Cyrillic ten years later, and return to the Latin alphabet in 1991. Each change of the alphabet was an act of cultural violence

intended to change the way of thinking among the community as a whole. It was also an extraordinary opportunity for the migration of signs and a permeation of meanings between various untranslatable discourses, as well as a source of cultural misunderstandings.



Slavs and Tatars, *Solidarność Pajk Study 3*, 2011. Acrylic yarn, cordon thread, metal beads, string crochet, fringe trim, wool, ribbons, steel, 80 x 40 x 40 cm.

Spiders

A spider is a folk decoration hung in the centre of a room in residential homes, resembling a chandelier. Spiders are a traditional ornamental form. They are closely linked to rituals and made from readily available materials of local origin: straw, beans, peas, feathers, yarn and frayed cloth – and later also made of coloured tissue paper and paper. Spiders had a decorative function, and were hung in the centre of the ceiling or in the so-called "holy corner". Spiders were also hung at Christmas and Easter (decorated with blown eggs), and were made anew each year. They represented a symbol of fertility and happiness in the new year. Spiders take different shapes. The simplest are made of sticks or wires hammered into a beet or celeriac and hooked to the ceiling. They can also be crystalline in form – made of straw, and ranging from very simple, consisting of several interconnected openwork prisms, to very complex structures, also made of straw; spiders can be in the shape of a sphere made of peas or beans – usually in the form of chandeliers; they are also made of wool and straw in the shape of a square, hexagonal, or octagonal disc. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, all types of spiders were made of tissue paper and paper in the shape of balls, harmonicas, stars or simply shredded ribbons. The works of the Slavs and Tatars with Spiders draw attention to their ambiguous aesthetic character. When we look at them from the perspective of the mixing of cultural influences, we clearly begin to notice in these regularly-shaped, three-dimensional ornaments, similarities to Far Eastern lanterns and dragons, as well as to Tartar ornaments that arrived in Europe with the Mongol warriors.



Slavs and Tatar, *Molla Nasreddin the antimodern*, 2012. Fibreglass, laquer paint, steel, 180 x 180 x 80 cm. © DR

The translation of “Allah”

Invited to the 8th Biennale in Berlin, Slavs and Tatars decided to refer not only to the life of Turkish immigrants in Berlin, but also to how cultural meanings migrate in the Islamic world. Their work dealt with a reform introduced in Turkey between 1932 and 1950, the only one that has thus far been reversed. This reform consisted of translating into Turkish the traditional Arabic call to prayer. The change was meant to emphasize the distinctiveness of Turkey within the Islamic world. However, controversy arose about substituting the universally used term for God – Allah – with another, pre-Islamic word – Tanrı. At the Biennial, the work *Ezan Çılgınlıkları* presented two speakers set up in a park emitting the Turkish version of the call to prayer, while a friendly space was also created there for resting and relaxing.

Conflicting beliefs

The Slavs and Tatars group is sometimes referred to as a “think tank without an agenda”. Their activities are not limited to exhibitions, as their publications and performative lectures are equally important and autonomous forms of expression. The work of this team, which consists of two people from very different cultures, neither of whom lives in their home country, is characterized by an astonishing provocative irony and lightness. It draws attention to unruly meanings that evade the established order, creating trouble and undermining official narratives. These works, despite their visual attractiveness, are not easy to interpret, and require the viewer to grasp and delve into complex contexts created by an at times absurd intermingling of cultural aspects, signs and symbols. The subject of the artists’ works is the connection between history, geopolitics and visual culture. It is also a full-fledged archaeology of everyday life, which seeks to draw attention to the values of cultures considered peripheral:

“We’ve lived in major European cities, studied at the finer institutions of the west, but found something was missing. We found it important to look elsewhere, beyond the major capitals of the western world. One of the original founding objectives, the polemics of Slavs and Tatars, is that many countries in the East are so hell bent on modernising at any price. They look at westernisation as modernisation, they look towards the West. We don’t esteem enough our own heritage. And one needs to find one’s own approach to modernity.”

This is creativity in the full meaning of this syncretic word. It is based on bringing together many often conflicting values and beliefs. This attitude is more typical of Confucian and Far Eastern thinking, where pantheism and

tolerance for various beliefs is more wi
which in the works exhibited results from combining various forms of
expression. Slavs and Tatars point to the ease with which cultural hybridization
occurs, and that homogeneous cultures are myths invented in the minds of
xenophobes.

Thanks to Mathilde Roman and AICA

**Cover: Slavs and Tatars, *Reverse Joy (Kha)*, 2012. Fountain, pigment, water,
metal bowl, acrylic paint, MDF, ceramic tiles, 241 x 241 x 60 cm. © DR**

About the author

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Marek Wasilewski is lecturing at the University of Arts in Poznań. From 2017, he is a director of the municipal gallery Arsenal in Poznań. He is a member of AICA. In the years 2000-2017 he was editor in chief of the bimonthly cultural magazine *Time of Culture*. He published in magazines such as *Art Monthly*, *Springer*, *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, *the International Journal of Education and Art*, and *Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education*.