

Views

Slavs and Tatars

"Made in Dschermay"

Albertinum / Kunsthalle im Lipsiusbau
02.06. – 14.10.2018

With a research practice centred around the geographical area called Eurasia, the Berlin-based collective Slavs and Tatars is familiar with discussions of postcolonialism and decolonisation. Rather than reiterating the general power relations between empires old and new, and smaller cultural and ethnic peoples, however, they primarily concentrate on linguistic and semantic subtleties that facilitate or interrupt exchange between cultures – and their largest survey in Germany to date, "Made in Dschermay", is no exception.

The tetragraph "dsch", traditionally used in the German language to denote the sound of "j" when translating words associated with the East (*dschihad*, *Dschinghis Khan*), points to Germany's uneasy relationship with its colonial past, the language itself segregating the West from East. Yet in this exhibition, Slavs and Tatars turns the modality on its heels. In addition to the show's title, a series of reflective works traces this prefix to *El Jihad* (El Dschihad in Germany), an Islamic propaganda newspaper published in several languages as part of World War I efforts to lure Muslims away from their coloniser, Great Britain, and towards the Central Powers. Upon entering the Kunsthalle im Lipsiusbau's foyer, with its broken decorum reminiscent of the age when Germany actively conquered other civilisations, *Alphabet Abdal* (2015) obstructs visitors' paths to the main hall. Made from blue and yellow woollen yarn, the large circular sculpture reads, in Arabic, "Jesus, son of Mary, He is Love" – a reminder that Arabic, while mostly linked to Islam, is also the language of many Christians around the world. Continuing with a political investigation of language, *Love Letters No. 1* (2013), one in a series of ten wall hangings, is inspired by drawings of Russian poet and artist Vladimir Mayakovsky. A large piece made from black and white

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Exhibition view

woollen yarn, it depicts a figure who is imprisoned between the pages of an oversized book while standing with its arms outstretched and shouting letters from different alphabets, which eventually fall to the ground. The work alludes to particular histories of languages that have been swept under the rug. For example, in 1926, the Turkic people residing in the former Soviet Union were forced to replace the Ottoman Turkish alphabet with a Latin and soon after Cyrillic one. In addition, in 1928, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, banned Arabic script in favour of Latin-based letters which are still used today, severing the relationship between Turkish language and its Arabic heritage. In line with Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's ideas, Slavs and Tatars establishes relationships amongst seemingly unrelated signifiers, or letters: they attempt to map out an etymology between languages separated arbitrarily by geography, politics, and history.

Comparing Slavs and Tatars's artistic practice to the production and use of textiles, one of their recurrent mediums, the collective's logic is woven from three threads: artist publications, lecture performances, and exhibitions – the common denominator being words as the constitutive physical objects of language. Slavs and Tatars probe languages' sensual surfaces, their visual forms and sounds, to shift our understanding of how linguistic ethnoses interrelate in historical retrospect. They often twist known expressions to generate semantic hybrids between typical applications and symbolic meanings. They confront topics such as cross migration and the rise of fixed national identities to produce a contextual and meaningful form of contemporary pop art that transcends the genre's flatness, instead addressing some of today's most pertinent sociocultural questions.

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