



Slavs and Tatars, *Afteur Pasteur (Nice)*, 2020, acrylic on gelatin silver print, 10 5/8 × 8 5/8". Installation view. Photo: François Fernandez.

Slavs and Tatars

VILLA ARSON

For nearly fifteen years, the collective Slavs and Tatars have been producing installations, sculptures, performative talks, and publications that address the relationship between language and the ever-shifting landscape of identity politics. Having started in 2006 as an informal reading group, Slavs and Tatars' remit of research is, as their name suggests, the not-so-small region "east of the former Berlin Wall and west of the Great Wall of China." The artists' practice unearths the ways in which power dynamics, domination, cultural erasure, and colonization use language to do their dirty work: for example, the romanization of the alphabet imposed by the nascent Soviet Union in an attempt to modernize its Muslim states. At the same time, their lighthearted self-mockery offers an invitation to constructive exchange. Slavs and Tatars' first solo presentation in France, "*Régions d'être*," comprising nearly forty works, offered an initiation into their collective thinking and dialogue, extending the group's repertoire of grotesquely humorous analysis to their host country.

A case in point was *Afteur Pasteur (Nice)*, 2020, a black-and-white framed photograph of Louis Pasteur that hung on a wallpaper patterned with vibrant green pickles whose curved, elongated forms when paired lost their long-assumed phallic connotations to suggest milk-swollen breasts. The portrait of the pioneer of modern vaccine and hygiene has been retouched so that a spatter of milk mars his black frock and moustache—a nod to the 1990s "Got Milk?" ad campaign that was a hit in the United States. Created in the context of the new pandemic era, the piece implies that the legacy of the French scientist's research joins a broader cultural conviction, casting bacteria and microbes as enemies to be conquered. Yet two surrounding works proffered a different view. In *Brine and Punishment*, 2019, a glass-fronted cooler stocked with bottles of sauerkraut juice, and *Salty Sermon*, 2020, a large wall-hung carpet bearing an array of phrases celebrating all things microbial swirling inside the outline of a human head, hygienics takes a back seat to the hybrid creative properties of fermentation and fruitful contamination.

The collective's use of transliteration forms a significant part of their practice; it is a means (in their own words) of "queering" language to tap into forgotten or erased regional histories. Present in the labyrinthine exhibition spaces were the 2009– series of vacuum-formed plastic signs "The Tranny Tease (pour Marcel)" that—through a playful slippage of meaning and sounds encountered when one alphabet is superimposed onto another—document the rise and fall of empires, states, and religions. In *Kwas Ist Das*, 2016, Russian and German become one (*kvass* being the name of a drink popular in the Baltic region) in a nod to the ill-defined boundary that has long demarcated the two cultures, subject to shift in the context of wars, treaties, or migrations. In the multichannel audio installation *Lektor (speculum linguarum)*, 2014–, a similar affront to legibility comes about through multilingual voice-over translations of *Kutadgu Bilig* (Wisdom of Royal Glory), an eleventh-century poetic text that forms the cornerstone of Turkic literature. Elsewhere were entries from 2020 to "Love Me, Love Me Not," 2012–. First conceived as a book and subsequently realized as acrylic prints on the reverse of mirrors, the series uses textual diagrams to address the thorny issue of renaming that has consistently followed political upheaval, such as the transformation of Yekaterinburg to Sverdlovsk during the Soviet period.

Through the presented works, which included a complete library of Slavs and Tatars' publications to date, this survey ultimately uncovered language not as some abstract *thing*, but as a visceral ingredient in the construction of fables, myths, histories, traditions—real or imagined, ingested and expelled from the very bodies of which it is part and parcel. Among ten handwoven wool carpets (*Love Letters*, 2013–14) that borrow from Russian revolutionary poet Vladimir Mayakovsky's imagery to explore language as a source of political or metaphysical liberation, the image of a human tongue behind prison bars was a reminder of how individual voices are often suppressed by global hegemonies and monolithic prerogatives.

— Anya Harrison