

Interview between curator **Gretchen Wagner** and artists **Slavs and Tatars** (August 8, 2012)

Projects 98: Slavs and Tatars

GW: Slavs and Tatars first began to work together in 2006. Can you discuss the origin of the collective and how you came to focus on a specific geographical region, Eurasia, as the subject of your practice?

ST: Slavs and Tatars began a reading group with a very specific remit of looking at this geographic region between the former Berlin Wall and the Great Wall of China. Why this region in the world? For equally intimate, intellectual, and polemical reasons. Very basically, if we believe this kind of nonsense that passes as wisdom, unfortunately, which is that the West and the East are in a collision course or that Islam is somehow incompatible with modernity, then the best thing we can do is look at a region of the world where they cohabited or coexisted for several centuries, whether it was in the Caucasus, or whether it was in the Balkans.

GW: In relation to your first activities as a reading group, how do language and books function within your projects?

ST: The reading group was sort of Oprah meets Attila the Hun, in a way. We found obscure texts that were not available in English and would translate these into English for the first time, or we would simply reprint what was out of print and inaccessible. Some we would find on our research trips, and then share them with an immediate group of friends, fifty or sixty people. Our first projects were, essentially, brochure type texts or small publications; editions of 50 or 100, maximum.

Insofar as it was a reading group, we keep coming back

to our origins. For us, everything begins with a book. In a sense, we started out for the first three or four years of our practice almost exclusively working with print—publications, books, and posters. If, in the last couple years, we have expanded to include a lot of sculpture, installation or performance, the fact remains that for us, everything is a means to bring people back to the book. When we make any kind of contribution to an exhibition, there's always a discourse or research element to the practice or to the project.

GW: You have described *Beyonsense*, the installation for Projects 98, as a “portrait of the antimodern.” Can you explain your engagement with the “antimodern”?

ST: It is important to say that being “antimodern” does not mean being against modernity. In his book *Les Antimodernes* (2005), Columbia University Professor Antoine Compagnon describes the true modernists not as the utopians who only look forward (e.g. Vladimir Mayakovsky, F.T. Marinetti) but rather as the “anti-modernists,” those somewhat conflicted visionaries deeply affected by the passing of the pre-modern age. As Sartre said about Baudelaire, those who go forward, but with an eye in the rear view mirror. We tend to see this antimodern position everywhere: Molla Nasreddin riding backwards on his donkey or Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, thrust forward with his back to the future, facing the past.

We do not believe in the wholesale western idea of modernity. We err on the side of the mystical and not the rational. We don't believe in the positivist, we don't believe in the excessive emphasis on the individual vis-à-vis the collective, which are all legacies of modernity, in a sense. *Beyonsense* was an attempt to locate a different form of modernity within the museum's own collections, or a different understanding of the various material. For us, MoMA's collection of Russian avant-garde books was very instrumental in the first stages of research.

GW: This research brought you to the linguistic element,

that of the phoneme “kh,” which is the focal point of your current project at MoMA.

ST: Yes, Khhhhhhh is the title of our latest book featured in the Projects 98 installation. “Kh” has become a transcultural emblem or a mascot of sorts, like our Molla Nasreddin. Both performatively and conceptually. Unlike most other phonemes or letters of the alphabet, “kh” is pronounced not by the tongue but by the throat. Instead of pushing air through the vocal tract like most sounds, “kh” is pronounced by restricting the passage of air. I mean, through this one phoneme named “kh,” you can sort of unravel quite complex notions of wisdom versus knowledge, or the oral versus the written, or the idea of sacred language versus profane language.

GW: Do you consider your practice to have social, or even political, applications? If so, in what ways do you intend it to have agency?

ST: That’s a good question. We’re defeatist by nature, in this very Slavic sort of sense of defeatism, meaning that we know we’ll fail but we get up every morning trying our best nonetheless. Our role is to provide the stories, or the tools, or the approaches that allow people to rethink themselves, or their own sort of subjectivity, or their own individuality, or their own sense of collective responsibility.