Slavs and Tatars base their work on the rituals and traditions of a geographical area situated between the former Berlin Wall and the Great Wall of China, in other words the vast intercontinental area called the Eurasian Steppe, which functions as their research laboratory. This territory is characterized by an extremely diverse fusion of identities and signs resulting from competing empires: be it Persian, Ottoman, Russian, Chinese, Mongolian or others. As a result their work is not unlike a bazaar, a gathering of heterogeneous objects from different origins.

Often dealing with two opposite or mutually exclusive ideas, “the metaphysical splits” as they call it, their work is based on extensive scientific and academic knowledge of these cultures, as well as their familiarity with old folklore and tales, conventional wisdom, oral traditions, legends, myths and more or less fantastical stories. All of which is frequently submitted to the trial of translation and especially of transliteration, which is the transcription of a sign from one writing system to another. Within these splits, fermentation and a sense of humor play a crucial role. Fermentation because of its ability to simultaneously deteriorate and preserve; and a sense of humor (expressed through caricature and irony) because of its way of integrating antagonistic notions through lightness. In any case their work, as they put it, speaks “to the mouth, the throat, the stomach, the sexual organs”, and remains impervious to the risk of creating controversy within cultures that often choose to eliminate any kind of sensuality when dealing for example with religion.

Like a great open book, their first solo exhibition in France offers an overview of their artistic practice featuring both past works and future collaborations. Slavs and Tatars began as an informal reading group in 2006. In the first years of their practice, the artists’ production was limited to the two dimensions of the printed page: re-publishing material that was out of print, translating texts unavailable in another language, etc. As their practice has proliferated to include the other media featured in the exhibition at the Villa Arson – such as sculpture, installations, audio-works, or lecture-performances – the role of print has continued to play an important role in the artists’ activities. Slavs and Tatars see in print a platform for discourse, but also a democratic spirit. Printed matter is accessible compared to the exclusivity of (fine) art; it can be taken on the train, read over breakfast, or passed along to a friend.

Slavs and Tatars is an internationally renowned art collective devoted to an area East of the former Berlin Wall and West of the Great Wall of China known as Eurasia. Since its inception in 2006, the collective has shown a keen grasp of polemical issues in society, clearing new paths for contemporary discourse via a wholly idiosyncratic form of knowledge production: including popular culture, spiritual and esoteric traditions, oral histories, modern myths, as well as scholarly research. The collective’s practice is based on three activities: exhibitions, publications, and lecture-performances.

For nearly fifteen years, the artist collective Slavs and Tatars has been producing installations, sculptures, conferences and editions which question our knowledge of regional languages and cultures, or even of cultures in general.
new productions created especially for the maze-like space of the Villa Arson art center. The works all belong to the eight cycles of their production: Régions d’être, Kidnapping Mountains; Friendship of Nations; Not Moscow Not Mecca; Language Arts; Mirrors for Princes; Made in Germany; Pickle Politics. The cycles are endless movements, constantly being fed, rather than series with a beginning and an end. The exhibition takes on the title, “Régions d’être”, a play on words of “raison d’être” (reason for being): in fact, Slavs and Tatars’ raison d’être is actually regional, a call to look elsewhere, beyond the nexuses of power, authority or knowledge, to the margins of ideologies and the frontiers of belief systems.

Amongst other venues Slavs and Tatars have had solo exhibitions at: the MoMA, NY (2012); Salt, Istanbul (2017); the Kunsthalle Zurich (2014); the Vienna Secession (2012) and the Ujazdowski Center for Contemporary Art, Warsaw (2016). Their work is represented by Tanya Bonakdar Gallery (NYC), Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler (Berlin), Raster Gallery (Warsaw) and The Third Line (Dubai). Slavs and Tatars recently opened their Pickle Bar in Berlin, a Slavic take on the apéritivo bar with a program open to the public, in collaboration with the KW Institute of Contemporary Art.

**TRANSLATE ME OVER A RIVER**

In parallel to “Régions d’être”, the Izolyatsia Foundation and the Villa Arson are producing and broadcasting a series of filmed interviews on the subject of translation and transliteration, entitled “Translate Me Over a River”, featuring ten leading international figures in the worlds of art and research. Slavs and Tatars’ questions are answered by the participants in English and subtitled in Ukrainian and French. The interviews, which last approximately fifteen minutes each, will be broadcast every week for the duration of the exhibition, on site both at the Villa Arson and at the Izolyatsia Foundation, as well as on the websites of both venues.

**The Izolyatsia Foundation is an independent platform supporting cultural initiatives and contemporary culture, housed in an old shipyard in the north of Kiev (Ukraine).**

**ÉM** Your work is very often based on the confrontation of two seemingly different ideas. You call these deliberate oppositions “metaphysical splits”. Isn’t the first of these splits in the very name of your collective: Slavs and Tatars? Traditionally Slavs have been considered as former slaves settled in a specific area, whereas Tatars are seen as free and wild warriors. Even if these age-old images are total clichés, they still survive within our collective subconscious.

In parallel to “Régions d’être”, the Izolyatsia Foundation and the Villa Arson are producing new productions created especially for the duration of the exhibition, on site both at the Villa Arson and at the Izolyatsia Foundation, as well as on the websites of both venues.

**S&T** Yes, you’re right, our name in itself expresses our choice to bring together different ideas. You call these deliberate oppositions “metaphysical splits”. Isn’t the first of these splits in the very name of your collective: Slavs and Tatars? Traditionally Slavs have been considered as former slaves settled in a specific area, whereas Tatars are seen as free and wild warriors. Even if these age-old images are total clichés, they still survive within our collective subconscious.

**ÉM** Your juxtapositions often employ transliteration, which is the transcription of a sign from one writing system to a sign from another writing system. You have said that transliteration is “the trashier younger sibling of translation, its more prestigious, older sister”. Why are you downplaying transliteration (to the detriment of translation)?

According to the Abrahamic notion of hospitality shared amongst the three monotheist religions – Christianity, Judaism and Islam –, a stranger must be invited into one’s home. In the same way, according to Ricoeur, translation is an act of hospitality where one receives the foreign word at home, while at the same time expatriating oneself into the other’s language. If that’s the case, then perhaps transliteration – which changes the script but not the word itself – can be seen as a way of destroying or queering the language. Your work is also based on fermentation. Taken literally, on a chemical level, this would mean that the cultures you refer to are in a permanent state of decomposition. But in social science or literature, “fermentation” is “the trashier younger sibling of translation, its more prestigious, older sister”. Why are you downplaying transliteration (to the detriment of translation)?

**S&T** We aren’t the translators who are downplaying it! Quite the contrary, transliteration reveals an extraordinary wealth of philological, historical, and cultural meanings. It’s the linguistics mafia who are downplaying it! You mention French philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s notion of “linguistic hospitality”. Could you explain what this concept refers to exactly?

According to the Abrahamic notion of hospitality shared amongst the three monotheist religions – Christianity, Judaism and Islam –, a stranger must be invited into one’s home. In the same way, according to Ricoeur, translation is an act of hospitality where one receives the foreign word at home, while at the same time expatriating oneself into the other’s language. If that’s the case, then perhaps transliteration – which changes the script but not the word itself – can be seen as a way of destroying or queering the language. Your work is also based on fermentation. Taken literally, on a chemical level, this would mean that the cultures you refer to are in a permanent state of decomposition. But in social science or literature, “fermentation” is “the trashier younger sibling of translation, its more prestigious, older sister”. Why are you downplaying transliteration (to the detriment of translation)?
These cycles underscore the critical conception of the Enlightenment, and its insistence on binary oppositions (reducing the relation between units or ideas to oppositions: profane vs sacred, rational vs irrational, etc). Fermentation scrambles this dynamic: in so far as it preserves thru a managed or controlled form of rotting; an example of the "metaphysical splits" mentioned above. In fact bacteria plays this double part of being both beneficial and dangerous. Ever since Pasteur, we have had a tendency to overemphasize the research itself: we present art to the public is never traditional artistic term.

Indeed, one understands this idea when one is familiar with the critical and heterogeneous dimensions of your work, but aren't you afraid that this "région d'être" might be construed as a regionalist way of thinking which could be interpreted as a way of isolating yourselves, especially at a time of crisis like the one we are presently going through?

Regionalism enables us to think beyond nations and simplistic identities; on the contrary it lays claim to a popular form of cosmopolitanism. People unfortunately have a tendency to view a cosmopolitan person as someone living in New York, Paris, or London, whereas Uygurs often master three or four languages, as do the inhabitants of Lviv where they speak Ukrainian as well as Russian, Polish, and sometimes Tatar. As the Iranian-American professor of comparative literature Hamid Dabashi puts it, “Every home has its abroad”. One can understand this idea as an organ. One can understand this desire to create lightness when dealing with matters that are sometimes very serious?

We use two parallel methods: on the one hand we conduct scientific, academic, and bibliographical research; on the other hand we do field work which necessitates a different kind of inquiry, a more emotional and experiential or affective approach. When conducting this field work we often discover information through samizdat books (self-published books sold illicitly in the USSR), through rituals such as pilgrimages to sacred sites in Central Asia which are considered to be outside of the Muslim orthodoxy, or through the oral practices which constitute an actual historiography for the Uygurs, all of which is precisely unavailable either on the Internet or in the digital library jstor, and does not have an isbn number. One could say that we discover a good dose of irony, particularly through puns or through a certain choice of imagery, often akin to caricature – which is an art form in its own right in the publishing world. Why this desire to create lightness when dealing with matters that are sometimes very serious?

Humor is extremely important to us, not only as a mediating strategy but also simply as a way of life. And one must point out that the sense of humor we use is hospitable, and not detrimental to others. It is an inclusive sense of humor which makes fun of itself, very typical of our region, forgive us a bit of essentialism. This kind of irreverence – puns, caricatures – also enables us to reach an audience that is often anti-intellectual.

Your works are rife with old folklore and dangerous. Ever since Pasteur, we have had a tendency to overemphasize the research itself: we present art to the public is never traditional artistic term.
more about the planets in the universe of Star Trek than about any country in Central Asia. But our approach also comes from the tradition of the wise fool, like Molla Nasreddin (a popular character in Muslim culture, an ingenuous philosopher dispensing at times absurd and at times ingenious teachings), or from the tradition of the court jester who can allow himself to be critical without the target of his criticism becoming aware of it.

ÉM

Is it because of their syncretic or falsely religious aspect that your works sometimes provoke strong reactions? I’m thinking in particular of PrayWay, a huge and supposedly sacred lectern that you use in many of your exhibitions for seating visitors and inviting them to talk. You even say that this object is a “100% polemical platform”. I would say the work is syncretic, since it often blends subjects (such as humor and religion), and categories or ways of dealing with something previously considered to be antithetical. In our opinion the true mark of a sophisticated form of knowledge is the ability to accommodate contradictory or mutually exclusive ideas, to invite them into one’s home, as an individual or a society. One can be analytical while welcoming emotional or metaphysical ideas. A concept can be both rational and irrational. Our work deals with faith, but without criticizing it from a secular point of view as is often the case in artistic and intellectual milieus. And this is one of the main reasons why our work has never been censured or caused outrage, although it does deal precisely with sensitive and delicate issues.

S&T

ÉM

How did you think out and conceive the exhibition at the Villa Arson? Does it follow a path, specific themes, a summary? Since this is our first solo exhibition in France, we chose “Régions d’être” as the title, which is also the title of one of our research cycles. This cycle covers the whole range of our interests while adapting as best it can to the labyrinth spaces of the art center. Our work is somewhat like a “bazaar”, in the sense that there is a bit of everything for everyone. In the same way, at the Villa Arson there will be social sculptures such as PrayWay or Reverse Joy, participatory installations like the Pickle Bar, more traditional works (such as the mirrors Love Me, Love Me Not), a large selection of our editions (a democratic and accessible activity which dates back to the beginning of our activity fifteen years ago), and a work with sound (Lektor). The common thread remains the theme of language as both a platform for speech as well as an affective experience. The linguistic gymnastics in our work come partly from our education in France: here, language and its literary potential are central to notions of self-representation.

S&T

ÉM

When one discovers your universe one is struck by the abundance of stories and sub-stories that intermingle, by the entanglement of references that create a sort of unbridled meshing of disparate cultures. But strangely enough, on a formal level your work is very classical in its use of traditional materials. Your installations are almost academic, everything is perfectly straight, clean and impeccable. This paradox seems to me to be another incidence of this unity of opposites you are so fond of. But perhaps this is just idle speculation?

S&T

No, you’re absolutely right. There is a Texan saying that we particularly like: “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”. In our opinion, our position is radical enough in the world of art – in its contamination of fields, its mixture of scholarly research and pop culture, its Gnostic inquiries, its street humor, its emotional engagement with the rituals of faith, not to mention its focus on regionalism – to allow for a certain classicism in its materialization. In the end, art should always take us somewhere else: towards new horizons, new semantic fields, new ways of thinking. A work of art mustn’t be an end in itself, it mustn’t be a phenomenological black hole, as those who see art as autonomous maintain. Our particular task is to bring us back to the Book, in an almost Abrahamic sense. The works that museums collect, or that galleries sell to collectors, that are insured, packaged, art-handled etc., are props, meant to bring the audience back to the subjects discussed in our books.
Slavs and Tatars’ Work cycles

RÉGIONS D’ÊTRE
The cycle Régions d’être spans the unwieldy geographical remit of Slavs and Tatars – between the former Berlin Wall and the Great Wall of China – while also serving as a prequel to the collective’s practice. Régions d’être is the collective’s term for an area that falls between the cracks of history and general knowledge: largely Muslim but not the Middle East, largely Russian speaking but not Russia, and having a complex relationship with the nation. Yet rather than representing a specific value, history or culture, this ‘region of being’ is as much an imagined, poetic geography as it is a real, political and historical geopolitics.

NOT MOSCOW NOT MECCA
In this cycle, the artists look to syncretism – the combination or amalgamation of distinct beliefs, religious geographies, languages, or politics – as a third way between the two major geopolitical heavyweights of the 20th and 21st-centuries: communism and political Islam. Hybrid genealogies are told from the perspective of the region’s fruits: from the persimmon to the mulberry, from the melon to the pomegranate. The history of the region’s flora moves beyond the anthropomorphic focus on historical personages of a region.

LANGUAGE ARTS
The march of alphabets has often accompanied the ascension and fall of empires and religions. In Language Arts, the collective unteases the politics of alphabets: the many fraught, often forgotten yet palpable attempts by nations, cultures and ideologies to ascribe a specific letter to a sound.

MIRRORS FOR PRINCES
Mirrors for Princes refers to a medieval and renaissance genre of advice literature in both Islamic and Christian cultures that counselled rulers on matters of statecraft, the body politic, and good governance. ‘Mirrors for princes’ (specula principum or Fürstenspiegel) represented an early form of secular scholarship that raised the level of statecraft to that of religious jurisprudence or theology. For the artists, aside from producing and foreshadowing a ‘care of the self’ that was instrumental in western modernity, ‘mirrors for princes’ is a form in which critique is presented as a form of gift-giving or hospitality.

MADE IN GERMANY
Coinciding with the World War I centenary, and made in the wake of the European migrant crisis of 2015, Made in Germany sheds light on Germany’s little-known historical relationship with Islam and ‘the East’.

PICKLE POLITICS
Whether microbes or mitochondria dwelling furtively on the skin or non-native agents living within us: bacteria comprise one kilogram of the average human body. Pickle Politics looks to the practices and symbolism of fermentation, constructing a political argument using notions of the rotten, the spoiled, and the soured.
Exhibited artworks

ENTRANCE
Cycle PICKLE POLITICS

01. **LYTES**, 2020, plexiglas, digital print, LED lights, aluminium, 70.5 × 50.5 × 6.5 cm

Too often the cucumber is approximated as male genitalia, whether for sexual or silly ends. Lytes reclaims the feminine agency of the pickled cucumber via its nourishing role as provider of bacteria as well as luminosity. Installed in the entry hall of the Villa Arson, Lytes alerts visitors to salacious and salty offerings inside the exhibition space, architecturally and experientially, through a pickle bar where fermented cabbage juice is served.

ROOM 1
Cycle PICKLE POLITICS

02. **BRINE AND PUNISHMENT** (bottle), 2019, cabbage pickle juice, glass bottle

Pickle juice is an epiphenomenon, what Slavs and Tatars call a ‘stupid’ medium, through which we can better understand cultural differences and complex approaches to time and history. If across Eastern Europe, pickle juice has traditionally been consumed as a hangover cure, in more recent times it is marketed in the West as a sports and performance beverage.

03. **SALTY SERMON**, 2020, woolen yarn, 290 × 290 cm

Salty Sermon provides a manifesto for the collective’s approach to pickling. Slavs and Tatars see in fermentation nothing less than a robust challenge to the Enlightenment and its legacy of binary thinking. After all, fermentation is a means of preserving thru managed rotting; that is, achieving something via its counterintuitive antithesis.

For sale: € 2
04. **NATIONS** (Le fric, c’est pas si chic, dit le Tajik), 2012, reverse screen print, acrylic fluorescent paint, mirror, wooden frame, 160 × 110 cm

Cycle RÉGIONS D’ÊTRE

Whether it’s gender politics as geopolitics, migrant labor, or jadidism, to name a few, Nations employ bawdy humour and deliberate one-liners to deliver ice-breakers of unassuming density.

05. **AFTEUR PASTEUR** (Nice), 2020, silver gelatine print, acrylic paint, 27 × 22 cm

Cycle PICKLE POLITICS

Louis Pasteur’s mustache, and face, are dripping with milk, a nod to the legendary Got Milk campaign. The legacy of the famous French scientist’s work is exemplary of an Enlightenment project taken to an extreme: bacteria and microbes, we are told, are our enemies, so many foreign agents against whom we erect a liquid wall of hand-sanitizer.
ROOM 2

06. **DIL BE DEL**, 2014, copper-plated brass, silver acrylic paint, 10 × 12 × 9 cm

Cycle MIRRORS FOR PRINCES

The phrase “speaking from the heart” is taken quite literally in this work as the tongue – the organ of speech – is grafted directly onto the heart.

The title, *Dil be Del*, further emphasizes this jumble of body parts through a composite of the words for “tongue” and “heart” in Turkish and Persian respectively.

07. **LOVE ME, LOVE ME NOT** (*Tanger*), 2020, acrylic paint on mirror reverse, aluminium frame, 85 × 60 cm

Cycle RÉGIONS D’ÊTRE

A genealogy of a given city’s name changes, the result of rising or falling empires, states, and / or populations. Some cities divulge a resolutely Asian or Muslim heritage, so often forgotten in some citizens’ quest, at all costs, for a European, Christian identity. Others vacillate almost painfully, and others with numbing repetition, entire metropolises caught like children in the spiteful back and forth of a custody battle. Like much of Slavs and Tatars’ work, *Love Me, Love Me Not* was first conceived as a book, a compilation of 150 such city names.

08. **EDITIONS AND PRINTED MATTER** (various dimensions), 2006–2020

Cycle VARIOUS

Slavs and Tatars began as an informal reading group in 2006. In the first years of their practice, the artists’ production was limited to the two dimensions of the printed page: re-publishing material that was out of print, translating texts unavailable in another language, etc. As their practice has proliferated to include the other media featured in the exhibition at the Villa Arson – such as sculpture, installations, audio-works, or lecture-performances – the role of print has continued to play an important role in the artists’ activities. Slavs and Tatars see in print a platform for discourse, but also a democratic spirit. Printed matter is accessible compared to the exclusivity of (fine) art; it can be taken on the train, read over breakfast, or passed along to a friend.
**ROOM 3**

**LOVE LETTERS**, 2013–2014, woollen yarn, 250 × 250 cm (each)

Cycle LANGUAGE ARTS

Ten hand tufted carpets, each equal in dimension, investigate language as a source of political, metaphysical, even sexual emancipation. By revising original drawings by Vladimir Mayakovsky, Love Letters address the very charged if slippery issue of language through one of its best-known, if conflicted, champions. The tongue’s *yin* and *yang*, its bipolar disorder - as a source of man’s greatest achievements and yet a cause of his tragic failures - finds its appropriate poster-boy in the figure of Mayakovsky, whose Futurist experiments with language and embrace of the nascent Bolshevik regime resulted in some of the most important works of avant-garde art and literature. Yet his own instrumentalization of language for the purposes of the revolution eventually led to his own disillusionment and suicide, a watershed moment widely believed to mark the beginning of Stalin’s terror.

Soon after the 1917 Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks found themselves inheritors to a Russian empire with sizeable territories of largely Muslim, Turkic-speaking populations. Lenin believed the Revolution of the East – that is, the political emancipation of Muslims through modernization – was transmitted through the Latinization (or more precisely the Romanization) of their Arabicscript languages. Around the same time, in 1928, Atatürk initiated his language revolution for many of the same reasons as Lenin: to cut Turks off from their Islamic heritage and usher them into modernity. The march of alphabets has always accompanied that of empires and religions: the Latin script along with the Roman Catholic faith, Arabic with Islam and the Caliphate, and Cyrillic with Orthodox Christianity and subsequently the USSR.

**LOVE LETTERS** No. 1, 2013, woollen yarn, 250 × 250 cm

Squeezed between policies of forced alphabet conversion, a man expires, shut between the pages of a book. The different letters represent the many failed attempts to Cyrillicize languages that were previously written in a different script.
Here the tongue – the central organ of language – has taken on the role of enemy of the state. Locked up behind bars, the tongue writhes in protest, resisting the urge to place graphemes (letters) onto phonemes (sounds). For Slavs and Tatars, the tongue – and, by extension, language – harbours the potential for multiple forms of resistance, whether it be sensual, political, or metaphysical. Letters are likened to shackles, keeping the tongue in check and placing restrictions on its movements. Alphabets impose an ordering system on the tongue, forcing it to comply with the larger programme of empire-building.

Four tongues accommodate the four phonemes (sounds) found in the Persian language that are absent from the original Arabic alphabet. Given the role of Arabic as the sacred language of Islam, these distinct phonemes – ’پ’ [p], ’چ’ [ch], ’ژ’ [zh], et ’گ’ [g] – are closely tied to Persian cultural identity, as a means to distinguish oneself within the Muslim community.

In one of his seminal essays, Roland Barthes deconstructs Balzac’s notorious novella, S/Z, about a French aristocrat who falls in love with a star of the Italian opera only to find out she is a he, that the singer is in fact a castrato. To Barthes’ binaries of he / she, revealed / concealed, homosexual / heterosexual, Slavs and Tatars add an extra one: the Arabic letters of ’ﺽ’ / ’ﻆ’, the emphatic versions of the original S/Z. Both Sides of the Tongue further highlights the artists’ investigation of language as a nexus of sensualized politics, via two letters considered highly specific to the Arabic language.
13. **HYMNS OF NO RESISTANCE**, 2010–2014, gold foil on canvas, traditional marbled paper, laser print, variable song sheets, 42 × 30 cm (each)

Cycle KIDNAPPING MOUNTAINS

**Hymns of No Resistance** features classic and cult pop songs revised to address issues of territorial dispute, language, and geopolitics within greater Eurasia. An adaptation of Michael Sembello’s *Flashdance* track ‘She’s a Maniac’ becomes ‘She’s Armenian’, replacing the struggles of an aspiring dancer with those of a diaspora Armenian. Meanwhile, ‘Young Kurds’ – a retelling of Rod Stewart’s ‘Young Turks’ – tells the story of Sherko and Shirin, a Kurdish couple on the run. ‘Stuck in Ossetia with You’ (originally ‘Stuck in the Middle with You’ by Stealers Wheel) looks at the Russo-Georgian war in 2008.

14. **LOVE LETTERS No. 4**, 2014, woollen yarn, 250 × 250 cm

A peasant woman is pictured kissing a hand – possibly genuflecting, or bending in obedience, to a figure of power. Upon closer inspection, however, there are Arabic letters hidden or camouflaged in the knuckles that are the subject of her adoration. These letters represent the inevitable loss of phonemes (sounds) when any language conversion takes place, in particular those coming from the back of the throat: the glottal ‘ع’ (ayn) and the fricative ‘غ’ (ghayn) left behind in the Romanization of Ottoman Turkish.

15. **EDITIONS AND PRINTED MATTER** (various dimensions), 2006–2020

Cycle VARIOUS

16. **LOVE ME, LOVE ME NOT** (Alger), 2020, acrylic paint on mirror reverse, aluminium frame, 85 × 60 cm
17. **REVERSE JOY** (Kha), 2012, fountain pump, pigment, water, metal bowl, acrylic paint, ceramic tiles, MDF, 80 × 240 × 240 cm

Cycle LANGUAGE ARTS

Throughout their oeuvre, Slavs and Tatars often use the term ‘metaphysical splits’ to refer to the combination or collision of two mutually exclusive or antithetical ideologies, registers, concepts within one page or space. No work perhaps better captures this idea of coincidentia oppositorum than **Reverse Joy**. Through the very simple gesture of a red pigment, the fountain brings together two ends of the spectrum: the innocent with the cynical, the naïve with the violent, through a single color red, for some a festive symbol recalling compote or kool aid, and for others the trace of blood, of martyrdom. Here, three iterations – in Hebrew, Cyrillic and Arabic alphabets – of the phoneme [kh] dance ceremoniously around the red fountain.
The Tranny Tease (pour Marcel), 2009–present, vacuum-formed plastic, acrylic paint, 64 × 91 cm (each)

Cycle VARIOUS

Transliteration, the core concept behind The Tranny Tease (pour Marcel) (2009–present), is one of the resources that Slavs and Tatars use to trick language into exposing its tacit cultural depths, clashes and semantic quandaries. Technically, transliteration refers to the transferral of words or characters from one alphabet into another, a process of paramount importance in a region where Latin, Arabic, Cyrillic and Glagolitic alphabets, among others, coincide. As the artists affirm, "the march of alphabets has always accompanied that of empires"; struggles for power are also waged in the arena of language. Through a series of playful slippages in phonetic, semantic and theological terms, the works use transliteration as a means to explore the symbolic entanglement of languages and scripts, and their elusive convergences and divergences, touching on notions such as identity politics, colonialism and faith."
18. **MADE IN GERMANY, 2015**
The renowned mark of quality was used to mock Germany’s behind-the-scenes role in the declaration of jihad or holy war, by the Ottoman minister of war, Enver Pasha (1881–1922) in 1913 devised by the Ottoman minister of the moniker using a military alphabet.

**Entente Powers during WWI.**

By the Ottoman Sultan, against the role in the declaration of jihad or holy to mock Germany’s behind-the-scenes The renowned mark of quality was used into distinct graphemes was thought for use in wartime correspondence. An early precursor to script reforms, its separation of the Arabic letters into distinct graphemes was thought to facilitate the reading and writing of Ottoman Turkish.

18. **SATURDAY, 2016**

An act or document freeing a slave, several manumissio (written on both sides of the work, in Hebrew and Greek) have been found in Crimea. According to the Hebrew bible, slaves were to be freed in the 7th year, after 6 years of labor, freed in the 7th year, aka the Saturday to the Hebrew bible, slaves were to be freed in the 7th year, after 6 years of labor, regardless of their origin, performance, profile, etc. Given the struggle of Jews throughout history, from the Exodus to pogroms to diaspora, this was a rather progressive if not generous approach to a contentious issue esp compared with their Christian and Muslim contemporaries.

18. **KWAS IST DAS, 2016**

A fermented drink made from rye, Kwas or Kvass is a traditional Slavic and Baltic drink which has of late been promoted as an indigenous response to Coca-Cola and other imported soft-drinks. The line dividing Slavic and Germanic peoples has long been a mobile one, shifting east or west as a result of wars, treaties, and migrations. Kwas ist das combines the two languages in one, offering a linguistic amalgam in lieu of conflict, one that essentially amounts to WTF.

18. **JEZESSER JEŻYK, 2014**

Jezzers jeżyk, pronounced “yowzers yewzik”, celebrates the nasal phonemes specific to the Polish language through a retro-exclamation. Unlike most other Slavic languages, the Polish language has prominent nasal phonemes – ą and ę. These letters have provided an unlikely source of self-determination and resistance in the face of pan-slavism, Russian imperialism, and other threats.

18. **HOLY BUKHARA, 2014**

A moving example of the syncretism – be it linguistic, religious, or ideological – found in Central Asia, Bukhori yeh Sharif is an homage to the Jews of Central Asia, aka Bukharan Jews, whose language (Boxori) provides an unlikely collision of Persian dialect with Hebrew script. Revising the epithet of Central Asia’s holiest city, Bukhara yeh Sharif, meaning “Holy Bukhara,” with one letter, celebrates the language and the city’s pluralist approach to Islam.

18. **DSCHIHAD, 2015**

A slippage of scripts suggests a verb, an action, and yet another meaning to the already-loaded terms of jihad and Warsaw. The past participle had and saw disarticulate the traditional signage associated respectively with a medialized term such as Jihad and a city devastated by war. The awkwardness of four consecutive consonants – to approximate the [d’z’] phoneme in German – highlights the term Dschhad as irrevocable foreign or Other.

18. **Mountains of Wit, 2014**

Горе от Ума (Gore ot Uma) is a famous 19th-century play about Moscow and Warsaw.

**Mountains of Wit**

It is rare that a title navigates so eloquently from the pristine shores of its original to the scrappier coast of its destination language: Woe from Wit definitely manages better than other attempts (The Misfortune of Being Intelligent among them). By changing the E in the original Russian title to an Ё, a quintessentially Russian letter, the title becomes Mountains of Wit and the urban premise of the original work is hijacked by a Caucasian setting equally imaginative and apposite, one which played an influential role in Griboyedov’s life and death. As the Tsar’s plenipotentiary to the Caucasus and Iran, the young playwright was tasked with enforcing the 1829 Treaty of Turkmenchay, one of a series of Caucasian territories ceded by a declining Persian Empire to a rising Russian one. And it was in Tbilissi, the capital of Transcaucasia that Griboyedov met his future wife, the young princess Nino Chavchavadze. After Griboyedov’s death at the hands of a mob in Tehran, Chavchadze became a symbol of romantic fidelity, remaining a widow for almost three decades and inscribing on his epitaph at Mtatsminda Pantheon:

**Your intelligence and work are eternal in Russian memory. But why did my love have to outlive you?**

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**ЛЮБОВЬ МОЯ**

**НО ДЛЯ ЧЕГО ПЕРЕЖИЛА ТЕЪЯ**

**ВЪ ПАМЯТИ РУССКОЙ,**

**УМЪ И ДЕЛА ТВОИ БЕЗ СМЕРТNY**

**became a symbol of romantic fidelity, remaining a widow for almost three decades and inscribing on his epitaph at Mtatsminda Pantheon:**

18. **TO BEER OR NOT TO BEER, 2014**

Those familiar with the dregs of college – also referred to as ‘frat-boy’ – humor indigenous to Anglophone countries, not to mention those holiday destinations
frequented by the aforementioned (Cancun, Amsterdam, etc.), might have encountered a short-sleeved garment of clothing emblazoned with the illustration of a beer and a question: “To beer or not to beer?”. Another specimen commonly found features the question in yet another, slightly altered, iteration: “Two beers or not two beers?” By re-writing the popular citation from William Shakespeare’s Hamlet – “To be or not to be” – these modified invocations to imbibe alcohol have squandered the existential gravitas of the original, despite centuries of clichéd usage.

To drink a beer or not to drink a beer (nay, two beers!) remains, after all, primarily a question of consumption. For To Beer or Not To Beer (2014), the artists looked to transliteration in an effort to elevate the popular back to the sublime. Normally transactional, transliteration here inches closer to the transcendent – for transcribing “To beer or not to beer” into the Arabic script, the sacred script of Islam, redeems the existential query of the original: to imbibe alcohol entails a complex web of religious, cultural if not phenomenological questions around identity, subjectivity, and faith.

18. M. COO COO 4 KUMIS, 2016

Made from fermented mare’s milk and found across Central Asia, kumis was called ‘milk-champagne’ and even ‘cosmos’ by the first European travelers to the Mongolian steppe. Not only is mare’s milk hard to come by, its usage as a cure for mystery illnesses further preferred the drink a cult status in the 19th and 20th centuries.

18. N. ODHYT, 2014

A nod to Courbet’s “L’Origine du monde”, OdHyT plays on the Polish word for ‘rectum’ which reads literally as “from being.” Meaning ‘from’ in several Slavic languages, the preposition ot used to exist in old Church Slavonic as a Cyrillic letter unto itself: ﾊ．

18. O. ωXXX, 2014

Meaning ‘oops’, ωXXX (or ‘okh’) is an example of linguistic and cultural transmission, with the great omega’s sassy side highlighted by the proximity of a gang of X, for a particularly attractive alliterative stuttering. Not by coincidence, the X is a Cyrillic and Greek letter for Slavs and Tatars’ signature guttural phoneme, [kh], and subject of their 2012 publication Khhhhhhh.
One of the principal arguments of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk for changing the Turkish script from Arabic to Latin was the abundance of vowels (eight in all) in the Turkish language that could not be appropriately accommodated by the three vowels of the Arabic alphabet. The words pictured here, ωXXX! (meaning ‘oops!’ in Greek) and ööps! (meaning ‘kiss’ in Turkish) are purposefully and playfully punned against one another, poking fun at how the discourse of sexuality – power, submission, domination, and resistance – is surprisingly similar to that of language politics.

Instead of a bolt of lightning coming down from the heavens, God is pictured taming a wild tongue that dares to speak the Turkish words Ezan Çılgınları. This term was used to refer to those who defied the authorities’ enforcement of the Turkish ezan (call to prayer). Enforced from 1932 to 1950, the call to prayer was translated from Arabic to Turkish during the Turkish language revolution, known as dil devrimi. As part of this controversial policy, even the word ‘Allah’ was translated to ‘tanrı’ – a powerful display of language’s ability to cut to the core of one’s faith and identity.

The nose’s role in language is routinely overlooked, often overshadowed by the tongue and throat. Here, a series of nasal letters from Arabic, Cyrillic, and Latin that have been lost to language conversion are shown falling by the side of the road. Like breadcrumbs, the trail of forgotten letters maps out the course of modernization, which is synonymous with progress – always moving forward while leaving a path of upheaval and change in its wake.
22. **PRAYWAY**, 2012, silk and wool carpet, MDF, steel, neon light, 50 × 390 × 280 cm

A collision of the sacred and the profane – the rahlé, the traditional book stand used for holy books, and the takht (or river-bed), vernacular seating areas used in tea-salons – PrayWay is part installation, part sculpture, part seating area, and all polemical platform.

23. **KITAB KEBAB** (*Fatima et Marie*), 2020, books, metal kebab skewer, 29 × 44 × 40 cm

A traditional kebab skewer pierces through a selection of books, suggesting not only an analytical but also an affective and digestive relationship with text. The mashed-up reading list proposes a lateral or transversal approach to knowledge, an attempt to combine the rigor of the more traditionally-inclined vertical forms of knowledge with a range of the horizontal.
Throughout the history of language reform – be it in the USSR or Turkey, Yugoslavia or Iran – it is rarely qualified linguists who are tasked with the delicate job of revising languages or scripts. Instead, it is politicians, nationalists, and amateur philologists who dare alter the complex, living system that is language. Here, a peasant woman is run over by the force of institutional change, another casualty of language modernization and progress.

Kurumumsu (meaning ‘institution-ish’) skewers the organization in Turkey responsible for the Romanization project: Türk Dil Kurumu (the Turkish Language Institute).

A decision was made in 1939 to change their alphabets once again, this time to Cyrillic. When these languages were Cyrillicized, each was done so in a slightly different manner. Thus, the various languages could not be mutually intelligible, an example of the linguistic equivalent of ‘divide and conquer’. The figure here cries out in pain and alliterative exhaustion, exclaiming the same sound – [dj] as in ‘John’ – written five different ways.

A brunette rahlé (or book-stand used for holy books) offers another take on the seduction of texts and exegesis.
The multichannel audio work *Lektor* (speculum linguarum) from 2014 contains text drawn from the 11th-century Turkic mirror for princes *Kutadgu Bilig* (Wisdom of Royal Glory), read in its original Uighur with several voice-overs. The selection of translations (German, Turkish, Polish, Arabic, Scots Gaelic, Aboriginal Jagera, Flemish, Danish, Spanish, Persian and French) for the voiceover or ‘dub’ traces the exhibition history of the piece through the languages of venues. Used for films in Poland and Russia, and elsewhere only for news segments, the simultaneous playback of two distinct audio tracks, a technique known as Gavrilov translation, makes for a disruptive experience, touching on issues of legibility, authenticity, and language as a form of hospitality.

Written in the 11th-century in Kashgar, in what is known today as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in western China, *Kutadgu Bilig* is a cornerstone of Turkic literature. The importance of the work is difficult to overstate: it is to Turkic languages what Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh* is to Persian, *Beowulf* to English, or *Nibelungen* to German.

In rhymed couplets (*masnavi*), four main characters personify four abstract principles: Justice, Fortune, Intellect, and Contentment. Their debates serve as a rare example of Socratic dialogue in a Muslim tradition known for its theological emphasis on the One. A central discussion takes place between a Sufi dervish and a vizier to the king, whose names are Wide Awake and Highly Praised — addressing the balance between seclusion and society, spirit and state, echoes of which we continue to find in the US, Europe, and the Middle East today. The *Kutadgu Bilig* sited Turkic literature and ideas of statecraft by looking to the east, placing them on an equal footing with their counterparts in the Arabic and Persian traditions.
Disembodied lips allow speech from elsewhere from other organs be it the stomach (ventriloquism) or the genitals. Gut of Gab is an homage to Fatemeh Baraghani (also known as Qorrat al Ayn or ‘Consolation of the Eyes’), an important poetess, theologian and early pioneer of feminism in Iran.

“At the turn of the 20th-century, philology and orientalism jumped into bed with the Kaiser, and a bastard child was born in the form of El-Dschihad, a biweekly publication founded by Max von Oppenheim. Born of Germany’s late arrival to colonialism, El-Dschihad aimed to stoke anti-imperial sentiment in territories belonging to the Entente Powers during the First World War. Oppenheim and Enver Pasha, the Ottoman war minister, had convinced the hapless Sultan Mehmed V Reshad to declare jihad on November 11, 1914. El-Dschihad’s intended audience was Muslim POWs held at a camp in Wünsdorf, outside Berlin, called Halbmondlager (half crescent camp), who would ostensibly return to the front on the side of the Central Powers or to their homelands in an effort to spread their new liberationist message. Like the paper itself, the camp was part of a propaganda effort to show Germany stood with Islam: prisoners were given particular luxuries – including recreational games, halal meat, and a custom-built mosque, the first functioning on German soil.

We were first struck by the spelling of Dschihad in German. In the Duden (the German equivalent of the Oxford English Dictionary), we searched for other words that start with ‘dsch’. It reads like a Saturday Night Live sketch of orientalist terms: Dschingis Khan, Dschellaba, Dschungelfieber. The awkwardness of four consecutive consonants – to approximate the [d͡z] phoneme not native to German – is a marker of something else, a kind of foreignness. When Germans spell ‘jeans’ or ‘gin and tonic’, for example, they don’t write it with a ‘dsch’. Perhaps in Dscherman, there are certain Gs that are acceptable, and others that are not. El-Dschihad was not the first, nor the last, attempt by non-Muslims to win ‘the hearts and minds’ of Muslims. Despite having socialized with two giants of Islamic Modernism – Jamaladdin al-Afghani, a philosopher and teacher at Al-Azhar University who preached pan-Islamism, and Muhammad Abduh, al-Afghani’s student and a key reformer who believed in an inclusive approach to the faith – Oppenheim made a rookie mistake: he overlooked the obvious fact that the Ottoman Sultan did not have substantive spiritual authority over Muslims. Like many others before him and since, Oppenheim’s instrumentalization of political Islam failed to take into account the heterogeneity of the Muslim world.”

Excerpt from Slavs and Tatars’ publication Wripped Scripped (Hatje Cantz, 2018)
31. A. **REVERSE DSCHIHAD** (Urdu), 2015, screenprint, polished steel, 244 × 122 cm
31. B. **REVERSE DSCHIHAD** (Tatar), 2015, screenprint, polished steel, 244 × 122 cm
31. C. **REVERSE DSCHIHAD** (Arabic), 2015, screenprint, polished steel, 244 × 122 cm
31. D. **REVERSE DSCHIHAD** (Russian), 2015, screenprint, polished steel, 244 × 122 cm
32. **LOVE LETTERS** No. 10, 2014, woollen yarn, 250 × 250 cm

Here a man looks into the mirror and sees the letter ‘Җ’ from the Abkhaz language. Pronounced with the lips, this letter has since come to be used as shorthand for the word ‘пиздец’ (pizdéc), the Russian equivalent of ‘fuck’. The Abkhaz alphabet has an incredibly convoluted past, following the twists and turns of Russia’s imperial conquests, resulting in nearly fifty-seven letters today.

33. **TRIANGULATION**, 2011, concrete, paint, 27 × 24 × 23 cm (each)

Cycle NOT MOSCOW NOT MECCA

Stalinist policy towards Central Asia – ‘To Moscow Not Mecca’ – aimed at replacing Islam with communism as the chief belief system of the local Muslim population of the Soviet Union. **Triangulation** chooses not to choose between the two major narratives of the 20th and 21st-centuries, that is, revolutionary communism or political Islam. Instead, each of the road markers brings together a resolutely secular city with one known for its sacred importance.

33. A. **TRIANGULATION** (Not Juan-les-Pins Not Jerusalem), 2011, concrete, paint, 27 × 24 × 23 cm

33. B. **TRIANGULATION** (Not Detroit Not Damascus), 2011, concrete, paint, 27 × 24 × 23 cm

33. C. **TRIANGULATION** (Not Maui Not Medina), 2011, concrete, paint 27 × 24 × 23 cm

33. D. **TRIANGULATION** (Not Bahamas Not Baghdad), 2011, concrete, paint, 27 × 24 × 23 cm
34. **LONG LIVE THE SYNCRETICS,** 2012, steel, paint, silk ikat, 150 × 320 × 100 cm

Modeled after the branch of a mulberry tree whose fruits are white or black, *Long Live the Syncretics* delicately dangles ribbons as a nod to the progressive, syncretic approach to Islam in Central Asia, where Buddhist, Hindu, and pantheist rituals are incorporated into the belief system.

35. **DUNJAS, DONYAS, DINIAS,** fibreglass, steel, 52 × 30 × 25 cm

Long-standing Serbo-Turkic enmities make peace in *Dunjas, Donyas, and Dinias*. The word for the fruit “quince” in Serbian – *dunja* – is a common name given to women as a symbol of beauty, and happens to be the homonym of the word “world” in Arabic and Turkic: *donya*.

36. **HOW-LESS,** 2012, needlework, silk, cotton, 200 × 120 cm

“You Know of the How / I Know of the How-less” is attributed to Rabia al-Adawwiya, a Muslim saint and Sufi mystic. Considered to be one of the first female Sufis, she is credited with pioneering the notion of Divine Love central to the veneration of God in Sufism.
37. **THE DEAR FOR THE DEAR.** 2012, wood etching, needlework silk and cotton cloth, wooden rahle, 30 × 40 × 15 cm

According to an Egyptian proverb, “life is like a cucumber: one day in your hand, the next day in your ass”.

38. **HANGING LOW.** 2012, fibreglass, foam, steel, 110 × 140 cm

Via the puckered lips of someone who smiles backwards, Hanging Low pays homage to the conflicted relationship to memory, to pluralism, and to joy through mourning. Józef Wittlin’s *Mój Lwów (My Lvov)* laments the loss of the plural identities, languages, and affinities in a city that was once Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, and German, and warns of memory’s selective, if unstated, agenda. He speaks of the strange mix of the sublime and the street urchin, of wisdom and cretinism, of poetry and the mundane – as a special indefinable taste: bittersweet.

39. **THE FRAGRANT CONCUBINE.** 2012, handblown glass, bulbs and canvas cables, with electric fixtures, dimensions variable

Xian Fe (Iparhan), a girl kidnapped from Uyghuristan – China’s westernmost, Muslim region – and forced to become a consort in the Qianlong court, requested hami melons to be delivered to her chambers to remind her of home. Xian Fe never gave up her chastity and was murdered by the Empress Dowager for it. The hami melon lights remain on in honor of her resistance, in effect “never giving up the fruit.”
COLOPHON
Exhibition guide accompanying Slavs and Tatars’ Régions d’être at the Villa Arson in Nice.
Translation: Claire Bernstein and the artists
Authors: Éric Mangion and the artists
Graphic design: Stan de Natris with Aurélie Defez and Amine Boulkroun
Exhibition design: Stan de Natris, Slavs and Tatars
Printing: Perfectmix, Nice
Edition: 500 copies (En)
The program Translate me over a River is supported by the Izolyatsia Foundation (Ukraine). (izolyatsia.org)
List of contributors: Omar Berrada, Lia Dostlieva, Leah Feldman, Borna Izadpanah, Alevtina Kakhidze, Ewa Kaniwskas-Gedroyc, Michael Kurzwelly, Olga Onuch, Katja Petrovska
Thanks to: Amine Boulkroun, Valérie Castan, Aurélie Defez, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler (Berlin), Pablo Larios, Laura López, Simon Nicolas, Raster Gallery (Warsaw), Tanya Bonakdar Gallery (New York) et The Third Line (Dubai)

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20 avenue Stephen Liégeard, Nice
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Open every day except Tuesday from 2 to 6 pm.
Closed on 24, 25, 31.12.2020 and 01.01.2021
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All art works courtesy of the artists and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler (Berlin) gallery unless otherwise indicated.

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The Villa Arson is a public establishment of the Ministry of Culture and member of Université Côte d’Azur - UCA.
It is supported by the Région SUD - Provence-Alpes Côte d’Azur, the Département of Alpes-Maritimes and the City of Nice.
La Villa Arson is part of BOTOX[S] and Plein Sud networks.

All Slavs and Tatars’ publications are free to download on: slavsandtatars.com/printed-matter