Performative Knowledge and *Friendship of Nations*: The Practice of Reading and Being Together in the Work of Slavs and Tatars Collective

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Abstract

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This thesis examines the work of Slavs and Tatars art collective—particularly its *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz* (2009–2017) cycle of work. The cycle takes on the history of Poland and Iran, specifically the countries' civil and revolutionary movements of the 20th and 21st centuries, and produces new interpretations of these conjoined narratives. *Friendship of Nations* includes a range of artistic outputs: craft objects, banners, lectures, print matter, and readings rooms. The thesis focuses closely on questions of reading collectively; the reading room structure *RiverBed* (2011) and the newspaper-like publication *79.89.09*. (2011) are considered in their historical and relational contexts, and analyzed as spaces that engage new modes of reading sociability and cultivate distinct publics. Drawing on Michael Warner's theory of counterpublic social formations, I argue that Slavs and Tatars tap into a social imaginary that is in opposition to dominant ideological narratives of strictly national belonging or stranger fetishism. The thesis also examines how Slavs and Tatars emulate and transform the craft traditions of Poland and Iran, creating new hybrid objects that become mediators of shared experience and intercultural dialogue within an exhibition space, as seen on the examples of *Solidarność Pająk Studies* (2010–2016) and *Friendship of Nations* (2011) series. I address how this re-reading of history and the process of envisioning new, non-Western-centric interpretations constitutes the world-making function of Slavs and Tatars' art practice. The productive potential of their counterpublic social spaces and intercultural objects go beyond commonplace notions of shared identity, opening up a cosmopolitan and transnational view of the world.

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Introduction

"A dervish once said: between Western Alienation and Eastern Submission I'll take: *a nap* / *a fag* / *a coke* / *a Hermes bag*, etc."[1] Such are the words that can be found on page ten of a newspaper publication, authored by the artist collective Slavs and Tatars, that waits for its reader in an art gallery, on a bed-like platform covered in Afghan rugs. But what of the in-between where the dervish finds himself and what possible promise does it hold? In situating itself in the middle—or "choosing not to choose," as the header for this newspaper section notes—the collective renegotiates commonly perceived binaries (such as the opposition of East and West) with a playful and even absurdist gesture that can be described as resolute surrender. To surrender in this case is to listen—or rather read—more intently to the stories that reconsider these binaries and embrace a multitude of knowledge in all its forms and articulations. With the work of Slavs and Tatars as a case study, my thesis examines how the practice of reading together raises questions about audience formation and engagement, multicultural exchange, and ethics of hospitality as a tool for imaginative world-making.

This thesis focuses on the collective's second cycle of work, named *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz* (2009–2017), which includes a diverse collection of forms. There are multimedia sculptural objects and installations, such as public works *Monobrow Manifesto* (2010–11) balloon and *Reverse Joy* (2012) fountains, the eponymous series of textile banners *Friendship of Nations* (2011) (fig. 1) and other series based on the reworking of craft and traditional folklore objects; two lecture-performances—*Reverse Joy* (2012) and *79.89.09* (2009); the latter of the performances has been turned into a newspaper-like publication *79.89.09*. (2011) (fig. 2), which then was included in the final book publication (2013) of the same title as the cycle, along with other texts authored by the collective and invited contributors (fig. 3). In particular, I look at the *79.89.09*. publication, the "reading room" space *Dear 1979, Meet 1989* (2011), and two series of visual objects, *Friendship of Nations* and *Solidarność Pająk Studies*

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[1] Slavs and Tatars, *79.89.09*., ed. Gavin Everall and Jane Rolo, 2nd. ed. (London: Book Works, 2011), 10. Slavs and Tatars must be invoking the figure of the dervish as a follower of Sufi Islam, who is, ironically, ascetic in character; the dervish order is most prominent in Turkey, the country which is often seen as "the bridge" between Europe and Middle East and Asia due to its geographic position. For more information on the dervish philosophy and its development, see Mansour Shaki and Hamid Algar, "Darvīš," *Encyclopædia Iranica* 7/1 (London: Routledge, 1994), available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/darvis/, last updated November 18, 2011.

(2010–2016), as exemplary studies for how the collective creates new forms of relation through shared experience and knowledge.

Slavs and Tatars is an art collective that self-describes as international and anonymous. Anyone who has come across the group is familiar with the following words: "Slavs and Tatars is a faction of polemics and intimacies devoted to an area east of the former Berlin Wall and west of the Great Wall of China known as Eurasia."[2] In fact, these words follow the group everywhere it goes, and feature in all of the publications by and about the collective, promotional material for its exhibitions, and artist introductions—acting as a short artist statement. The group was co-founded by two individuals: Payam Sharifi, who is an Iranian-American writer and artist, and Kasia Korczak, a Polish artist.[3] The pair first convened as a book club, reading rare literature and out-of-print publications, and started their work as Slavs and Tatars in 2006.[4] Today, the collective is based in Berlin, and its members regularly travel throughout the Eurasian continent to conduct their research. The anonymous status of the collective mainly expresses itself in the individual artists' reluctance to use their personal identities and experiences; instead, they define Slavs and Tatars as its own entity and prioritize that collective identity in publications or interviews.

Slavs and Tatars' core tenet of being "a faction of polemics and intimacies" renders the group's activities as expressly political and confrontational, but at the same time as a hopeful promise of something personal and relational with its "intimacies." The collective's name itself combines, rather paradoxically, a national specificity and a cultural nuance with a global and unifying gesture that brings together two vast and diverse groups of peoples—those of Slavs and Tatars. The geographical region in question spans thousands of kilometres, hundreds of ethnic groups, dozens of nations, and millennia of histories. The collective attempts to bring forward an idea of solidarity and collectivity to these cultural groups by reconsidering their shared histories and socio-political positioning in the world—a reconsideration of the term "Eurasia" and its productive potential. This is done through focusing on distinct and sometimes trivial elements of

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[2] Slavs and Tatars, artist website, "About," Slavs and Tatars, accessed December 18, 2018, https://slavsandtatars.com/about/.

[3] Payam Sharifi was born in 1976 in Austin, Texas; Kasia Korczak is from Łódź, Poland, born in 1976.

[4] "Slavs and Tatars," Culture.pl, Adam Mickiewicz Institute, accessed June 1, 2019, https://culture.pl/en/artist/slavs-and-tatars/.

history and lived experience in order to get to the underlying connections, for example, by looking at the sound [kh] which exists in a multitude of Eurasia's languages or even the practice of fermentation and pickling, widespread in many cultures but each with its particularities and connotations.[5]

In a 2012 video interview for a Polish web-portal Culture.pl, Payam Sharifi speaks of Slavs and Tatars' thematic dedication to Eurasia with a sense of resolve in his voice: "We've devoted ourselves to this region for the next forty, fifty years… And while we're exploring certain themes or topics within this region, we're sharing it with people around us."[6] With Sharifi's face outside of the frame of the video (for the sake of anonymity that the collective was following more strictly in its earlier days), his words further position Slavs and Tatars as a project that has a very specific purpose in mind—making it a collective on a mission.

This group identity of the collective carries distinct connotations within the artistic realm. Multiple art critics and historians have identified a strong turn toward the collective and collaborative during the 1990s, particularly as an "interest in alternative ways of producing knowledge" and new modes of self-organization.[7] The collaborative turn usually refers to art that is socially-oriented, community-based, and has activist character. In the case of Slavs and Tatars, their artistic practice involves collaboration between the members of the collective, leaving their

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[5] See the collective's *Language Arts* (2012–2016) and *Pickle Politics* (2015–) work cycles respectively.

[6] "Slavs and Tatars on the Links between East and West," Culture.pl, Adam Mickiewicz Institute, video, 3:32, accessed October 25, 2018, https://culture.pl/en/video/slavs-and-tatars-on-the-links-between-east-and-west-video-interview/.

[7] Maria Lind, "The Collaborative Turn," in *Taking Matter Into Common Hands: On Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices,* ed. Johanna Billing, Maria Lind, and Lars Nilsson (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007), 16. Theorizations of such collaborative work include new genre art by Suzanne Lacy, dialogical art by Grant Kester, relational aesthetics by Nicolas Bourriaud and many more—which primarily focus on projects that involve a great degree of collaboration with their audiences during the creation process of the work. Of course, collaboration as such is not a new concept in visual art practices; examples span from artistic guilds to hierarchical studio productions, to modernist group projects such as Surrealist games, Constructivist theater, or Fluxus. For a more full discussion on the topic of collaborative practices, their history, and political implications, see Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, ed., *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007) and John Roberts and Stephen Wright, ed.,"Art and Collaboration," special issue, *Third Text* 18, no. 6 (2004). Claire Bishop's volume *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (New York: Verso, 2012) also provides an in-depth historical and theoretical analysis to participatory art.

audiences on a receiving end of the finished works.[8] The ideas of community-building and collective action, which are closely tied with collaborative forms of art production, continue to be relevant to the Slavs and Tatars' practice in a somewhat indirect way—via their mode of address toward audiences, which I will be examining closely throughout my thesis.

Internationalism is another significant attribute of the Slavs and Tatars collective due to its self-positioning within Eurasia.[9] The contemporary art world at large has become more and more globalized, and its international nature expresses itself most prominently in the form of omnipresent biennials that often get criticized for having a Western focus and bias. But the ubiquity of the biennial can contrastingly be explained by the establishment of separate contemporary art worlds unique to their respective regions—which have developed independently from and contrary to the idea of the single, Western-centric art world.[10] Such remapping of cultural production is largely done, according to curator and media theorist Peter Weibel, through a rewriting methodology: rewriting histories from local perspectives against hegemonic grand narratives, making the gesture anti-exclusionary and anti-colonial in its essence.[11] When discussing contemporary artworks within the internationalized world, it is thus important to take into consideration each geopolitical context to avoid generalizations and misattributions of power.

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[8] It should be noted that the collective takes on the help of others throughout their work process: for example, writer and artist Mara Goldwyn is their primary research assistant, who often does library research and then contributes to the collective's publications. Additionally, Belgian artist and graphic designer Boy Vereecken and English-American writer and artist Victoria Camblin have been credited as the third and fourth members of the collective at various points throughout the years. Sharifi and Korczak are the two core members of Slavs and Tatars.

[9] For the purposes of this introduction, I am using the term "international" to describe how the collective's work fits into the context of what is known as the international art world, as well as echoing the earlier description of the collective being "international and anonymous" due to the members' origins. However, the practice of Slavs and Tatars can be understood as "transnational" as well, considering the breadth of "Eurasian" histories that the collective works with, and how these histories and ideas more often than not go beyond and transcend national boundaries.

[10] Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg, "From Art World to Art Worlds," in *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, ed. Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel (Karlsruhe: ZKM, 2013), 28.

[11] Peter Weibel, "Globalization and Contemporary Art," in Belting, Buddensieg, Weibel, *The Global Contemporary*, 27.

In his contribution to a book-length monograph on Slavs and Tatars, an essay titled "On Aggregators," art historian and theorist David Joselit proposes a new historical framework for contemporary art analysis and proposes the term "international style" to describe a now globally prominent "style" of art that has its roots in conceptualism and works at the levels of a proposition, a document, and a ready-made.[12] Joselit conceives of "the aggregator" as a specific dialect of the international style and brings in Slavs and Tatars' work as an example of an aggregative practice that engages knowledge and histories through the conceptual mechanics of ready-mades and appropriation. Through re-enactment, relocation and recollection of particular histories, Slavs and Tatars "map the plasticity of contemporary geopolitics" and "question the sovereignty of things."[13] Such "plasticizing" and questioning are part of critical approaches in art which go against top-down globalization and instead work with localisms to find connections to global issues, inequities, and propositions.[14] As Indian cultural theorist Nancy Adajania writes, in going against a merely homogenizing globalization, a turn to *globalism* instead is "the audacious and positive reflection of a desire to release the cultural self towards others in a manner that bypasses dependency and embraces collaboration, thus making for a productive cosmopolitanism."[15]

Cosmopolitanism indeed proves to be useful as a lens to examine the artistic work at hand. The concept can be roughly summarized as a model for social belonging where a citizen self-identifies not with a specific culture or nation, but rather with the world at large. Many theories of cosmopolitanism exist, and have circulated for many centuries, with the first recorded cosmopolitan philosophy being the Stoicism of ancient Greece. Contemporary philosopher

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[12] David Joselit, "On Aggregators," in *Slavs and Tatars: Mouth to Mouth*, ed. Pablo Larios (London: Koenig Books, 2017), 109. The first version of this essay was published in *October* 146 (Fall 2013). Joselit acknowledges the fact that the term "international style" comes from modernist architecture history, however, he reclaims the term and its legacy for present-day use to describe the character of contemporary art; the use of the word "style" also differs from the terms "movement" or "period," suggesting a globally inclined spread and diverse adaptations of visual practices, rather than their temporal succession of one after the other. Ibid., 108.

[13] Ibid., 115.

[14] Terry Smith, "Contemporary Art: World Currents in Transition Beyond Globalization," in Belting, Buddensieg, Weibel, *The Global Contemporary*, 192.

[15] Nancy Adajania, "Time to Restage the World: Theorizing a New and Complicated Sense of Solidarity," in 2*1st Century: Art in the First Decade*, ed. Miranda Wallace (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 2010), 223.

Kwame Anthony Appiah emphasizes ideas of coexistence, pluralism of values, and ethics of responsibility for others in his interpretation of the theory. Appiah urges us to have more cross-cultural contacts and conversations: for these help to test, challenge, or, perhaps, even reinforce differences between people; nevertheless, such conversations would be productive even if they simply "help us to get used to one another."[16] Conversation here does not have to be literal and face-to-face; it can be a metaphorical and imaginative engagement with unfamiliar ideas, experiences, and places—including contact with another culture via art, literature, or any other media.[17] As it will become evident in the work of Slavs and Tatars, such imaginative engagement occurs through the texts and visual objects that the collective produces.

In contemporary art discourse, cosmopolitanism is closely tied to imagination and imaginative world-making as ways to critically assess and renegotiate contemporary realities and subjective allegiances.[18] Art historian Marsha Meskimmon, for example, links the concepts of cosmopolitanism and of being "at home in the world" with embodiment and belonging, which can be evoked by material and affective artistic gestures.[19] These gestures act as encounters through which meaning emerges; for Meskimmon, art carries the potential to enliven new imaginaries and thus create an embodied and embedded subjectivity in a viewer, producing a more active engagement with knowledge and the world.[20] Similarly, cultural studies theorist Nikos Papastergiadis proposes *aesthetic cosmopolitanism* as a new theoretical basis for contemporary art which reflects "a cosmopolitan worldview that is produced through

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[16] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), 78.

[17] Ibid., 85.

[18] That is not to say that cosmopolitanism is exempt from its common critiques. On the contrary, both Meskimmon and Papastergiadis, mentioned right after this footnote, acknowledge cosmopolitan theories' Euro-centric elitism and its utopian nature (which is often seen as naive and thus dismissed), as well as cosmopoltianisms' fixation on reason, morality, and righteousness. Instead, Meskimmon and Papastergiadis focus on the affective and imaginative qualities of cosmopolitanism and its ideals and apply them within the sphere of contemporary art.

[19] Marsha Meskimmon, *Contemporary Art and the Cosmopolitan Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2011), 8. In this book, Meskimmon examines several examples of works by women artists that draw forth the idea of home and belonging.

[20] Ibid., 10, 93. As Meskimmon writes, such a conception of subjectivity also leads to a better sense of responsibility to and response-ability within the world, thus bringing cosmopolitan imagination into the realm of ethics and politics.

aesthetics."[21] Papastergiadis's aesthetic cosmopolitanism also takes into account the affective dimensions of art, which in turn work towards a (world-making) cosmopolitan imaginary. Importantly, such art takes on a political significance "through the interplay between the creative imagination and intersubjective relations"—the latter of which emerge in these new conceptions of possible worlds.[22] Slavs and Tatars work with the concepts of world-building to create an image of a cosmopolitanly inclined world, where individual belonging is diversified beyond the already existing forms of allegiance and identification, and where new embodied subjectivities and relations arise.

Slavs and Tatars work in thematic cycles, and each cycle then manifests itself in three forms: exhibitions, lecture-performances, and publications. The variety of outcomes is ostensibly guided by the collective's desire to reach as large and diverse an audience as possible: the group's members often use the metaphor of a bazaar-like approach, where a viewer can gravitate toward a preferred "form" of knowledge on offer.[23] Through the collective's research-creation and writing, a work cycle takes on these three forms and then ends with a comprehensive book publication that comprises that cycle's research and creative output. The artists consider the book to be a final product of a cycle and even the main focus of each project: as Sharifi says, "everything else, the sculptures, the banners, the performances—all those are a premise to bring people back to the book."[24] With eight cycles of work so far, the amount of visual, printed, and other multimedia material produced by Slavs and Tatars is fairly vast. *Régions d'être* (2008–2014) was the cycle zero that established the collective's thematic grounds in its focus on the Eurasian regions; *Kidnapping Mountains* (2009–2014) was the first cycle of work and included installation for the first time, as well as produced a book as the cycle's culmination; then follows *Friendship of Nations* (2009–2017), which introduced lecture-performance to the collective's repertoire and "reading room" spaces within its exhibitions; then *Not Moscow Not Mecca* (2011–

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[21] Nikos Papastergiadis, *Cosmopolitanism and Culture* (Malden: Polity Press, 2012), 90.

[22] Ibid., 95.

[23] Magyar Fanni, "'Giving a Three-Dimensional Quality to Language' – Slavs and Tatars," artportal, published November 08, 2017, https://artportal.hu/magazin/giving-three-dimensional-quality-language-slavs-tatars/.

[24] "Slavs and Tatars on Reading as a Collective Activity," Culture.pl, Adam Mickiewicz Institute, video, 5:20, accessed October 25, 2018, https://culture.pl/en/video/slavs-and-tatars-on-reading-as-a-collective-activity-video-interview/.

2014); *Language Arts* (2012–2016); *Mirrors for Princes* (2014–2016); *Made in Germany* (2015–2018); and the most recent cycle of work *Pickle Politics* (2015–).[25] The collective's work has been exhibited in such venues as SALT Galata and Beyoğlu, Istanbul; Secession, Vienna; Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin; The Third Line gallery, Dubai; Tate Modern, London; the Museum of Modern Art, New York City; REDCAT Gallery, Los Angeles; Presentation House Gallery, North Vancouver. Slavs and Tatars participated in multiple biennials throughout the globe, including 10th Sharjah Biennial (2011) in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates; Asian Art Biennial (2013), Taichung, Taiwan; Ural Biennial of Contemporary Art (2013, 2017), Ekaterinburg, Russia; Manifesta's 10th edition in Saint Petersburg, Russia (2014); 32nd Biennial of Graphic Arts (2017), Ljubljana, Slovenia, the 2019 edition of which the collective has curated; and Venice Biennale (2013 and 2019), both times as part of the Arsenale exhibitions.

Much of Slavs and Tatars' activity exists virtually, as they have built up an active presence on online social platforms to share and promote the members' research, interests, and activities, while the collective's official website houses a comprehensive archive of its oeuvre. The collective's publications (primarily in English) are available for download, and video recordings of the lectures are provided to the online audiences—in these ways the work is made accessible in order to expand its public reach. As I began my own research, the Slavs and Tatars website became an indispensable resource, especially considering that I have not been able to see the work that is discussed in this thesis in person, since the second cycle *Friendship of Nations* has not been exhibited for several years. By engaging with the primary material online and though published works, I am positioned as a member of the virtual public (audience) created by the collective and its texts.

It must be noted that Slavs and Tatars tend to guide the interpretation of their work, primarily through their own books, which explain in detail the creative process behind each cycle.[26] This makes for a certain difficulty for a researcher seeking to navigate the collective's work according to one's own interpretations and analysis. I have tried not to excessively repeat

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[25] Each cycle's duration is based on the years of production of respective works. Visual objects and materials from a cycle get exhibited in group and solo shows even after the cycle's so-called completion; same goes for the lecture-performances, which can be performed as stand-alone events, even if most of them are thematically tied to a particular cycle.

[26] This drive is also evident in the fact that in many interviews the collective would use direct quotes from their publications to answer questions.

the collective's words throughout this thesis, but instead to engage with their presented narratives from a critical perspective. Writing about the collective's work propagates the knowledge presented by the artists, in turn embedding it into what social theorist Michael Warner calls "a cross-citational field" that encompasses many other people and texts.[27]

The *Friendship of Nations* cycle explores points of historical and cultural connections between Poland and Iran, specifically as it concerns the countries' political and cultural revolutions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.[28] The events of significance are the Iranian Revolution of 1978–79 (abolishing the pro-Western Pahlavi monarchy and becoming the Islamic Republic), Poland's *Solidarność* movement (also known as Solidarity) and the country's eventual 1989 emancipation from the communist rule of USSR-backed Polish United Workers' Party, and then the recent Iranian Green Movement of 2009 when millions of Iranians protested against the results of the year's presidential election. This is not a common historical correlation to make, but Slavs and Tatars, by creating historical amalgamations, question knowledge as a concrete set of truths and answers, thus expanding the field of possible interpretations and, ideally, mutual understandings.

Friendship of Nations as a name is an evocative concept in itself. This phrase is a particular reference to the USSR's official rhetoric of multiculturalism and its call to the unification of the world's proletariat. Also known as "fraternity of peoples," the concept had developed from the ideas of proletarian internationalism within Marxist-Leninist theory and took off in the 1920s in the Soviet Union after the unification of its multiethnic republics.[29] The internationalism itself was based on the ideals of being loyal not to the motherland or fatherland

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[27] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 95.

[28] *Friendship of Nations* was originally conceived out of a project *79.89.09* (2009), which was a commission by Berlin-based contemporary culture magazine *032c* on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The magazine contribution then turned into the Slavs and Tatars' first lecture-performance of the same name, and was eventually published in a codex form for the first time as a newspaper publication in 2011.

[29] M. T. Iovchuk and B. V. Bogdanov, "The Internationalism of MarxistLeninist Philosophy and Its Historical Path in the USSR," *Soviet Studies in Philosophy* 16, no. 4 (1978): 65.

but to the fellow working class people of the world.[30] The notion was expressed in visual culture through posters and postcards (fig. 4 *A–C*) and multiple large monuments of the same name: such as a fountain in the public park VDNKh in the heart of Moscow, Russia, and an Arch in Kiev, Ukraine. The idea had seeped into other parts of everyday life and larger infrastructure: the Peoples' Friendship University in Moscow (RUDN), one of the leading universities of USSR and Russia today, famed for its highly diverse and international student body, or even the Friendship Pipeline, the longest oil pipeline in the world, to this day spanning much of Eurasia. However, behind this heartwarming slogan lied the Soviet Union's imperialism and its response in the Cold War: bringing the Communist Bloc and fellow socialist states together to oppose "the West."

Slavs and Tatars adopt this troubled narrative trope of propaganda and instead endeavour to reclaim its idea of intercultural friendship.[31] Although the sentiment of friendship might seem idealized and utopian, the collective embraces it fully, overtly stating that even if their attempts are bound to fail, it is nevertheless necessary to try. I find this to be one of the most compelling aspects of "Slavs and Tatars" as an artistic project. The appeal to the imaginative and the world-building function of art presents its viewers with a hopeful approach to complex and difficult histories—which are revisited, reinterpreted, and maybe even redeemed—leading to an alternative to the contemporary ethos of estrangement and alienation. Throughout the *Friendship of Nations* cycle, Slavs and Tatars bring up the revolutionary and devotional histories of Poland and Iran and approach this knowledge through the logic of hospitality and gift-giving.

In this thesis, I examine how the collective uses this logic in discursive and material ways to create both a shared public space and a notion of a distinct public for its audiences. The first section considers the practice of shared reading and how the "reading room" RiverBed structure,

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[30] David Brandenberger, "Proletarian Internationalism, 'Soviet Patriotism' and the Rise of Russocentric Statism During the Stalinist 1930s," *Left History* 6, no. 2 (1999): 84–85. Brandenberger argues that Lenin's original concept of proletarian internationalism had been replaced by ethnocentric nationalism (in particular, russocentrism) in the 1930s under Stalin's rule, where loyalty to the Soviet motherland became fundamental. The logic of international help toward allied states, however, remained to be the official foreign affairs ideology. As seen in a speech delivered before the General Assembly of the United States in 1973 by Andrey Gromyko, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR at the time: "Peace and friendship among nations have always been the motto of Soviet foreign policy and its invariable goal. […] It is determined by the very nature of our social system." See: Andrei A. Gromyko, "Peace and Friendship among Nations: Soviet American Agreements," *Vital Speeches of the Day* 40, no. 1 (1973): 9.

[31] Slavs and Tatars, *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz*, ed. Mara Goldwyn, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Book Works, 2017), 17.

created for the cycle's exhibitions, cultivates new modes of sociability. My analysis is guided by public sphere theory, specifically Michael Warner's idea that publics and counterpublics as social formations hold a productive potential: to make space for new subjectivities and world imaginaries. In the second section, two series of works—*Solidarność Pająk Studies* and *Friendship of Nations*—are analyzed as case studies of the collective's approach to craft, cultural self-determination, and gift-giving being a way to share experience and knowledge. I extend my argument on the (counter)public to also address Sara Ahmed's encounter theory in which she proposes a mode of communicative ethics to oppose the disposition towards stranger-ness in present-day social politics. With it, I demonstrate how the material objects within these two series by Slavs and Tatars act as mediators for new forms of belonging.

I approach the given works from a methodological position based on the performative, as it is described by art historian Dorothea von Hantelmann. Von Hantelmann proposes this approach to recognize both a situational and relational effect that an artwork produces "in a given spatial and discursive context [and] in relation to a viewer or a public," respectively.[32] The following sections will provide a historical and social context to the objects analyzed, as well as a consideration of how these objects perform new realities in relation to various audiences. I thus consider Slavs and Tatars' work of re-telling histories as "performative knowledge"—due to a variety of forms it takes on and its ways of engaging the social imaginary by creating situational experiences.

Section 1. Reading collectively—the making of publics

Slavs and Tatars' practice, as a whole, can be seen as a love affair with books and reading since the collective originally came together as a book club. For the first several years of the collective's life, it produced printed matter exclusively, then branching out to sculpture,

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[32] Dorothea von Hantelmann, "The Experiential Turn," Walker Art Center, accessed June 25, 2019, https://walkerart.org/collections/publications/performativity/experiential-turn/. Von Hantelmann uses this approach to describe a shift in thinking about art: from depiction and representational function done by an artwork to its reality-producing function and relationality to its audiences. "Performative," then, is not a category of (contemporary) art, since every artwork is performative in the fact of producing meaning and realities.

installation, and lecture-performance since 2009.[33] Small edition publications, poster series, and even T-shirts with custom prints were the primary media; all were text-based and used language in unexpected, humorous, and affective ways.[34] In their early interviews, the collective's members speak of their aspiration to embrace various methods of distribution for their prints and publications, beyond an art gallery and its bookstore, imagining them being available to the public at regular shops and airport stands.[35] However, as their work has developed into the three-fold practice of exhibition–lecture–publication that it is today, it seems that the Slavs and Tatars project acts primarily within the confines of art institutions, significantly limiting the collective's scope of reach for its audience. Nevertheless, the collective's textual work takes on a primary role in reaching out to and directly engaging its audiences: from the distribution of their publications within exhibitions, bookshops, and online, to the construction of shared reading spaces. In this section, I will consider this in detail and draw out how Slavs and Tatars use their publications to create a sense of a distinct public by employing the concept of collective reading. I specifically focus on the group's RiverBed reading space, as part of *Dear 1979, Meet 1989* installation, and its *79.89.09*. publication, both primarily featured in the exhibitions of the *Friendship of Nations* years.

Here, art historian Claire Bishop's writing must be mentioned, particularly her influential volume *Artificial Hells* on the history and analysis of participatory contemporary art—since the practice of Slavs and Tatars can be characterized as "participatory" by way of its publishing and readership-constituting activity. For Bishop, the aesthetic aspect and the "autonomous realm of experience" that it engages for its viewer are inseparable from a work's participatory nature, and

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[33] "Slavs and Tatars on Reading as a Collective Activity," Culture.pl; Katerina Polozhentseva, "Пайям Шарифи [Payam Sharifi]," Look At Me, published April 13, 2009, http://www.lookatme.ru/flow/posts/art-radar/64045-payam-sharif/; Slavs and Tatars, artist website, "Lectures," Slavs and Tatars, accessed March 12, 2019, https://slavsandtatars.com/lectures/. *Kidnapping Mountains*, a 2009 show at Netwerk Center for Contemporary Art in Aalst, Belgium, was the collective's first to feature 3D objects.

[34] Examples of such work are *Drafting Defeat: 10th century Roadmaps, 21st century Disasters* (2007) publication, *Wrong and Strong* (2005) poster series, featuring slogans such as "It is of utmost importance we repeat our mistakes as a reminder to the future generations of the depths of our stupidity," and *Les Antimodernes* (2005) t-shirts, inspired by Antoine Companion's book of the same year *Les Antimodernes: de Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes*. The poster series and the t-shirts were being sold at the now-closed Parisian concept store Colette.

[35] Ingrid Chu, "Rebuilding the Pantheon," *fillip* 8 (Fall 2008), accessed May 2, 2019, https://fillip.ca/content/rebuilding-the-pantheon/; Polozhentseva, "Пайям Шарифи [Payam Sharifi]."

thus the work needs to be examined fully, beyond its seeming notion of "goodness" that is reflected in the idea of democratic participation.[36] Additionally, the simple binary of active vs. passive participation and spectatorship is shown to be insufficient for such an analysis, as the relationships that are produced within or due to an artwork are inevitably more complex.[37] I will strive to follow this insight in my analysis of the collective's practice, its visual forms, and in theorizing the bonds that get created in the process.

The act of publishing can be considered as its own form of artistic practice, as argued by comparative literature scholar Annette Gilbert and others in her recent edited volume. A publication becomes a site of action: a site implicated in the processes of production and distribution by those responsible for it, and a site where its text interacts with its reader, where the means of this interaction are in part predetermined by the formal and editorial choices made by the makers.[38] Slavs and Tatars are writers and primary editors to their publications (occasionally including entries by invited authors) and are responsible for the books' graphic design and layout; the books are produced by various publishing houses that focus on artist editions, largely with the support from institutions that show a respective cycle's exhibition.[39] After their publication, the collective makes its books available online on their website, where they can be downloaded for free. The readily available format speaks to the dimensions of accessibility and usability of a publication as a source of information. The digital form, even if

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[36] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (New York: Verso, 2012), 40. Bishop also focuses on pedagogical notions in contemporary art in the last chapter; this "educational turn" often expresses itself in the form of artists giving workshops, lectures, performances, publishing books, constructing reading rooms, etc. She writes of such projects: "this art must tread the fine line of a dual horizon—faced towards the social field but also towards art itself, addressing both its immediate participants and subsequent audiences. It needs to be successful within both art *and* the social field, but ideally also testing and revising the criteria we apply to both domains." Ibid., 241, 274. Of course, I am not trying to conflate Slavs and Tatars with a school-like enterprise, nor to exaggerate the social significance of their project within the "life" component of the "art and life" equation. Rather, I seek to identify the pedagogical tropes within the forms of their practice and methods of reaching their audiences, the limits in doing so, and the potential towards both artistic and social realms, especially considering the longevity and efficacy of their art's reach through books and the reading process.

[37] Ibid., 38.

[38] Annette Gilbert, introduction to *Publishing as Artistic Practice*, ed. Annette Gilbert (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 20.

[39] Such as the UK publishing house Book Works, responsible for both editions of *Friendship of Nations* final publication, which was first published with the support of Sharjah Art Foundation and Raster Gallery (Warsaw).

less sensorially engaging than its physical counterpart, makes the text highly "workable:" searchable, ready to be referenced, highlighted, copy-pasted, and shared further.[40] Alessandro Ludovico, a researcher, educator and magazine editor, points out this particularity of a digital text in his essay "The Social Sense of Print." Ludovico positions this form as a potential new frontier for knowledge distribution, where anyone with the means to store, collect, and share texts should accept the responsibility to do so—to archive one's "own cultural history."[41] On a collective and societal level, such acts can lead to a reimagining of our relationship to knowledge at large, making it accessible beyond libraries, educational institutions, and even copyright.[42] The collective's publications are already heavily referential in their cross-referencing and citation of dozens of texts, with neatly organized bibliographies included at the end of each book—an act of generosity for a curious reader or researcher and a conscious placement of the resulting texts into existing discursive fields that is done by the artists.

Reading as a mode of engagement recurs within the Slavs and Tatars' exhibitions. In every major show, there is a "reading room" in the form of a sitting platform—where visitors can refer to the group's own publications and their research material. These spaces anticipate a collective form of readership as the platforms are built to accommodate several readers at once. This reveals the group's methodology and its alternative approach to participation and pedagogy: through the different entry-points of an exhibition, lecture-performance, and publication, the narratives presented in each cycle continuously unravel through acts of reading, re-reading, translation, and mistranslation—exemplifying a continuous, indirect and almost roundabout approach to learning. The collective encourages its audience to partake in this process: not by teaching the viewer, but rather by extending an invitation to interpret and learn together.

To provide a context for the Slavs and Tatars' reading rooms, it is useful to review the history of reading in the West, which reveals that the practice has deep roots in oral tradition and thus in collective ways of life. The practice of reading together in familial, casual, professional or public environments has existed since the conception of writing systems. Comparative literature scholar Karin Littau suggests that reading aloud and for others, from announcing government

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[40] Alessandro Ludovico, "The Social Sense of Print," in *Publishing as Artistic Practice*, ed. Annette Gilbert (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 232.

[41] Ibid., 235.

[42] Ibid.

decrees in ancient times to reciting poetry in the 19th century, has become a widespread and available form of social entertainment within one's familial and social circles and "continued to be a favoured mode of reading, perhaps even until as recently as the invention of television."[43] Organized, non-commercial reading societies and semi-private lending libraries—the early variants of book clubs as we know them today—started appearing throughout Europe as early as the 17th century, as a way for its patrons to split the cost of periodical subscriptions and books, provide space to expand one's social circle, and discuss the read material and other quotidian affairs.[44] By the beginning of the 19th century, these organizations began to be supervised, controlled, and then banned by church and government authorities, for fears of them posing a "moral and political danger" to society; nevertheless, these organizations contributed to the development of a reading culture and political education within the bourgeoisie of Germany, France, and Britain, being a part of the "reading revolution" or "reading mania" that had swept a large portion of the literate public.[45] Publishing historian Reinhard Wittmann notes that after the 1800s, the reading public of these countries "was largely anonymous, unhomogeneous [*sic*] and fragmented," with its reading habits primarily lead by personal interests and individual intellectual and social needs.[46]

Sociologist Elizabeth Long, in her essay "Textual Interpretation as Collective Action," writes about the prevalence of the figure of a solitary reader in conventional understanding of readership, due to the hegemonic iconography depicting a socially withdrawn, scholastic, pensive character, who is usually white, male, and upper class.[47] Such thinking is detrimental because it ignores social, institutional, and political structures and processes within which the figure of a reader is situated, and further establishes reading within the domain of the private. Nevertheless, shared reading communities persevered through history, having moved to the

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[43] Karin Littau, *Theories of Reading: Books, Bodies, and Bibliomania* (Malden: Polity Press, 2006), 15.

[44] Reinhard Wittman, "Was there a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century?," in *A History of Reading in the West*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 309.

[45] Ibid., 307, 310, 311.

[46] Ibid., 311–312.

[47] Elizabeth Long, "Textual Interpretation as Collective Action," *Discourse* 14, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 105–107.

spaces of public commercial lending libraries and specialized coffeehouses; presently, book club practices are equally prevalent and highly diverse: from formal study groups, private neighbourhood clubs, to formats aided by other forms of mass media, taking shape as online forums or the infamous televised Oprah's Book Club.[48] Reading groups actively confront and overturn the conception of a solitary reader, bringing to the foreground the relationships to the larger world that frame each reader and also render the group a community. Various studies have shown that book clubs serve an important social function as a shared space for identity-forming, reflection, and partaking in social discourse that would not have been possible otherwise.[49] Long states: "[reading groups] occupy a social space that calls our received distinction between public and private into question, and offer forums for critical reflection that have been crucial in negotiating the moral and ideological dimensions of social identity."[50] She continues, "for many, joining a reading group represents in itself a form of critical reflection on society—or one's place within it—because it demands taking a stance towards a lacuna felt in the everyday life and moving towards addressing that gap."[51] Indeed, reading communities and shared spaces have contributed to many social processes, helping their users to share knowledge and amass cultural capital, which often advanced social change. Many women active in the suffrage movements of 19th century Europe and North America were members of reading groups; African-American literary societies self-organized and maintained supportive communities in the late 19th century USA; village craftsmen throughout Europe shared religious and instructional texts; and, of course, pamphlet and newspaper reading, often done aloud in confined spaces, helped to engage revolutionary sentiments in France, and, following the French Revolution of 1789–99, sustained an increased interest in news about freedom and equality, which was expressed in liberally and

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[48] Stephen Colclough, "Representing Reading Spaces," in *The History of Reading, Volume 3: Methods, Strategies, Tactics*, ed. Rosalind Crone and Shafquat Townheed (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 99; DeNel Rehberg Sedo, ed., *Reading Communities from Salons to Cyberspace* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1, 6. It must be noted that today's commonplace conception of a book club is highly gendered and has its own set of constrictive connotations due to being historically associated with the "low-brow" genre of a novel enjoyed by middle and upper class women.

[49] Rehberg Sedo, *Reading Communities*, 4–5. For examples of such studies, see Betty A. Schallenberg's and Jenny Hartley's entries in Rehberg Sedo's edited volume, as well as scholarship by Elizabeth Long, such as *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) or her aforementioned "Textual Interpretation as Collective Action."

[50] Long, "Textual Interpretation as Collective Action," 112.

[51] Ibid., 116. Long conducted a study of various reading groups in Houston, Texas, in the 1980s.

socialist inclined printed press of later Europe.[52] It is thus clear that reading clubs and communities are diverse social formations around the act of shared reading, with a rich historical legacy, and that they are implicated in complex social processes.

According to Slavs and Tartars' Payam Sharifi, individual reading is a fairly young phenomenon, considering the much longer history of the text itself.[53] If "individual reading" is defined as a private, silent mode of reading, this is not to say that such activity did not exist before the last couple of centuries. Studies of the history of reading in the West and of the Roman script, such as the one by historian Paul Saenger, show that silent and individual reading existed at least since late antiquity and developed its scope and usage mostly due to word separation (from the 7th century onwards).[54] Examples of this would be monastic reading and the copying of religious manuscripts, which already existed in the 11th century on the European continent, or the practice of scholastic silent reading encouraged within the medieval universities during the 12th and 13th centuries. However, this does not describe the "general" reading practice at the time, and no clear evidence exists to know the true extent of silent reading, or even reading literacy itself, at certain points in medieval and pre-modern history.[55] In any case, Saenger points to the importance to this mode of reading by stating that, from around 12th century and on,

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[52] Ibid., 111–113; Rehberg Sedo, *Reading Communities*, 3–4; Wittmann, "Was there a Reading Revolution," 291; Hugh Gough, *The Newspaper Press in the French Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1988), 61; Mick Temple, *The Rise and Fall of the British Press* (New York: Routledge Focus, 2018), 8–9.

[53] "Slavs and Tatars: Society of Rascals @ Off-Biennale 2," *ArtMagazin Online,* video, 13:08, published November 29, 2017, http://artmagazin.hu/artmagazin_hirek/slavs_and_tatars_society_of_rascals__off-biennale_2.3936.html/; Slavs and Tatars, artist website, "Reading Rooms," Slavs and Tatars, accessed August 24, 2019, https://slavsandtatars.com/cycles/regions-d-etre/reading-rooms. Sharifi claims it to be around 120–150 years old.

[54] Paul Saenger, "Silent Reading: Its Impact on Late Medieval Script and Society," *Viator* 13 (1982): 373–377. Saenger performs a more detailed analysis of this form of reading in the West and how it fits within a larger global history of reading non-Roman scripts in his book *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

[55] Ibid., 379; Elspeth Jajdelska, *Silent Reading and the Birth of the Narrator* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 3.

"private visual reading and composition thus encouraged individual critical thinking and contributed ultimately to the development of scepticism and intellectual heresy."[56]

The timeframe Sharifi refers to is consistent with the invention of pulp in the 1860s, which in turn led to a wider proliferation of books and the book becoming a highly consumable and even discardable object.[57] This further transition to individual reading is also concurrent with rising literacy rates across social classes, and an already ongoing change in readership attitudes and the perceived value of books—from educational to aesthetic and entertainment value—insomuch as books became an escapist respite from the shocks of modernity and its increasingly accelerating modes of life.[58] Linguistics and literature scholar Elspeth Jajdelska argues that a century earlier, sometime towards the end of the 17th to mid-18th century, a significant shift in writing occurred, presupposing the reader of a text as a hearer (reading silently), and not a speaker (who reads aloud).[59] Therefore, reading became a more intimate, introspective, individual affair, akin to an imaginary conversation between writer and reader. She notes that today, "in linguistics, literary criticism, and everyday discourse, […] it is widely assumed that reading is a kind of hearing," and there are always markers of this assumption in the text itself, such as cues for the reader establishing spatial and temporal references for the given narrative.[60] This is a pertinent argument in considering the publishing work of Slavs and Tatars. Looking through their publications, it can indeed be assumed that they are written for a "hearer" and are supposed to prompt a rather private encounter.[61] It is the material conditions of the environment

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[56] Saenger, "Silent Reading," 399. Saenger extends this argument to the history of the Protestant Reformation during the 15th–16th centuries—when silent, individual reading of religious texts, often in pamphlet form, aimed to achieve a private and intimate experience with the Divine; he writes: "the formulation of reformist religious and political ideas and the receptivity of Europe's elite to making private judgements […] owed much to a long evolution […] in the manner in which men and women read and wrote" (Ibid., 414); see also his *Space Between Words*, 276.

[57] Littau, *Theories of Reading*, 21.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Jajdelska, *Silent Reading*, 6. Jajdelska's analysis concerns English literature.

[60] Ibid., 10.

[61] What I am referring to here is that the texts within the collective's publications have a clear narrating figure that leads the reader through pages; the collective occasionally refers to itself as "we," establishing its own voice, as it is within *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz*. The text permits or encourages silent reading, rather than requires a reader to proclaim the text to an external audience.

the publications are shown in, such as the reading rooms of the exhibitions, that contribute to a collective, non-solitary notion of the reading process.

Slavs and Tartars attempt to "bring the social back" into reading by stressing their origins as a book club and continuing this logic of non-hierarchical, open-ended engagement within the collective's artistic practice and the physical spaces it constructs for shared reading.[62] An analysis of these spaces is essential, for "when texts are consumed as part of a social performance, both the way in which the reading body is brought into play and the nature of the social relationship between auditor and listener, or solitary reader and venue, [the process] can produce meanings that are impossible to recover from the text itself."[63] The environmental and social conditions that define the embodied presence of a reader in a space affect the meanings constructed within a reading process.

Communal reading spaces have also been explored within the realm of artistic practices. Perhaps its most prominent example within art and exhibition-making is Alexander Rodchenko's Workers' Club. The Workers' Club was conceived by Russian Constructivist Alexander Rodchenko as a prototype for an ideal (or rather utopian), functional leisure space for the Soviet proletariat. The original version of the space was built for the 1925 *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* held in Paris. It consisted of a highly functional room with a variety of utilitarian objects: a long table with foldable leaves, a stand with horizontally-positioned rotating cylinders for viewing slides and images, a chess-playing station, and an intricately designed multifunctional tribune/screen construction; everything pointed to the fact that the space was made for learning by consuming information and media.[64] Life and art came together within the Workers' Club walls: the environment of the Club and the things in it were designed to help the worker, as the quintessential Soviet citizen, to organize and enliven the new everyday.[65] The Club was conceived as a space where "revolutionary politics intertwined with

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[62] Littau writes on the shift in the early 18th century Europe that resulted in "a [new] conception of literature, not as an activity deeply embedded in the social and political context of the day but as an autonomous and aesthetically driven pursuit" (Littau, *Theories of Reading*, 19), which leads to the question of *bringing the social back*, or rather *onto the foreground* of reading.

[63] Colclough, "Representing Reading Spaces," 112.

[64] Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, vol. 1 (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 207.

[65] Christina Kiaer, "Rodchenko in Paris," *October* 75 (Winter 1996): 30.

radical artistic practice," and where aesthetics and politics came together to produce a specific "revolutionary perceptual experience" and thus a new subjectivity, based on this collective reimagining of the daily life.[66] The project has become perhaps the most famous of Rodchenko's constructions but was never brought to life to fulfill its original functions in the USSR; instead, replicas of the Workers' Club were built for numerous exhibitions (mainly in the U.S. and Europe) of early Soviet art.[67] These consequent reiterations of the Club—such as at the Art Institute of Chicago's 2017 show *Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia!: Soviet Art Put to the Test* or Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein's retrospective *Alexander Rodtchenko. Fotografie und Design* of 2015—reveal the variety of curatorial methods for creating shared reading spaces and how these methods are attuned to both their contemporary moments and the contexts of their respective art institutions.

Many artists have subsequently worked with the idea of a library, book collection, reading space or reading club in their practices. The level of engagement with books in these differs from one example to another. Mark Dion's series *The Library for the Birds* put an aviary with live birds into a gallery space: the birds cohabiting with a tree structure that bears on its branches a myriad of volumes on ornithology and naturalist themes—an absurdist encounter with nature and a questioning of our inscribed knowledge on it for any viewer who is to enter the aviary.[68] Thomas Hirschhorn is known for his series of temporary public installations as monuments to famous philosophers, all built in working-class urban neighbourhoods, and which culminated with the 2013 *Gramsci Monument* in the South Bronx, New York City.[69] The plywood constructions offered various amenities such as a library full of Antonio Gramsci's books and other social theory texts, a café, a workshop studio, an open-air theatre, among others; the project was intended to reactivate a public space (the street) as a space for encounter, lasting

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[66] T.J. Demos, "Is Another World Possible? The Politics of Utopia and the Surpassing of Capitalism in Recent Exhibition Practice," in *On Horizons: a Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Hlavajova, Simon Sheikh, and Jill Winder (Utrecht: BAK, 2011), 57–58.

[67] Alexander Lavrentiev, "Workers' Club," in *Alexander Rodtchenko. Fotografie und Design* (Vaduz: Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, 2015), 53.

[68] Stephanie Buhmann, "Behind the Scenes: A Conversation with Mark Dion," *Sculpture* 35, no. 7 (2016): 51. The latest installation of the project was *The Library for the Birds of London*, at Whitechapel Gallery, London, in 2018.

[69] Jessica Rizzo, "Immanent Utopia/Utopia Imminent: Thomas Hirschhorn's Gramsci Monument," *TDR/The Drama Review* 58, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 170.

reflection, and communication.[70] Iraqi-American artist Wafaa Bilal's *168:01* project (2016–) works toward a rebuilding of the College of Fine Arts library collection at the University of Baghdad, destroyed in 2003, by exhibiting shelves with hundreds of empty white volumes, which are to be replaced by newly-acquired books funded by viewers' donations—an exchange system generating knowledge capital in real time.[71] Christian Nyampeta, a Rwandan-Dutch artist, organizes study and reading groups: in his project *Scriptorium* (2017–), he works with a translation group, recruited through an open call, that is translating seminal texts by African philosophers from French into English.[72] LA-based artist collective Finishing School set up *The Patriot Library* (2003) in galleries: a collection of reading materials that are considered to be questionable and dangerous by the U.S. Federal government post–9/11 (due to the newly adopted Patriot Act legislation to prevent terrorism), the reader of which could be deemed as having suspicious intentions and thus be monitored at a regular public library.[73] Moreover, a multitude of collectives and artist-run organizations—such as 16Beaver, The Serving Library, Wendy's Subway—provide publishing services and an accessible space for shared reading, lectures, discussions, and events. In the volume *Living as Form*, which focuses on socially-engaged art practices, editor and curator Nato Thompson identifies one of the thematic directions within contemporary art as *performing knowledge*, saying: "if politics have become performative, so too, has knowledge—in other words, you have to share what you know."[74] Reading, in the case of Slavs and Tatars, is the "form of living," a commonplace and habitual practice, that gets exposed, examined, and reimagined yet again through the artists' creative research process and

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[70] Vincent Marquis, "'I Want to Fight': Thomas Hirschhorn and the Monument as Dialogue," *espace* 112 (Winter 2016): 46, 50.

[71] Wafaa Bilal, "168:01," Wafaa Bilal (artist website), accessed May 5, 2019, http://wafaabilal.com/168h01s/.

[72] Christian Nyampeta, "Study" and "Translations," *Radius Station*, accessed March 20, 2019, https://radiusstation.net/study/ and https://radiusstation.net/scriptorium/.

[73] Finishing School, "The Patriot Library," Finishing School (artist website), accessed May 5, 2019, http://finishing-school-art.net/The-Patriot-Library-2003/; Nato Thompson, ed., "Finishing School: The Patriot Library," in *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991–2011* (New York: Creative Time, 2012), 154.

[74] Nato Thompson, ed., "Living as Form," in *Living as Form*, 24.

presentation via publications, lectures, and exhibitions.[75] The knowledge presented within the work of Slavs and Tatars is thus performative—due to the collective's selective and aesthetic choices, and the forms this knowledge takes within each shared space.

Beginning with its group exhibitions associated with the *Friendship of Nations* cycle (2009–2013), the collective produced a multitude of seating structures for their reading rooms. The first is a wooden seating platform named RiverBed, which appeared in the 2011 group show *Again, A Time Machine* at the artist-run gallery Eastside Projects in Birmingham, UK, and has since continued to be featured in various solo and group shows throughout the Slavs and Tatars' career (figs. 5 and 6). A seating structure's form oftentimes reflects the themes and issues of the pertinent cycle, such as *Nose Twister* made for *Language Arts*: a sleek couch out of wood veneer and foam encased in faux leather, designed in the shape of a now-obsolete Turkish letter (fig. 7).[76] Or *PrayWay*, which debuted in 2012 and has since also been featured repeatedly as a meditation on the collective's practice at large: a wooden platform covered with a carpet, conceived to be a play on the shape of a stand for a Quran or other sacred text (otherwise known as a *rahlé* or *rehal*) or, to an unacquainted viewer, the shape of an open book (figs. 8 and 9).[77] All these self-contained reading rooms offer a communal space for collective action—that of being together and, ideally, reading together—and they provide the comfort to be used as such. It should be mentioned, however, that in the last several years the collective began to move away from such forms, instead creating installations–as–seating–arrangements which function in more confrontational and seemingly uncomfortable ways relative to the reader's now singular body—namely their *Dresdener Gitter* and *Underage Page* structures for the *Pickle Politics* cycle (2016–) (figs. 10 and 11).[78] The *Gitter* series is a play on the materials and forms of crowd-

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[75] While Slavs and Tatars would not make it to a survey volume on socially-engaged art such as *Living as Form* (since their practice does not take audience or community collaboration as central to its work's creation or longevity in a direct sense), the idea that "living itself exists in forms that must be questioned, rearranged, mobilized, and undone" fits the underlying sentiment of the collective's approach to reading. Ibid., 29.

[76] Slavs and Tatars, *Naughty Nasals* (Białystok: Galeria Arsenał, 2014), 73–74.

[77] Slavs and Tatars, artist website, "PrayWay," Slavs and Tatars, accessed March 16, 2019, https://slavsandtatars.com/cycles/regions-d-etre/prayway.

[78] Slavs and Tatars, artist website, "Pickle Politics," Slavs and Tatars, accessed March 16, 2019, https://slavsandtatars.com/cycles/pickle-politics/; Sarah Johnson, "Hannover: Slavs and Tatars," *ArtForum,* accessed March 16, 2019, https://www.artforum.com/picks/slavs-and-tatars-78296/.

control metal fencing used in Germany; the exhibition's visitor, in order to use these for reading, needs to straddle the metal poles or kneel on a foam cushion on the floor.[79] This could be indicative of a change in direction for the collective: a reconsideration of reading spaces and their potential to be productive shared environments, or perhaps the shift has become a way to confront and engage the individual reading body more directly. In any case, each reading room structure functions in the gallery space as an art piece in its own right and an essential part of the larger exhibition, not an addition to it, and thus brings its users more directly into the overarching framework of the show.

Friendship of Nations' RiverBed is significant considering its pertinence to the cycle's thematic context of Iranian history. It is a recreation of a traditional Iranian structure, and the collective explains its intentions in the following words:

> The *takht* (bed, or what we call a 'RiverBed' in honour of its ideal location by a source of water), the vernacular structure found at teahouses, roadside kiosks, shrines, entrances to mosques and restaurants across Iran and Central Asia, accommodates a group of roughly four or five people without the unfortunate and unspoken delineation of individual space dictated by the chair. Friends, families, and colleagues sit, smoke shisha, sip tea, eat lunch, take naps, and create—however momentarily—a sense of public space, all the more remarkable in countries where public space is circumscribed, such as Iran.[80]

Despite the commonplace character of the structure in the aforementioned geographical region, it appears that little research has been done on its history and its significance within the construction of public spaces.[81] The Farsi word for the thing itself—تخت or *takht*—can have various meanings: a bed, a raised platform, a seat, a seat of power (such as dais or throne or its geographic location), or as an adjective meaning flat, horizontal, level.[82] In their application of the term, Slavs and Tatars specifically bring up the public aspect of the takht, the seating platform-daybed, which is located outdoors and is supposedly open for use to anyone (fig. 12).

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[79] Slavs and Tatars, artist website, "Pickle Politics."

[80] Slavs and Tatars, artist website, "RiverBed," Slavs and Tatars, accessed March 16, 2019, https://slavsandtatars.com/cycles/regions-d-etre/riverbed/.

[81] I would like to thank the staff of the McGill University's Islamic Library, namely Ghazaleh Ghanavizchian, for her help with the research on the takht bed and public spaces in Iran.

[82] *Francis Joseph Steingass: A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary*, s.v. "تخت," University of Chicago, accessed October 23, 2018, https://dsalsrv04.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/steingass/; Farsi Dictionary, s.v. "تخت," accessed October 23, 2018, http://www.farsidic.com/en/Lang/FaEn/.

Central Asia's variation of the takht is known as *tapchan*, and in countries like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan it remains to this day a prevalent open-air spot for family and community gathering, eating, and resting—either as part of a household or a commercial venue such as a teahouse or coffeehouse (fig. 13).[83] In Iran, tea and later coffee consumption have been widespread since at least the 16th century; while varying in its interchanging popularity, the semi-public drinking establishments came to be known as coffeehouses (*qahva-ḵāna*) regardless of the beverage selection on offer.[84] Studies of coffeehouses in Iran show the emergence of a new public sphere within the patronship of these establishments, thus making the seating arrangement and the pertinent furniture essential mediators of these developing social processes. Farshid Emami, in his study "Coffeehouses, Urban Spaces, and the Formation of a Public Sphere in Safavid Isfahan," writes of a new social behaviour originating with the rise of coffee-drinking and the booming construction of the appropriate spaces for this novel activity, starting from the beginning of the 17th century.[85] These establishments were most often built as theatre-like open spaces with a fountain in the centre and platforms out of masonry or wood around the perimeter, with their architecture and design described akin to a small oasis (with water, plant shade, and perfumes in the air).[86] Emami notes the composite character of the public/private within these spaces that are outdoors but protected by the foliage of trees or lattice screens: public due to them being outside of the domestic realm, and private due to its exclusivity and intimacy of a

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[83] The tapchan is widely mentioned in the tourism industry's writing and advertising, for example: "The Best Places to Visit in Uzbekistan for Some Down Time," Silk Road Explore, published September 1, 2015, https://silkroadexplore.com/blog/the-best-places-to-visit-in-uzbekistan-for-some-down-time/. Additionally, in these countries and other Central Asian regions, the system of *mohalla*—of self-governing neighbourhood communities—is used; members of mohallas would gather in teahouses to discuss affairs and conduct communal events and activities. See: Ali Mohmmad Rather, "Mohalla System of Uzbekistan and Kashmir," *Journal of Central Asian Studies* 18 (2009): 149–151.

[84] ʿAlī Āl-e Dawūd, "Coffeehouse," *Encyclopædia Iranica* 4/1 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/coffeehouse-qahva-kana/, last updated October 26, 2011; Daniel Balland and Marcel Bazin, "Čāy," *Encyclopædia Iranica* 5/1 (London: Routledge, 1992), available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/cay-tea/, last updated December 15, 1990.

[85] Farshid Emami, "Coffeehouses, Urban Spaces, and the Formation of a Public Sphere in Safavid Isfahan," in *Muqarnas: An Annual on the Visual Cultures of the Islamic World* 33, ed. Gülru Necipoğlu (Boston: Brill, 2016), 210.

[86] Ibid.

conversation to be had within the limits of its communal seating.[87] Frequented by middle and upper class men (with the seldom inclusion of a women-only day once a week), the coffeehouse establishments became spaces for observing and being observed, to perform one's social identity and be entertained by musicians, poets, and theatrical troupes; they earned a reputation as meeting hubs for the intellectual class and the craftsmen guilds, and as hotbeds of social and political discussion, either pro-government or dissenting in nature.[88] Takhts, in particular with their shared seating arrangement, are bearers of contextual complexity within the life of the region's public spheres and spaces.

Various scholars, however, point to the general decline of public space in contemporary Iran due to a multitude of factors: the 20th century's Westernization under the Pahlavi monarchy (1925–1979), incorporation of vehicles and roads, increasing privatization of urban areas, continuous gendering of the public vs. private spaces, and the governmental control of public behaviour.[89] As traditional Iranian coffeehouses give way to Western-style cafés in recent decades, the takht platform is not as prominent of a feature of the urban public space as before, being replaced by individual chairs instead.[90] This points to the reality whereby a takht might seem out of place in present-day Iran, outside of the private courtyard or a tourist attraction, as can be seen on the example of the "Traditional Banquet Hall" restaurant located in the central bazaar square in Isfahan (fig. 14). Its appearance today is therefore likely to evoke a rather idealized, mythologized, and perhaps even nostalgic notion of a productive urban public space.

The primary role of a takht or a tapchan lies within the idea of hospitality and openness to a variety of activities within its space. Either a pit-stop rest, a business meeting or a family meal —the area of a carpet-laid platform extends itself to its user. Eating together, or commensality, is

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[87] Ibid., 189.

[88] Ibid., 190, 197; *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. "Coffeehouse."

[89] Maryam Charkhchian and Seyyed Abdolhadi Daneshpour, "Interactions Among Different Dimensions of a Responsive Public Space: Case Study in Iran," *Review of Urban & Regional Development Studies* 21, no. 1 (Mar 2009): 15–16; Shahram Taghipour Dehkordi and Milad Heidari Soureshjani, "From Sociopetal to Sociofugal: a Reverse Procedure of Tehran Urban Spaces," *Journal of Urban Design and Mental Health* 2017, no. 3 (2017), https://www.urbandesignmentalhealth.com/journal-3---sociopetal-spaces-in-iran.html/.

[90] Dawūd, "Coffeehouse." Nevertheless, even in the Safavid-era coffeehouses, chairs were also used as outdoor furniture, more often reserved for poets and storytellers to perform in the centre of the drinking house's smaller courtyards. See: Emami, "Coffeehouses, Urban Spaces," 189 and 194.

a considerable part of the takht's offered functionality. "Commensality is about creating and reinforcing social relations," Susanne Kerner and Cynthia Chu write in their edited volume on the food-sharing practice.[91] Therefore, inclusion or, instead, exclusion of certain bodies becomes an important aspect to consider in this process: who exactly gets to participate and who invites them, what the occasion or reasoning behind the event is, or even one's dietary restrictions—all play a role in establishing these social relations through a shared meal.[92] The takht is a space for commonplace, everyday commensality, and its theoretical possibility to host a group of strangers (if it indeed brings together individuals with no familial, kin or community relations) can be defined as "hospitality commensality," a term proposed by Malaysian anthropologist and sociologist Tan Chee-Beng.[93] Chee-Beng thinks of this mode of commensality as an extension of its domestic mode, and explains it as "an institutionalized way of expressing the value of hospitality, […] important for organizing human interaction."[94] This speculative receptivity for participation and community-building within the public realm rectifies what Slavs and Tatars called "the unfortunate and unspoken delineation of individual space dictated by the chair." By targeting the chair and working against its limitations of hosting merely a single person, the collective reimagines the world as a series of more communal interactions that could bring strangers together based on a shared activity.

If takhts play a role of social prompts within an urban space (to sit down, take a rest, share a meal), the same rationale is invoked within the exhibitions where a RiverBed is present. Slavs and Tatars intentionally use a metaphor of eating within their work: seeing reading and learning as a form of consumption, thus evoking an embodied response and a sensorial involvement in the process. Reading together is likened to eating together—a communal and shared intimacy of a moment on the reading platform. It creates a space of flexible hybridity between the private and public realms within the bounds of a takht, as if testing the boundaries of their users' affinity for potential social interaction and for the space itself. A person wandering

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[91] Susanne Kerner and Cynthia Chou, introduction to *Commensality: From Everyday Food to Feast*, ed. Morten Warmind, Cynthia Chou and Susanne Kerner (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), e-book, 1.

[92] Ibid., 3.

[93] Tan Chee-Beng, "Commensality and the Organization of Social Relations," in Warmind, Chou and Kerner, *Commensality*, 25.

[94] Ibid., 28.

within the exhibition space may be drawn to the takht because of their tiredness and need for a pause. Or simply by a curiosity that responds to the RiverBed's inviting and colourful forms—after all, the structure is made to affect the senses with its warm-toned wood, red carpets, and soft cushions—a contrast to the white-cube space of a gallery. Or to another visitor, perhaps, the RiverBed poses a distraction and an unwelcome point of disruption to their visit. The reading room calls out to the body as much as to the mind, counting on a reciprocative embodied response of the gallery-goers. This foregrounding of the body (as a site in itself) provides a spatial and material dimension to the experience of reading as the encounter with a text and other readers.

The first iteration of RiverBed (2011) is an elevated platform measuring around three squared meters. A small railing on three of its sides demarcates the communal space of the takht, which is covered with Afghan carpets or kilim rugs. Featured in most of the shows that were part of the *Friendship of Nations* cycle, two identical RiverBeds are placed back to back, complete with the rahlé book stands propping up the collective's newspaper *79.89.09*. on the platforms.[95] In most exhibitions, the collective also includes a selection from their research bibliography (books that Slavs and Tatars referenced in preparation of the cycle), which then turns the RiverBed into an installation named *Dear 1979, Meet 1989* (figs. 5 and 15).

The books that make up the *Dear 1979, Meet 1989*'s small archive are primary and secondary sources on Polish and Iranian history and related topics.[96] Most books are in English or are English translations, with some of the publications being in Farsi, Polish, or Russian. They range from texts such as *Poland and Persia: Pages from the History of Polish-Persian Relations* (2009), published by Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Iran, to *444 Days: The Hostages*

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[95] Out of the six main exhibitions of the cycle, the Riverbed was featured in three of them, all titled *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz*: at Kiosk in Ghent, Belgium (2011), REDCAT gallery in Los Angeles, USA (2013), and Presentation House Gallery in North Vancouver, Canada (2013). At the first solo showing of the cycle at Gdańsk City Gallery, Poland, titled *Przyjaźń Narodów: Lahestan Nesfeh Jahan* (2011), a round sitting platform covered by a fitted circular rug was used as a reading space, same with the show *Continuous Conversation* at Karlin Studios in Prague, Czech Republic (2012).

[96] These books are a part of the bibliography that comprises the "Dear 1979, Meet 1989" chapter of the *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz* publication. The list of the books that get exhibited (a slightly shorter one) can be found through the Works Sited project—a program of the Los Angeles Central Library, where *Dear 1979, Meet 1989* was exhibited in conduction with the 2013 show at REDCAT gallery. See: "Dear 1979, Meet 1989," Works Sited, Los Angeles Central Public Library, accessed February 15, 2019, http://www.works-sited.info/index.php?page=slavsandtatars/.

Remember by Tim Wells (1985), which recounts the events of a hostage crisis of the United States Embassy in Tehran in 1979–81. From a book on Iranian craft *Reverse Painting on Glass* (2007) to *Hammer and Tickle: A History of Communism Told Through Communist Jokes* (2008). There are three books of *What Is to Be Done?*: the 1880s Russian novel by Nikolay Chernyshevsky, Vladimir Lenin's work *What Is to Be Done?: Burning Questions of Our Movement*, and a volume of lectures *What Is To Be Done: The Enlightened Thinkers and an Islamic Renaissance* delivered by Iranian sociologist and revolutionary thinker Ali Shariati in the 1970s. Counting roughly forty titles, the library is a small one considering the amount of literature published on the topics involved, but it is a rather extensive one for the conditions of the given reading room itself. Situated in the middle of a gallery among the installations surrounding the RiverBeds, and counting on the willing participation of the gallery-goer, the books silently await to be read. Of course, one cannot expect the audience member to sit down and spend enough time to read through the whole library or even one book but merely scan through some of them, which leads to the conclusion that the level of active, direct participation with the books (on average) is limited from the beginning. The artists' gesture of an invitation—of hospitality that is mediated by the space of the RiverBeds and the book selection on offer—here meets with the intention of the visitor–as–reader, willing to engage in reciprocity. Even if the visitor chooses not to engage in active reading, this gesture allows the viewers to have an insight into the creative process of the collective and positions the audience as an equal participant in this process, which is akin to the nature and sociability of a book club. This implied sociability acts as a basis for the social formations that arise within the art collective's audiences, as I will illustrate in this section by further considering the RiverBed reading room and its elements.

For the *79.89.09*. publication, the format of a newspaper is significant. Historically, the medium of a newspaper has been used as a primary way of instituting readership based on a local or national scale, where the population of a town or one nation reads the same thing and thus feels as one audience or public.[97] German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas, who is considered to be the father of public sphere theory, has conceptualized this process in the 18th

[97] Wittman, "Was there a Reading Revolution," 305.

century Europe as a creation of what he called a "bourgeois public sphere."[98] With the birth of mass media and the establishment of news as a commodity, the subjectivity of readers turned toward the idea of belonging to a unified public with its own "public opinion."[99] This position of a single unified public sphere is now widely contested within the literature.[100] Other scholars have also emphasized that newspaper reading was not limited to the upper class: the peasantry and working class of the 19th century, even when low rates of literacy prevailed, often familiarized themselves with local affairs through a shared experience of oral readership.[101] Newspapers and pamphlets had a prominent role in the history of revolutions and social change, since each publication had its own partisan politics and thus catered to a specific (and thus smaller) public with specific interests and convictions.[102] For example, in the years before and during the French Revolution, hundreds of periodicals were published for both in support and opposition to it, reaching small towns and rural areas.[103]

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[98] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989), 27.

[99] Ibid., 26, 42–43, 51. Benedict Anderson, in his book *Imagined Communities*, ties newspaper and novel readership, beginning with the 18th century Europe, to the formation of the imagined community of nationhood. See: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006), 24–25.

[100] This idea was criticized and expanded upon, from a neo-Marxist viewpoint, by fellow German scholars Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge in their *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), which is considered to be a first critique of Jürgen Habermas's theory. Additionally, Nancy Fraser critiques Habermas's original conception of the unified public sphere on the fact that the concept of the "bourgeois" sphere is based on exclusion of women and marginalized groups within societies, and then analyses its limitations exactly due to the *national* nature of Habermas's mass media readership. See: Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990) and her essay "Transnationalizing the Public Sphere: On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian World," in *Transnationalizing the Public Sphere*, ed. Kate Nash (Malden: Polity Press, 2014), 12, 15.

[101] Martyn Lyons, "New Readers in the Nineteenth Century: Women, Children, Workers," in Cavallo and Chartier, *A History of Reading*, 342–43.

[102] Harvey Chisick, "The Pamphlet Literature of the French Revolution: an Overview," *History of European Ideas* 17, no. 2–3 (1993): 151; Harvey Chisick, "Pamphlets and Journalism in the Early French Revolution: The Offices of the *Ami du Roi* of the Abbé Royou as a Centre of Royalist Propaganda," *French Historical Studies* 15, no. 4 (Fall 1988): 625–626; Jill Lepore, "Does Journalism Have a Future?," *The New Yorker*, published January 21, 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/01/28/does-journalism-have-a-future/.

[103] Chisick, "The Pamphlet Literature," 151; Gough, *The Newspaper Press*, 68.

Iran's 1979 Revolution and Poland's 1980s revolutionary movement of Solidarność also depended on underground print to disseminate their ideas. After a slight relaxation of censorship laws by the monarchical government in Iran during the late '70s, dozens of organizations of various political affiliations formed and began to print leaflets, newsletters, and petitions—which had continued well into the days of the Islamic Revolution itself with its mass rallies, general strikes, and clashes with the government forces.[104] On the other hand, after the victory of Islamic rule in the Revolution, the new government encouraged the translation of state-approved texts into foreign languages to export the ideology of revolutionary Islam beyond Iranian borders.[105] In Poland, the culture of samizdat (covert self-publishing to evade censorship of the government) flourished from the mid-70s, and the Solidarity movement depended on a regular publishing of its *Tygodnik Wojenny* (*War Weekly*) and *Tygodnik Solidarność* (*Solidarity Weekly*) to gain momentum in the '80s.[106] In fact, according to historical accounts, "ninety percent of those interned during the martial law crackdown of 1981 [by the ruling Polish United Workers' Party] were not union or political activists, but those responsible for writing, printing and distributing opposition pamphlets."[107]

As for the newspaper in non-revolutionary times, the local dailies thrived throughout the 20th century, and urban centres would print dozens of papers each—a testament to the number of distinct public spheres to whose views and lifestyles these papers catered for.[108] Today, the printed press has largely shifted its focus to opinion pieces and editorials, leaving the immediacy of 24/7 cycle of news to television and online news aggregators.[109] Alessandro Ludovico

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[104] Ervand Abrahamian, "The Crowd in the Iranian Revolution," *Radical History Review* 105 (Fall 2009): 16, 24.

[105] Behrouz Karoubi, "A Concise History of Translation in Iran from Antiquity to the Present Time," *Perspectives: Studies in Translation Theory and Practice* 25, no. 4 (2017): 604.

[106] Ken Rogerson, "The Role of the Media in Transitions from Authoritarian Political Systems: Russia and Poland Since the Fall of Communism," *East European Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (1997): 339–341; Slavs and Tatars, *79.89.09.*, ed. Gavin Everall and Jane Rolo, 3rd ed. (London: Book Works, 2013), 39.

[107] Magda Walter, "Return to Poland," *Washington Journalism Review* 12 (1990): 35, quoted in Rogerson, "The Role of the Media in Transitions," 340.

[108] Lepore, "Does Journalism Have a Future?"; Temple, *The Rise and Fall of the British Press*, 59. These sources speak to European and North American contexts.

[109] Lepore, "Does Journalism Have a Future?"; Temple, *The Rise and Fall of the British Press*, 41.

suggests that despite all the changes in journalism, the format of a newspaper and its mode of interface has stayed historically familiar and unchangeable, and is thus a carrier of public trust.[110] Within contemporary artistic practices, the act of publishing "fake" newspapers plays into the familiarity of the format and at the same time questions its veracity through a "re-appropriation of the public imaginary."[111]

The newspaper *79.89.09.*, written by Slavs and Tatars, plays into this familiar format but does not adhere to a specific geographical location or a distinct community as its base public. As the name suggests, the publication speaks to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Solidarność's victory of 1989, the Iranian mass protests of 2009, and the links between them. The 44-page newspaper recounts historical facts along with anecdotes and interpretations of the events, including images of and words on the collective's other visual work from the *Friendship of Nations* cycle. Each page consists of illustrations and short texts that accompany each other. The overall tone of the narration is lighthearted and humorous, especially in the beginning, with an occasional rhyme in the headlines: such as "Barbara Ann"—"Bomb Iran"—"Geopolitical ~~Beef~~ Lamb"—"Mix-tapes of Modernist Islam," that reveal a serious and often somber matter in the texts below (fig. 16).[112] The childish phrase "I'm Rubber, You're Glue…" sits on the page between a paragraph on the history of U.S.—Iran relations and a photograph of an anti-Iran protest of 1979, where a man is pictured holding a sign "Deport all Iranians: get the hell out of my country."[113] The urgency of a newspaper's format and the shortness of each "article" are contrasted with the more "editorial" nature of the reflections on history.

Page 24 of *79.89.09*. speaks to the Slavs and Tatars' approach to their sources and the self-awareness of the publication itself (fig. 17). It includes an image of a front page mock-up for a *Tygodnik Solidarność* issue, visibly collaged with typed-out finished articles glued onto the page, and the section of the folio (date, issue number, price) filled in by hand. Below the image, the header "Stop Crying and Start to Work…" introduces an online comment left by a Polish user

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[110] Ludovico, "The Social Sense of Print," 227.

[111] Ibid., 227, 235. Ludovico gives examples of Yes Men's *New York Times Special Edition* (2008) and *Faux Soir* (1943), a spoof issue of the Belgian *Le Soir.*

[112] Slavs and Tatars, *79.89.09.*, 3rd ed., 6–7.

[113] Ibid., 5.

on an Iranian news website, specifically on the 2010 article "Why North Tehranis Don't Revolt"—a reflection on the 2009 Green Movement protests.[114] The user writes:

> Fighting for freedom is always the very long path. […]
> Stop crying and start to work, make leaflets, underground presses, convince workers and people from small cities etc., that there are hundreds of methods. I know, it is hard work, but my experiences from Poland told me—there is no other way. You have to deserve your freedom.[115] (Fig. 18.)

This inclusion of an online comment by a largely anonymous user reveals the overarching logic of bricolage within *79.89.09*. and the collective's methods at large—of sourcing their materials from places far and wide, physical and virtual, from academic sources of historical accounts to an opinion expressed by an internet user on an online platform. The text of the comment and its tone are also significant: a Polish passer-by directly addresses the Iranian public who reads the news blog, relating his experiences of the Solidarność times to the struggles of the Iranian public unrest. This comment is an allusion to the newspaper's aims—to make the worlds collide, to facilitate intercultural and multinational exchange, to bring people who come from very different places and contexts closer together in metaphysical terms and in commonplace solidarity. A seemingly inconsequential act of expressing one's opinion is now re-thought and re-addressed in a different medium within the Slavs and Tatars publication, where it is available to their respective publics to read. The public sphere of the given readership has thus greatly expanded.

Responding to the contemporary modes of readership and the creation of publics within a globalizing world, American scholar Michael Warner proposes an alternative model for public sphere theory to conceptualize the contemporary mass public. Warner's public sphere is not global or unified but is composed of an infinite number of publics and counterpublics—social formations that get conjured around a text, be it a visual, textual or audial one. A public gets created by a text's address to its readers (a text addresses its public by being read) and depends on the idea that "texts that can be picked up at different times and in different places by otherwise unrelated people."[116] A public exists because its text is sustaining its readership

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[114] The original article and comment can be accessed at: "Why North Tehranis Don't Revolt," Tehran Bureau, *PBS*, February 17, 2010, accessed June 15, 2019, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/02/why-north-tehranis-dont-revolt.html/. The online news magazine *Tehran Bureau* has been hosted by *PBS* and then by *The Guardian* until 2016 and currently seems to be inactive.

[115] Slavs and Tatars, *79.89.09*., 3rd ed., 24.

[116] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 68.

through time and is distributed further to other readers, thus guaranteeing a public's longevity.[117] For Warner, publics are sporadic, self-organized, intertextual, and interdisciplinary: meaning that publics operate within existing frameworks of understanding texts and are situated within a fabric of existing discourses, other publics, and other texts.[118] Following this theorization, in *Friendship of Nations* the circulation of the cycle's texts and publications creates a certain form of a public—"an ongoing place of encounter for discourse," whether that public is aligned with dominant discourses or is situated in opposition to them. This making of publics occurs in multiple ways: through the encounter with visual objects, by an audience member reading the *79.89.09*. newspaper in a gallery or after bringing it home or giving it to someone else, by listening to the lecture-performance or watching its recording online.[119] The continued availability of the cycle's texts and their multimedia diversity (print, digital, video forms, etc.) greatly increase the chances for longevity of the Slavs and Tatars-led publics and thus make them a lasting and productive space of discourse.

Warner also stresses the importance of the performative and aesthetic dimensions of a public address and its discourse—such as a way of address, genre, style, and language—which often get misrecognized and overshadowed by logic and opinion-forming within this discursive process.[120] With Slavs and Tatars, this is communicated in the visual forms the collective chooses for its texts, the imagery and the tone of address in the newspaper, and in the indirect approach to the histories learned and inherited, which encourages reflection rather than decision-making and opens space for an imaginative dimension toward the unknown. The expressive poetics of form and style often position such texts and its publics outside the common-place or dominant forms of address, thus putting these publics into the counter-public domain. A counterpublic, in Warner's conceptualization, is different from a (dominant or dominantly aligned) public in that:

> a counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a

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[117] Ibid., 90, 106.

[118] Ibid., 16, 67, 95.

[119] Ibid., 90. In the case of lecture-performances, its audience is not a public in Warner's sense, since it is a defined group of people (a finite group of strangers in a finite space). However, putting a recording of it online guarantees that the text can be picked up by a reader beyond those temporal and spatial restrictions.

[120] Ibid., 114–115.

> general or wider public but a dominant one. And the conflict extends not just to ideas or policy questions but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public or to the hierarchy among media.[121]

Furthermore, in thinking of the readers–as–counterpublic–members, "participation in such a public is one of the ways by which its members' identities are formed and transformed," thus potentially able to activate the social imaginary into a transformative act of world-making that would not replicate the dominant public's power relations.[122] Warner's examples of a counterpublic are the readership of a queer magazine or the audience of an African-American sermon preaching; sub-publics such as youth cultures or artistic publics could be considered counterpublics as well, due to their subordinate position to the dominant public(s).[123]

Does this mean that through the act of readership of Slavs and Tatars' *79.89.09.*, a counterpublic gets conjured? In principle, the readership of this newspaper-like publication becomes a part of one discursive public, or maybe even a transformative counter-public, if the reader's subjective understanding of their position in the world changes and (trans)forms. It is important to note, however, that this public gets formed within an art institutional framework of museums and galleries which play by dominant ideological rules and whose spaces are known to be welcoming to a selected few. In other words, while the discourse created by Slavs and Tatars might be seen as having a critical relation to power, aligning its readers to be oppositional to dominant publics might be a stretch.

Perhaps here it might be appropriate to consider my own position as part of the *Friendship of Nations* readership. As a reader of the main book of the cycle, of the *79.89.09.* newspaper, and an (albeit virtual) viewer of the art objects from the exhibitions, I am undoubtedly a part of the texts' public: I came across the collective and its work almost by chance and was "addressed" by its publications. But assessing and qualifying the impact of the texts is much harder. For myself, as a child of parents for whom the fall of the Berlin Wall

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[121] Ibid., 119. Negt and Kluge were the first to develop the concept of a counterpublic, theorizing "the proletariat public sphere as a historical counterconcept to the bourgeois public sphere," see: Negt and Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*, 57. Warner bases his definition of a counterpublic mainly on Nancy Fraser's "subaltern counterpublic," but expands the limits of his counterpublics beyond the subaltern to include such groups as those of youth culture. For Fraser's definition of the subaltern counterpublic, see Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 67–68.

[122] Ibid., 57.

[123] Ibid., 119–120.

became a breaking moment of their young adult lives, as a Russian "post-Soviet" citizen who inherited the histories of imperialism and repressions, along with the "brotherhood" rhetoric regarding other Soviet Republics, as a transnational subject who had immigrated to the West and "abandoned" the East—questions around ideas such as friendship of nations, people's revolutions, and the importance of intercultural hospitality seem to be innate to my subjectivity. I would like to think that I have learned something from this experience of reading Slavs and Tatars, that it made me feel as part of a collective process which tapped into some sort of collective agency within this public—an agency that creates an image of the world that is, even if for an instance, more hospitable and understandable due to this newly acquired knowledge. This shift in subjectivity, namely a reconsideration of contemporary politics through a lens of shared histories of Poland and Iran, would pass as a counterpublic concern within Warner's theory. At the same time, reading is an individual process in terms of how it affects a reader: every individual within a public does not read in the same way and does not come to the same conclusions, and, of course, a discussion does not necessarily lead to a decision, and decision-making does not equal action.[124] But perhaps precisely this uncertainty regarding the means and the open-ended nature of final aims is what Slavs and Tatars base their practice on—that roundabout, indirect approach to the material at hand that the collective continuously cites as its way to avoid didacticism for the sake of everyone involved.[125]

As we have seen, Slavs and Tatars' material methodology can be described as aggregative, composite, and assemblage-like in the ways the collective engages its primary source material of texts and other cultural knowledge.[126] Frank Farmer, an American scholar of rhetoric and literary studies, proposes bricolage as a methodology for counterpublics in his book *After the Public Turn: Composition, Counterpublics, and the Citizen Bricoleur*. Bricolage—a known technique in visual arts whereby a maker uses available materials to create something new—within a textual world becomes a way for "an innovative making of texts" through the use of any materials and tools available to their writer and in turn creates "heretofore unrealized

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[124] Ibid., 123.

[125] "Slavs and Tatars: Society of Rascals @ Off-Biennale 2," *ArtMagazin Online*.

[126] Joselit, "On Aggregators," 113–114.

social formations."[127] Farmer also views a counterpublic not as an entity but rather as an act of *counterpublicity*. Therefore, it is possible for a public to have a counterpublic function when it is necessary to do so, which further foregrounds the temporality and liminality of such formations.

Within the *79.89.09*. newspaper's readership and the audiences encountering the RiverBed installation in the Slavs and Tatars' exhibitions, these new and unexpected social constructions emerge in the form of concrete, albeit small and temporary, publics. Driven by the aesthetic and performative modes of address and the unconventional approach to knowledge taken by the art collective, these formations take on a counterpublic function within the larger public spheres. The logic of dialectical bricolage continues in material forms within the *Friendship of Nations* cycle's visual objects, which I will be examining in the next section.

Section 2. Crafted objects—extending a helping hand

Another compelling way that Slavs and Tatars allude to Iran's and Poland's histories of civil activism is through the visual objects created for the exhibition component of the *Friendship of Nations* project. The art collective turns to festive traditions, seeing craft as a potentially revolutionary media—in that craft work produced by the people for their own needs can be instilled with subversive meanings. Such an understanding of craft can be interpreted in a counterpublic light, where objects act as texts and address their audiences to create counterpublic formations.

Most of the visual objects of the cycle resemble objects of craft and folklore. Almost all of them are in series: the eponymous banners *Friendship of Nations* (2011), made in the tradition of commemorative banners for the Muharram festival in Iran and other Shi'ite communities; chandelier-like hangings *Solidarność Pająk Studies* (2010–2016), referencing pająki craft of rural Poland; reverse glass paintings *Study for Sarmat Surface* (2011), utilizing a technique used for religious-themed paining in both Poland and Iran; *Inrising* (2017), four images executed in a traditional Polish paper cut-out technique and depicting a mythical Persian bird; and a mirror mosaic *Resist Resisting God* (2009), reminiscent of geometric wall and ceiling decor of Shi'ite mosques and shrines. In this section, I will be considering *Solidarność Pająk Studies* and *Friendship of Nations* series and how they act as objects evocative of collective knowledge,

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[127] Frank Farmer, *After the Public Turn: Composition, Counterpublics, and the Citizen Bricoleur* (Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2013), 66 and 53.

diplomacy, and intercultural encounter within the Slavs and Tatars' exhibitions—specifically via the hybridity of their craft forms and their embedded cultural identifiers.

An essay "Craft as Citizen Diplomacy," authored by the collective and included in the final *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz* publication, introduces the artists' thinking process related to the objects for the cycle's exhibition component. From the beginning of the essay, Slavs and Tatars bring up the age-old opposition of Craft versus Art, mentioning the futility of the dichotomy and arguing for recognition of craft practices as legitimate actors in their own right.[128] This binary thinking is definitely reductive, and the collective exposes what is unfortunately a prevalent view of craft within contemporary art discourses.[129] However, it is clear what Slavs and Tatars are trying to invoke in this opposition in response to their own work: positioning craft as an honest, humble, righteous expression of the people. The collective is then continuing this effort and extending it back to its audiences—an undertaking that immediately strikes one as commendable, because such a use of craft appeals to cultural heritage, intergenerational memory, and is a direct way to "materialize belief," in the words of craft historian Glenn Adamson.[130] Values such as tradition and sharing knowledge through careful, painstaking, and skilled labour are continuously brought up. Innovation is explained not as an avant-garde rupture but as a result of continuity within the passing down of skill and knowledge between a master and an apprentice.[131] Any change, then, is a natural progression of years of hard work and diligence, and not because of one person but of a people as a whole—and this is where craft's revolutionary potential comes up. The process of craft-making, supposedly

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[128] Slavs and Tatars, "Craft as Citizen Diplomacy," in *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz*, ed. Mara Goldwyn, 2nd rev. ed. (London: BookWorks, 2017), 129–130.

[129] Glenn Adamson, in his book *The Invention of Craft*, argues that "craft" practices tend to be viewed under a revivalist lens and as an escape from modernity and industrialization, as well as opposed to "art" within binaries such as collective—individual, tradition—innovation, instinctive—intellectual, etc., thus severely limiting the understanding of diverse craft practices and their application through history. The narrative of craft in Western discourses, particularly after the Industrial Revolution in Europe, often got manipulated and redefined to fit specific ideologies (e.g. the Arts and Crafts movement). It is therefore essential to pay attention to how and to what means craft narratives are utilized, and who has the agency to drive these narratives forward. See: Glenn Adamson, *The Invention of Craft* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

[130] Adamson, *The Invention of Craft*, 231.

[131] Slavs and Tatars, "Craft as Citizen Diplomacy," 151. This is a reflection of what the collective calls its "antimodernist" approach, characterized by the methodological gestures of "looking backwards in order to advance more boldly forwards." Ibid., 133.

communal, time-consuming, and intricate, is likened to the processes of social perseverance and political resistance.[132] These histories of resistance, in Poland and Iran, are directly embedded in the *Friendship of Nations* cycle's crafted multimedia objects, which are in turn presented as mediators of communal experience and social disobedience. The collective character of these objects is also evident in the fact that almost all of the aforementioned works are series, further emphasizing repetition and continuation.

It is now necessary to get more familiarized with the specifics of the historical narratives that are brought up in the *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz* cycle, and which are pertinent to the *Solidarność Pająk Studies* and *Friendship of Nations* series of works.[133] On the Polish side of the given story, there is Soldarność: an anti-communist trade union movement that started with a strike at a shipyard in the city of Gdańsk in the August of 1980. The movement grew and ultimately resulted in the overthrow of the ruling Polish United Workers' Party in 1989 in favour of liberal democracy—all through a decade's worth of consistent civil resistance. Catholicism, as the country's largest religious movement, also played a major role in establishing Polish identity during this period of political struggle. Pope John Paul II, the head of Roman Catholic Church at the time, was a Pole, born Karol Józef Wojtyła. His visits to his homeland, namely those in 1979, 1983, and 1987, had a significant effect on the Polish nation in unifying and strengthening the collective identity of the country's population; the 1979 visit is often considered to have been influential in steering the Polish nation towards the Soldarność movement.[134] Slavs and Tatars also point out the Passion play—a yearly public performance of the Passion of Jesus Christ—as an example of Polish religious devoutness that has persevered

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[132] Ibid., 139.

[133] The following description is based on the contents of the *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz* publication, specifically its introduction and "79.89.09" chapters (reprint of the *79.89.09*. newspaper), both authored by Slavs and Tatars.

[134] For example, in his addresses, John Paul II brought up a number of Saints from Polish history, drawing parallels between their lives and the then-current hardships of the Polish people due to the communist regime. Reports of the events show that up to 12 million people participated in the public gatherings during the Pope's 1979 visit and that, as a result, the participants felt supported in their individual beliefs and values and in solidarity with each other. See: James Ramon Felak, "Pope John Paul II, the Saints, and Communist Poland: The Papal Pilgrimages of 1979 and 1983," *Catholic Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 557; Adam Biela and Jerome J. Tobacyk, "Self-Transcendence in the Agoral Gathering: A Case Study of Pope John Paul II's 1979 Visit to Poland," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 27, no. 4 (Fall 1987): 404.

through centuries and became a more organized practice after the country regained its independence from the Austrian, Russian, and Prussian Empires in 1918.[135]

From here, the collective identifies connections between Poland and Iran and their social histories. The most prominent Iranian traditions that the collective works with are those related to Muharram, the month of grieving in Islam, and its ritualistic and festive performances of *ta'zieh*. Ta'zieh performances stage the historic Battle of Karbala of the 7th century and the death of Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī, who is the grandson of Prophet Muhammad and one of the most central figures in Shi'ism (a branch of Islam that is the official state religion in Iran).[136] Muharram rituals took on additional significance in the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the country's Green Movement of 2009, where the narratives around the martyrdom of Husayn—regarded as an act of ultimate sacrifice and resistance against evil—were mobilized by the respective opposition parties.[137] Therefore, the Catholic heritage displayed at Polish Passion plays and the Gdańsk strike and the Islamic Muharram processions in Iran are presented in the work of Slavs and Tatars as powerful sources of communal belonging and dedication (based on religious identity), the reparative action of public grieving, and are also linked to political agitation.

Recent public sphere theory has turned toward the examination of the role of religion within the public sphere—an aspect that had been largely ignored in the early days of this field of study, as the public was defined in strictly secular terms.[138] The current consensus is that religion should be viewed not as separate from the public life of a society (under the guise of it being a private affair) or antithetical to the ideal of a secular democratic state (a reverberation of the

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[135] Slavs and Tatars, "Polish Taziyeh," in *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz*, ed. Mara Goldwyn, 2nd rev. ed. (London: BookWorks, 2017), 123.

[136] Ta'zieh can also be spelled as ta'ziyeh, ta'ziah, or similarly in its English transliteration. As Peter Chelkowski explains, "'Ta'ziyeh' is a verbal noun from the Arabic *'azza* meaning to 'mourn,' 'console,' 'express sympathy with.' In some countries such as Iran, it denotes a theatrical production of a Shiite passion play." See: Peter J. Chelkowski, Editor's introduction to *Eternal Performance: Ta'ziyeh and Other Shiite Rituals*, edited by Peter J. Chelkowski (London: Seagull Books, 2010), ix.

[137] Firouzeh Mirrazavi, "Ta'zieh Performance (On the Occasion of Ashura)," Iran Review, October 11, 2016, http://www.iranreview.org/content/Documents/Ta'zieh_Performance_In_Iranian_ Islamic_ Culture.htm/; Elizabeth L. Rauh, "Thirty Years Later: Iranian Visual Culture from the 1979 Revolution to the 2009 Presidential Protests," *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 1324.

[138] See the volume *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, eds. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Vanantwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), esp. Introduction for a review of this recent discussion and *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere* online journal [https://tif.ssrc.org/] for more on the topic.

Enlightenment's ideas in the Western world) but instead should be examined as one of the many constituents of the society's norms, traditions, and social behaviour of its citizens.[139] Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor particularly points out how religion often acts as a strong basis of national identity and communal belonging on an individual level, thus contributing to a constitution of one's political identity.[140] This mode of belonging informs what Taylor calls the *social imaginary* one partakes in—"the normal expectations we have of each other, […] some sense of how we all fit together in carrying out the common practice."[141] American sociologist Craig Calhoun further speculates on the significance of religion on the cosmopolitan imaginary, writing:

> Cosmopolitanism is not realistically imaginable as the transcendence of all forms of belonging. […] Global solidarity will be achieved—if it is ever achieved—by transformation of religion and other forms of cultural belonging rather than by escape from them. And it will be achieved on the basis of hope and critical perspectives and solidarity that inform public reason but are not produced simply from within it.[142]

Thus religion can be not only a foundation to the forms of belonging within a society but also a source of mutual solidarity that expands into a multicultural and multinational concern. At the same time, an appeal to religious belonging invokes affective and spiritual aspects of one's individual and communal sense of reason—a rather counterpublic approach within a secular understanding of today's world.

Slavs and Tatars offer their own series of crafted objects—vernacular forms to Polish and Iranian cultures—that are positioned within these historical and social contexts to acquire a new dimension of meaning. Guided by the collective's overarching ambition of sharing experience and knowledge, the *Solidarność Pająk Studies* chandeliers and *Friendship of Nations* banners exist as pointers to the experiences of collective struggle and as indicators of what can be learned

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[139] Craig Calhoun, "Cosmopolitanism and the Ideal of Postsecular Public Reason," *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere*, published February 11, 2008, https://tif.ssrc.org/2008/02/11/cosmopolitanism-and-the-ideal-of-postsecular-public-reason/.

[140] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 193–194. Taylor further develops his concept of the modern social imaginary within the context of contemporary belief and secularism in his book *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), see esp. section "Modern Social Imaginaries."

[141] Ibid., 24.

[142] Calhoun, "Cosmopolitanism and the Ideal."

from these events. They are shared, to follow the collective's poetic terms, as gifts: from one nation to another on the imagined international scale, and from the collective to the exhibition's audience in the "real" and local institutional scope.

Interestingly, Slavs and Tatars identify their craft series as oppositional to "the transactional," due to their purpose as votive or diplomatic gifts.[143] However, cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, in his seminal essay "Commodities and the Politics of Value," brings attention to the notion of a gift and how it often gets lost within the positivist attitude attributed to it. Appadurai problematizes gift-giving, which is often seen in simplified terms such as "reciprocity" and "sociability," by regarding it as an object which still exists within the conception of commodity—or "any *thing* intended for exchange."[144] Gift-giving is an exchange process that is not merely spontaneous or an act of hospitality but rather expects a certain temporal continuation of a resulting relationship between the involved parties (a calculation).[145] It is important to look at any commodity, including a gift, and its social life as a series of commodity situations, where the object's "exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature."[146] It is therefore worth examining the gift functions of *Friendship of Nations'* craft objects: their social aspects and what lies within the notion of their exchangeability.

Gift exchange has historically been an important material expression of political diplomacy and "a vehicle for the establishment of shared values and material and visual experiences" between parties, often in a transnational, transcultural context.[147] The practice is centuries-old: the gift-exchange between rulers and royal courts range from foodstuffs to textiles and precious metals to exquisite objects made by the best craftsmen of a gifting community or

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[143] Slavs and Tatars, "Craft as Citizen Diplomacy," 134.

[144] Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 9, 11. Italics added.

[145] Ibid., 12.

[146] Ibid., 13.

[147] Zoltán Biederman, Anne Gerritsen, and Giorgio Riello, introduction to *Global Gifts and the Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia*, ed. Zoltán Biederman, Anne Gerritsen, and Giorgio Riello (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1.

nation.[148] Today, the practice still continues, and is a shining example of soft power executed by nation-states over each other: for example, China engages in what is known as the "panda diplomacy" since the 1950s, wherein its government gifts pandas to their ally states, or the incident in 2011 when the French president Nicolas Sarkozy gave the U.S.'s Barack Obama gifts in value of more than forty thousand dollars, receiving merely a collection of DVDs in return.[149] Evidently, gifts (as carriers of symbolic meaning) participate directly in the systems of value and power, so moments of gift exchange can become moments where discrepancies and imbalances of power become evident.[150]

Diplomacy and official gift-giving, of course, are tied to the concept of statehood, a structure that does not exist within the world of the *Friendship of Nations* cycle, since the exchange of gifts is proposed and imagined by the collective and not by official nation representatives or peoples of the given countries themselves. The gift's calculative dimension within this world, however, is a good indication of what is at stake. The created objects are more often than not an amalgam of a craft from one culture with added symbols and imagery from another. These embedments and modifications within the Slavs and Tatars' series create hybridized cultural symbols that can be read by both Polish and Iranian people. They become the material groundwork for an imaginary discourse between two disparate nations, addressing an imagined public. Thus, the proposed moment of gift exchange, encapsulated within the objects, is a poignant moment of an encounter: of multicultural differences inhabiting one physical space and making apparent both the distances and closeness between each other. Ideally, the calculation would mean an ongoing productive relationship between the two parties, where this dialectical relationship—and not a binary opposition—comes into its own. I would like to continue this discussion with the analysis of the particular forms and connotations of the *Solidarność Pająk Studies* and *Friendship of Nations* object series.

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[148] Ibid., 6–22.

[149] Elias Groll, "Let Slip the Dogs of Diplomacy!," *Foreign Policy*, published November 26, 2018, https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/26/let-slip-the-dogs-of-diplomacy/; Harriet Rudolph, "Entangled Objects and Hybrid Practices? Material Culture as a New Approach to the History of Diplomacy," in *Material Culture in Modern Diplomacy from the 15th to the 20th Century*, ed. Harriet Rudolph and Gregor M. Metzig (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 5.

[150] Biederman, Gerritsen, and Riello, 2.

i. Case study: pająki

The political significance of Polish folk culture and its traditions lies within its role in building and maintaining cultural identity of the nation.[151] This is particularly pertinent given the history of the region, which has been continuously under the rule of other European empires throughout 18th–19th centuries, and, in the 20th century, suffered through the invasion by Nazi Germany of 1939 and then the post–WWII Soviet-backed communist rule. A turn to craft, as well as to the study of ethnography in the 19th century, became a way of "validation of Polish nationhood" in the absence of sovereign statehood.[152] Even during the Stalinist years of the Soviet Union, craft traditions and folklore were highly regarded and encouraged due to its peasant roots and freedom from the bourgeois associations of studio art, thus fitting comfortably within the official ideology.[153] However, state-approved folk art more often than not represented peasantry and its vernacular culture as unchangeable and suspended in time, creating a very specific version of a given craft's "authenticity."[154] During the years of Solidarność, the movement's influence spread across the nation not only via its political print but also through folklore (via anonymous inscriptions, songs, poems, and literature that came out of the Gdańsk Shipyard strike), which used national and liturgical expressions of identity to its own advantage as a point of difference from the Communist Bloc and the USSR.[155] Indeed, the descriptions of the Gdańsk strike depict the atmosphere as festive and ritualistic: with its gates decorated with icons, portraits, banners, flowers and flower wreaths—similar to the spirit of the decor in a traditional Polish home (figs. 19 and 20 respectively).[156] Perhaps this is why Slavs and Tatars

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[151] Robert Gary Minnich, "Chapter 1: Aspects of Polish Folk Culture," in *Aspects of Polish Folk Culture: An Anthology of Contemporary Research from The Department of Slavic Ethnography, Cracow*, ed. Robert Gary Minnich, *Bergen Studies in Social Anthropology* 38: 1987 (Bergen: Department of Social Anthropology, University of Bergen, 1987), 5.

[152] Ibid.

[153] David Crowley, "Stalinism and Modernist Craft in Poland," *Journal of Design History* 11, no. 1 (1998): 75.

[154] Ibid., 76.

[155] Czesław Robotycki, "Art A Vista," in *Aspects of Polish Folk Culture: An Anthology of Contemporary Research from The Department of Slavic Ethnography, Cracow*, ed. Robert Gary Minnich, *Bergen Studies in Social Anthropology* 38: 1987 (Bergen: Department of Social Anthropology, University of Bergen, 1987), 67, 71, 76.

[156] Ibid., 69–71.

chose pająki: picking up its narrative of celebration and communal belonging and then extending it in the logic of cultural diplomacy.

The Polish craft tradition of *pająki* (translating to "spiders") are chandelier- or mobile-like constructions meant to be hung from a ceiling in a rural home. Historically, they were crafted as decoration for harvest festivals or various holidays, mainly Christmas and Easter, and communal celebrations like weddings and christenings. Since very limited records of Polish pre-19th century ethnographic practices exist, the specific origins of the craft and its development are largely a matter of speculation. It is clear that the tradition is widespread and diverse: similar craft forms can be found throughout Europe and beyond, especially in the Baltic and Scandinavian regions, such as the Lithuanian *sodai* (fig. 21) or Finnish *himmeli* (fig. 22).[157]

Pająki were primarily constructed out of straw, with other readily-available materials such as dried beans and grains, flowers, egg-shells, feathers, coloured paper, and later cloth ribbons and tinfoil used as decorative elements on top of the basic structure (fig. 23).[158] The shape of the pająki and the materials used depended largely on the geographical region, as well as the time period. The craft must have developed out of earlier pagan traditions, and the preceding iterations of pająki were used to celebrate solstices.[159] Additionally, pająki and their specific elements had magical and protective qualities, warding off evil spirits and witches.[160] Polish folk stories and superstitions—such as killing a spider brings bad weather or bad luck—stem from the belief that spiders are useful creatures and refer to the symbolic meanings of

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[157] Stefan Lew, "Pająki," in *Malowanki ludowe, pająki i kwiaty wsi Rzeszowskiej [Folk painting, spiders and flowers of the Rzeszów region]* (Brzozów: Brzozowskie Towarzystwo Kultury w Brzozowie, 1970), 8; Richard H. Hulan, "Good Yule: The Pagan Roots of Nordic Christmas Customs," *Folklife Center News* 11, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 7; "Straw Art – Šiaudinukai," Lithuanian Folk Art Institute, accessed April 10, 2019, https://ltfai.org/lithuanian-folk-art/straw-art-siaudinukai/.

[158] Sula Benet, *Song, Dance, and Customs of Peasant Poland* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1951), 95–96; "Plastyka zdobnicza na Lubelszczyźnie [Decorative art in the Lublin region]," Muzeum Lubelskie w Lublinie, accessed October 24, 2018, https://www.muzeumlubelskie.pl/Dzialy_muzeum/Dzial_Kultury_Materialnej_I_Duchowej/Sekcja_Etnografii/Zbiory_etnograficzne/Zarys_etnograficzny_Lubelszczyzny_/Plastyka_zdobnicza_na_Lubelszczyznie-1-430-56_154_24_64_73.html/.

[159] Lew, "Pająki," 8.

[160] Ibid., 9.

spider–the–insect and spider–the–decoration.[161] The chandelier-like crafted pająk was a form most prominent in the beginning of the 20th century and is perhaps the most popular one today; it is thought to be inspired by the chandeliers found in bourgeois homes, palaces, and churches of the time.[162] Thus the rural pająk became somewhat of a status symbol, where crafters (who were mostly women) would create complex and colourful structures to achieve the most lushly decorated household.[163]

We can now turn our attention to the pająki made by Slavs and Tatars, a series of objects titled *Solidarność Pająk Study*. In "Craft as Citizen Diplomacy," the collective particularly singles out pająki-making as an ultimate example of "diligence, moderation, and slowness—a bona fide trifecta of Polishness."[164] *Pająk Study*'s versions of the chandelier creations continue on this idea of a slow-burn, grassroots spirit of resistance, now mixing the common forms of pająki with Shi'a and Persian symbols and references.[165]

Comparing the Slavs and Tatars' reinterpretations of pająki to the traditional Polish forms, the first difference that makes itself apparent is the fact that several of the *Solidarność Pająk Studies* are executed in black or dark brown (as can be seen with *Study 2*, *6*, and *7* in fig. 24), and are thus in stark contrast with the bright colours of the conventional spider chandelier.

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[161] Paulina Szymczewska, "Przesądy polskie, wierzenia Słowian wciąż aktualne? Zabobony i przesądy w Polsce. Pawie pióra i bociany, sprawdź! [Are Polish superstitions and Slavic beliefs still current? Superstitions in Poland. Check out the peacock feathers and storks!]," Dziennik Polski, published November 27, 2017, last updated May 27, 2018, https://dziennikpolski24.pl/przesady-polskie-wierzenia-slowian-wciaz-aktualne-zabobony-i-przesady-w-polsce-pawie-piora-i-bociany-sprawdz/ar/12640074/.

[162] "Kwiatami i pająkami izby przystrajano... Tradycyjne zdobnictwo wnętrz [Flowers and spiders decorated the House... Traditional interior decor]," Muzeum Lubelskie w Lublinie, accessed October 24, 2018, https://www.muzeumlubelskie.pl/Archiwum_wystaw_/Kwiatami_i_pajakami_izby_przystrajano_Tradycyjne_zdobnictwo_wnetrz-2-523-44.html/. In fact, Polish encyclopaedia entries for "pająk" cite the light chandelier as one of the meanings of the word, see: *Encyklopedyja Powszechna*, 1st ed., s.v. "Pająk" (Warsaw: S. Orgelbrand, 1865); Aleksander Brückner, *Encyklopedia Staropolska* 2, 1st ed., s.v. "Pająk" (Warsaw: Trzaska, Evert i Michalski, 1939).

[163] Ibid.

[164] Slavs and Tatars, "Craft as Citizen Diplomacy," 139.

[165] Interestingly, scholarship of Polish literature of the mid-19th century notes that the spider metaphor was censored at the time: it was seen as exemplary of freedom and thus resistance, since a spider can weave its web anywhere it pleases. See: Magdalena Rudkowska, "Pająk. O wyobraźni twórczej Józefa Ignacego Kraszewskiego (wstęp do rozważań) [The Spider. Józef Ignacy Kraszewski's Creative Imagination (An Introduction to the Essay)]," *Napis* 21 (2005): 69-70.

Black is one of the two colours associated with Shi'a Islam, with the other one being green.[166] During the month of Muharram, black is heavily present in the spaces of prayer and commemoration, and Shi'ites are also encouraged to wear black clothing. The *Solidarność Pająk Study 7* is further decorated with wooden prayer beads and Christmas baubles; similar baubles and chandeliers are also used in decorating public spaces where communities gather during Muharram.[167] *Study 9* and *10* are purely geometric constructions out of thin brass, copper, and aluminum tubes, directly referencing the original straw material of earliest spider chandeliers which were free from other embellishments (fig. 25). The forms of these pająki are similar to those of the craft's close relatives, himmeli and sodai; they are also reminiscent of the patterns guided by the principles of sacred geometry of Islam, which is most prominent in mosque and shrine architecture. Geometry in Islamic cultures is "a rational system of abstract thought fundamental to Islamic philosophy" and reflects the values of unity, infinity, beauty, as well as order and multiplicity through shapes and numbers that each have its symbolic significance.[168] The sensory experience of Islamic geometry-based art is additionally linked to introspection: "to trace the origin in creation the direction is not backwards but inwards. The seemingly abstract forms enhance the quality of contemplation with its unbroken rhythm and endless interweaving."[169] This thoughtful slowness of (self-)reflection is echoed and brought about by the forms of *Solidarność Pająk Studies 9* and *10*. Contrastingly, *Pająk Studies 3* and *4* are full of colour and festive spirit: embellished with satin-finish ribbons, fringe trim, and tassels with metal bead details; the fringe and tassels are a nod to Persian carpets and textiles (figs. 26 and 27).[170] During the 10th Sharjah Biennial, where the *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz* project was first exhibited, these two pająki hung in a small darkened room, accessible right from

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[166] Mohammed K. Fazel, "The Politics of Passions: Growing up Shia," *Iranian Studies* 21, no. 3/4 (1988): 46.

[167] Ibid., 47.

[168] Rasheed Araeen, "Preliminary Notes for the Understanding of the Historical Significance of Geometry in Arab/Islamic Thought, and its Suppressed Role in the Genealogy of World History," *Third Text* 24, no. 5 (2010): 509; Nazli Ganizadeh Hesar, Nasim Najaf Golipour Kalantari, and Mortaza Ahmadi, "Study of Sacred Geometry in Islamic Architecture," *Cumhuriyet University Faculty of Science Science Journal (CSJ)* 36, no. 3 (2015): 3804, 3806–3810.

[169] Schalk le Roux and Nico Botes, "Number, Point and Space: the Islamic Tradition," *de arte* 75 (2007): 62.

[170] Slavs and Tatars, "Craft as Citizen Diplomacy," 134.

the street and the inside of which was completely covered by large sheets of green fabric and a strip of Muharram banner running beneath the ceiling (figs. 28 and 29).[171] The space imitated that of a communal room used for prayer and Muharram ceremonies in Iran (figs. 30 and 31). In this instance, the joyful pająki occupy an unusual space for themselves, specifically one that elicits mourning and contemplation; such a simultaneity of two contexts makes for a surprising encounter. Within this moment of a seeming conflict, the project exposes its motivations—its attempt to bring to light similarities and differences between vastly distant cultural practices and forms of belonging that they evoke.

In her book *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, Sara Ahmed puts forward a new mode of hospitality and communicative ethics dependent on an embodied sense of unsettling, which in turn stems from unknowing and surprise; such hospitality is "premised on the surprise of an opening or gift, [and] would begin by admitting to how the assimilation of others, and differentiation between others, might already affect who or what may arrive, then or now, here or there."[172] This opens up a space of encounter to a temporal and collective continuity, as any given encounter is far from singular: each party brings with them their identity, histories, and relationships to others and the larger world. Such approach opposes the often prevalent stranger fetishism within an encounter with the unknown, where one tends to detach the other from their respective contexts and worlds, which leads to that other to become the "dangerous other" or "exotic," desirable, and even consumable in their strangeness.[173] With awareness of this continuity and by opening the dialogue to alliances "yet to be formed," we can move beyond simple oppositions of sameness and difference.[174] It is exactly within this collective aspect that a possibility for productive conversations lies; as Ahmed writes, "the collective then is not simply about what 'we' have in common—or what 'we' do not have in

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[171] "Sharjah Biennial 10: Plot for a Biennial," guidebook, Sharjah Art Foundation, accessed February 18, 2019, http://sharjahart.org/images/uploads/downloads/SB10-guidebook-final.pdf.

[172] Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 151.

[173] Ibid., 114.

[174] Ibid., 179–80.

common. […] Collectivity then is ultimately tied to the secrecy of the encounter: it is not about proximity or distance, but a getting closer which accepts the distance, and puts it to work."[175]

Here, if we are to follow this theorization of an encounter, the *Solidarność Pająk Studies* should be understood as being put to work within one, and only gain meaning in the process of this meeting. The pająki do not represent a multicultural hybridization of Polish and Iranian identities, and do not claim absolute likeness between the historic and cultural contexts of the two countries or their peoples—to do so would be to oversimplify and to generalize their respective complexities. Rather, the craft objects mediate the encounter between the subjects, initiating that imaginary discourse between the two nations and extending it to the audiences of the exhibitions, and therefore form a certain collectivity—presenting us with the strange and the surprising, and, in Ahmed's words, "what it is that we may yet have in common."[176]

ii. Case study: Muharram banners

Similar processes get conjured though another group of crafted objects by Slavs and Tatars: ten textile banners, *Friendship of Nations*, stand as the title series for the cycle's exhibitions. The banners present in themselves an amalgamation of traditions, beliefs, and protests, inscribed in visual and symbolic terms. The objects strongly reference Muharram wall hangings of Shi'a Islam, or *parchams*, although similar forms of banners get used in Catholic religious outdoor processions, such as for the Passion of Christ plays or *Corpus Christi* feasts.

Historically, textile production and the crafts associated with it have been a rich source of economic survival, creative output, and cultural significance for the peoples of the Persian Empire and the greater Iranian Plateau regions.[177] Textile weaving, dyeing, woodblock printing, cloth hand-painting, and embroidery are diverse craft forms found throughout the area. Textile crafts were performed by women as part of housework, by cottage industry in rural areas, or in

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[175] Ibid.

[176] Ibid., 181.

[177] Iran Ala Firouz and Sumi Gluck, "Textile," in *A Survey of Persian Handicraft: A Pictorial Introduction to the Contemporary Folk Arts and Art Crafts of Modern Iran*, ed. Jay Gluck and Sumi Hiramoto Gluck (New York: The Bank Melli Iran, 1977), 177.

organized professional guilds, which largely consisted of men, in urban centres.[178] Wall hangings as interior decoration, embellished with stitch embroidery and fabric appliqué, were part of an established craft form by the 19th century; these ranged in their stitched imagery from flower motifs and arabesque patterns, to images of *Khorshid Khonum* (a figure symbolizing sun, light, and beauty) to bless a household during celebrations or to ward off young children from ill wishes, to pictorial records of a tribe's history for nomadic communities such as the Turkmen.[179]

A parcham is a type of wall hanging created specifically for Muharram commemorations and is used to decorate the interior and exterior spaces of mosques, pray rooms, communal gathering spaces, and private homes (fig. 31).[180] It is unclear when Muharram banners first appeared, but in her study of parchams, religious and ritual studies scholar Ingvild Flaskerud notes that many banners she came across in the early 2000s have been passed down through generations and used since the '50s.[181] The parchams follow a distinct iconography associated with Shi'ism and Muharram and can be considered as "visual expressions of religious poetry."[182] Customarily, the banners' background fabric is black (to evoke the feeling of grief) or green, and they feature either imagery of the Battle of Karbala, portraits of the first Imams and other members of the holy family, important mosques or shrines, or calligraphic emblems.[183] The wall hangings can be personalized through the inclusion of the buyer's name in the embroidery, or the names of the individuals, families, or community groups that the banners are meant for (fig. 32).

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[178] Hans E. Wulff, *The Traditional Crafts of Persia* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1966), 217. Wulff notes of embroidery in particular: "as it is generally not an industry or a craft but work done by women in the house, little is known about its development," signifying that the recognition of craftwork as a form of professional employment has historically been reserved for men only, even though first records of Persian embroidery appear as early as the 12th century. Iranologist and historian Willem Floor, in his study of the Persian textile industry, claims that in late 19th–early 20th centuries, embroidery work was done exclusively by women, supposedly outside of the guild system, see: Willem Floor, *The Persian Textile Industry in Historical Perspective, 1500–1925* (Paris: Société d'Histoire de l'Orient / L'Harmattan, 1999), 30.

[179] Iran Ala Firouz, "Needlework," in *A Survey of Persian Handicraft*, 218, 236, 252.

[180] Ingvild Flaskerud, *Visualizing Belief and Piety in Iranian Shiism* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 89. While Flaskerud calls the banners "parchams," they are most often referred to as Muharram banners, flags or wall hangings in English sources; "parcham" [پرچم] in Farsi simply means flag or banner.

[181] Ibid., 89.

[182] Ibid., 98.

[183] Ibid., 89.

Parchams are often given as votive gifts, symbolizing the act of promise and commitment to the receiving party or as a moral and material help offering.[184] Additionally, parchams can be purchased at the holy sites of pilgrimages as mementos of the experience or as souvenirs for family and friends.[185] As it can be seen, these are ritualistic material objects that participate in processes of consumption, as well as validate beliefs and offer communal and self- identification for their buyers as a result of this exchange.[186]

Flaskerud, in her analysis of Shi'ite material culture in Iran, writes of the power of imagery (depicted on the banners) that accompanies the historical and religious narratives used within Muharram:

> The story is felt. The audience of Shia verbal and visual storytelling practices does not simply passively receive the message, but interacts with storytelling by responding to it. Such participation may activate feelings of personal pain, as well as sympathy with the suffering of others. Embodied emotions are thus part of the memory activated by many viewers when they engage with interpreting images. These emotions are personally inscribed and experienced, but are also part of the collective devotional pattern related to the Shia dogma of redemption.[187]

Moreover, the public often directly handles the parchams, touching the wall hangings before and after rituals or prayers.[188] Parchams and other decorative objects become mise-en-scène devices for the overarching collective processes of grief, commemoration, and celebration; they play a direct role in evoking an embodied affective response from their public.

Performance rituals and ta'zieh plays constitute a larger cultural framework of the month of Muharram. Muharram, and its tenth day in particular, 'Ashura, is one of the most poignant moments in the life of Shi'a communities. Ta'zieh plays, performed throughout the month, culminate at 'Ashura, when they depict the events of the Battle of Karbala: the tragic and violent martyrdom of Hussain ibn ʿAlī, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, along with other male members of the holy family, at the hands of Yazid I on this day in 680 AD (fig. 33). This historical event lies at the core of Shi'ism itself, becoming the basis for the narrative of eternal

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[184] Ibid., 180.

[185] Mona Moufahim and Maria Lichrou, "Pilgrimage, Consumption and Rituals: Spiritual Authenticity in a Shia Muslim Pilgrimage," *Tourism Management* 70 (2019): 322–332.

[186] Ibid., 329–330.

[187] Flaskerud, *Visualizing Belief and Piety*, 154.

[188] Ibid., 219.

struggle against unjust power and tyranny.[189] Religious studies scholar Mahmoud M. Ayoub explains the significance of the ritual, and of the figure of Hussain specifically, to Persian and the larger Shi'a community:

> The ʿĀšūrāʾ cultus in Shiʿite Islam is based on an historical event and commemorated the death not of a god, but of a man who was intensely involved in the life of an actual community. […] Whatever its origins or relations to other religious phenomena, the ʿĀšūrāʾ cultus is yet another instance in human history of man's attempt to deal creatively and meaningfully with his ephemeral condition.[190]

Moreover, UNESCO includes ta'zieh into its List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and adds that its traditions, symbolism, and recognizable forms throughout the Shi'a culture make the dramatic art "a common language for different communities, promoting communication, unity and creativity."[191]

The collective nature of the emotional response to and the sense of self-identification with this narrative are continued through ta'zieh's reenactments. Scholars of ta'zieh point to a specific relationship between the plays' audience and the performers, along with the performance itself, and identify a unique relational dynamic between them: since there is no clear (physical) divide between the stage and the crowd, the audience acquires a "liminal status […] as performer-spectator" and becomes a crucial part of the plays through its acts of empathic grieving.[192] The ta'zieh is thus a means to continuously re-establish the ideological, moral, and communal order and also provides a cathartic output for the audience, who is able to grieve not

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[189] Hamid Dabashi, "Ta'ziyeh as Theatre of Protest," in *Eternal Performance: Ta'ziyeh and Other Shiite Rituals*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (London: Seagull Books, 2010), 182. It is the Battle of Karbala and the consequent events that became the ultimate divide between the Sunni and Shi'a branches of Islam, and to this day Shi'ism considers itself to be in opposition to greater forces—in religious, cultural, and political terms.

[190] Mahmoud M. Ayoub, "'Āšūrā'," *Encyclopæddia Iranica* 2/8 (London: Routledge, 1987), available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/asura/, last updated August 17, 2011.

[191] "Ritual Dramatic Art of Ta'zīye," UNESCO: Intangible Cultural Heritage, accessed June 22, 2019, https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/ritual-dramatic-art-of-taziye-00377/.

[192] William O. Beeman, "Cultural Dimensions of Performance Conventions in Iranian Ta'ziyeh," in *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran,* ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (New York: University Press, 1979), 27.

only for the martyred members of the holy family but for its personal losses and struggles as well.[193]

The Karbala narrative of resistance against evil and the ultimate sacrifice of Hussain for all believers continues to play its part within the Iranian society. Throughout the country's history, political actors have influenced and even manipulated the meanings behind the processions and the public's participation in them. In the 1930s, Muharram grieving rituals were restricted and frowned upon by the government of the newly-established Pahlavi dynasty, whose rule looked towards modernization and Westernization.[194] During the 1978–79 Iranian Revolution, the Karbala narrative was used by Shi'a clergy to mobilize the nation to resist the monarchy and the regime's tyrannical ways.[195] After the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran and the lift of the previous restrictions, ta'zieh plays have become more rigorous in their forms and more institutionalized in their organization.[196] Moreover, as medical anthropologists Mary-Jo Delvecchio Good and Byron J. Good write on the role of the state on the nation's emotional discourse in the decade after the Revolution, "the Islamic state in Iran today *mandates* a sad demeanour and expressions of grief as a sign of religious and political commitment."[197] Muharram became an openly political tool used by the governing body, and the Muharram iconography now reads as a visual form of political allegiance. This strategy was redeployed during the Green Movement of Iran in 2009 and its widespread protests against the re-election of then-acting president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The traditional symbolism and iconography of

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[193] Ibid., 30. Of course, not every member of contemporary Iranian society participates in the Muharram commemorations fully or at all; reportedly, some use this time as an opportunity to go around certain societal prohibitions, such as young men and women meeting and socializing despite the presence of the "morality police." See: Ali Reza Eshraghi, "Iranians under the Islamic Regime: More or Less Religious?," *AlJazeera*, published August 6, 2013, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/08/20138512624781648.html/.

[194] Peter J. Chelkowski, "Dasta," *Encyclopædia Iranica* 7/1 (London: Routledge, 1994), available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/dasta/, last updated November 18, 2011. *Dasta* is "the most common term for a ritual procession held in the Islamic lunar month of Moḥarram (q.v.) and the following month of Ṣafar."

[195] Ibid.

[196] This conclusion can also be made in comparing the descriptions of ta'zieh in the volume edited by Chelkowski in 1979 and those in the more recent publication, also edited by Chelkowski, of 2010.

[197] Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good and Byron J. Good, "Ritual, the State, and the Transformation of Emotional Discourse in Iranian Society," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 12 (1988): 45.

opposition and resistance against larger forces of evil were mobilized once again, simultaneously subverting the government's previous claim to those images and thus their connotations of righteousness.[198] The Muharram processions and events, along with the visual and material objects associated with them, now carry not only complex ritual and religious significance but are further implicated in socio-political mechanisms and economies. This context cannot be dismissed when considering the parcham-like banners by Slavs and Tatars.

The *Friendship of Nations* series of banners were created in a process of conversation between the artists and banner-makers, who are the carriers of techniques and languages of these particular vernacular forms. The "Craft as Citizen Diplomacy" essay mentions that the banners were made by Polish and Iranian craft-makers and identifies two of them: the Polish tailor Anna Staniszewska from Łowicz province, who is renowned for her sewing and hand-embroidery work on religious and commemorative banners, and the Iranian tailor Agha Derakhshan, who has a shop on one of Tehran's oldest streets.[199] It is unclear how the work was split between these two makers and if each individual banner has seen the hands of both Polish and Iranian tailors.

The banners in the series *Friendship of Nations* (2011) range in their imagery, with most of them featuring text, thus alluding to parchams that feature calligraphic emblems. The banners are much more colourful than their referenced material; they use lighter and brighter colours, patterns, or images as their background or primary subject, and one is even adorned with beading (fig. 34). The text, either in Persian, Polish, English, or a combination of several languages, is either embroidered or sewed onto the base fabric by appliqué. Some of the banners rely on rather obscure references and are difficult to decipher without having the background knowledge of Iranian and Polish culture and history—making obvious the fact of their idealized address to a distinct and even imaginary public. One such banner is *Man of Iran*, which references a poster for *Man of Iron*, a 1981 Polish film on the Solidarność movement, or the *Simorgh Solidarność* banner that depicts a Shi'a mythological "soul bird" perching on the anchor-like symbol of

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[198] Rauh, "Thirty Years Later," 1324.

[199] Anna Staniszewska, *Anna Staniszewska* (artist website), accessed May 1, 2019, http://sztandary.net/; Slavs and Tatars, "Craft as Citizen Diplomacy," 140, 151.

Solidarność.[200] I will focus on several banners for my analysis: *Lahestan Nesfeh Jahan*, which is also used as a title image for the cycle's publication, and the two slogan-based *Only Solidarity and Patience Will Secure Our Victory* and *Self-Management Body*.

Lahestan Nesfeh Jahan is a banner with a dark-red velvet background (sewn onto a larger piece of black fabric like the rest of the series), completed with several embroidered elements: ornamental frame, two hands with their palms outstretched in opposite directions to each other, and a Farsi inscription in the centre, encircled by a flower wreath motif (fig. 35). The phrase "Lahestan Nesfeh Jahan"—the embroidered text—is a play on the words "Esfahan Nesfeh Jahan," which is a slogan of the Iranian city of Isfahan. The original meaning, "Isfahan [is] half of the world" is changed to "Poland half the world," reflecting commonalities within the two geographic entities while also indicating the performative hybridity that Slavs and Tatars are reaching for. The phrase is a direct allusion to the events that took place in Isfahan during World War II when thousands of Polish nationals were temporarily relocated by the USSR government to Iranian cities as refugees, and Isfahan even became known as the "City of Polish Children."[201] The mass resettlement of thousands of Poles throughout Iran's urban centres had proved to be an example of Iranian uncompromising hospitality.[202] Historian Lior Sterfeld explains the resulting Polish influence on Iran's cities: "the presence of new arrivals—including Allied troops, migrants, refugees, and aid workers—surely helped the [social, cultural, political] transformation unfold more broadly and quickly."[203] Throughout the years of WWII, and the later decades for those who had chosen to remain in Iran, the Polish communities established a diaspora with a

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[200] "Slavs and Tatars: Friendship of Nations," Independent Collectors, June 3, 2015, https://independent-collectors.com/collections/christian-kaspar-schwarm-sammlung-christian-kaspar-schwarm-slavs-and-tatars-friendship-of-nations/. Berlin-based collector Christian Kaspar Schwarm owns a complete edition of *Friendship of Nations* banner series.

[201] Mara Goldwyn, "Drafting the Bear: a Story of Persian-Polish Hospitality," in *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz*, ed. Mara Goldwyn, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Bookworks, 2017), 59. The story, of course, is not that simple nor innocent, as the history of Poles exiled to Siberia and Central Asia and, later, the history of Anders' Army proves.

[202] Many records, authored by refugees, historians, and aid workers mention a warm welcome extended to the refugees. For examples, see Lior Sternfeld, "'Poland Is Not Lost While We Still Live': The Making of Polish Iran, 1941–45," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 23, no. 3 (2018): 101–127, where Sternfeld brings up a number of testimonies; Anwar Faruqi, "Forgotten Polish Exodus to Persia," *Washington Post*, published November 23, 2000, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2000/11/23/forgotten-polish-exodus-to-persia/2b106c08-e61c-4c36-8102-fb2e114c9bff/.

[203] Sternfeld, "'Poland Is Not Lost While We Still Live'," 104.

strong presence within Iranian society, opening businesses, schools, community centres and cultural institutions, and having public media presence via its own newspapers and radio stations.[204] This influenced the larger urban sphere, mainly of Tehran and Isfahan, and even began to attract the emerging Iranian urban middle class, thus creating an environment where an intermixing of cultures and experiences became possible.

The two embroidered outstretched hands of *Lahestan Nesfeh Jahan* (one on the top and one on the bottom of the banner) facing opposite directions suggest a hospitable and amicable gesture that traverses distance. Albeit it is not quite an affirmative act of a handshake, as could be seen in an example of a Solidarność–era poster that depicts two hands holding each other at the wrists in a supportive gesture (fig. 36). However, a single hand is a powerful image in itself in traditional Shi'a iconography. Firstly, an open palm with five fingers symbolizes the five members of the holy family of Prophet Muhammad, and this *panjah* symbol is often present on top of the metal standards carried in Muharram processions.[205] Secondly, an image of a severed arm is another sign—and on the banner, this is indicated with bright blood-red edges—it alludes to the story of the martyrdom of 'Abbas, Hussain's flag bearer in the Battle of Karbala, who lost both of his arms in the fight but pressed on.[206] A disembodied hand, for Iranians, is thus a symbol of uncompromising, determined resistance and sacrifice no matter the struggle; images of bloodied hands and panjah symbols were used in both Iranian social unrest movements of 1989 and 2009 (fig. 37).[207] At the same time, an image of a palm also carries a certain meaning in the Euro-American context of social unrest and protest sentiment, such as a clenched fist, or a "V for victory" sign—a gesture that was often used by Solidarność leader Lech Wałęsa and his supporters.[208] As a whole, *Lahestan Nesfeh Jahan* brings up the histories of resistance and (religious) devotion to a specific cause, actuates a communal gesture of mutual help within the word-play of "Poland half the world," and turns to Polish (and Iranian-Polish) experience as a potential source of knowledge.

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[204] Ibid., 113.

[205] Rauh, "Thirty Years Later," 1320.

[206] Ibid., 1318.

[207] Ibid., 1322.

[208] Ibid., 1317.

The banners *Only Solidarity and Patience Will Secure Our Victory* and *Self-Management Body* directly rely on text to convey their respective messages. In *Only Solidarity*, the title text in Farsi is cut out of gold-coloured faux leather and sewed onto the green velvet banner (fig. 38). The phrase is sourced from the Gdansk Shipyard Strike; the Polish "Tylko solidarność i cierpliwość zabezpieczy nasze zwycięstwo" was a graffiti inscription on one of the outside walls of the shipyard, facing the visiting public and onlookers (fig. 39).[209] The words have travelled onto a Muharram-like banner in the form of its direct translation, an intimate act of Polish–to–Iranian exchange. *Self-Management Body*, however, takes on language differently: its words "Self-management body: your fate in your hands" are embroidered vertically onto the banner twice, in English on its right side and in the original Polish on the left (fig. 40 *A–B*). Two versions of this banner exist, with the difference being the background cloth that was used. In both cases it is a cut of an actual Muharram fabric, complete with the running patterns of Islamic inscriptions and ornament; such a fabric could be used for making individual parchams customized with embroidery or simply hanged as a continuous wall covering in communal gathering spaces and prayer rooms. The banner's fabric and imagery reference Shi'ite context and physical spaces, and thus address an Iranian public; the words, with their use of Polish and English, can be read as an encoded incantation that simultaneously extends the conversation to other audiences.

"Self-management body: your fate in your hands," where self-management can be understood as self-government or autonomy, is another slogan of Solidarność. One of the movement's programs was decentralization of the government system and a return of more direct democratic power to local and municipal bodies, a principle which continues to be of political importance in Poland to this day.[210] The legacy of "power in one's hands" is combined with the symbolic meaning of a hand in Shi'ism and Muharram narratives, making an argument for a collective challenge to unjust rule—an encounter that extends its invitation to an English-speaking audience (or, alternatively, the audience of an internationalized art world). The

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[209] Slavs and Tatars, *79.89.09.*, 3rd ed., 28.

[210] Wlodzimiercz Kocon, "Local Government in Poland—Part I: The Reform," *Social Education* 55, no. 6 (1991): 363; Cezary Wenda, "For the Sake of the Correct Shape of the Polish Government," Ełk, published June 27, 2017, http://www.elk.pl/en/aktualnosci-wpis/2013/for-the-sake-of-the-correct-shape-of-the-polish-government/.

hybridized iconography and slogans of the *Friendship of Nations* banners aim to evoke the same embodied response as the Muharram hangings and maybe even trigger a cathartic effect in their audiences. The experience of such an encounter is likened to a felt reaction of a religious experience, while the banners' imagery references the logic of civil resistance movements and multinational solidarity—conjoining the devotional and political recognitions of belonging.

Slavs and Tatars use craft forms as vessels for local knowledge that can be passed on through generations and beyond its conventional local audiences. Interestingly, both pająki of Poland and wall hangings of Iran had stemmed from craft traditions the objects of which were imbued with protective qualities and acted as communal objects of care and assurance. The *Solidarność Pająk Studies* and *Friendship of Nations* series are grounded in these meanings of protective character and are shared with their audiences with the hope of a new relate-ability forming within this process of exchange. As I have argued, the reconsidered pająki and banners act as mediators for an international, intercultural, interpersonal encounter within the exhibitions of the collective's work. The knowledge, embedded within these carefully crafted objects, performs by being an initial gift offering and akin to a glue for the resulting social contract.

Conclusion

In the latest Slavs and Tatars' cycle *Pickle Politics*, a textual work *Kwas ist das* (2016) combines several languages to create a new form for a familiar German phrase "was ist das?," instead reading: "Quaß ист дасс?"[211] Quaß, or rather *kvas(s)*, a fermented Slavic drink which can be best described as bread soda, joins a transliteration of the rest of the phrase using the Russian alphabet. The humorous nature of the work is evident perhaps only to those who speak German or Russian and know of kvas. The absurdist idea of mixing languages, strangely, works—by initiating a sense of closeness over the joke, instead of sustaining linguistic, cultural, and national barriers. *Kwas ist das* also exemplifies one of the reactions that a Slavs and Tatars' project might elicit: "so, *what is that,* exactly?"

In this thesis, I have addressed how a collective re-reading of history and the process of envisioning new interpretations constitutes the world-making function of the Slavs and Tatars' art practice. The artists' bricolage-like approach to the construction of both texts and visual forms

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[211] "Was ist das?" means "what is that?" in German; "Quaß" is a transliteration of "kvas(s)" using German letters.

ensures that a transformative effect seeps into the existing narratives of history, allowing for new, unexpected, and surprising stories to take the stage. This new knowledge is presented in a multitude of forms and is performative in the ways that it produces new realities.[212] Furthermore, this performativity is reflected in how the work engages with the audiences, constituting new social relations.

In the artistic practice of Slavs and Tatars, processes of shared reading, learning, and understanding are seen as experiential. The material and spatial setting where this knowledge is embedded becomes of great importance. Within the *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz* cycle, the exhibition spaces, the RiverBed structure, the *79.89.09*. newspaper publication, and the crafted objects of *Solidarność Pająk Studies* and *Friendship of Nations* series all comprise an environment predicated on the gesture of hospitality. With their tactile, inviting materiality, the artworks elicit an embodied response: firstly, by proposing more collective forms of being together, and, secondly, by allowing the stories to be felt with the body, to be affective on a level that is beyond the strictly rational and logical. Affect and embodiment become a driving force in the production of new understandings and knowledge. Furthermore, the embodied, subjective response of a reader or viewer brings to the foreground the fact that they are not a passive spectator but rather an "active reading subject" who is critically engaged.[213] Here, the Slavs and Tatars' work might benefit from a more in-depth analysis from the viewpoint of affect theory.

By accepting the artists' invitation to read together, the art collective's audiences become distinct publics that carry out counterpublic functions within the larger public spheres. As I've argued in this thesis, there is a productive potential to their imaginative world-making. Curator and writer Simon Sheikh contemplates the potential of art, writing: "all exhibition making is the making of a public, the imagination of a world."[214] These momentary, even if imaginary, counterpublics come into being in the given moment of an encounter between a reader and a text, a gallery-goer and an artwork, or when other readers are also involved. Within these counterpublics, belonging arises in ways that go beyond the usual shared forms of identity, such

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[213] Littau, *Theories of Reading*, 134–135.

[214] Simon Sheikh, "Constitutive Effects: the Techniques of the Curator," in *Curating Subjects*, ed. Paul O'Neill (London: Open Editions, 2007), 181–182.

as the structurally imposed concepts of nationality or culture. In the view of art historian and writer Nina Möntmann, such new modes of relation can have an effect of "a radical re-conceptualization of community" on an individual and local scale, introducing alternative ways of understanding one's place within a community and the world at large.[215] Therefore, the initial act of reading a text (or seeing an artwork) becomes politically productive through its vision of creating alternative social bonds.

The narratives presented in the art collective's cycles go against a Western-centric or binary understanding of the world and instead spotlight the richness and breadth of localisms, following an anti-exclusionary logic and extending it to global audiences. In fact, even as I've used the words "international" and "intercultural" to characterize the nature of the encounters that occur in the *Friendship of Nations* cycle, I understand how these descriptors might miss the mark. While Slavs and Tatars do call upon the histories of civil resistance of very particular people at particular moments in time, to confine these lessons to a specific cultural or national domain is to define and limit their audiences, be they imaginary or not. *Friendship of Nations* regards transnationalism and cosmopolitanism as a way of being in the contemporary world, which can be defined by its globalisms, migrations, and hybridity. This cycle of work creates an understanding of shared experience and knowledge—a hand of solidarity extended to bridge the gap of estrangement—proving that multiple and diverse forms of belonging are indeed possible, and that the new subjectivities arising as a result might as well be imperative to our shared global futures.

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[215] Nina Möntmann, "New Communities," in *New Relations in Art and Society*, ed. Friederike Wappler (Zurich: JRP | Ringier, 2011), 70.

Figures

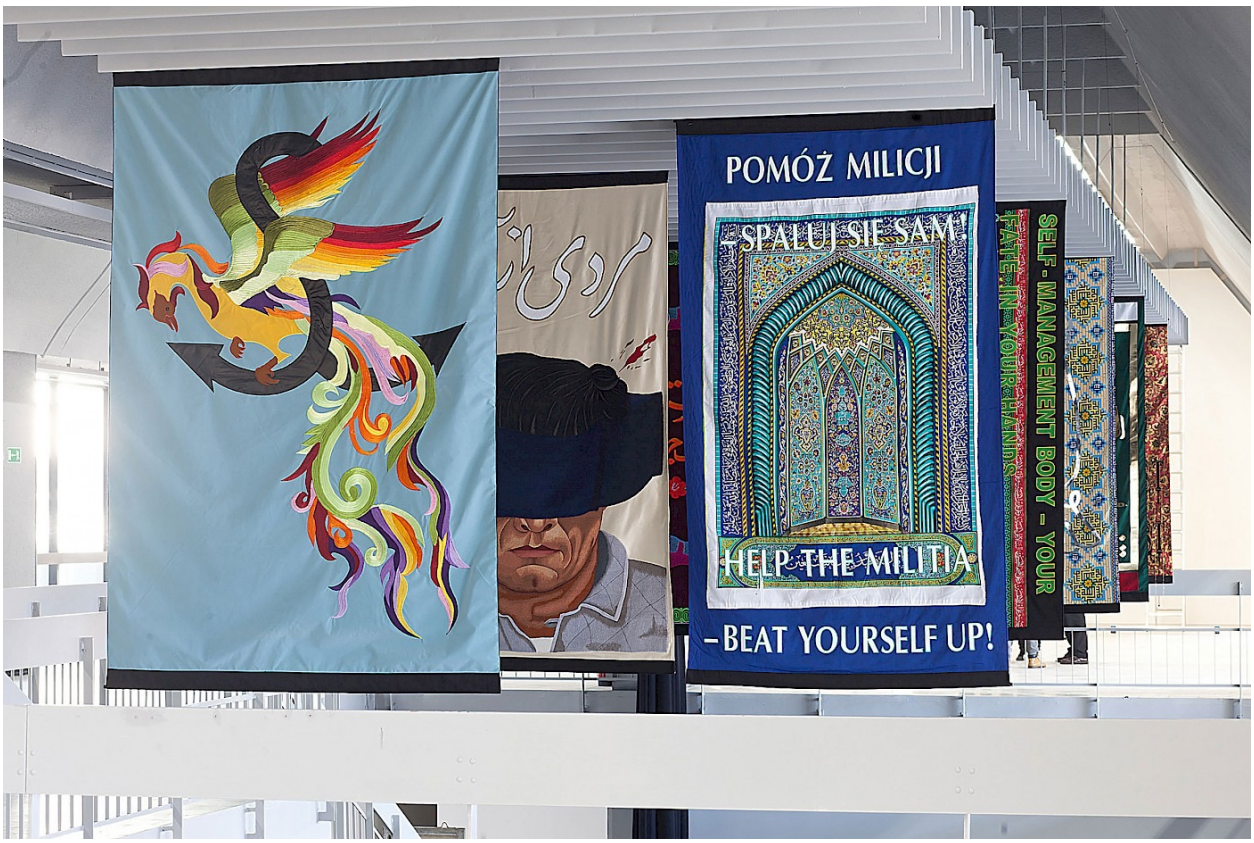
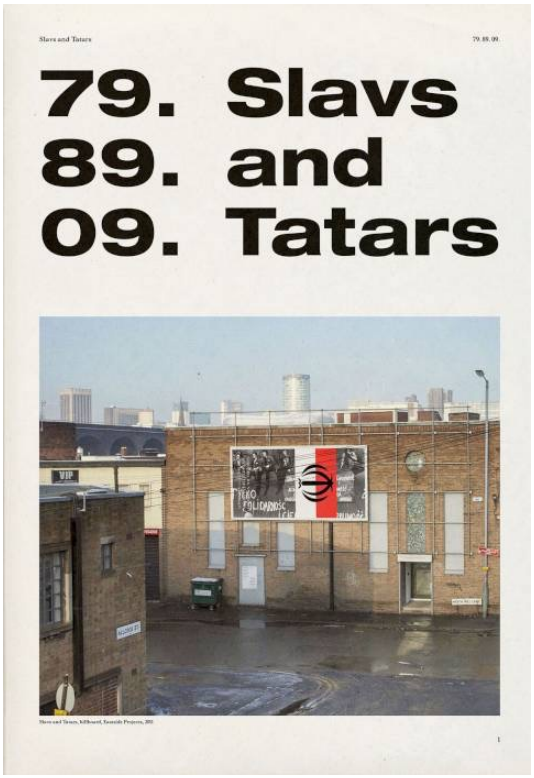


Figure 1 — Slavs and Tatars, *Friendship of Nations* banner series (2011). Exhibition view of *As You Can See: Polish Art Today* group show, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland (February 14–August 31, 2014).
Image source: Slavs and Tatars. "Friendship of Nations." Accessed May 10, 2019. https://slavsandtatars.com/cycles/friendship-of-nations/friendship-of-nations. Photo by Bartosz Stawiarski.



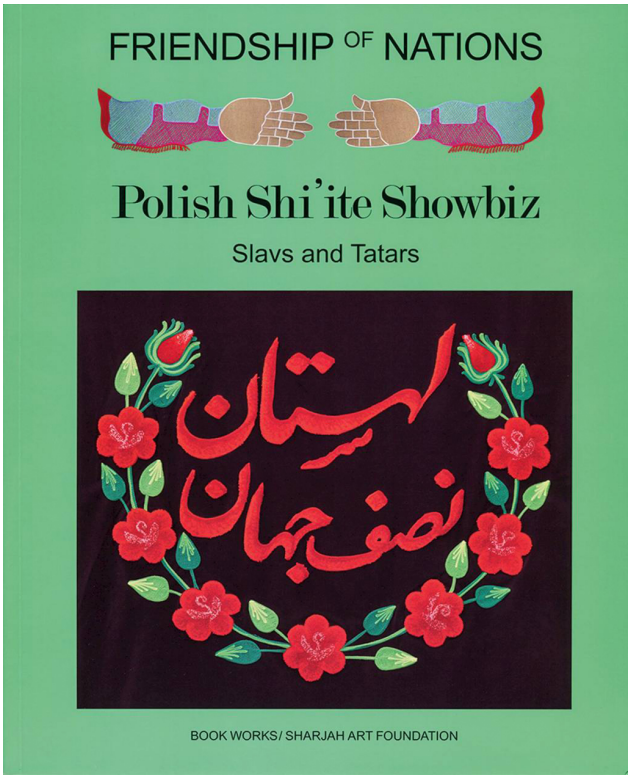


Figure 2 (left) — Slavs and Tatars, *79.89.09* (2011). The newspaper-like publication, first printed as an edition for a group show *Again, A Time Machine* at Eastside Projects gallery, Birmingham, UK (2011) and was reprinted for each consequent show associated with of the work cycle.
Image source: Slavs and Tatars. "Printed Matter." Accessed May 10, 2019. https://slavsandtatars.com/printed-matter/books/79.89.09/.

Figure 3 (right) — Slavs and Tatars, *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz* (2013). The final book to the *Friendship of Nations* work cycle.
Image source: Slavs and Tatars. "Printed Matter." Accessed May 10, 2019. https://slavsandtatars.com/printed-matter/books/friendship-of-nations/.

A.

B.

C.

Figure 4 — “Friendship of nations” imagery on Soviet posters and postcards. Counterclockwise from top:

A. A poster with the words “Peace. Democracy. Socialism” depicted, author and date unknown. Image source: Новосибирская Государственная Областная Научная Библиотека [Novosibirsk State Regional Science Library]. Accessed June 10, 2019. https://ngonb.ru/about/news/9219/.

B. Postcard, author and date unknown.
Image source: Pinterest. Submitted by user Lotta Неизвестная. Accessed June 10, 2019. https://www.pinterest.ca/pin/173599760621436376/.

C. A postcard by Iraklii Toidze, “We are for Peace” (1960).
Image source: Pinterest. Submitted by user Lotta Неизвестная. Accessed June 10, 2019. https://www.pinterest.ca/pin/173599760621436415/.

Figure 5 — Slavs and Tatars, *Dear 1979, Meet 1989* (2011). Wooden RiverBeds, afghan carpets, rahlé, reading library of Polish and Iranian books. Exhibition view of *Again, A Time Machine* group show, Eastside Projects gallery, Birmingham, UK (February 26–April 16, 2011).
Image source: Eastside Projects. Accessed May 13, 2019.
https://eastsideprojects.org/projects/again-a-time-machine/.

Figure 6 — Slavs and Tatars, *Dear 1979, Meet 1989* (2011). RiverBed, carpet, cushions, rahlé, reading library. Exhibition view of *Reading Room*, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin, Germany (September 16–October 10, 2017).
Image source: Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler. Accessed May 13, 2019.
https://k-t-z.com/reading-room/. Photo by def image.

Figure 7 — Slavs and Tatars, *Nose Twister* (2014). Veneer, faux leather, foam, paint. Note the image of a nose at the front part of the sitting area. Installation view of *Collective Making 03 / Stongue* at Kunsthal Aarhus, Aarhus, Denmark (October 10–November 29, 2015).
Image source: Slavs and Tatars. "Nose Twister." Accessed May 13, 2019. https://slavsandtatars.com/cycles/language-arts/nose-twister/. Photo by Jens Moller.

Figure 8 — Slavs and Tatars, *PrayWay* (2012). Silk and wool carpet, MDF, steel, neon lights. Installation view at Main project gallery at the 2nd Ural Industrial Biennale of Contemporary Art, Ekaterinburg, Russia (September 13–November 22, 2012).
Image source: 2nd Ural Industrial Biennale of Contemporary Art. Accessed May 13, 2019. http://en.second.uralbiennale.ru/catalog/item/196/.

Figure 9 — Slavs and Tatars, *PrayWay* (2012). Installation view at *Behind Reason* solo show, Künstlerhaus Stuttgart, Stuttgart, Germany (March 9–May 6, 2013).
Image source: Slavs and Tatars. "PrayWay." Accessed May 13, 2019. https://slavsandtatars.com/cycles/regions-d-etre/prayway. Photo by Bernard Kahrmann.

Figure 10 (left) — Slavs and Tatars, *Dresdener Gitter* (2018), part of Gitter series. Stainless steel, faux leather, foam. Installation view at *Made in Dschermany* at Albertinum, Dresden, Germany (June 2–October 14, 2018).
Image source: Euler. Accessed May 13, 2019.
http://berndeuler.com/auftraege/made-in-dschermany/.
[Euler is a Berlin-based metalwork studio that works with contemporary artists.]

Figure 11 (right) — Slavs and Tatars, *Underage Page* (2018), part of Gitter series. Stainless steel, faux leather, foam. Installation view, *Kirchgängerbanger* solo show, curated by Simone Mair, ar/ge kunst kallery, Bolzano, Italy (May 19–June 28, 2018).
Image source: ar/ge kunst. Accessed May 13, 2019.
https://www.argekunst.it/en/category/exhibitions/archive-exhibitions/. Photo by Tiberio Servillo.

Figure 12 — View of a courtyard of Tabātabāei house in the city of Kashan, Iran, with takht beds throughout the courtyard. The house was a residence of the affluent Tabātabāei family and is a heritage museum today.
Image source: Slavs and Tatars. "What Has Been Once Is for Eternity." In *Again, A Time Machine: From Distribution to Archive*, edited by Gavin Everall and Jane Rolo, 42-56. London: BookWorks, 2012.

Figure 13 — Tapchan platforms in the Luyab-i Houz (a public pond) in Bukhara, Uzbekistan.
Image source: Robert Wilson, Flickr. March 21, 2015. Accessed May 15, 2019. https://www.flickr.com/photos/10186213@N07/16984082658.

Figure 14 — Takhts in a restaurant located on the Naqhsh-e Jahan Square (a UNESCO World Heritage Site) in Isfahan, Iran. The restaurant calls itself Traditional Banquet Hall, attracting tourists with its historical architecture and decor.
Image source: TripAdvisor. Submitted by user Oriana70, March 2016. Accessed May 15, 2019. https://www.tripadvisor.ca/Restaurant_Review-g295423-d4788772-Reviews-Traditional_Banquet_Hall-Isfahan_Isfahan_Province.html.

Figure 15 — Slavs and Tatars, *Dear 1979, Meet 1989* (2011). Wooden riverbeds, afghan carpets, rahle, reading library of Polish and Iranian books. Exhibition view of *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz* at Presentation House Gallery, North Vancouver, Canada (April 2–May 26, 2013).
Image source: courtesy of Presentation House Gallery/The Polygon Gallery. Photo by Erik Hood.

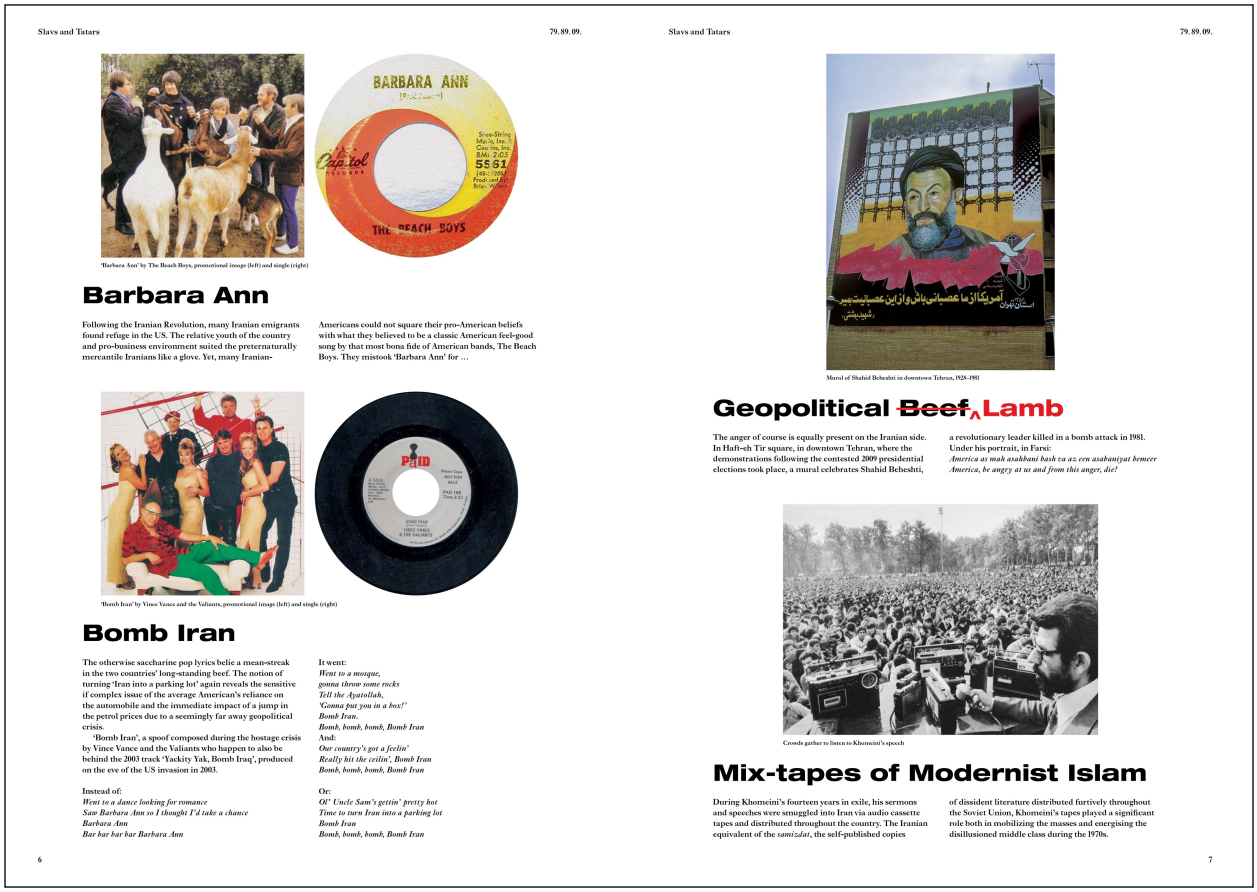
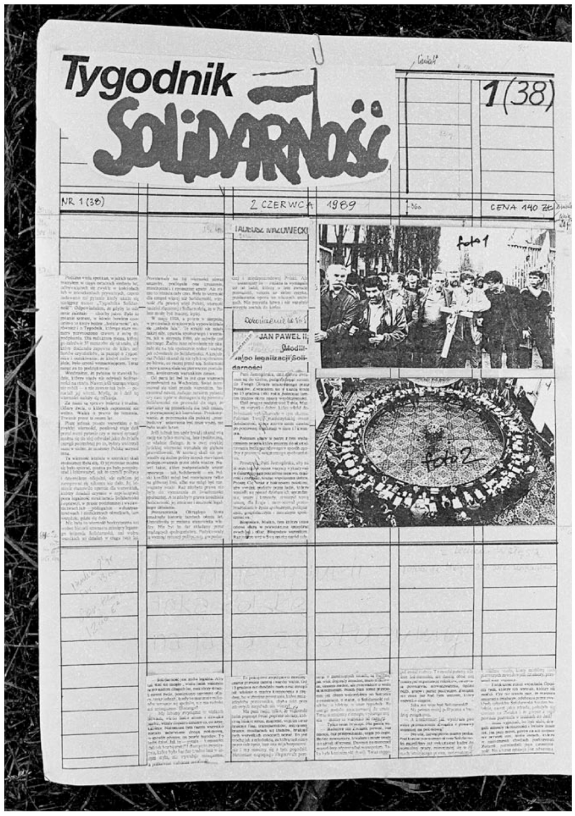


Figure 16 — Slavs and Tatars, *79.89.09*. (2013). Pages 6–7.
Image source: Slavs and Tatars. *79.89.09*. Edited by Gavin Everall and Jane Rolo. 3rd edition. London: Book Works, 2013.
https://slavsandtatars.com/site/assets/files/1284/79_89_09_slavs_and_tatars_english.pdf/.



The cover of *Tygodnik Solidarność*, 2 June 1989

‘Stop Crying and Start to Work ...’

Marek’s post, on the Tehran Bureau web site, offers a biting if entertaining look at how Poland views contemporary developments in Iran.

I’m writing from Poland. We have the same experiences from the past with our stupid, bloody Communist regime. Fortunately, now we are free.

Iran is close to my heart, because I’ve been there two times and I have many close friends in this wonderful country.

I love them, but I have to tell you one thing. I realized that the Iranian soul is too emotional. When one day people won the fight with basijis on the streets, they started to think that freedom was behind the next corner. Now the same people are crying after one defeat. It makes me angry.

Fighting for freedom is always the very long path. It is impossible to achieve it only on the street, in seven months. You should have the strategy for few years and smart, active leaders like Lech Wałęsa.

Stop crying and start to work, make leaflets, underground presses, convince workers and people from small cities etc., that there are hundreds of methods. I know, it is hard work, but my experiences from Poland told me — there is no other way. You have to deserve your freedom.

I love Iran and I’m sure that you will be free very fast, maybe in five years. But stop complaining first.

Marek/February 15, 2010 2:49 AM Tehranbureau.com

Figure 17 — Slavs and Tatars, *79.89.09*. (2013). Page 24.
Image source: Slavs and Tatars. *79.89.09*. Edited by Gavin Everall and Jane Rolo. 3rd edition. London: Book Works, 2013.
https://slavsandtatars.com/site/assets/files/1284/79_89_09_slavs_and_tatars_english.pdf/.

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Figure 18 — Slavs and Tatars, *79.89.09*. (2013). Excerpt of page 24 with the reprint of the online comment by user under the name Marek.
Image source: Slavs and Tatars. *79.89.09*. Edited by Gavin Everall and Jane Rolo. 3rd edition. London: Book Works, 2013.
https://slavsandtatars.com/site/assets/files/1284/79_89_09_slavs_and_tatars_english.pdf/.

Figure 19 — Last Catholic Mass at the Gdańsk Shipyard strike, Gdańsk, Poland, August 1980. Image source: Chris Niedenthal. Accessed May 15, 2019. http://chrisniedenthal.com/pl/works/stocznia-lenina-ostatnia-msza-w-trakcie-strajku-1980/.

Figure 20 — The Konopka family praying before the Christmas Eve supper, Tatary village, Kurpie ethnic region, Poland (approx.1940s). [Czesława Konopka (1925–1993), seen here second from the right, was a renowned Polish craftswoman.]
Image source: Kurpie—historia i trwanie [Kurpie—history and continuity]. Facebook. Photograph submission courtesy of Danuta Prusaczyk. Published January 7, 2014. Accessed May 15, 2019. https://www.facebook.com/Kurpie.Historia.Trwanie/photos/a.454599584618920/584173291661548/.

Figure 21 — Lithuanian craft of sodai (straw “garden”) chandeliers. Installation view at A. and J. Juškos Ethnic Culture Museum, Vilkija, Lithuania.
Image source: Kaunos Rajono Muziejus: A. ir J. Juškų Etninės Kultūros Muziejus [Kaunous District Museum: A. and J. Juškos Ethnic Culture Museum]. Accessed June 1, 2019. http://www.krmuziejus.lt/a-ir-j-jusku-etnines-kulturos-muziejus/.

Figure 22 — Himmeli by contemporary Finnish himmelist Eija Koski.
Image source: Eija Koski. Instagram. Published October 7, 2017. Accessed June 1, 2019. https://www.instagram.com/p/BZ7_L0XHeop/.

Figure 23 — Polish pająki, here made primarily with straw, coloured paper, and dried beans. View of installation at the Lublin Open Air ethnographic museum, Lublin, Poland.
Image source: Muzeum Wsi Lubelskiej—The Open Air Village Museum in Lublin. Facebook. Published December 17, 2015. Accessed May 15, 2019. https://www.facebook.com/muzeum.wsi.lubelskiej/photos/a.259571957409145/1095845083781824/.

Figure 24 — Slavs and Tatars, *Solidarność Pająk Study 2*, *6*, and *7* (2011).
Counterclockwise from top-left:
Solidarność Pająk Study 2, acrylic yarn, beads, string crochet, fringe trim, wool, steel.
Solidarność Pająk Study 6, christmas balls, wool, velvet ribbon, pattern trim, fringe trim, steel.
Solidarność Pająk Study 7, christmas balls, wood prayer beads, string, steel.
Image source: Slavs and Tatars. "Solidarność Pająk Studies." Accessed May 15, 2019. https://slavsandtatars.com/cycles/friendship-of-nations/solidarnosc-pajak-studies.

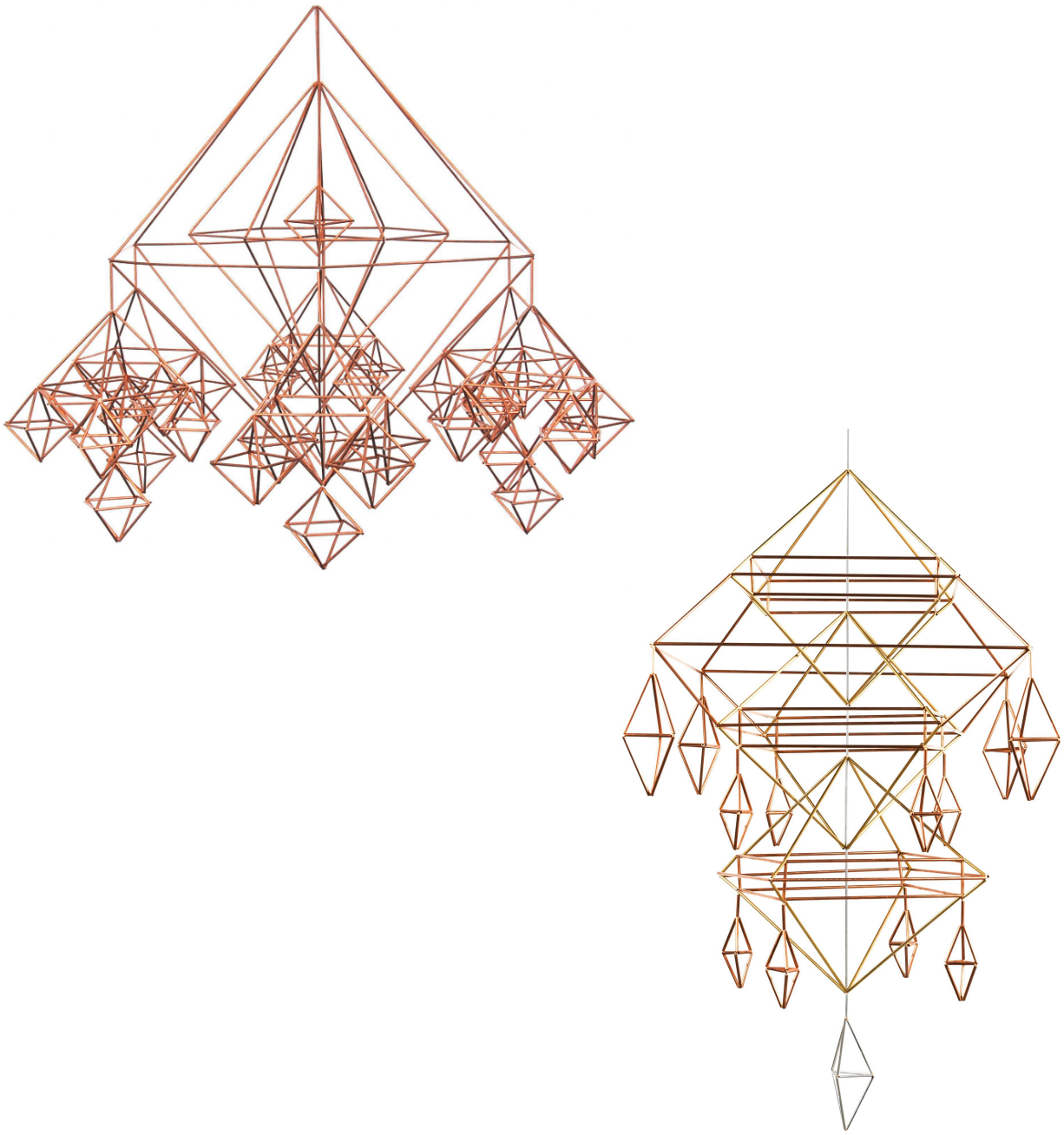

Figure 25 — Slavs and Tatars, *Solidarność Pająk Study 9* and *10*.
Top left: *Solidarność Pająk Study 9* (2013), copper, thread, fishing line.
Bottom right: *Solidarność Pająk Study 10* (2016), copper, brass, aluminum, waxed cord.
Image source: Slavs and Tatars. "Solidarność Pająk Studies." Accessed May 15, 2019. https://slavsandtatars.com/cycles/friendship-of-nations/solidarnosc-pajak-studies/.

Figure 26 — Slavs and Tatars, *Solidarność Pająk Study 3* (2011). Acrylic yarn, cordon thread, metal beads, string crochet, fringe trim, wool, ribbons, steel.
Image source: Slavs and Tatars. "Solidarność Pająk Studies." Accessed May 15, 2019. https://slavsandtatars.com/cycles/friendship-of-nations/solidarnosc-pajak-studies/.

Figure 27 — Slavs and Tatars, *Solidarność Pająk Study 4* (2011). String crochet, fringe trim, wool, steel.
Image source: Slavs and Tatars. “Solidarność Pająk Studies.” Accessed May 15, 2019. https://slavsandtatars.com/cycles/friendship-of-nations/solidarnosc-pajak-studies/.

Figure 28 — Slavs and Tatars, *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz* (2011). View of the installation at the Heritage Area of 10th Sharjah Biennial, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (16 March–16 May 2011).
Image source: Universes in Universe. https://universes.art/en/sharjah-biennial/2011/photo-tour/heritage-area/10-slavs-and-tatars/. Photo by Haupt & Binder.

Figure 29 — Slavs and Tatars, *Solidarność Pająk Study 4* (2011). Close up view of the pająki at the Heritage Area of 10th Sharjah Biennial.
Image source: Slavs and Tatars. "Craft as Citizen Diplomacy." *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz*. London: Book Works / Sharjah Art Foundation, 2013.

Figure 30 — A communal space decorated for Muharram ceremonies in Tehran, Iran.
Image source: Tasnim News Agency. Accessed June 22, 2019.
https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/media/2018/09/10/1824349/preparations-underway-in-iran-for-muharram-mourning-season/. Photo by Ali Jabbari.

Figure 31 — A communal room decorated with special banners for the month of Muharram, Gorgan, Iran.
Image source: Eric Lafforgue. Flickr. Taken on October 18, 2015. Accessed June 22, 2019.
https://www.flickr.com/photos/41622708@N00/23514371815.

Figure 32 — A workshop specializing in Muharram banners in the city of Mashhad, Iran. An empty framed space can be seen in the embroidery of the top banners, for a later inclusion of a name of its buyer or receiver.
Image source: International Quran News Agency. “Preparing Banners for Muharram Mourning Ceremonies.” Published September 18, 2017. Accessed June 22, 2019. http://www.iqna.ir/en/news/3463946/preparing-banners-for-muharram-mourning-ceremonies/. Photo by Mohaddese Zare.

Figure 33 — A ta‘zieh play performed in front of an audience. Villainous characters (Yazid I and his forces) are coded in red, while Hussain’s family and followers wear green.
Image source: UNESCO: Intangible Cultural Heritage. Accessed June 22, 2019. https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/ritual-dramatic-art-of-taziye-00377/. Photo by Akhtar Tajik.

Figure 34 — Slavs and Tatars, *Friendship of Nations* banner series (2011), installed hanging as a shade for the rest / reading area. Visitors are also reading the *79.89.09*. newspaper. Exhibition view of *Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz* at 10th Sharjah Biennial, Sharjah, UAE (16 March–16 May 2011). First exhibition of the cycle's work.
Image source: Slavs and Tatars. "Plot for a Biennial." https://slavsandtatars.com/about/exhibition/plot-for-a-biennial/. Photo by Elizabeth Rappaport.

Figure 35 — Slavs and Tatars, *Lahestan Nesfeh Jahan* banner (2011). Embroidery, synthetic velvet, cotton.
Image source: Slavs and Tatars. “Friendship of Nations.” Accessed May 15, 2019. https://slavsandtatars.com/cycles/friendship-of-nations/friendship-of-nations/.

Figure 36 — A poster for the Solidarność movement, "Liez na mnie [Lean on me]," 1981.
Image source: Polish Poster Gallery. Accessed June 26, 2019.
https://www.poster.pl/poster/budecki_solidarnosc_licz/.

Figure 37 — A logo of the Iranian Green Movement of 2009, depicting two disembodied hands: one showing a "V" for victory sign and an open palm symbol (panjah), as it would be often seen on top of metal standards.
Image source: Christiane Gruber. "Posters." *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition. Published January 30, 2018. http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/posters-in-iran/.

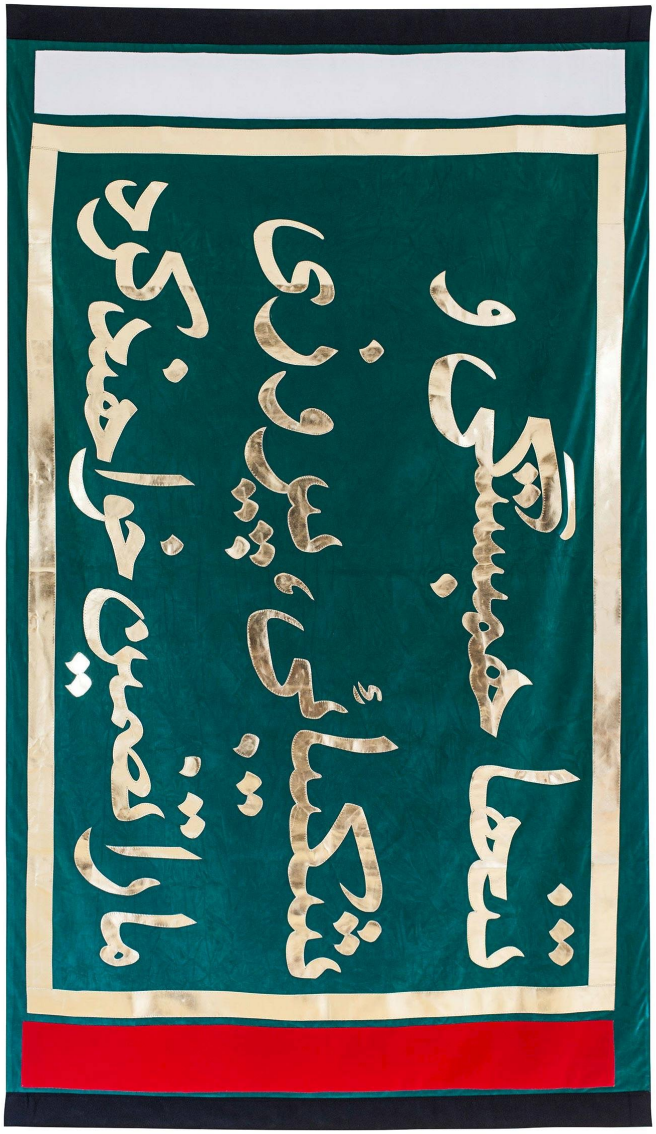

Figure 38 — Slavs and Tatars, *Only Solidarity and Patience Will Secure Our Victory* (2011).
Faux leather, synthetic velvet, cotton.
Image source: Slavs and Tatars. “Friendship of Nations.” Accessed May 15, 2019.
https://slavsandtatars.com/cycles/friendship-of-nations/friendship-of-nations/.

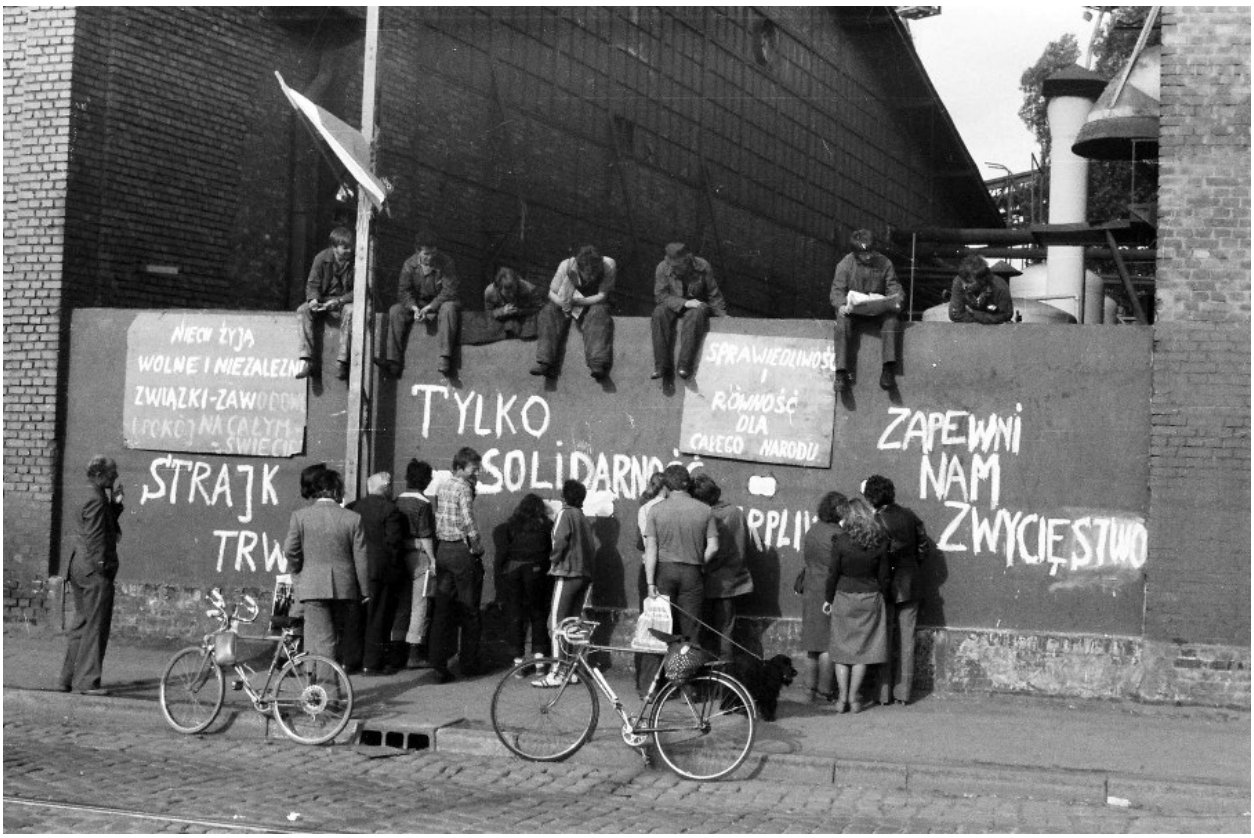

Figure 39 — "Tylko solidarność i cierpliwość zabezpieczy nasze zwycięstwo [Only solidarity and patience will secure our victory]" slogan partially visible on the wall behind the onlookers, Gdańsk Shipyard strike, Gdańsk, Poland, 1980.
Image source: Krystian Kaczmarek. "Zdjęcia ze strajku w sierpniu 1980 r. [Photos of the strike of 1980]." Accessed June 22, 2019.
http://krystiankaczmarek.pl/zdjecia-ze-strajku-w-sierpniu-1980-r/.

A. *B*.

Figure 40 — Slavs and Tatars, *Self-Management Body* banners (2011).

A. Embroidery, Muharram fabric, cotton.
Image source: Slavs and Tatars. "Friendship of Nations." Accessed May 15, 2019. https://slavsandtatars.com/cycles/friendship-of-nations/friendship-of-nations/.

B. Silkscreen (Muharram fabric), stitching.
Image source: Slavs and Tatars. *79.89.09*. Edited by Gavin Everall and Jane Rolo. 3rd edition. London: Book Works, 2013. https://slavsandtatars.com/site/assets/files/1284/79_89_09_slavs_and_tatars_english.pdf/.

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