

Pickle Politics: Review

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Slavs and Tatars — *Pickle Politics*
Sugar Contemporary, Toronto
(October 17, 2019—January 31, 2020)
Lecture-performances: October 17, 18, 19.

Art venues and their programming have been increasingly diversifying their forms throughout exhibition-making history, making space for ever-transforming art practices and their ever-expanding audiences (Smith 2017). Toronto has recently gained a new space, under the name of Sugar Contemporary, that hosts a three-year project run by curators Ala Roushan and Xenia Benivolski. Sugar is a research-oriented curatorial project and broadly concerns itself with site-specificity and public art, situated at Toronto’s waterfront and global cyber-space alike with its gallery and digital research platform. It is unsurprising that for their first exhibition, the curators chose the work of Slavs and Tatars—an art collective whose practice is equally interdisciplinary, spectacular, and often disorienting, including visual objects and installations, a vast publication activity, and lecture-performance events.

Slavs and Tatars have made their name by reconsidering both prominent and obscure histories of the Eurasian continent—“east of the former Berlin Wall and west of the Great Wall of China,” as they like to define themselves. Sugar presents their latest work cycle *Pickle Politics* in an exhibition of the same name, which focuses on the idea of fermentation in its literal and metaphorical meanings. Through the perspective of the microbial and effervescent, how do we consume and digest knowledge, how can we process events that happen around and to us? Do we

spit out the bitter substance, such as stale politics gone bad, or let it froth a little more before contemplating it again?

Sugar's *Pickle Politics* acts as a tasting room for such concerns. To start your journey into the fermented world, you can stop by the *Pickle Juice Bar* that is set up in the middle of the gallery, a make-shift station with two types of pickle juice on offer. There's a milder and sweeter version for the cautious visitor and a spicy chilli version for those who appreciate a bit of tang. While quirky and tart, the gourmet experience is not overly piquant, and that unsatiated feeling somewhat lingers throughout the exhibition and its events.

A repeating pattern of the same image makes up a major part of the show's aesthetic experience, fully covering one of the walls of the gallery and the sitting structures scattered in front of it. *Ogórek Trocki* (2016) depicts two cucumbers making up the rollers of connected Torah-like parchment scrolls, devoid of any text or religious messages, but with the words "Ogórek Trocki: Resurrection" in the background. The words refer to the story of Karaite Jewish peoples originally from the Crimean region, who, by way of re-presenting their cultural and historical identity to various authority bodies and authoritarian states, had managed to spare their communities from imposed Jewish taxes and then the Holocaust. At a certain point in history, a group of Karaites was resettled in Lithuania, where it cultivated a special specimen of cucumber intended for pickling. The story is compelling and intriguing, but I must admit that I've read about it later, post-exhibition, on the collective's website and scouring online encyclopedias since these facts were not disclosed within the show's space. This is largely how the art of Slavs and Tatars works: it's a collection of references and witty pointers for its audiences, who most often than not are unfamiliar with the specificity of topics and their convoluted contexts that the collective is exploring. It's akin to a list for extracurricular reading, with no mandatory test at the end: if you're curious enough, you'll look it up, or you can just take in and enjoy the visual.

As an integral part of Sugar's rendition of *Pickle Politics*, Slavs and Tatars presented a series of six of their lectures during the first three days of the show. The space was outfitted just for that, providing its patrons with plinth-like seating and turning the gallery into a provisional audience hall. Payam, one of the two co-founders of Slavs and Tatars, delivered all six lectures,

narrating the accompanying slides while pacing back and forth between the plinths. In the newest lecture instalment by the collective, *Red-Black Thread* (2018), he spoke about black identity as envisioned in the Soviet and Russian popular imagination, which was and continues to be informed by ethnic and multinationalism politics of the communist state and Russia's politics on immigration and otherness. To delve into such sensitive topics from a vastly different perspective to the one that is familiar to the North American audience—that of Euro-American colonial history and politics reinforcing racial inequality—is a refreshing serving of a new taste. However, Payam's narration often raised more questions than gave definitive answers, jumping from one sub-topic to another within the 45-minute lecture. Historical anecdotes, geopolitical maps, short video clips ranged in their subject from the meaning of "Caucasian" around the world to abolition of serfdom and slavery, from the "self-orientalization" of Russian identity to W. E. B. Du Bois' idea of double-consciousness, from traditionalist gender roles to expressions of queerness. This amalgam further muddles the connections between the known and the understandable, and it is not an easy task to reconcile them together, nor does it even seem possible in the moment. But the knowledge presented by Slavs and Tatars is welcome nevertheless: even if it speaks of faraway lands or ancient histories, it forces us, as keen listeners, to assess often disparate perspectives—to reconsider and further complicate our personal and social relationships to the issues raised.

As artist lectures go, there is always a Q&A period after the talk. The questions that were asked, however, craved for Slavs and Tatars to uncover underlying truths, as if Payam is an expert on global geopolitics and cultural histories. Perhaps we are just searching for answers in between and trying to learn from each other. The gallery staff seemed adamant to cut off the discussion after merely two questions from its audience—so much for inclusive conversation and collective engagement that are advertised as the aspiration behind such events. Of course, perhaps it would indeed be helpful to sit on it and ferment on those questions further. Navigating complex social politics and situating our identities in today's world becomes more productive the more we learn about ourselves and others: learning, through taste and smell first, and contemplating the aftertaste for its level of either satisfying sourness or unpleasant bitterness—to make a choice either to accept or to reject the narratives that we are given.

Bibliography

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About the Author

Polina Lasenko is a Russian-born art historian and researcher who currently resides in Tiohtiá:ke/ Montreal and has recently graduated with an MA in Art History from Concordia University. Her research is centred around contemporary art and modes of engagement with the audience.