

Bazm u Razm (installation view), dichroic glass (various dimensions), ash tree wood, 2014. Kunsthalle Zürich. Photo by Stefan Altenburger.



Mirrors for Princes

A CONVERSATION WITH SLAVS AND TATARS

Anthony Downey

Beatrix Ruf

Slavs and Tatars

If I understand correctly, the genre of mirrors for princes (*specula principum* or *Fürstenspiegel*) involves a form of political writing or advisory literature for future rulers on matters both secular and spiritual. The genre was shared by Christian and Muslim lands, in particular during the Middle Ages, with Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532) being the most well-known, if later, example. Could you talk about this as an idea and how it manifests itself in the context of current work being produced by Slavs and Tatars?



Dil be Del, silver-plated brass, metallic acrylic paint, 10 x 12 x 9 cm, 2014.

We were first (as often is the case) seduced by the name mirrors for princes itself – we first heard it in the context of a conference at the Freie Universität in Berlin in 2012.¹ Little did we know that it was actually a genre of advice literature. We thought, what would a mirror for a prince be today? That kind of first-degree interest, coupled with a layered, complex one, is something we try to maintain in the work.

Over the span of the conference we learned that mirrors for princes were among the first forms of secular

¹ New Approaches to the History of Political Thought: Mirrors for Princes Reconsidered (Interdisciplinary Conference, Freie Universität, Berlin, 2–3 November, 2012).

Çok konuşana 'yarışad' der bilgi; Ama söy/lemese de ona 'dilisz' der.

تقول المعطومة لمن يتكلم كثيراً إنه ثرثار، لكنها تقول للصامت الحكيم.

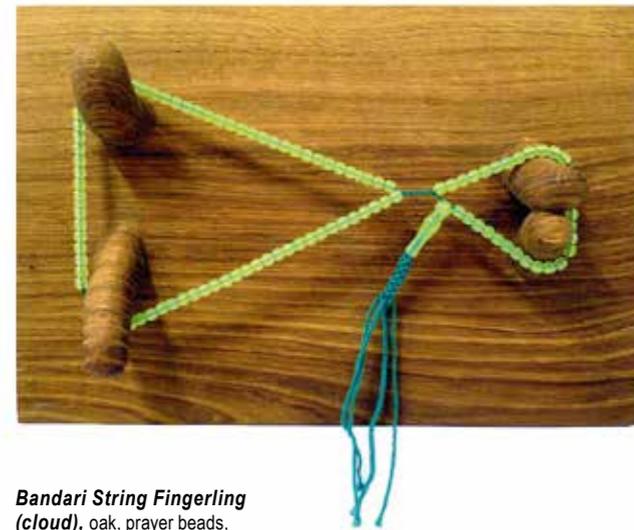
If he talks too much, wisdom says that he chatters, but if he talks not at all, it says that he is tongue-tied.

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scholarship, an attempt to put such study on the level of religious scholarship in the Middle Ages. What immediately struck us was how the pendulum has swung to the other extreme in today's political discourse. We find that there are airport bookshops full of books and CNN reporters and Twitter columnists – meaning everybody who has a political view, in sum – but there's an unspoken moratorium on intellectual or erudite scholarship on the role of faith in public life in the twenty-first or even the late-twentieth century. The more we dug into the material, the more it became clear that these books are amalgams; they're mash-ups of all different kinds of genres in one volume. So you have astrology, etiquette, military strategy, literary tropes, folklore and ethics all under this one rubric of a mirror for a prince. That spoke to us because our books also attempt to straddle those disciplines: they're not really journalism but they have journalistic elements, they're not academic scholarship but they're critical and analytical, they're not memoirs but they're intimate – it's this flattening of genres that we're interested in.



Bandari String Fingerling (cloud), oak, prayer beads, 20 × 30 × 7.5 cm, 2014.

And there are further specific examples because, again if I understand correctly, a book like

شۇنداق ئىكەن، مەن ئۇستىلىق بىلەن نىش قىل ئۇستىلىق بىلەن قىلىنغان نىش كىشىنى پۇقرى كۆرۈردۇ.

Wenn es so ist, richte Deinen Wandel danach! Richtet man sich danach, erhebt die Zunge den Menschen.

Jeśli tak jest, to używaj prostego języka. Bo zrozumiały język wynosi człowieka.

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the *Kutadgu Bilig*, which roughly means ‘the wisdom which brings happiness’, has the same kind of resonance that *Beowulf* or *The Iliad* has for Western readers; it's a critically important volume with a good deal of moral instruction contained within its pages. You have chosen to look at the *Kutadgu Bilig* specifically in relation to this idea of ‘wisdom’, a form of wisdom that comes in a combination of secular and faith-based statecraft. Can you talk a little more about how you came across the *Kutadgu Bilig*, and the importance of it, because although it is a historical text, first published in the eleventh century, it appears to have a direct resonance in the present.



Bazm u Razm (wing 4), dichroic glass (various dimensions), wood, 2014.

Even the notion of the word *wisdom* is problematic today. In the deconstructed world we live in, there is no such thing as an authoritative or univocal notion of what wisdom means; there are several traditions and discourses. Then to imagine that, since the advent of modernity, we have suddenly become a new species, with contrapostal thumbs for our iPhones, and that the accretion of tradition is no longer relevant, strikes us as almost comical. As Matt Mullican once said, if you want people to head as fast as possible for the exit, start using the words *faith* and *religion*.

Mademki böyledir, sen açik dil kullan; Dil açik olursa kişiyi yükseltir.

فاسئخدم، ما دام الأمر كذلك، الواضح من البيان قاتيلان الواضح يرتقي بصلحيه.

Since this is so, practice eloquence, which raises a man's estate.

تەلەپكە قاتتىق ساقلا، پەشەنە ئۆزىڭنىڭ سۆزۈڭنى قىسقارتقان، پەشەنە ئۆزىڭنىڭ سۆزۈڭنى قىسقارتقان، پەشەنە ئۆزىڭنىڭ سۆزۈڭنى قىسقارتقان.

Hüte Deine Zunge! So behütetest Du Dein Haupt.
Verkürze das Wort, so verlängerst Du Dein Leben.

Dobrze zważaj na swój język, byś zachował głowę.
Skracaj mowę, a żył będziesz długo.



Ezan Cılgınlıkları, mixed media, sound,
100 x 900 x 750 cm, 2014. 8th Berlin Biennale.

Dili iyi gözet, başın gözetilmiş olur;
Sözünü kısa kes, ömrün uzun olur.

احفظ لسانك يُحفظ رأسك،
واقصر القول وانعم بطول العمر.

Hold your tongue and you will hold on to your head.
Shorten your speech and you will lengthen your life.

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Because both have become too politicised and yet too generalised at one and the same time?



Hirsute happily with hairless, dichroic glass, tinned copper, 8 × 22 × 25 cm, 2014.

Thinking differently obviously has a visual manifestation because this way of thinking remains relatively literary until you put on a show like *Mirrors for Princes* at the Kunsthalle Zürich – perhaps Beatrix wants to comment on that – and now at the NYU Art Gallery in Abu Dhabi. A lot of this seems to have translation

We were recently at NYU Abu Dhabi for a site visit in advance of the residency and found it refreshing that there was a range of scholars, a self-selecting faculty that thinks rather differently from their counterparts at other elite universities. There are great things about having hundreds of years of history at Oxford and Cambridge and Heidelberg and Yale and Harvard to draw from, but there's sometimes a sclerosis and provincialism as well. If you're a transversal thinker working in the history department, you're going to have a hard time selling research that entails work in other departments, say theology or music, to the entrenched interests there. So this is our task – to think differently and to ask those questions that are not asked, including those around wisdom and faith.

تالاناق كوپ بايديسي نۇر غۇرن. تال بەزىدە ماختىلىدۇ، بەزىدە مىڭ تۈرلۈك سۆكۈش تالىدۇ.

Viel Gutes bringt die Zunge, aber auch viel Schaden. Mal wird die Zunge gelobt, mal treffen sie tausend Flüche.

Ile korzyści przynosi język, tyle też szkody. Nieraz chwali się język, a nieraz po tysiącokroć przeklina.

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at its core, and the realm of transliteration, or something copied from one medium to another.

Yes, I am particularly interested in the way a lot of your work deals with or is primarily about translation: its failure, how tradition translates and gets misguided, or, in the process of many interpretations, turns into something different. For me, there's an interesting, almost literal tautology in this translation process. Things are being translated as if they would function as language. When you think, objects come from the information of language and not, strictly speaking, of aesthetics. Your objects do not come from the translation process of thought into art as we know it, so to speak, and I would like to hear from you more about this because I think that your objects actually produce language, and don't just show how language is failing.



Hung and Tart (full ruby), handblown glass, 15 × 35 × 25 cm, 2014.

It's funny you should mention that: just recently we were thinking about the fact that we produce most of our work in Poland and these are the stronger works because, as we work with craftsmen not art technicians, they are a form of translation in themselves. There's a wilful loss of control or an abstraction of some sort that happens

Dilin faydası çok olduğu gibi, zararları da çoktur; Dil bazen övülür, bazen de çok sövülür.

أضرار بحد كثره الكلام كثيره كفايته، فاللسان بمدح حينها، ويشتتم حينها.

Many are the profits derived from the tongue, many too are the losses. The tongue gets now praises, now curses.

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Irokez, dichroic glass, tinned copper, 17 × 30 × 10 cm, 2014.

when you're working with someone who's not in any way versed in the language of art. Because of course in places like London, Berlin and elsewhere there are whole industries that produce artwork for artists.

That translation also happens first and foremost through the actual conception of the works as a discussion between ourselves, because it's two very different minds that are thinking about the same concept, and that happens through language. But we never thought about the works themselves as enabling – sorry, let me just understand it again: the works talk about the failures of language, but as objects, you said that they were –

Let's say that the translation process of thought into art is the common expectation of art as we know it, even to show the artist using language, especially when we're starting that relationship in a very constructive way. But this seems to be about the failure of language; the space between or the nonverbal – the preverbal, so to speak. Your pieces have the structure of language, are directly produced out of language and this produces the logic of language. In your objects language seems to be the natural partner or the logic or structure – or even the grammar of it.

شۇنداقكىن، سۆزنى بىلىپ سۆزلەپ سۆزلەشكەن، سۆزنى بىلىپ سۆزلەپ سۆزلەشكەن، سۆزنى بىلىپ سۆزلەپ سۆزلەشكەن.

Wenn es so ist, sprich nur, was Du weisst!
Dein Wort sei Auge für den Blinden!

Jeśli tak jest, to słowa mów z rozważą.
A słowa twe niech będą okiem dla ślepców.



SLAVS AND TATARS

Beyonsense (entrance view), *Projects 98*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2012.

*Beyonsense (installation view),
Projects 98, The Museum of Modern Art,
New York, 2012. Photo by Jason Mandella.*



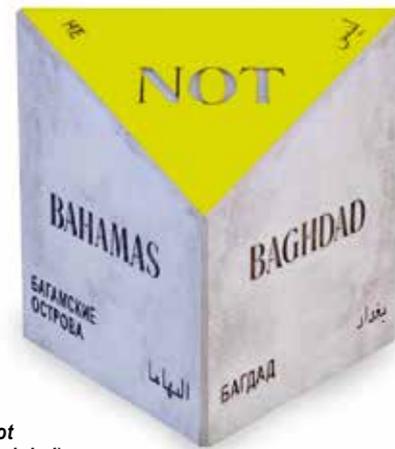
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When we come across ideas, we really do reify them as words; we try to create three-dimensional words out of the things that we're thinking about. It's like the autistic, oral version of concrete poetry, trying to make something that is completely abstract and esoteric, primarily visible.

Like the work *Tongue Twist Her* (2013), perhaps, where the object is tongue-twisted around a dance pole.



Triangulation (Not Bahamas Not Baghdad), concrete, paint, 24 x 27 x 23 cm, 2011.

The physical materialisation of the word itself, you appear to be suggesting, seems to be a process of looking through the word, through language – does that make sense?

Mademki böyledir, sözü bilerek söyle; Sözüün olsun gözüzlere köllere göz.

وما دام الأمر هكذا فنكلم بما نعلم؛ ولكن كلامك الضربير والأعشى بصر.

Speak knowledgeable, therefore, and your words will be an eye to the blind.

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Tongue Twist Her, silicon, polystyrene, metal pole, MDF, acrylic paint, 300 x 245 x 245 cm, 2013.

In the genre of mirrors for princes, which do have a didactic context, and accepting that the process of production creates different ends to what are expected, do your objects retain a didactic context, or do you think it's more about opening up a permissive context, a kind of engagement that is more about a tolerance of words, or with the experience of words?

Perhaps, because the editing process is a ping-pong of sending words back and forth, back and forth, and eventually, like a process of transmutation, that word becomes an object. There's a kind of wilful letting go, of not controlling what that aftereffect looks like.

This is what the *Mirrors for Princes* show is – when you work on something for two or three years and you don't understand it, that's the ideal situation. If you don't know where you stand on such polemical issues, whether it's questions of seclusion versus the state, faith versus secularism, occupation versus withdrawal, then the object can add a talismanic quality – that's the hope. You can't plan how that will work, you just have to go with it.

The question of didacticism in pedagogy is a difficult one for us

Der Unwissende ist blind, das ist offenbar. Geh, Unwissender, nimm Deinen Anteil vom Wissen.

Człowiek wiedzy pozbawiony jest jak ślepy, Nużę głupcze, czerp wiedzę od mędrców.

بئلمسز نېنڤكى قارىغۇدۇر. بۇر ئەي بئلمسز، تېگىشلىك بىلىم تال.

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because there has been a pedagogical turn, and often we're wrapped up into this. We always come back to the origin of Slavs and Tatars: that book club, where we began, was very important because pedagogy assumes that one person knows and another doesn't, and that's never the case. Similarly, we devoted ourselves to discovering what mirrors for princes are, in terms of genre, but in no way are we experts or didacts on the subject in hand. Permissiveness, however, is something that's very important for us: to transmit that permissiveness to the participant or the viewer is a key ambition.

We're very keen on the idea of the layman: how does the layman engage with the work in contrast to the art professional? There's a great quote by Calvin Tomkins in a profile of Siah Armajani that accompanied a great show at the Parasol Unit last year.² The original profile was published in 1990 and argued that it's important to distinguish between accessibility and availability, and that we have to redeem this idea of populism. Populism doesn't mean lowest common denominator, it actually means making the highest achievements available for the greatest number of people. So things are available, but only accessible according to how much effort you

² Calvin Tomkins, 'Profiles: Open, Available, Useful', *The New Yorker*, 19 March 1990: 48-72; reprinted in *Siah Armajani: An Ingenious World*, Parasol Unit, London, 2013.

Bazm u Razm (wing 3), dichroic glass (various dimensions), wood, 2014.



Bilgisiz insan, şüphesiz kördür. Yürü, ey bilgisiz, bilgiden payını al. فالجاهل بلا شك أعمى، فامض إليها الجاهل وخذ من العلم حظك.

The blind, that is the ignorant. Go then, fool, and get a share of knowledge from the wise!

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put into something. It doesn't just mean you make everything clear. Permissiveness here is important because it engages with notions of generosity – a gift or an exchange. The idea of a book club is that you're discovering with somebody; there's no leader of a book club.

What you've just described there is the genre of mirrors for princes. The *Kutadgu Bilig* is one example of the genre that uses the Socratic method. It is about learning *with* rather than *against*; it's about a dialogic learning process.



The Noughty Nasals, wood veneer, wheels, fabric, foam, various dimensions, 2014.

Another reason we are interested in the genre is that the critique is presented as a form of reciprocation, not as a frontal assault. These are books – codices, texts – which were often written as a gift to somebody. So while they're explicitly saying 'this is how your son should rule', implicitly what they're saying is 'this is how you're not ruling'. We are interested in how critique is delivered effectively through circuitry – through the gift, through generosity. We often use the analogy of commemorating something while stabbing it in the back. Actually that's what a lot of these texts do; the first ten pages are praises, whether it's to God or the setting. Most people fall asleep before they get through the introduction

Der Geborene stirbt und verschwindet ohne Spur, Rede gute Worte, dann ist Dein Wort unsterblich.

Zwiąż, człowiek się rodzi i umiera, lecz pozostają po nim słowa, Mów dobre słowa, a pozostaniesz niesmiertelny.

قارا، تۇغۇلغان ئادەم ئۆلىدۇ، سۆزى يالغان بولمىدى. سۆزۈڭكى ياخشى سۆزلە، تۇزۇڭ تۇرالمىدى.

The Squares and Circurls of Justice,
steel, cotton turbans, polyester hats,
170.5 × 655 × 40 cm, 2014. Kunsthalle Zürich.
Photo by Stefan Altenburger.



Lektor (*speculum linguarum*),
multichannel sound installation, mirrored
plexiglass, speakers, 2014. Kunsthalle Zürich.
Photo by Stefan Altenburger.



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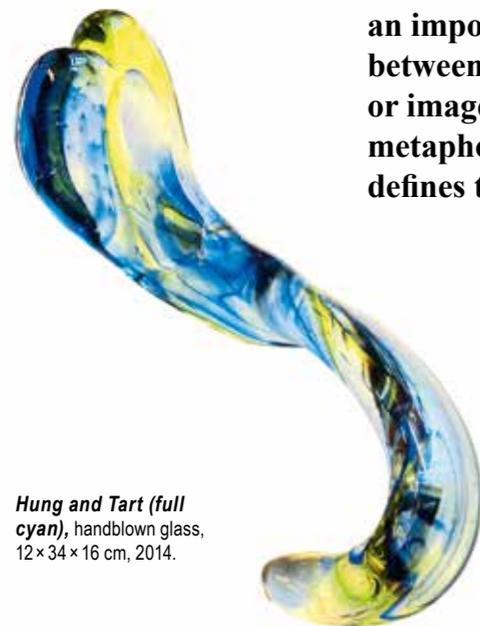
because it's the antithesis of our need for immediacy and transparency: they resist shortcuts.

You said that you were interested in how the *Kutadgu Bilig* softens the lines between different disciplines: politics, religion and even science. These terms also play an important role in your work. But this is not scientific or political writing, it's literature. That's an important distinction to make in relation to the question of how to make books that are pragmatic.

And what it does to the narrative form in the process?

Exactly, and this approach is also an ethic. I'd be interested to hear from you on whether you place an importance on the differentiation between morality versus ethics, or image and literality versus metaphor, as an element that also defines the work.

We both go back and forth between whether the work wilfully or accidentally employs literality, as opposed to metaphor. When there's a strength to literality, it's in the sense that it's also a smokescreen, like a Hollywood set or a Potemkin village – but hopefully there are different layers



Hung and Tart (full cyan), handblown glass, 12 x 34 x 16 cm, 2014.

Bak doğan ölüür; ondan eser olarak söz kalır; Sözüñü iy söyleseñ ölümsüz olursun.

كل مولود يموء، ويقى منه الكلام، فان احسنه الكلام تغور محله.

What is born dies, but words remain a sign, so speak good words and you will be immortal.

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behind that village. Whereas with metaphor it's immediately apparent that there's a transmission or translation through something.

We pride ourselves on the fact that we do research in four languages, and this was the most significant work we've done in languages that we don't speak – part of a process of willful abstraction. It's a completely new way for us to approach the text.

What's interesting in terms of morality and ethics in Islamic and Muslim medieval literature is that the term *adab*, which means morality, behaviour and virtue, is the same word as that used for literature; *adabiyaat* and *adab* have the same root. The Persians had another term, *akhlāq* or virtue, so they see these two concepts as different. In Muslim lands a lot of mirrors for princes were incorporating a previous body (or the mistranslation of this process) of Zoroastrian knowledge. So they were adapting the Zoroastrian idea of kinship and religion into a completely different, Islamic context.

We would probably come down on the side of literality more than metaphor, but literality coupled with a kind of misfiring. Our past two or three years of work comes under the umbrella of what we call the Faculty of Substitution, where if you to go from A to B you have to resort to circuitry, you can't go straight, you must go to C and



Bazm u Razm (wing 2), dichroic glass (various dimensions), wood, 2014.

Jeśli człowiek odznacza się dwoma przymiotami, nie zestarzeje się. Jeden przymiot to dobre czyny, a drugi to dobre słowa.

Mit zwei Dingen ist der Mensch unsterblich, Das eine sind gute Taten, das andere gute Reden.

ئىككى نەرسە بىلەن ئادەم قىرمايدۇ: بىرى ياخشى ھەرىكەت، بىرى ياخشى سۆز.

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It seems to me that the performativity of language itself is key to understanding what I would describe as the work's dialogic context. The expectation on the audience to engage is not one of an engagement towards a common end, but instead a very physical and material, agonistic thing in and of itself. You have to twist yourself around these works, sometimes literally, but always conceptually. Could you talk about this element of performativity in the work, that sense that something is unfolding?



Sheikha, steel, textile, fans, 125 x 80 x 130 cm, 2014.

The question of performativity could be answered through the metaphor of taking the term and flaying it like a piece of meat – breaking it, reifying it, decomposing it and putting it back together. This word is used in our practice often, for example in our lectures, but we still haven't understood what about our work is performative other than the way we treat the research.

Kishi iki şey ile kendini yaşlanmaktankurtarır; Bir iyiyi iş, diğeri de iyi söz.
المراء بامرین يحفظ نفسه من الهرم؛ عمل صالح، وقول حسن.

If a man has two things, he does not grow old; one is good deeds, the other is good words.



Zulf (brunette) and Zulf (blond), oak wood, hair, various dimensions, 2014. Kunsthalle Zürich.

Pamiętaj, człowiek rodzi się i umiera, a słowa jego pozostają, choć dusza odchodzi, pozostaje jego imię.

Die Menschen sind geboren und gestorben, ihre Worte aber sind geblieben. Nur durch ihre Worte ist ihr Name geblieben.

ياقنىكى ئادەم تۇغۇلىدۇ، ئۆلىدۇ، لېكىن ئۇنىڭ سۆزى قالىدۇ. ئۆزى كەتسىمۇ نامى قالىدۇ.

Anthony Downey

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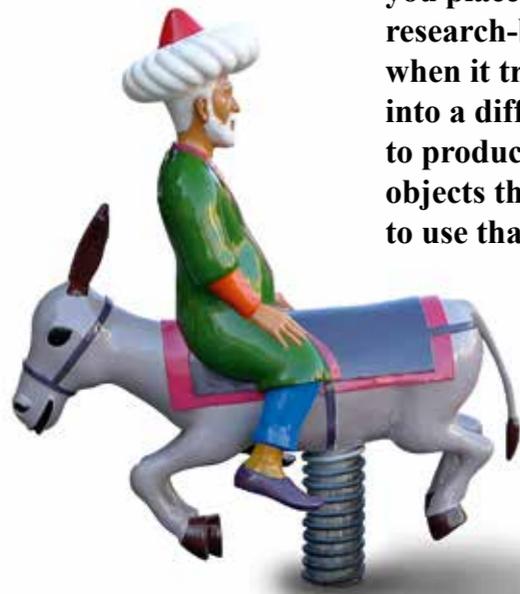
A sort of conceptual gymnastics – does that work better?

Perhaps, but again there is a missing element. In our discourse, performativity has a very corporeal kind of vision, and we can't pretend to understand what that corporeal, phenomenological understanding is, because in the lectures we don't see it; perhaps in the work it's there, but not in the lectures.

Another interesting aspect I think we should talk about is the tradition of research-based art – you intentionally position your work in the art world. You could say we're going to go through the university or the academy, but you place it in the art world. Often research-based art is only a success when it translates the document into a different form. You choose to produce objects, all kinds of objects that perform – if you want to use that term.

Molla Nasreddin:
The Antimodern, fibreglass, laquer paint, steel, 165 x 157 x 88 cm, 2012. Nasreddin's pole position – backwards on his donkey – demonstrates the Sufi wise-man-cum-fool's particular take on progress and history, not to mention making for an often awkward exchange between children and their parents. Obligated to hold the old man's belly instead of his back, younger passengers inevitably pester their parents with thorny questions on perspective and time.

To answer the first question of why research in art: when we started out, we had no intention of being artists; what we thought we were going to do was publish one or two books per year and continue our previous careers. The kind of research we were doing wouldn't have sat well, or have



Bak, kişi doğdu, öldü sözü kaldı; insanın kendisi gitti, adı kaldı.

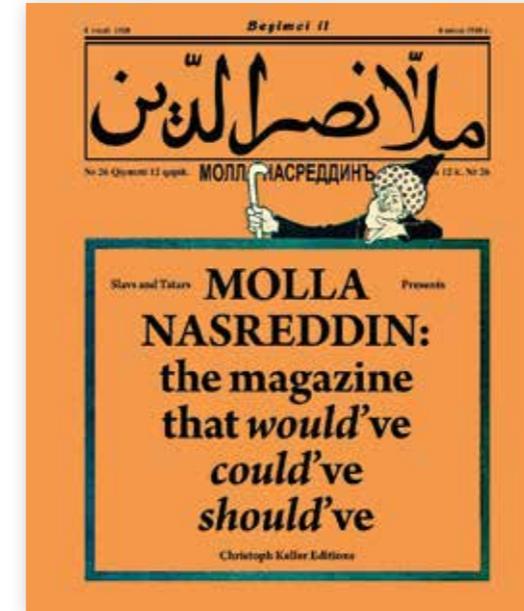
وإد الإنسان ومات، ويبقى منه الكلام، يشخصه ماضي الإنسان، وبقي منه اسمه.

Though a man must die, his words remain behind, and though his soul departs his name stays.

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Molla Nasreddin, offset print, 28 x 24 cm, 208 pages, published by JRP|Ringier, 2011.

been accepted or supported by any other medium. It is a testament to the elasticity of art as the only medium or discipline – at least to our knowledge – that is constantly questioning its own definition, so that what was outside of art became invited within.

The stories of *Molla Nasreddin* (2011) are the best example; this is the kind of historical document that universities and policymakers should have published – it could have fitted into a whole array of different milieus and yet only the art publishers accepted it. That is the reason for our research. From the beginning we were very keen never to show the research as such. In this sense, there is a kind of literality that we abhor. There should be a cardinal rule to prevent showing documents – because you don't want to read things on a wall. You want to read things in your bedroom, in your bathtub.

People tend to hide behind the document; it becomes a buttress. It's very important never to allow anything to become an end point, so the document must be revisited as an incitement to do something. After the research we constantly ask ourselves, what are we bringing to the table as artists that historians, linguists, novelists and activists are not? What the hell do we have to say about language politics, about mirrors

Wünschst Du Dir ewiges Leben, Unsterblichkeit, So lasse Du, Weiser, gute Tat und gute Worte zurück.

O mędrze, jeśli pragniesz, by dusza two była nieśmiertelna, Dbaj dobrze o czyny swe i słowa.

سەن ئۆلمەيدىغان بىر ھايات تېلەسەڭ، خۇلقى مەجىز بىلەن مۇزۇڭنى ياخشى قىل، ئەي دادا.

Anthony Downey

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Qit Qat Qa, mirrored plexiglass, fibreglass, steel, 146 × 70 × 50 cm, 2013.

3
Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz, 2011, Sharjah Biennial 10.



Kitab Kebab, books, metal kebab skewer, 135 × 50 × 50 cm, 2013.

for princes? Otherwise, yes, you should just read the scholarship.

When we started working together, we realised anything we tried to do on walls didn't work. Of course we don't think of our practice strictly as art. Sure, we see that what we do works within art institutions and contexts, but we didn't put anything on a wall for six years, until relatively recently. We never thought we wanted to do sculpture, but were always drawn towards the middle of the space. So it was really about the centre, becoming part of the experience, always going inwards. It began in Sharjah, where everything we created was flat, simple, singular pieces that you could ostensibly hang on the wall; yet we didn't manage to do so: we created a space where you can spend time.³ There is also the question of craft. The idea of creating a document as an object draws us, whether it's in the context of ethnographic or folklore research – documents as dioramas, illustrating an environment around objects with painted backgrounds, people and wax, in a way that is anathema to the contemporary context. It's a challenge, a question of recreating the estrangement that happens when you create a galactic document that wings between periods of thousands of years. Some of the grooming objects in the Zürich show,

Kendine ölümsüz bir hayat dilerisen işin ve sözün iyi olsun, ey hakim.

ان كنت تدرجو لنفسك الخلود، فليكن قولك و عمالك صالحا ايها الحكيم.

Keep your deeds and words good then, O sage, if you seek undying life.

Anthony Downey

Beatrix Ruf

Slavs and Tatars

Sometimes these objects also look quite literal; that is, they look like they have a clear linguistic function (the tongue as shape, the mouth as shape), but humour always seems to undermine any easy access to functionality. Humour, slippage and transliteration are also key to the development and not just the ideas of these objects, for example, *Kitab Kebab* (2012, ongoing) and *Qit Qat Qa* (2013).

I want to go back and touch on a number of words that came to me as I looked over the material involved in both the book and installation *Mirrors for Princes*, and see if they have any further purchase in this context. I was thinking about haunting:

or even the turban *Wheat Molla* (2011), work within this kind of extended time frame.



Wheat Molla, wheat, cotton, brick, 30 × 35 × 25 cm, 2011.

Humour also brings an element of generosity, something very warm that otherwise the elaboration of the object could repel. Humour attracts, or diffuses the situation; it also gives you more room to manoeuvre. You can actually be very violent if you're humorous, more aggressive without that aggression – sort of annoying somebody with humour.

Die Zunge habe ich gelobt und getadelt, Mein Wunsch war das Wort, so habe ich gesagt.

Tak bardzo wychwalałem język, lecz nieraz go przeklinałem, Wszak chciałem ci wyjaśnić znaczenie słów.

تلتني خيلي ماخنتيم، يازنده سؤكتم، ماخنتيم تلتني ساگا چوشهءوردوروش نلدي.

Dili bu kadar övmek ve arada bir sövmekten amacım,
Sana sözün ne olduğunu anlatmaktır.

هذا المديح مني للسان (للسان) والشتمه والذم؛
بيان حقيقة القول لك مني.

The tongue I have praised and chastised,
my wish was the word, thus have I said.



Friendship of Nations: Polish Shi'ite Showbiz (installation view), 2011. Sharjah Biennale 10. Photo by Alfredo Rubio.

همسلا سوزنی بیخسا ناهل ماقول کور مینوؤ.
کیشی هاچنلاک سوزنی سوز لایوؤ، یوشور مایوؤ.

Nicht jedes Wort, das gefällt, ehrt den Verstand,
Sprich nur nötige Worte, sie halte nicht zurück.

Każdego słowa i jego znaczenia nie należy skrywać,
Mówić winno się prawdziwe słowa, niczego nie ukrywać.

Anthony Downey

Beatrix Ruf

Slavs and Tatars

there's almost a repression or an exploration of historical oppression – colonisation, imperialism, geopolitics, globalisation, call it what you will. The work as you present it seems to be almost like a 'ghost at the banquet', in a way that is exploring what haunts present-day representations of Islam, Muslims, Slavs and, indeed, Tatars. The submerged genre of mirrors for princes, in particular, seems to haunt political discourse today because that level of discourse is absent, or deferred, and it is precisely that absence that draws attention to the fact of its presence and the need for it. So I'm thinking about *Mirrors for Princes* as a kind of haunting of present-day political discourse, if that works?

Sharp Eye (Hazel), fibreglass, acrylic paint, polyester resin, 125 x 100 x 100 cm, 2014.



Perhaps haunting in terms of excavating the forgotten and overlooked – but not in a frightening sense. Perhaps we could also consider haunting as a form of reoccurrence – it's something that is unresolved. Rather than finding or discovering an archive, we work with it as a reoccurring subject.

That which refuses to go away, which refuses to die.

Her sözü saklamayı de anılayıs hoş görmez; Kişi gerekli sözü söyler, gizlemez.

الفهم لا يرضى أن يكون كل كلام سرًا؛ والمرء يبوح بما يلزم ولا يخفي.

Not every word that flatters honours knowledge; speak only necessary words, those do not hold back.

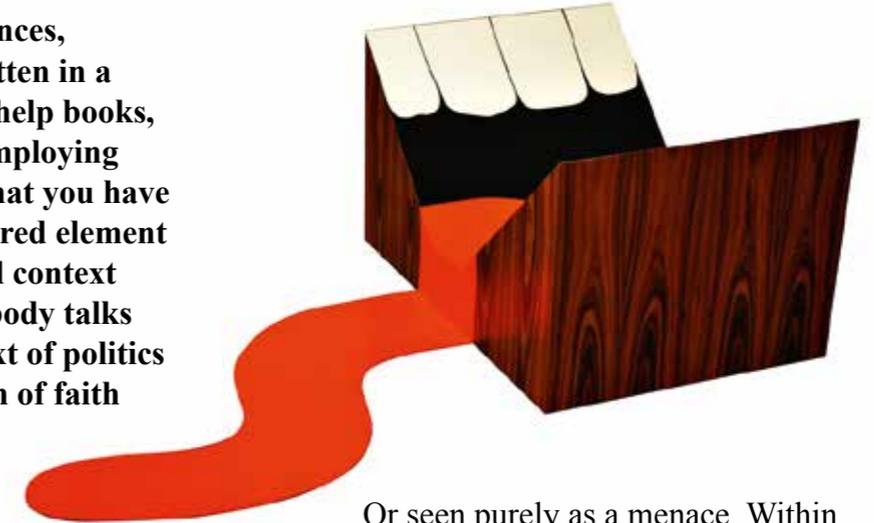
Anthony Downey

Beatrix Ruf

Slavs and Tatars

Because mirrors for princes, as a genre, is now rewritten in a vulgarised form as self-help books, the genre seems to be employing different idioms. But what you have done is excavate the shared element of developing a spiritual context within the political. Nobody talks about faith in the context of politics today. In fact, the notion of faith seems to be excised–

Rahlé for Richard, veneer on MDF, 56 x 110 x 180 cm, 2014.



Exactly, it's almost like it repeats itself, it's constantly the same; it comes back under different names in different times.

Or seen purely as a menace. Within *Lektor* (2014) there is an element of reoccurrence, repetition, and this mantra of constantly coming back. You see it in the main space of the Zürich Kunsthalle show because of the presence of four languages in four channels; by the time one sequence ends, the original language has just finished when the destination language is beginning, so there's a kind of linking up to, or trying to catch up to, itself.

It's interesting to talk about ghosting because a ghost's form is changing; there is no given form. That's something that reoccurs in your work; looking at cultural

Mein Wort habe ich zu Dir, mein Sohn, gesprochen, Oh Sohn, nimm es gut an!

O, junaku, słowa me kieruje do syna jako rade, Syn mój stoi niżej ode mnie, nie jest mi równy!

تەجە دانا! سۆزۈمنى ئوغۇلۇمغا سۆز لىدىم، ئوغۇل مەندىن تۆۋەن تۇرىدۇ. ماكا قاتناق تەڭكەشمۇن!

Anthony Downey

Beatrix Ruf

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phenomena in that more concrete, harder but changed form, which is therefore still there, haunting or reoccurring. These self-help books are probably the least appropriate or the worst ghost that could come out of mirrors for princes.

I'm also thinking about Gavrilo's translation and technique, that mimetic quality of two languages coming together, fighting and contesting one another.⁴ It seems Gavrilo translation, as a form, is very much about how the voice is a form of contestation, working in an ephemeral, immaterial sense, to simultaneously haunt another voice.

⁴ Gavrilo translation is a translation practice often used in Poland and Russia. The language of the original film or news segment is kept audible and almost equal to the destination language. The simultaneous playback of two distinct audio tracks makes for a disruptive experience, touching on issues of legibility and authenticity (the method is often used for news segments and documentaries). This method, of course, would often result in deviations from the original to the 'translated' voice. For a fuller discussion of this technique, see David Crowley's essay in this volume.

You're right, it haunts (maybe we can take the ghost metaphor further); it's a voice that overrides yet serves something, so it's this very strange thing where you're trying to explain in another language what somebody is saying but while you're doing that you're speaking over them.

I can't get away from Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia here; the accumulation of many different voices together to create something that is nonsingular, nonindividual, nonauthentic, nonoriginary, but also accumulative. That heteroglossic moment where meaning emerges

Ev, yigit, ben bu sözü oğlum içi söyledim: Oğul benden aşağıdır, bana nasıl denk olur.

هذا القول قلته لابني لأنها المقام: ابني أسفل مني فكيف يوازني!

My word have I, my son, spoken to you, oh, son, accept it well!

Anthony Downey

Beatrix Ruf

Slavs and Tatars

and mutates is not only about contest, it's about agonism and antagonistics; it's about the nonresolution of a specific point or historical moment. Have you guys looked at Bakhtin before?

⁵ David Joselit, 'On Aggregators', *October*, vol. 146 (Fall 2013): 3-18.

Of course, the dialogic is important, as is the carnival and carnivalesque. We were just reading David Joselit's essay about aggregates.⁵ He mentions that the difference with aggregates is that each element retains its own autonomy as opposed to becoming a mash-up or a third thing. Aggregates rely as well on asynchrony, whether through time (in the form of an anachronism) or scale. It's kind of like magnets; when magnets repel, there's a discharge, but perhaps one of agency.

It seems to me that the genre of mirrors for princes hasn't just been chosen because it's a form of historical document that brings together occluded narratives that have been partly forgotten. Nor is it just the reference to political instruction. It seems the reason you've chosen it is that it speaks to the ethos of present-day human behaviour, and perhaps what's missing from today's political discourse. I think this notion of political instruction in the context of the ethos of ethical and human



Nose Twister, veneer, faux leather, foam, paint, 60 x 250 x 250 cm, 2014.

ئەبى ئوغۇل! سۆزۈمنى سىڭا سۆزلەيدىم. ئەبى ئوغۇل! سىڭا ئۆزۈڭنىڭ بۇ تەسەھەتتىكى قەلدىم.

Zu Dir sprach ich mein Wort, oh Sohn! Dir habe ich meinen Rat gegeben, oh Sohn!

O synu, do ciebie mówię te słowa! O synu, tobie daję me rady!



Lektor (*speculum linguarum*),
multichannel sound installation,
mirrored plexiglass, speakers, 2014.
GfZK Leipzig. Photo by Johannes Ernst.

Anthony Downey

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Slavs and Tatars

behaviour seems to be the key debate of our time. Politics seems bereft of imagination, for want of a better term. Does that have something to do with the choice of this specific mirror for princes? What does it have to say to the present moment? How it offers a codependent, historical document or lineage for re-engaging the discussion.



Hung and Tart (split magenta), handblown glass, 15 x 35 x 25 cm, 2014.

We had a great idea for a proposal: if there were a government commission of a public artwork, we could have a mirror for princes text read to visiting dignitaries.

It's read to you, in its entirety.

It's formal and you have to take time to listen, so yes. I think the focus of *Lektor* (2014) on language is very important here because everything starts with the enunciation. Whether it's the way heads of state allow themselves to talk about Vladimir Putin or how the language that's used to talk about immigration has evolved in the past ten years. James Scott uses the term *infra-politics*; the private domain of the oral, whether in speech, songs or gestures, as forms of opposition

An edited version or extract from?

So it's formal, instructional?

Anthony Downey

Beatrix Ruf

Slavs and Tatars

that escape even the most oppressive regimes. Scott argues that we often look to the most overt and organised manifestations of politics, those most often successfully suppressed, but that we don't ever look at the gestures, the private jokes – those are infra-politics. We are interested in that kind of infra-discourse, the discourse that happens away from sight but, also, within one's self.

And it is this sense of the *infra*, that which lies beneath or behind, that seems to be made manifest in the objects.



Other People's Prepositions, glass, steel, 112 x 45 x 45 cm, 2013.

To come back to objects, when we started we were very concerned with the spaces that we build – like *PrayWay* (2012), or the riverbeds, as in *Dear 1979, Meet 1989* (2013) – and we always think of a comparison between those seating spaces and a chair. The chair is articulated individually – there's your space and my space. We're always trying to introduce a space where it's not about you and the chair but where one becomes the other. The collective trumps the individual.

You could perhaps see the notion of ethics and advice literature throughout previous works, not just in the current body of *Mirrors for Princes*. Much of our research,

Ey oğul sözümü sana söyledim:
 Ey oğul, bu öğütleri ben sana verdim.
 يا بني هذا القول لك مني،
 يا بني هذه أمرك الوصايا لك مني.

To you I spoke my word, oh, son!
 To you have I given my counsel, oh, son!

Anthony Downey

Beatrix Ruf

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But not necessarily on equal terms – again, it’s an antagonistic, agonistic process.

Which was the idea of the book club. This is quite a strong, potent, structural element for the rest of your work.

I see in all your work that you look at things in terms of how the text failed, so to speak, in a historical context and in the chronology of the text being transmitted to different channels and also conditions, in terms of politics or religion. When you think of art and its history, language is bound to fail, as many

installations and sculptures engage a sense of responsibility towards the other and the world around you.

Even the idea of the oral aspect of reading is interesting. Our challenge is to understand how to reclaim the collective act, how do you reactivate – or activate, even – or redeem the collective act of reading?

We often see reading as intimate, but perhaps the way to read a book is as though you are reading it aloud to the other person. Or the other extreme: as a text is written solely and exclusively for you.

Benden sana gümüüş ve altın kalırsa,
Sen onları bu söze denk tutma.

فإن ورنث مني قصة وثرأء
فلا تجعله بوزاري هذه الوصايا

If I bequeath to you gold and silver,
do not consider that to be equal to these words.

Anthony Downey

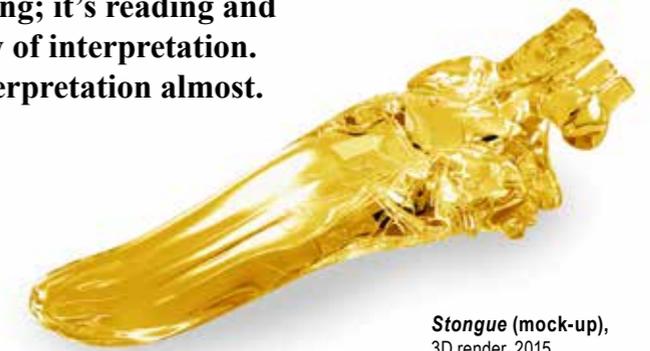
Beatrix Ruf

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artists have actively been saying. In your work, it seems the objects take on the grammar of language, they intentionally do not make language fail, but almost visualise or materialise language into objects. So the encounter with this is actually the absolute opposite of performativity because it’s reading and not speaking; it’s reading and not the activity of interpretation. It excludes interpretation almost.

Perhaps *enunciative* rather than *performative* might be a better term – to enunciate, the literal moment of saying as opposed to the moment of making meaning, as opposed to any narrative.

There seems also to be a moment of estrangement – the materialisation or enunciation of that word can be a moment of estrangement, too.



Stongue (mock-up),
3D render, 2015.

Enunciation is closer to the idea of the reification of the word. By enunciating something – the mantra, the *dhikr* – you are already making the word an object, and when you make a word, term or an idea an object, then you can break it, you can shatter it, you give it a materiality. How do you give a real, fleshy corporeality to a term that otherwise can slip through your fingers?

Verwendest Du Silber, so geht es zu Ende,
Verwende mein Wort, so erhältst du Silber!

Gdy placisz srebrem, wnet się ono skoinczy,
Gdy spożytkujesz me słowa, zdobędziesz srebro!

كولموشنى ئىشلەتسەڭ تۈگەيدۇ،
بوقالدىڭۇ، سۆزۈمنى ئىشقا سالىساڭ كۆمۈش تېپىلىدۇ.

فما أنفقت من تيد بيزول ويغني؛
وبالتزام قولي تكسب الثيرا!

Apply silver to affairs and it will be used up,
but apply my words and you will gain silver.

PrayWay, silk and wool carpet, MDF, steel,
neon, 50 × 390 × 280 cm, 2012. New Museum,
New York. Photo by Patrick McMullan.



Von Mensch zu Mensch wird das Wort vererbt,
Der Nutzen, das geerbte Wort zu behalten, ist gross.

Słowa dziedziczy człowiek od człowieka,
Wielka jest korzyść z odziedziczonych słów.

كشدين كشيگه قالدنغان مەراس سۆزئۆر.
ۋە مەسپەت قالدنغان سۆزنى تۇتساڭ پادىسى كۆپتۇر.

Anthony Downey

Beatrix Ruf

Slavs and Tatars

You've got to work hard at this – every time I see your work I get a totally different experience, and you have to be ready to absorb and engage this difference. Maybe this goes back to your notion about accessibility and availability.

It has a rich meaning, the term *vulgar* – it's not just a simile for scatological. You know *vulgate* is actually the common speech of the people, the vernacular. The vulgate Bible was prepared by St. Jerome in the fourth century BC, and handed down to the people and accepted as the recognised version, thereafter making the Word of God more widely accessible to the individual, and this is the origin of the notion vulgarisation. A vulgarisation can be the secularisation of the sacred.

Vulgarisation is also something we could talk about as a question of profanity and the sacral. We keep talking about the talisman or the totem, creating works that have or suggest a ritualistic quality, but at the same time there is a very clear process of vulgarisation.

This is a tension that we have within our own practice, and within our dynamic. It's again this idea of the repelling magnets – on one end we're

Kişiden kişiye, miras olarak söz kalır.
Vasiyet edilen sözü tutmamın faydası yoktur.

يبقى البيان من الإنسان للإنسان ميراث،
وتوالت الكلام الموصى به كثيرًا.

Words are one man's legacy to another.
So hold on to the legacy of my words, and the profit therefrom will be a hundredfold.

Anthony Downey

Beatrix Ruf

Slavs and Tatars

invested in the printed word, and yet the printed word profanes the sacrality of texts, the very thing that we seek to preserve.



5 o'clock shadow, linden wood, mirror, shaved copper ore, 18 x 48 x 31 cm, 2014.

سۆز كۆك ناسماندىن بوز يەرگە چۈشكى،
ئىنسان سۆز بىلەن تۇزىنى قانداق قىممەتكە ئىگە قىلدى.

Vom blauen Himmel fiel die Rede zur dunklen Erde;
Der Mensch hat sich durch seine Worte verliehen.

Słowo zstąpiło z niebieskiego nieba na brudną ziemię;
A człowiek zdobył znaczenie dzięki słowu.