

MIXED LANGUAGE.

SAID ATABEKOV

Boris Chukhovich, 2011

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The popularity of the myth of the Tower of Babel results in a traumatic grief of humanity about the existence of a common language, that would allow everyone to "live as one community" and to implement global projects. And still, common language is associated in our collective memory with mutual consent and cooperation, while its absence with conflict and disunity. The myth suggests that the pre-Babylonian language was clear, because "in the beginning, there was the Word. The Word was with God, and the Word was God..."¹ This is also how Foucault writes about such ideas, "In its original form, when it was given to men by God himself, language was an absolutely certain and transparent sign for things, because it resembled them". Thus in the myth, the clear and straightforward thoughts of the creator are embodied in the character of words. Like the kingdom of God, "Adamic language" excludes uncertainty and ambiguity. However the inaccessible purity of the "original" language still arouses the libido of local nationalists, who sublimate their energy in the ostracism of loan-words, neologisms, barbarisms and "foul expressions". It also stays as a vague object of desire in the works of Benjamin and Derrida: *die reine Sprache* (pure language)² or *une langue archi-maternelle* (super-mother tongue)³. Yet, the myth of original language has remained a myth, and the dreams of a clear language, a passeistic utopia. And even if the Adamic language had existed, it still would have not been so much like the Creator himself, but more like the people who used it up to the 11th chapter of the Genesis. And according to the first biblical narratives, the pre-Babylonian community was not so different in its perfection, consistency and integrity from the post-Nietzschean one. The modernist revolution of the 20th century was accompanied by a new interest in the Babylonian trauma. Languages, by "changing their own past, serve the cause of enmity", and break up the "multilingual humanity into custom-fighting camps, into several world-markets"⁴, states Velimir Khlebnikov.

Striving to create a universal and uniform language, modernism approved two strategies. The first one was a kind of creationist approach. In accordance with the pathos of futurists, this new language was thought to be created on the foundation of the utmost simplified basic elements that are understandable to everyone on the “third satellite of the Sun”. It’s enough just to recall the *zaim* (заумь) of Khlebnikov, or the *onomalanguage* of Fortunato Depero. In contrast to this “atomic strategy” (see *Atomic language*), a desire to compile a language based on sources taken from various languages has also appeared. In the era of the early avant-garde, when the main priority of the artists was still the homogenization of the language, this desire was more latent and collateral. However, a heterogeneous counterpoint had already existed: one can remember those loan-words from “primitives” and, in particular, from African languages, which were implemented by Dadaists, such as Tristan Tzara⁵. And an even earlier successful experience of a linguistic mix was the creation of Esperanto, an artificial language, compiled by Ludwig Zamenhof, based on lexical items used in the Roman-Germanic and Slavic languages, as well as in Greek and Latin. So in modernism, while striving for pre-Babylonian unity on the basis of radical reductions, the premise of commonality was born, not excluding plurality, diversity and flexibility.

This direction was formulated conceptually in the late 70’s, when intellectuals from Martinique, Jean Bernabé, Raphael Confiant, and Patrick Chamoiseau published their manifesto, “In Praise of Creoleness”⁶. The object of their analysis was the newly-formed languages of Latin America and of the adjacent islands, where a mixed population of Europeans and different minority communities, from island natives to imported African slaves, lived. The authors of “In Praise of Creoleness” demonstrated the productiveness of meeting and mixing of languages. Their manifesto has presented the value of Creolization as a universal model, which could open new perspectives on intercultural and interlinguistic interaction. They initiated an international discussion that was devoted to both the futuristic and retrospective value of the new concept. It clearly showed that all cultures of the world were and are “Creole”, and that languages are mixed. With increasing migration and the spread of new communication technologies, Creolization can offer the potential of a New Babylon. The gradual horizontal mixing can present a conceptually new alternative to the global vertical hierarchy, with a focus on Wall Street, the Secretariat of the Monument to the Third International or any other power incarnation of “the fourth Rome”. The possibility of a spontaneous turn from broken-up human multitudes to multiple unities is also shaping. Located at the intersection of Chinese, Indian, Turkic, Iranian and Russian worlds, as well as in the zone of interaction of four world religions, Central Asia has always been an arena of miscegenation. Even “modern times” were not an exception, which enabled Russian-European art to be painted on Central Asian palimpsest.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the official ideology of post-Soviet states in the region proclaimed the slogan of returning to lost roots, and the authorities, with the help of improvised artists, began to hastily erase signs of the colonial and Soviet past. Despite this, many artists chose the opposite paradigm. For them, Russian-Soviet art and, in particular, the legacy of the Russian avant-garde remained a major source of creativity that did not exclude an appeal of both key themes of historical art of the region and problems of international art. A strategy of inclusivity became the aesthetic roots of their choice, as the principal means of artistic expression - patchwork, superimposing, overlapping, cohesion, a combination of heterogeneous and randomly combined elements. *Said Atabekov* is one of the most notable artists of the last decade working in this direction. Describing his latest projects, one could likely say that he is working on creating a Central Asian dialect of visual Esperanto, which, in light of the dominance of Orientalist and self-orientalist discourses in Central Asia, can be objectively attributed as “Anti-Kipling”.

The exhibition presents four projects of the artist – “*Bosphorus Prayer*” (2007), “*Red Cross*” (2010), “*Farewell of Slavianka*” (2010), and “*Flags*” (2009-2011). Each of these, in its own way, perceives the possibility of a mixed language in the matter of trans-cultural communication. **Cohesion of signifiers.** The project “Bosphorus Prayer” features a woman conducting prayer-like ritual gestures, which reflect ambivalence and uncertainty. A closer look captures the gestures of praying in the movements of her hand, both Islamic and Christian at once - she makes a cross, but her hands are held as Muslims do. It does not matter whether this is an act of profanation of ancient sacredness or sacralization of today’s profanities. More important is the contextual relevance that evokes those “trans-cultural epochs” in the development of Central Asian art, when lines originating from different sources united in a single artifact. It is enough just to recall the era of “Greco-Bactrian”, “Kushan-Bactrian” or “Indo-Kushan” art. However there is also a considerable difference; while these trans-cultural phenomena were the result of a natural convergence of two or more collective sources, “Bosphorus Prayer” was born as a result of a personal mixed-cultural act. In communicative terms, this strategy is effective. The ritual, captured on video, is read and understood on both sides of the symbolic “Bosphorus”, which ceases to serve as a border between religions and cultures, but becomes a binding bridge.

Trans-cultural references. The installation “Flags” is interesting, primarily because of its hybrid objects – korpeshes in the style of flags - with which the artist occupies the exhibition space. Korpeshe is a traditional form of Central Asian textile, which serves a dual function of mattress and blanket in the tents of Kazakh nomads. These flags of European countries, made of patterned fabrics, could be perceived as a literal expression of mixed languages

using symbols of the “West” (represented by national state symbols) and the “East” (stereotypical arabesque pattern). Perhaps such an interpretation would satisfy official orientalists or enthusiasts of the “historic reconciliation” of East and West, - “the twain, that never shall meet”. However, the case of Said Atabekov’s needs more clarification. Firstly - and this is even more evident in Venice, which is probably the most richly decorated and adorned city in Italy - arabesque, which arrived from the Persian miniatures and Byzantine, has become an integral part of classical Italian art along with the classical art of the West, since the early Renaissance⁷. This means that it is not about connecting two “disparate” sources, but about combining the already mixed and remixed. Secondly, it is impossible to ignore the fact that Korpeshe is a part of a nomad’s everyday life, whose figure has become an emblem of our time through the works of Deleuze, Guattari, Derrida and many others. A nomad is not tied to a territory, can move in any direction, is open to all winds, and is not subject to any nostalgic trauma. For him, national borders and symbols, such as flags, have meaning only in one sense: how to cross them in order to move on. Therefore, state attributes on the flag-Korpeshes change while the trans-cultural patterned background remains unchanged. Thirdly, we should note that the image of the Nomad, which stands in the background of Said Atabekov’s installation, does not coincide with the exotic-nomadic Orientalist images, which can be found amply in Central Asian art. It is given that the artist is aware of the attractiveness of his work, which is often perceived by the viewer as a mystical and lyrical revelation. And the principle of mixing when creating an image indeed allows Atabekov to introduce elements of shamanic, nomadic or Sufi creativity into his projects. However, the presence of self-destruction, irony and diverse intellectual connection in the artist’s works has more in common with nomadism of Deleuze than with the nomads of pre-colonial Turkestan. Deleuze believes that in order to become a nomad, today it is not at all necessary to travel – “there are trips that take place on the spot, trips to intensity”,⁸ taken in the quietness of one’s study. Said Atabekov, along with Korpeshes, keeps an empty case of Kalashnikov assault rifles in his “office”. Quiet is relative here and the non-conflict of universal crossover is ephemeral.

Superposition of signifiers. The project “Red Cross” is characterized by a double game in the spirit of Arcimboldo, with superimposed layers of different characters. Archetypal images of the Russian avant-garde are apparent: a square, cross and circle (in fact, if the cross can be understood as the merging of two rectangles, then the crescent is obtained by subtraction from a circle). Precisely these forms appeared as sacred symbols of the new artistic doctrine, first at suprematic exhibitions, then on the tomb of the patriarch of the movement. However sacredness and iconicity of these signs, underlined by the transformation of the circle into “Islamic” crescent moon, is filled with new meanings in the project.

The Russian avant-garde sought to exclude associations of colored geometric shapes with any “forms of life” - though here, when taking a closer look, these forms are executed using photo images of poppy fields. The reality of colored panes becomes a base for the illusionary, life-like images, revealing the relative truth of both layers of the images. It reminds the viewer of the post-suprematic deconstruction of the “real”, seen in the later works of Malevich, in the 30’s. In the meantime the iconography of the project includes solid referential clichés associated with poppies - from the blossoming Eurasian steppe, to the Afghan poppy plantations, bringing heroin dividends. We need not forget that the ancient Greeks already considered poppies as symbols of Hypnos and Thanatos, the gods of sleep and death. These values are assigned to this flower in many cultures, including Central Asian. Therefore mixing and overlapping layers of meanings predetermine the transparency of the issues addressed in the project.

Inter-media interferences. The project “Farewell of Slavianska” is a slide show presenting an unusual ritual. According to Said Atabekov, the captured action was carried out by his Kazakh relatives, trying to find traces of the artist’s great-uncle, who went missing in 1943 during the Great Patriotic War. At first the villagers made a special object - a “carpet” with the same half-sacred, half-suprematic images of a crescent, square and circle, which are parts of the previous project, followed by a ritual procession of the object. The slide show connects several languages. Firstly, it is the language of the newly-created ritual itself, which retains characters of Islamic memorial ceremonies, as well as possibly some of pre-Islamic origin. Secondly, the medium of photography evokes, as if in a mirror, a reflection of photographer Max Penson, an important figure in Central Asian art. In Penson’s photographs, Turkestan appears to be imbued with freshness and, at the same time, with alarming discourses of the early socialist era. It is typical for him to mix “diagonal compositions” of Russian Constructivism with local traditional “texture”, which is, however, devoid of Orientalist “spices”, as the photographic material is not exotic for the artist, but part of his everyday reality. The third element is the “carpet”, which is obviously an artifact of Said Atabekov - symbols of major world religions, especially in the form of tombstone markers and sacred objects have long entered the vocabulary of the artist. And finally, the fourth and especially important element is the specific language of cinema, transforming the inter-media slideshow into a spacio-temporal piece of art, including sound. Stravinsky once likened the music of films to wallpaper decorating rooms, and probably mistakenly, because, metaphysically speaking, sound reaches the “soul” and human emotions incomparably faster than image⁹. As a lingua franca, melody is often much more effective than visual images and, especially, words. It is sufficient to give the example of the song, “Lili Marleen”, whose “fascist German origin” has not stopped it from spreading in the midst of the war in many languages, and basically among the opponents of Germany.

It is however unlikely that this song will ever have a visual or verbal competitor. In Said Atabekov's project the melody, "Farewell of Slavianka", could be considered a pan-Slavic and pan-Soviet version of "Lili Marleen". A common theme and an especially indispensable attribute in war films are farewell scenes at train stations (Kalatozov's film "The Cranes are Flying"). The song, "Farewell of Slavianka" being strongly incorporated into the slide show, radically changes the meaning and perception of the ritual that was recorded by the artist. This is not a musical illustration and definitely not a "wallpaper", but rather it is a counterpoint against the Asian-NOT-Slavic context. But perhaps this is the plaintive element in the project that activates feelings of the viewer, regardless of their origin and cultural background. The melody is well-known, it has strong associations, and "basic emotions" are similar all over the world. If we accept the idea of Ernest Ansermet, claiming that "feeling, as such", is a "musical sense" ¹⁰, and contrast it with Adorno, who proposes that music is similar to languages, but "music is not language" ¹¹, we can confirm that in this case, a well-known world "hit" translates the artifact into a universal context of lingua franca. However, in fact, Adorno's vision of music is almost identical to how Benjamin understands "pure language": "Music refers to true language: the language, which would include a revelation for the speaker himself, at the expense of the uniqueness of the thought identifying the speech" ¹². The Babylon circle is closed so that it can be unlocked again.

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NOTES

1. Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966, p.51.
2. Die reine Sprache – „Pure Language” is the central concept of Walter Benjamin's article, "Task of the Translator" (Walter Benjamin, "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers", Suhrkamp, 1974-89), which in function is similar to the "original language", that would continue to connect "the succeeding languages", coming out of a „single root”.
3. Une langue archi-maternelle appears in the reflections of Derrida, as the untranslatable core of any text, which is closely connected with the hermetic, untranslatable sacred "first language" (see Alexis Nouss, "Babel: avant, après", dans *TTR: traduction, terminologie, rédaction*, vol. 3, no 2, 1990, p.55)
4. Велимир Хлебников, «Художники Мира!» // Творения, Москва, Советский писатель, 1986, с.619.
5. Anne Tomiche, «Babel et les avant-gardes futuristes et dadaïstes», dans *Les Mythes des avant-gardes*, Clermont-Ferrand, Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2003, pp.153-167.

6. Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau et Raphaël Confiant, *Eloge de la créolité*, Paris, Gallimard, 1989.
7. See: Gustave Soulier, *Les influences orientales dans la peinture toscane*, Paris, Henri Laurens, 1924.
8. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche aujourd'hui*, Paris, UGE, coll. «10/18», t.1, 1973, p.174.
9. By definition of a prominent Soviet aesthetician, Vladimir Dneprov, music is a „phenomenology of emotions”. (Владимир Днепров, «О музыкальных эмоциях. Эстетические размышления» // Кризис буржуазной культуры и музыка. Москва, Музыка, 1972, с.99).
10. Эрнст Ансерме, Статьи о музыке и воспоминания, Москва, Советский композитор, 1986, с.204-205.
11. Quoted from French sources: Theodor W. Adorno, «Fragment sur la musique et le langage», dans *Quasi una fantasia. Écrits musicaux II*, Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque des idées, 1982, p.3.)
12. Ibid., P.5.