# Slavs and Tatars
# *MERCZbau*

## May 5 – Oct 7, 2022



Slavs and Tatars' timely exhibition *MERCZbau* revisits the intertwined histories of the Ukrainian city of Lviv and the Polish city of Wroclaw from the perspective of a specifically eastern Orientalism.

Following World War II, as Lviv was incorporated into the newly expanded Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, the Polish population of what had long been Poland's third most populous city was forcibly relocated to Wroclaw, the historical capital of the German borderlands of Silesia, which had been gifted to Poland at the Potsdam Conference in 1945 in exchange for the loss of its eastern territories. This massive population transfer also affected scholars affiliated with the renowned Jan Kazimierz University in Lwow, a majority of whom were secured posts at the newly founded Wroclaw University. One key scholarly institution, however, did not survive the traumatic upheaval of this expulsion: the Department of Oriental Studies, which had long been one of the premier such institutions of its kind in Europe, thanks in part to Lwow's strategic location in the southeastern corner of the Second Polish Republic (1918–39).

For their exhibition at the Neubauer Collegium Gallery, the Berlin-based artist collective have created a speculative range of merchandising ("merch") dedicated to the defunct Department of Oriental Studies of the University of Lwow, acting as if age-old traditions of scholarship and inquiry about "the east" had survived the Polish population's westward journey. As such, the installation – its title doubles as an allusion to Kurt Schwitters' landmark *Merzbau* environment in Hannover (1923–37) – offers a reflection on the perennially shifting meanings of our enduring east/west divides.

*MERCZbau* initially set out to engage a recent history that is still painfully alive to many on both sides of the Polish-Ukrainian border. Little could we have known that this project would acquire an added layer of geopolitical complexity and topicality in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has forced many scholars at the University of Lviv, like countless others across Ukraine, to flee westward – across a Polish border drawn less than a lifetime ago. The Ukrainian diaspora will sadly continue to grow, and it has already affected Chicago's historically large Polish and Ukrainian communities. In many ways, Chicago is both Poland's and Ukraine's westernmost city. *MERCZbau* invites us to consider the continued entanglement of histories and peoples across borders as articulated most poignantly in the human drama of migration, whether from east to west or from south to north. And only very occasionally, it seems, the other way round.

The exhibition was made possible in part through a partnership with the Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry at the University of Chicago. Proceeds from the sale of the merchandise will be donated to the Scholars at Risk organization.

Curated by Dieter Roelstraete

## About the Artists

Slavs and Tatars identify themselves as 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." Founded in 2006 as a collaboration between artists and designers, the group focuses on three interlocking spheres of production and activity: exhibitions, lecture-performances, and publications. Recent solo exhibitions have taken place at Op Enheim in Wroclaw, the Hayward Gallery in London, Villa Arson in Nice, the Kunstverein Hannover, the Contemporary Center in Vilnius, SALT Galata in Istanbul, the Kunsthalle Zürich, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Blaffer Art Museum in Houston.

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