

Conversation with Aslı Çavuşoğlu



Natalie Bell

Natalie Bell: One of the themes I see frequently in your work is forensics and its relationship to archaeology, but it's the connection to interpretation and how we think about art objects, whether contemporary or historical. I'm curious how you approach the idea of forensics or the interpretation of objects or a crime scene, as in *A Murder in Three Acts* (2012), which is also about art objects, albeit in a different narrative language. How do you think about an object's afterlife by way of interpretation?

Aslı Çavuşoğlu: Actually, archaeology and forensics are more *modus operandi* for me than the themes of my work. I am comfortable within these fields because they can be analogies for many things: How do we create stories, fictions, and/or national narratives through objects? Or, how do we extract the true value of art objects? How do we make connections? How do we project ourselves onto objects such that our ideas redefine them? I'm more interested in that process than in archaeology itself.

NB: That seemed to be what was at work in "The Stones Talk," your solo show at ARTER (2013), in which you recreated fragmented bits of archaeological finds, or "study pieces," that are considered too partial for museum display. I wonder if some part of that had to do with thinking about the fragments *per se*, and what it means to have something irreparably partial, in terms of how we approach its value and use.

AÇ: I heard from an archaeologist who was working in Çatalhöyük, an archaeological site in Turkey, who told me about an early excavation in that area in which they excavated a female idol lacking a head; the archaeologists of the time thought that it would be ugly to show it that way, so they made a head for her. But they used materials and techniques to integrate a head that a viewer wouldn't understand to be added later. It got me thinking about who decides what is lacking or inconsequential, or how this manipulation of archaeological objects can alter the story they offer, and how, with display and its hierarchies, museums help to create nationalism, to make the viewer conform to an identity.

I was thinking about how other narratives can be employed or how other display methods can change the story these objects are telling. The name of the exhibition is paraphrased from Freud, actually. Freud was using all these archaeological objects, small idols, showing them to his patients and asking them to interpret them, and there, of course, they were not in a museum. They were just on his desk. So then, he writes this very beautiful lecture, “The Aetiology of Hysteria” (1896), which he concludes with a Latin phrase, “Saxa loquuntur!”: *Stones speak*. He says that it’s never the object speaking. It’s our ideas, and we make them speak.

NB: Many of your projects consider the way cultural heritage is constructed. Sometimes that happens through archaeology, sometimes through a particular landscape or site, and sometimes by calling upon a specific figure, such as Alexander the Great. How did that inquiry first emerge in your work, and where does it stand in your thinking at this point?

AÇ: One of my early projects was titled *The Demolition of the Russian Monument at Ayestefanos* (2011). Its long title comes from the first Turkish-made film in history. The history of Turkish cinema starts with this film, but nobody saw it, so nobody knows if it existed or not. After the Turkish Republic was formed, the government was trying to find the first Turkish somethings—first Turkish painter, first Turkish filmmaker, and so on. They completely ignored all the heritage of the Ottomans, so they were trying to find Turk-Turk filmmakers, not Greek-Turk. The Manaki brothers, the second filmmakers in the world, after the Lumière brothers, were from Albania—born into a Greek family, but just happened to die in a place that now belongs to Macedonia. However, they were left out of Turkish film history and a ghost film was nominated as the first.

The Alexander the Great statue I made [*Gordian Knot* (2013)] was about the debate between Macedonia and Greece: both countries were saying, “He’s *our* hero, so he cannot be *yours*.” It lasted maybe fifteen years. Recently they agreed that Macedonia would change

its name. Macedonia is now called North Macedonia because of this dispute.

NB: I had no idea it was about something so ancient.

AÇ: Especially after the collapse of Soviet Union, every Balkan country was trying to find some basis to claim that it should be a separate country, so they had to come up with historical figures and stories. This selection of the figureheads or pioneers of a culture, tied to ethnic background or country, is something I find very primitive, yet effective. I am curious how the Manaki brothers or Alexander the Great would relate themselves to the Balkans now.

I find UNESCO and its claims about cultural heritage problematic as well. They say, “Culture is for everybody,” but if you don’t have a visa, if you can’t afford international travel, you can’t visit UNESCO sites. It’s not for everyone, actually, if we are honest about political and economic realities. We can see the problem with Syrian heritage and who is claiming it now. All these 3-D printers are making copies of Palmyra, and I’m wondering who has the copyright and to what end could it be reproduced? To place a replica of one of the main arches of Palmyra in London, in Trafalgar Square,¹ is completely kidnapping, hijacking Syrian cultural heritage, and claiming that it all gained relevance to the Western world primarily because it was a Roman site, a “desired” past of Europe.

NB: Cultural heritage, and how it can be read into the landscape, also informs your project for Manifesta 11, with the thrift-store landscape paintings you found and manipulated [*Muthoscapes* (2016)].

AÇ: I really like the word *pentimento*; that’s what the work is about. It’s an Italian word to describe when a painter changes his or her idea and repaints the painting. The term relates to regret, and also nostalgia. My aim was to collect landscape paintings of Switzerland and find the very first brushstrokes of all these anonymous painters who, when they painted the mountains, changed their minds and placed them somewhere else. I tried to create a metaphor for a

utopian place that's just on the axis in the very first layer, that is now completely erased by another landscape painting.

NB: Do they usually start with the mountain?

AÇ: Yes. They start in the center with the biggest mountains. Of course, I cannot detect which mountain was painted first, but at least I can tell that they changed and erased some parts and painted over them. My idea was to make the covered-up mountains emerge again, also in relation to the idea of Switzerland as a haven or utopia, a branding strategy employed especially after the Second World War. In fact, it is the most difficult country to immigrate to.

NB: Many of your other works are also about uncovering things that are hidden, whether literally or figuratively, and particularly about historical moments or aspects of a political history that has not been publicly recognized or sufficiently acknowledged. What about your short film *In Different Estimations Little Moscow* (2011), in which you looked at a very specific historical event in Turkey—the 1980 coup d'état trial, known as Point Operation, in which the government prosecuted those involved in a short-lived democratic movement in Fatsa—but uncovered it through different personal recollections? It seems like for many people, this history still felt unsafe.

AÇ: The work reflects upon personal stories that are inconsistent with each other, because the story of the 1980 coup in Fatsa was never allowed to be written. What happened there was never told; it was never recorded or publicly discussed. Even the families from there never told their children what happened.

NB: How much of that project was improvised along the way?

AÇ: Actually, I had no idea what I would find when I first embarked on that project, so I wanted to go there first to get a sense of the atmosphere. I thought reenactment wouldn't be a good idea because I wouldn't want to evoke a trauma if people were still hurt by past events. I was trying to be respectful of their memories. I just wanted

to hear what people would say about this event, if they wanted to speak about it at all; what I heard were all the scattered histories about what happened—inconsistent places, people, incidents, shootings, etc. I was thinking the core idea would be to reflect this fragmentation, that there's no one linear history about the military operation. Nobody agrees with each other, and some people haven't spoken to each other in forty years and they have completely different things to say. Especially because talking about this incident was banned. I thought my approach would be more artistic and more ethical if I just made space for all the stigmatized stories and showed that it's impossible to place all these small pieces to create something linear.

NB: What was your experience like working on *The Cut* (2015)? How did people perceive that project in Warsaw, and what was the reaction or expectation from the community when they saw their landscape excavated to reveal these World War II-era ruins?

AÇ: We received, of course, very diverse responses, but I remember one opposing view. There was this neighbor who said, "I want to forget. Why do you make me remember?" He meant, "I know that we live in ruins, and there are so many dead people underneath the earth, but I cannot continue if I know it all the time." He was right. It was a nice trigger to start a conversation with different people, because others had said they were happy to see the rubble of the ghetto, so all these horrible things wouldn't happen again. That's why we wanted to make it only a three-day event that would unearth a terrifying past and leave it to be covered by oblivion again. We made a cut, or an excavation, and then together we filled the earth with all these materials we extracted, not making any hierarchical order and not valuing one over another, and just put the grass on top of it to mark that it was discovered and could be interpreted and excavated again. I think this is what I am trying to do in most of my projects. I'm not trying to say this is the right version of the story, or this is the right way to look at or interpret things. It's more an attempt to open up to multiplying narratives. You can have your own interpretation. Narratives are all constructed, so they can be reconstructed again and again.

NB: Another work that takes up history and censorship is *191/205* (2010), in which you look back at words that were banned by Turkish state media. What's surprising for me about those words is that many are themselves about memory and history. Could you discuss how you first learned about that list of words and how you developed the piece?

AÇ: Actually, when I was pursuing the list of these banned words, I was so sure that those times of censorship had passed and that it would never be like that again. I had, I guess, a nostalgic view of this past military coup and censorship issues, because it was 2010—which is not that long ago—and we had a really great, free life in Istanbul. For my friends, my generation, when I first talked about the project, they were like, “Oh, that’s absurd! Did it really happen?” In fact, two years after I made the project, there was an internet ban. Some words were banned in domain names, together with some blogs and some online news sites. There was a really big protest about it.

The use of language has been very definitive; especially then, leftists and rightists had quite particular and divided jargons. For instance, one would say “entire,” the other would say “whole.” And through these uses of words you could tell people’s political inclinations. The polarization of everyday language continues even now. If somebody passes away, there are two ways to offer condolences: one is a new one, made up by secularists, and the other is more religious-sounding, more traditional.

NB: Can you give an example from the banned list?

AÇ: They were saying that you could not say “revolution,” because it is very leftist, but we could say “reform,” which is not exactly the same word. Or, instead of “equality,” they were suggesting the Ottomanic version of the word that nobody uses, which has a lot of connotations of a glorified past. I had no idea what I was going to do with the list when I first pursued it. It took me six months to find the entire list.

NB: How did you go about compiling the complete list?

AÇ: I went to the archives of the state television and radio and they told me they have the right to burn down their archive every ten years—which is what they did, because what you choose to keep can be dangerous for the former director. So they burned it down, and it was only through the former director of the archive, who’d made a copy of this list for himself, that I got it. He sent me a photocopy of his own copy, which was a very bad photocopy: one page was almost completely black, you could hardly read the words, and there was one page missing. That’s why the work is called 191 out of 205, because the remaining words were on that one page I was never able to find. I had this information and it didn’t make sense to just put it on the walls, so I approached a Turkish-German rapper and he composed a song using all the words. It’s a protest song about gentrification, corruption, many different political things, and it uses 191 of these words as well.

NB: Thinking about what can or can’t be spoken, or the way censorship has manifested in present-day Turkey, leads me to a more recent work, *Future Tense* (2017), that concerns a moment in which censorship has taken an unusual direction.

AÇ: I can’t recall his name, but there’s a thinker from the Middle East who says, “If there’s a government who’s afraid of words, that means that words can still change things.” Each time there is another wave of censorship, it proves that we should be hopeful that language and words are capable of change. *Future Tense* came out of a moment when a lot of journalists were jailed after the failed military coup in 2016, and all the commentators and journalists I find important to read were suddenly absent.

In all this turmoil, people were talking to each other and asking what would happen in the future. It occurred to me that astrologists and tarot card readers were playing a big part in the news and political commentary, even on TV, talking about what’s going to happen next. I realized why they were so interesting to viewers—because this was

also what normal people, including the government, were doing: filling the gaps with gossip. The soothsayers would say whatever they wanted about politics; they were immune to censorship because they were using the tools of astrology and other supernatural elements.

There are very biased astrologists working in different newspapers, some pro-government, some anti-government. The astrological charts they publish in the papers are so political! And their interpretations reflect the politics of the newspaper they're working with. Ten years ago, when you would buy a newspaper, you were able to read different opinions. But nowadays it's one single opinion. There's no discussion, no opposing views. For *Future Tense*, I was wondering if it would be possible to have a newspaper in which I could invite all these different groups, different astrologists, so they could create a newspaper that is polyvocal? I invited about fifty soothsayers from Turkey, of diverse ethnicities and political orientations, to contribute. There are so many opposing views about the future of Turkey: one soothsayer says it's going to be divided; the other says it's going to be perfect, it's going to be bigger, like old times. So it's actually all about these people's aspirations. It's analogous to archaeology and archaeological objects. You try to compile all these different objects, interpretations, and histories to support your idea. Of course, I'm not saying "astrology and archaeology" because my archaeologist friend would kill me: "Can you compare us with astrology?"

1. A twenty-foot marble replica of the Arch of Triumph in Palmyra, made from 3-D renderings, was unveiled in London's Trafalgar Square in 2016. The original arch was destroyed by Islamic State militants in late 2015. The project was an initiative of the University of Oxford, Harvard University, and Dubai's Museum of the Future, which came together to form the Institute for Digital Archaeology.