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Halil Altindere in Conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist

Hans Ulrich Obrist: I want to begin and ask you, Halil, what brought you to making art. How did it all start, how did you become an artist, was there an epiphany?

Halil Altindere: It started all of a sudden, it was not planned. I knew that I had a gift, that I was talented, but it was not that I dreamed of being an artist. I went to University and I started to spend time at the library, reading and following international magazines and art books. I photocopied the magazines and asked friends to translate the articles for me. It was a very genuine curiosity that led to me becoming an artist. This was around 1995–1996.

HUO: Yes, this was more or less when we met. We met for the first time in Nantes, in 2000, at the art school. Robert Fleck was the Dean, and he had invited me to come and speak to the students. How did you come to be in France? Also I think it's interesting to say that this interview is actually based on us knowing each other for years.

HA: Yes, yes, that's true. I was still a student, I was doing my master's in Istanbul, actually this was the time when I'd moved to Istanbul, and I decided to spend some time in Europe to be able to follow the art scene more from the center. In 1997, I participated in the Istanbul Biennial, the one that was curated by Rosa Martínez, and in 1998 I participated in the São Paulo Biennial. The reason that I wanted to do the residency in France was specifically to visit the museums and to grasp the European art scene. I spent most of my time in the shop at the Centre Pompidou!

HUO: Who were the artists that inspired you at the time?

HA: Around 1998 Alexander Brener was an inspiration. I was very fond of the sense of humor inherent to Francis Alÿs's or Maurizio Cattelan's work. And John Baldessari as well, because of his sense of humor.

HUO: Are there any artists from Turkey who inspired you?

HA: There is Sarkis. When I was a student I was interested mostly in conceptual art. Sarkis was the pioneer of the genre when he participated in the Harald Szeemann exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* (1969), so that's why he was my leading source of inspiration. And there are Altan Gürman, Şükrü Aysan, Cengiz Çekil, Füsün Onur, İsmail Saray, Serhat Kiraz, and Hale Tenger, Hüseyin Alptekin, Ayşe Erkmen and Gülsün Karamustafa from the 1990s.

HUO: I thought we should talk about some of your pieces that you feel are breakthrough pieces, in which you invented your language. It is always very

interesting with an artist to see where the work starts. I was wondering what the first entry in your catalogue raisonné is for you: where do you consider the student work ended and your oeuvre began?

HA: It was the work that I made when I participated in the Istanbul Biennial for the first time in 1997. It was actually an ensemble, a group of works: *Dance with Taboos (ID)* and *Dance with Taboos*.

HUO: Can you explain why they are important for you, for instance, *Dance with Taboos*, [with] Atatürk covering his face?

HA: The 1990s were quite turbulent in terms of political atmosphere in Turkey and it was quite dark because there were some taboo issues that couldn't be discussed. Atatürk was a taboo, you could not discuss him and the identity issue, the Kurdish identity issue was also quite un-discussable. I wanted to question these issues and to open up a discussion about them.

HUO: So in a way all of these works were very political. Now, let me put it like this, when I visited the designer Janette Laverrière, who was almost a hundred years old, she asked me at the entrance of her studio – it was our first encounter – “Are you political?” I said “Yes, of course”, and she later explained to me that if I had said no, she would not have let me into the studio. So hence my question: Are you political?

HA: I wouldn't say that I am a political artist, but I am very inspired by the everyday. And everyday life is very political in Turkey. So the political touch in my work derives from the things that I witness. But I would not say that I am political as a statement. If you want me to define this political touch, I wouldn't say that it's a dark and heavy political touch, it's a political touch with a sense of humor, it's ironic.

HUO: I was in Rome and I saw the big exhibition at the MAXXI about the Turkish art scene, and you were one of the most present artists in the exhibition. There were several artworks which reminded me, in a way, of Duane Hanson. When did you, beside your videos and photography, get interested in hyperrealist sculptures?

HA: In 2008 René Block invited me to show in Istanbul. It was my first solo in Istanbul, and it was the first time that I felt that I had a high level of trust and I was really financially supported. And as you know, wax is a very expensive material. I decided to make a sculpture of a person who would not normally be the subject of a sculpture. So I chose a homeless person, who was spending his time on the street near the gallery space where I was going to have my solo show. He had this really a-typical appearance, with his mustache, and with his hat, and with his suit, he was a very special homeless person. The title of this first solo show, with only one work, was *I Am Not Sure If This Is an Exhibition*. I closed the gallery space and I covered all the windows with newspapers. I put the sculpture outside the gallery space on İstiklâl Street—the most crowded spot in Istanbul—and it was on the street 24 hours a day.

HUO: So that's the homeless person work, [*Pala the Bard*, 2008], but in the MAXXI there were several other such sculptures, too. It's interesting because the American artist Duane Hanson, whose retrospective we've organized [at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London] has actually also used a lot of very banal motifs and very often portraits of protagonists who would not normally be depicted within the museum, there is a strong social dimension to his work. Two questions, I am wondering if Duane Hanson was an inspiration? And could you tell us about some of the further sculptures that you made?

HA: Hanson is not only an inspiration for me as an artist who makes sculptures, but he is an inspiration to all of the sculptors in the world. He is the leading sculptor who made sculpture for ordinary, everyday people, not important people or figures. That's why he's an inspiration. My recent hyperrealistic sculpture is of a baby that is trying to put his fingers into the electricity socket. There was also this black street seller, selling fake handbags, it's a very universal scene, you can see this in Paris, in Istanbul, anywhere in the world.

HUO: In the same show at MAXXI there was also a political piece that you did. It's a form of resistance, it represent a movement, and at the same time a fashion show.

HA: The title of the work *Resist Kazova* comes from the name of the factory, actually. The workers from that factory are quite important in Turkish working class history, as they were the first group of workers who actually resisted their boss. They were not getting paid and they occupied the factory. At the end of the day they seized control of the factory and it was a big victory within working class life. They became the first group of blue-collar workers without a boss, so it was quite heroic what they did. I went to the factory, it was very important and we celebrated this moment, and I spent a lot of time with them at the factory. By coincidence it was the time of the Gezi protests as well and the Gezi movement motivated them, and they really wanted to collaborate. I mean in Turkish we call it the "Gezi çapulcu" or the Gezi spirit and this Gezi spirit made them want to collaborate. So I designed some sweaters for them. It is very understandable that they also have to sell, to be able to survive in the market, so I wanted to make it visible, in the form of a runway show, but with sweaters that underlined the resistance of the workers. I put those two separate things together: a runway show, a very capitalist form of display, but the subjects and the designs that I put on the sweaters were very resistance-based. That's why we put the red carpet on the street, not in a private space, not in a posh area, but on the street. The models that you see on the runway, they come from different backgrounds. Some of them are well known in Turkey, some of them are not. There are activists, artists, there are real models, there are writers, a lot of TV stars.

HUO: In the MAXXI exhibition in Rome, there was of course also *Wonderland* (2013) which we exhibited two years ago, in the Serpentine *89plus Marathon*, it's a piece that very much continues in that vein of resistance because it has to do with reclaiming a neighborhood. It's about young rappers in a gentrifying area of Istanbul, it's both a very powerful film and a music video in a way. Can you tell us about the genesis of *Wonderland*, the urban context of this area, the gentrification in Istanbul,

and about the collaboration with these remarkable young rappers which is at the core of the work?

HA: I was listening to rap when I was a teenager in the mid 1980s, but hip-hop and rap changed in the 1990s. It started to become more mainstream, and melted into popular music. The kids in the video are a good example of this resistant essence of rap. They reflect this essence, because they come from unprivileged areas and families and they continued to make rap as the music of the oppressed and unprivileged people. That's why I really respect them.

HUO: Following on from these two pieces can you speak about the role of new technologies in activism? They played a big role in the protests in Istanbul, which had a lot to do with social media.

HA: Yes, drones are a very important part of this technology. I use drones a lot in my work. When they were first launched and started to be used, they were a surveillance mechanism for spying on people. But the first small drones were used to defend activists because they were filming shootings at demonstrations, and when a violent act by the police was filmed, social media activists and different NGOs were able to use it in their defense. So a kind of authoritarian machine that was supposed to serve surveillance and spying was used against it in the end. Now I am working on a new video project and for that I am also using a drone. This time I'm using it because a drone can carry a lifebuoy, you know, a life ring like the ones on boats. In the video I am using a drone to fly a lifebuoy in the fastest way, to actually help migrants.

HUO: That leads us to the question of public space as your practice very much oscillates between the inside and the outside of the museum. *Carpet Land* (2012) is almost like a Land-Art piece, it's a sketch of a Land-Art piece. Or if you think about *The Monument of Direct Democracy* (2009), the flipped police car is in a way a public monument. So it would be interesting to hear a little bit more about your view of these works outside the museum context and *The Monument of Direct Democracy*.

HA: *The Monument of Direct Democracy* dates back to 2009. I put it in front of the Akademie der Künste [in Berlin]. The concept of the whole exhibition *Istanbul Next Wave* was based on the direct representation of the Turkish nation state. I did not want to make such a work. At the time there were harsh protests against the government in Russia and in Greece, people were burning cars as a form of protest. The police car was used as a readymade, and the reason I wanted to put it outside of the museum instead of inside was an institutional decision, because a lot of institutions have fears about the displays of their shows. *Carpet Land* actually shows a real village in the southern part of Turkey, near Antalya, it's a very touristy city near the sea. So I wanted to make a piece that looked like Land Art, but which wasn't really. I wanted it to look fictional, to look staged, but it was not staged. It resembles the gesture that I want to make through the hyperrealistic sculptures too: because they look so real, but when you approach you realize that they are not real. With *Carpet Land* it's the opposite way: You think that it is staged, that I put these carpets there, but it's

not the case, it's real. It's the same story. There was also this issue of peasantry, because in Turkish literature and in Turkish art history, the village is symbolic of naivety and purity. But these villagers actually lay all of the carpets out on the land because they want the carpets to be aged by the sun so they look old and antique. The villagers sell these carpets at really high prices to the Grand Bazaar, in touristy areas in Istanbul and everywhere in Turkey.

HUO: Talking about these public projects, I wondered if you have any unrealized projects. Projects that are too big or too small to be realized, projects where you faced censorship? This is my only reoccurring question in all of my interviews. However, I think it's very fascinating to see what artists would do if it lay outside of these constraints, and what prevented them from doing these projects. So, what are your unbuilt roads, Halil?

HA: My project that I proposed for documenta in 2007 remained an unrealized project. The title was *15 Minutes of Freedom* and I wanted to free some prisoners from the prison via helicopter, and give them their 15 minutes of freedom. The helicopter would fly them over documenta's spaces, Kassel's gardens, and over the city. I went to the prison in Kassel, and spent some time with the prisoners, did some workshops with them to be able to realize the project. But a few months before the opening the manager of the prison invited me to Kassel from Istanbul and said: "Your dream is my nightmare". The *15 Minutes of Freedom* project for documenta is my only unrealized project up until now. I am now working on a new project, I don't know if it will be realized or remain unrealized. Because of the migrant crisis right now, I want to make a refugee camp on the moon, in space. I am trying to get in contact with a Syrian refugee cosmonaut, he now lives in Istanbul, so I am trying to get in contact with him. And I also want to get in touch with futuristic architects and food engineers and biologists will also be involved. It is quite a big project because it will raise questions about how refugees can survive in space.

HUO: Tonight I had a conversation with David Deutsch, the visionary scientist from Oxford [University], who wrote the book *The Fabric of Reality*. He writes about the idea of parallel universes, parallel realities. Now obviously you have many parallel realities. Today for the purpose of this interview we spoke about your trajectory as an artist, you are also very engaged as a curator and as an art publisher. I saw the book you curated on Turkish Art [*User's Manual 2.0: Contemporary Art in Turkey 1975–2015*]. Can you tell me about your practice as a curator and publisher? For you as an artist what does it mean?

HA: At the end of the 1990s, in 1998, the exhibition that you curated with Hou Hanru *Cities on the Move* was very inspirational for me. I didn't see the exhibition but I looked at the catalogue and it was really important for me. The way that you put the artists together with the issues of urbanism and urban areas and cities, and the way that art was in collaboration and in conversation with other disciplines really influenced me a lot. The following year in 1999 together with some friends, we started the first contemporary magazine in Turkey, *art-ist*. It was not only art writers who contributed to the magazine, but we also printed articles by economists, anarchists, and writers, from all different

disciplines. They were the ones who were working beyond the limited perspectives of the art scene, and opened new doors and new readings. They gave a breath of fresh air to discussions. Maybe it was not my task as an artist, but nobody else was doing it and I believed that somebody had to do it. So, I did it. The same thing happened with curating shows. The first show I curated was in 2002, the title of the exhibition was *I Am Bad and I Am Proud*, it was followed by *I Am Too Sad to Kill You*, and my curatorial practice continued until 2010. But the idea and the purpose were to take these more underground artists and to give them visibility. In 2005, I started a series of monographs of young Turkish contemporary artists. It was the first series that focused on young Turkish contemporary artists. I must underline the fact that one of the most important characteristics of that series of monographs was that it was the first monograph of each featured artist. In 2007, I published the first *User's Manual: Contemporary Art in Turkey 1986–2006*, a big and comprehensive book about the history of Turkish contemporary art. Last year I published the second volume of *User's Manual*, an updated version that included the 1970s as well, so it started from 1975 until 2015 [*User's Manual 2.0: Contemporary Art in Turkey 1975–2015*]. Last but not least I also published a book for children, a book on Turkish contemporary history for kids [*Contemporary Turkish Art for Kids*].

HUO: My very last question: How do you assess the situation in Istanbul in 2016? We hear from newspapers and from friends that there is more and more oppression, there is a collapse of democracy, that more and more intellectuals and friends from the art world are being fired from their teaching jobs. What we hear indirectly about the political situation is very worrisome, but it would be interesting to hear from you directly, how do you feel about it and how do you see the situation in Istanbul in 2016?

HA: I accept that it is a very dark period. It was always believed that the 1990s were the darkest period in Turkish political history, but this current period is getting worse and worse, even worse than the 1990s. Every single liberal voice is either put in jail or removed from the country. We have even had this rumor recently that if you are against the government, you will have your citizenship removed. There are these kind of absurd proposals and we discuss them. Before there was a war in the eastern part of Turkey between the Turkish army and the PKK, the Kurdish guerrilla fighters. Now, there is war happening in the cities and this collapses the cultural history and the cities as well. The nature of the war changed and evolved. To sum it up, it's not good, but there is always hope.

HUO: That is a wonderful conclusion about hope. Gerhard Richter says art is the highest form of hope, and Ernst Bloch too talks about the principle of hope. Thank you very much, Halil, for this great interview.

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