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Conversation with Halil Altindere

Maria Lind

Maria Lind: I'm very happy to be invited to do this conversation for your upcoming publication, Halil, as we go way back! The first time I came across your work was the İstanbul Biennial in 1997, curated by Rosa Martinez, and the following time was the Sao Paulo biennial in 1998 and the section Roteiros, curated by Vasif Kortun and Ami Steiniz. It was one of the strongest biennials that I have experienced so far, both the historical part that Paulo Herkenhoff curated, and the regional sections that Vasif was involved with. As a young and emerging artist, what was it like to participate in one of the biggest and most influential art events at that time?

Halil Altindere: Yes, after İstanbul Biennial in 1997, they invited me to Sao Paulo Biennial for the Middle East part, (Roteiros). I exhibited my work which was a photograph showing the Turkish nationalist political party's slogan on a wall *Love it or Leave it / Ya Sev Ya Terk Et* (1998). I made wallpaper and a video of it also; the title was *me, not me, but me not* (1998). I exhibited two works in Sao Paulo. The video was mostly about identity, cultural & political cannibalism. This biennial is very important for the curatorial history. And that was a very important moment and a very good experience for me.

Maria Lind: I wanted to mention a few keywords that have emerged out of looking at and reading about your work, and to ask if you could comment on them? One is 'emancipation', another one is 'collective experience', a third one is 'striking images', and a fourth one is 'tenderness'. Maybe we can start with emancipation?

Halil Altindere: Since I was a young student, I was always interested in art. I grow up in Mersin and I studied in a small city, Adana, near the Mediterranean Sea. When I wanted to make art and be an artist, I needed to move to Istanbul. I needed to get my family's approval, I told my family that I'll move to Istanbul, to study for master's degree in arts, but my plan was actually to move to the big city and meet the artists and make something. When I moved to Istanbul in 1996, the art world was very conservative. There were only small galleries, and Istanbul Biennial. Other institutions were only involved with local events. Heads of these institutions were not interested in young artists, nobody was curious about contemporary art. When I came to

Istanbul, I met with young artists and quickly we became friends and we thought, 'Why don't we make something about this by ourselves?' and we started meeting at my house almost every night to talk, discuss. After these talks, in 1999, we published the first Turkish contemporary art magazine with Vahit Tuna, Erden Kosova and Süreyya Evren, *Art-ist*, with other young writers and artists, anarchists with different backgrounds, and we started to create our own platform. During that era Vasif Kortun was just came back from New York. And he was especially interested in young artists, who were trying to figure out their part in this art world.

That was the first moment that we kind of experienced 'emancipation'. Through the platform that we created, we criticized, we wrote about whatever we want, and because it wasn't institutionalized, we were totally free. In time, we grew bigger, because everyone who wanted that freedom joined to us. It was during the beginning of globalization and the Internet, all that information age, so everyone who wasn't happy with the institutions; galleries and the system were joining to us on that platform. Other than just showing artworks as artists, we had a publication where we can be able to express our ideas and ideologies and which can go to people's houses. That was very important to us.

Maria Lind: Art was a means to practice emancipation, to perform emancipation. I also think that there's something closely connected to emancipation as an ideal, universal emancipation, as a red thread going through many of the works. Basic human rights, equality on all levels etc. Not least in relation to the formal powers, such as the state. I'm thinking about some early works, for example with the passport, the money bills Dance with taboos1997?

Halil Altındere: 1990's were crucial years for Turkey, the political period was rough. Human rights violations, forcibly disappeared people... The Saturday Mothers group, who came together every Saturday in the Galatasaray who are the relatives and mothers of the people who were forcibly disappeared came together for the first time after this period. Pressure on the press was so strong, even some journalists murdered. And there was the battle in the East side of Turkey. All of this raised the darkness... It was inevitable to see the situation and results in the artworks.

When you make art, of course you focus on everyday life and you see some truth and you choose some of this matters to express in your art. But when we started, many subjects were still taboo, both for art world and for government, for art writing.

So those taboos became our starting point. We started making art by playing with taboos.

When we criticized the political situation in Turkey, it wasn't easy for the art world, art audience and government to look at it. With our art and our magazine our main aim was to protect the platform we created, not only to exhibit our art but also to discuss the situation in Turkey, Istanbul. And for me identity was a key concept to understand all of this.

Maria Lind: The next keyword is connected to emancipation, namely 'collective experience'. Many of your art projects embrace the idea of collective experience and they also involve collective experience in terms of the making of the work. Again, you're performing collective experience, you make the works together with other people, so like with emancipation, it's a subject matter, but it's also a methodology.

Halil Altindere: Yes, it is very important in my practice. The collective experience started with the magazine, *Art-ist*, then continued in 2002 when I first curated my first show *I'm Bad and I'm Proud*, and after that, I curated 5 other shows in total. So, what I'm saying is that this gesture of taking something from real life and slightly manipulating it, is really important to for work.

About creating a work together, about collaboration and collective experience, the works *Wonderland* (2013) and *Homeland* (2016), the videos are very important to me. I met with this hip-hop band called Tahribat-ı İsyani in Sulukule. It was the place where actually the change has started with the bulldozers and stuff, like that, the destruction started. This really, really young hip-hop band who were born and raised in that destructed area during the construction, they made a collaborative video called *Wonderland*. So, I gave them the platform to express themselves, express their art, but I didn't shape their ideas, I tried not to direct them in a certain position. It was just collaboration of me giving a platform and them performing. A very famous rapper named Fuat gave support and played in the video. And then, again on 2016, I did a similar thing for the work *Homeland*, the video, with a Syrian rapper Muhammed Abu Hajar, which I prepared for the Berlin Biennial.

Maria Lind: Exactly. Those are very powerful works. Can you speak a little bit more about *Homeland* and the making of it?

Halil Altindere: When the refugee crisis first began, everyone, every artist wanted to do something about it, some of them organized workshops with the children in the refugee camps, some of them created direct works about the problem. But I created a certain distance between this situation and me

because it was too fragile and sensitive. So, I didn't want to just do something about it. But when I got the idea about doing a musical collaboration with a rapper, I thought that can actually work. And then, I researched on social media, on internet, for rappers that perform in Arabic language. And then, I ran into the rapper Muhammed Abu Hajar and I picked him, because he was the most hopeful one, his lyrics were the most hopeful ones. They weren't just complaining, they were mostly hopeful. And then, I went to Berlin to meet with him. When we first met, the only direction I gave him was, to talk about his own journey from Syria to Turkey to Balkans to Germany, but also, I wanted him to talk about the story of all the refugees. So, it wasn't supposed to be just a personal story, but like a general one, and then, almost a story between fiction and real life.

Maria Lind: How did you get in touch with the other participants in the video, and where was it filmed?

Halil Altindere: When the first ideas were coming together for the video, I didn't want to go to a cast agency and pick actors to play refugees. So, especially my gallery, Pilot and the gallery's owner Azra Tüzünoğlu helped a lot, and we got in touch with General of Migration Management which actually takes care of this refugee situation and they had all that data, I guess. And with Çanakkale Biennial's help, we find 45 refugees to act in the video and we get the permissions.

Maria Lind: There are some mighty scenes in nature, where are they filmed?

Halil Altindere: They filmed in Istanbul, Çanakkale and Berlin. Çanakkale, so it's like the last point to, closest to Bulgaria and Greece. So, it was important that it was filmed close to the Bulgarian and Greek borders, so it was in Çanakkale. Because in real life that's where they left the country too...

Maria Lind: The participants were personally familiar with the terrain and the landscape?

Halil Altindere: The refugees who took part in the video were living at this area Çanakkale almost since they came to Turkey. Because they were traumatized victims, this video and the experience of making it made this situation more kind of playful for them, almost like a treatment, and gave them hope. And it was about being hopeful.

Maria Lind: For me, it's an iconic work of the 2010s. I think it will, in the future, mark this period in a complex and yet clear way. I'm thinking of a couple of other works that have this collective experience involved: *Dengbejs*, which I remember clearly from Documenta 2007 and the *Resist*

Kazova project which I have not seen in the flesh. Could you please speak a little bit about these two ones?

Halil Altindere: When they first invited me to Documenta, Kassel, they wanted me to make something sight specific. From my perspective there were two interesting places: Karlsaue State Park, a public space in the middle of the Kassel on one side, and a prison. I started to think with those two. And I was mostly interested in the Kassel Jail, the prison and its architecture. It's built with *panoptic architectural* style, so I was very interested in that. I started discussing with the staff of the prison and the main person in there and the prisoners, I talked with lawyers as well, to be able to get the prisoners out of the prison, give them freedom for 15 minutes- I wanted to make the prisoners be able to visit Documenta basically. So, I wanted them to be the audience as well, to be able to see the show. But they weren't allowed to walk around, so I found like an opening in the law, the prisoners could actually fly over the show. So, I made a suggestion, a proposal to take every prisoner one by one by a helicopter and they would just hang on the helicopter and go around the show up in the sky and then land, and then another prisoner would go up, and then see the show, and then land, hanging from the helicopter. Everything was approved, but during the week of the show, one prisoner -totally unrelated to this project- escaped from a prison in Germany, so there was a huge press coverage and the staff of the prison didn't want to go through with it, because there was a scandalous situation going on so it was- it would be very inappropriate to do that at that time. So, the project was canceled. They didn't tell me that the project was canceled until I arrived to Kassel. And then the manager of the prison told me, "Halil, I really loved your project, but your dream would be my nightmare if we go through with this", so he just broke the news that way to me. And then we developed the *Dengbejs* right after that. 'Dengbej' means 'storyteller'. They are a part of the tradition of Kurdish people. Dengbejs, tells the war stories, love stories, tales of the villages in a musical form, for ages. Because the Kurdish language was forbidden for a long time, this traditional way of storytelling continued and reflected to the need of having a history of our own as the Kurdish society. So, in the age of MP3, I wanted to make a film about that oral history tradition and the storytellers. The location for the film is actually the top floor of a skyscraper, a glass building in the middle of Diyarbakır. And the owner of the building built a mountain cabin, the scenes are located in that. But when the camera pans out you just realize that that's the location at the end film and shows you the actual location.

Maria Lind: This is such a striking image with the wooden cottage on top of the glass skyscraper, just as the sketches for the unrealized project in Kassel with the helicopter and the suspended prisoner below. The third keyword, is

precisely 'striking images'. It seems to me that in your films, as well as in your sculptures and your photographic work and your painting, there is something about a striking image at the core. It's almost as if it's a condensation - many things are concentrated into this image. Is this something you work with consciously or is it just something that happens?

Halil Altındere: Actually I'm dealing with everyday life and the striking subjects, that's why my works involves striking images, naturally. For example you've asked about Resist Kazova, which was not an artwork but a collaborative project made in 2013, during the 2013 Gezi Protests, which was important because thanks to Gezi the collectivity was high at that moment. Which is why this is a good example to show how striking images comes with life... Resist Kazova was mainly about textile workers whose bosses stopped paying them and than ran away. So, the workers took over the factory, and then asked me to design a line for them to use in their products. After I designed and they finished the products we made a street fashion show, real political activists, supporters, artists, writers became the model for this fashion show and it was cheered by a real crowd who cared for the subject. Who were not only art audience. Because the issue was real and striking, because the crowds that were there to support were real, everything ended up being striking... We took the concept of 'fashion show', something that's created by the capitalism and fashion industry and we changed it for our project and use it against to the system. The video was only a document of it but Resist Kazova was something that flows in life, and our personal histories.

Maria Lind: Reading about this so-called Gezi Spirit made me realize that it goes through so many of your works, and its engagement. Maybe it also bears on the fourth keyword, which is 'tenderness'.

Halil Altındere: Because I'm dealing with real-life issues, they're by nature tender subjects. So, it just, translates.

Maria Lind: If we move to recent projects and the presence in Venice, we have the Space Refugee, Muhammed Ahmed Faris. This is a fascinating story which we can connect to Homeland, but also to Dengbejs. Here you move even more into fiction than in some of the other videos. Please tell me a bit about this work.

Halil Altındere: I choose my subjects from real people's lives but when people see them they see them as if they are fiction characters. The audience can be confused about what's fiction and what's real. I'm interested in this situation itself. I choose Faris because; he's an cosmonot who has been in the actual space! But now he can't even leave Turkey because he's an

immigrant. Faris's story is almost like fiction or ready-made for him, because without doing anything, it's a very absurd story. It's real life, but when you tell about it to other people, it's almost like you're telling a fiction story. Him being an astronaut and going to space, but now not even being able to go outside Turkey, that irony... I choose subjects that are so absurd they almost sound like fiction. For me the reactions of world leaders to the refugee situation were like fiction to me, it was almost not possible to be real. So, I was very interested in that area where subjects are- the lines between fiction and reality are blurred and they're mixed into each other.

This refugee project started in Berlin and then went to New York, Istanbul, Sharjah, London and then continued in this year's Venice Biennial. This video project, Journey to Mars, is a VR video, but it basically started from the fact that no one wanted refugees, so let's send them to Mars then, the idea of that. But then, because I collaborated with NASA, all the parts of the video had a scientific base. The way the architecture in the video, the agriculture, the plants, how they were growing, the human rights in the video, they were all collaborated with NASA and made to be what it would be if it was real life. So, it was very real. It was fiction, but it was actually suited to real life. Because lawyers, and scientists and architects were involved...

Maria Lind: It is interesting that in reality Muhammed Ahmed Faris was a cosmonaut, who was in a Soviet space station, and we have NASA entering your project. Something, which was of course very difficult during the Cold War... We could claim that right now we are experiencing Cold War 2. The Cold War is back, and I am curious to hear what it means for you to work as an artist in Turkey of today. It's different from Turkey of the project Resist Kazova, for instance, and older works too.

Halil Altindere: Every era of time has their own realities, they're different... So, in Turkey, '90s were different, early 2000s were different, and then 2010s were totally different as well. Because of our geographical situation, we're in a very fast-changing zone, so it's not like Stockholm.

The news, the recent news are always very hot and warm here, the atmosphere can be change very quickly. During Gezi, it was, it was like a dreamscape. But now that dream turned into a nightmare.

Maria Lind: Today, many artists, critics, curators have left not only Istanbul but Turkey. I'm currently based in Berlin and a number of them are people I see regularly in Berlin. How is it to be practicing in Istanbul today?

Halil Altindere: The time to live here is now.

Maria Lind: In relation to the striking images, I am thinking of your trilogy of paintings *President Series*, 2010-2011, the president, the first lady, maybe, and prime minister. I find them intriguing. Can you please elaborate on what they are and how you came to them and how you look at them today? Because they're almost ten years old by now.

Halil Altındere: I actually wanted to make a series of work about the history of Turkey for the past 50 years, its social history and political history and sociological history. So, '70s were chaotic, '80s were where the neo-liberals in rise like rose and there were disco tights everywhere, and '90s and 2000s were the times of civil wars. And then, through three prime ministers, I wanted to go through these different kinds of social time zones. Through three prime ministers and their relation to guns and weaponry...

First of them was Bülent Ecevit who was the prime minister of Turkey during the 70's. The work that reflects that time period... It is a photograph, which shows Ecevit when he got the news of an assassination that happened in Taksim Square. So, that work is about the fear of him.

And in the '80s, Turgut Özal was the prime minister. So, it's post-coup, and then there's a relaxation, neo-liberalism, fun times. It's parallel to the times of Thatcher and Reagan. The weapons and guns represent celebration there, like the start of something or an opening of something.

'90s and 2000s were when locally it got really tense, and there were lots of deaths, neighbors were killing each other, there were murders, people were getting lost from the prison, prisoners were getting lost. So, the weapons and the guns and the weaponry represent that.

Maria Lind: The three paintings are quite large, they're based on footage from the media, and they refer to pop art as far as I can tell. They are inserting themselves in a particular tradition in terms of art's relationship to the commercial sphere and the sphere of commodities and the rise of the media as a formal power. What is your view on this?

Halil Altındere: Yes, I actually call them 'post-pop'. The pictures were directly taken from the newspapers. And they looked like socialist realism as a style to execute the paintings. But, yes they are also pop.

Maria Lind: Interesting. Another recent work is *The Neverland* pavilion in Venice. What is that about?

Halil Altındere: Last year Ralph Rugoff, invited me to London for Art Night. Then, they said they could open British Interplanetary Society's archives for me, for the real space research. During the Olympics, there was a refugee

team and they got many medals, and they were very successful, and their countries didn't represent them... Then I offered Ralph to, because the Venice Biennial is the Olympics of art, why not do a refugee pavilion or a pavilion to represent the ones that are not being represented, and the idea started from there.

Maria Lind: How has it worked?

Halil Altindere: I gave the idea to Ralph, but then Ralph told me, 'why not do it yourself?'. The idea first started when Ralph told me 'why not do it yourself?', this refugee pavilion. I actually looked at augmented reality, so that I could actually take a refugee's works but rendered through augmented reality where you had to use a gadget or phone to see something that is actually not there. So, this simultaneous existence and non-existence. But then I thought that would be a grey area, because people feel like they have to like the works because refugees make them. So, it was a complicated thing. So, the work ended up being the *Neverland* pavilion, because there are almost 190 countries and only 90 of them are represented by pavilions in Venice Biennial. So, I thought this façade of a pavilion could be the pavilion of all the unrepresented artists, refugees and the ones from the other countries. But just a facade, so the inside is empty. It has two meanings, one is representing the unrepresented, but also, it's a parody of representation as well by itself as a sculpture. It's a critique of representation of artists in 21st century in a format of 19th century, in a format of a fair. So, it's also about the critique of representation of artists from- and the pavilions. Because he thinks in our time, artists have no countries anymore. They're boundary less. Most of the countries are showing people that are not from their country originally anyway.

Maria Lind: One of my favorite works of yours, Halil, is the golden necklace spelling 'If I can't dance, it's not my revolution'. Something which rarely happens to me with art does indeed happen with that work, namely that I would like to own it. It is based on a quote by the feminist anarchist Emma Goldman. I have a feeling that your work is constantly challenging traditional notions of masculinity through for instance the three photographs of the trans people *Untitled* 2004, *Misunderstood* 2010, *Nurse* 2011, but also the way that the formal powers, the state, the media appear in more or less macho disguise, and their approaches are imbued with this kind of outdated, problematic masculinity. In your work that masculinity is not left intact in its traditional sense. How does 'masculinity' play into your work?

Halil Altindere: So, about masculinity, it's almost like the *Neverland* work. I think art is- classifying artists by their sex and religion and the country that's

not what I think of art. For me, art is sexless, geography-less and religion-less. I'm aware of the fact that there's this tendency to do- to talk about art or to make art in a politically correct way. If in the work comes across as masculine, it's because of the geography I'm from and the issues I'm dealing with are rough. Also, I made a series of images of trans people called *Untitled, Nurse and Miss Understood*, and that was about those people that we admire on stage or on television, but almost murder or commit hate crimes on streets. I also have a work; it's called Emma Goldman series. They're a series of gold necklaces, but one of them is Emma Goldman's famous quote 'If I can't dance, it's not my revolution', curved on the necklace. Taking those feminist sayings is almost a response to that politically correct nature of art.

Maria Lind: Another keyword is 'mediation'. Mediation in the sense of how can art be made accessible to people who are not yet informed about it or included in it. I'm thinking of the children's book you've made about contemporary art, about your role as the editor and founder of art-ist, the exhibitions that you have curated; but also the two photographs of your mother reading a book on pop-art and the other one a book on Fluxus art. What is this interest of yours?

Halil Altindere: I made *My Mother Likes Pop-Art Because Pop-Art Is Colorful* in 1998. During that time, I was mostly making works about identity and that pop-art work was important because it was just when I started doing international exhibitions and I had identity as an artist, but that identity completely changed the minute I entered at my mother's house. Even language used to change from Turkish to Kurdish and my taste buds changed, the food I liked changed and the understanding of life changed. So, that work's about that. My artist identity and the identity I was born with. And *My Mother Likes Fluxus Because Fluxus Is Anti-Art* came later, and it's about making something your own, so it's more of an autobiographical work.

Beside the artwork, magazines and the publication called *User's Manual* was an attempt to form a written contemporary art memory for Turkish artists. It's an archive for Turkish artists that have never done before. Because before that art history was not including contemporary art and it was not democratic enough, it just wasn't enough for us. And the way the book was built was very subjective and it was aiming to give their rights back to the artists who kind of form the basis of Turkish art. It's almost like a suggestion catalog, so if you want to make a collection of Turkish art, these people are that are most effective in the history of Turkish art. And there are

four generations in the book and they're all given democratic pages, so it's a very subjective book.

Maria Lind: When can we look forward to your next curating project?

Halil Altındere: I paused being a curator in 2010.

Maria Lind: Is there any chance that this 'pause' might be over soon?

Halil Altındere: After 2010, when I curated my last show, there was a commercial art market boom in Istanbul, so Istanbul was chosen the European Culture Capital and all that stuff, so I'm feeling like money took over the collaboration process almost. So, I stopped curating, but fortunately the bubble has popped, so why not in the future?

Maria Lind: Finally, when I went through your work, preparing this conversation and thinking about your work, it embodies very much the trajectory of Turkey from the late '90s until today, the way I have experienced it, and the Turkish art scene in general being unusually rich compared to other contexts in the world. Another feature is that a number of your works perform what is so important about contemporary art, namely to function like a seismograph, like something that tells about things before those things can be really felt or understood by the rest of society. The way you dealt with collective experience, the way you dealt with trans people, the way you dealt with surveillance, I'm thinking of the sculpture of *Mobese*, 2011, pole with the surveillance cameras. I'm thinking about the collaborative recent films, *Homeland* and *Wonderland*, the use of the drone as a production device in the videos. These are, to my mind, things that point to experiences and questions that were not perhaps so palpable at the time of the making of those works but now, several years down the line, they are. This is more a comment from my side than a question or asking for your feedback.

Halil Altındere: *Wonderland* was made in February 2013. It was first showed in Madrid; CA2M (Centro de Arte Dos de mayo) for the first time and it didn't get much recognition back then. Then, Gezi Protests happened, so suddenly everyone thought the movie; the film was made after the riots, about the riots, so... Again the real life and the truth lead.

Maria Lind: Another work, which resonates in a similar way for me, is the 2009 *The Monument of Direct Democracy*, with a car turned upside down, which is way before the Arab Spring, for instance.

Halil Altindere: After the incidents, many people texted me the images saying like “Your work is in Greece”, during Gezi Events as well. Many people were calling me and sending me images, saying ‘Your work is here’.

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