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Interview with artist Aslı Çavuşoğlu

By A. Will Brown



Aslı Çavuşoğlu, still frame from *In Diverse Estimations Little Moscow*, 2011. © Aslı Çavuşoğlu.
Commissioned by Borusan AŞ. Courtesy of NON, İstanbul.

A. Will Brown: Peter Aksakal's book *Bir Yerel yönetim deneyi, Fatsa* (A Local Management Experiment, Fatsa) was important in inspiring your film. Can you discuss that? Do you still have your copy of the book? And is it still banned?

Aslı Çavuşoğlu: The first time I read the book was when I was in high school. At the time, the book was banned and thus rare, so I had to read it with the outside covered in newspaper. After I finished reading it, I gave it to another friend to read. It wasn't appropriate for me to possess such a hard-to-find banned book—it was meant to be circulated. Also, in a Communist group, the idea of possession is regarded as inappropriate.

During my research for the film *In Diverse Estimations Little Moscow*, I found out that there was a second edition available, one that was printed legally. This second edition was really the first edition, as the original first edition was considered illegal. In Fatsa, I discovered a library with banned books. All the books, ranging from philosophy, sociology, and even books written by republicans were covered with newspapers. It was interesting to see how a "forced" action of covering books was prevalent among different generations.

AWB: How did the people of Fatsa respond to your film? Was there any backlash?

AC: A number of documentaries about Fatsa and the 1979–1980 events had already been made. However, these films were produced by leftist groups with very low budgets and were distributed only within limited circles. Most of the people I interacted with still felt affected by the


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legitimate permissions.

I wouldn't say there were any hostile responses to the project, but I had an interesting dialogue with someone who was involved in the resistance in 1980. He said he didn't want to talk to me. He believed that I didn't have the right to tell the story of Fatsa because I hadn't lost anyone from my family in the resistance. This idea of the "right of narration" is always an intriguing question that triggers most of my projects; I was very interested in his argumentation. The dialogue I had with him helped lead me to the final decision to make the film more fragmented, in order to dismantle and resist a traditional narrative form.

AWB: I'm interested in your use of untrained actors from Fatsa, and in how that created a space for the scenes to exist between cinema and theater yet also as a distinct yet undefined place between performance and memory. Can you explain, or talk about, the decision to use untrained actors from Fatsa? Did this create extra challenges, or did it open up new types of storytelling?

AC: I worked with two generations of people in Fatsa. First was the generation of people who got involved in the participatory democracy experience in 1979. The second was the younger generation who had no idea what happened in Fatsa years ago. The older generation conveyed their memories of particular moments to the younger generation in order for us to re-enact some scenes. There was a lot of conflict caused by faded memories. Often it was very hard for the older generation to agree on exact locations or what took place during certain incidents.

The project is an experimental oral-history project, a performance, and a film. I wanted the film to be a vessel for such an exchange.

AWB: Who are some of the other artists, film directors, cinematographers, or creative people that you look to, or looked closely at, when thinking about a new work?

AC: I always consult my Alejandro Jodorowsky tarot deck before embarking on any new project.

AWB: How did you decide on what scenes, or memories, from Fatsa's 1979 municipal democracy and the 1980 Point Operation to include in the film? Were there moments you left out but wanted to incorporate?

AC: Today Fatsa is a large town struggling with huge economic and social problems. The chief factor that contributes to these problems is the collapse of hazelnut production. The high rate of unemployment in Fatsa gives rise to a great deal of emigration. Most of the young people in Fatsa experience severe difficulties finding a job, and a considerable portion of them have joined various religious sects. Also, numerous young people in the town use drugs and carry guns.

People born in the 1980s after the military coup were depoliticized and alienated from politics, whereas the generation following is highly political. The families that witnessed the violence during the coup still bear a fear of the military, and raised their children to evade getting involved in politics. That's one of the reasons why only a few people from my generation are aware of the details of the Fatsa experience, and this includes young people from Fatsa.

The film utilizes places that were important during the Fatsa experience —places like the caves where revolutionary fugitives hid themselves from soldiers, and the coffee shop where People's Committee meetings were held. Most of these places are drastically different now, which is in parallel with Fatsa's sociopolitical structure. For example a movie theater, which used to be a gathering place, has now become a kitsch wedding venue. To show the degree of transformation, I wanted to use these once important locations as they are now.

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Aslı Çavuşoğlu, still frame from *In Diverse Estimations Little Moscow*, 2011. © Aslı Çavuşoğlu.
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AWB: How has the recent democratic election of incumbent prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as president been received? Do you see this as a significant step forward?

AC: The elections were just another verification of Erdoğan's power in Turkey. One must sink in order to be able to float, right?

Most people thought that the Gezi Park resistance was the first collective action in the history of the Republic of Turkey. Gezi's unique nature makes it incomparable to any event in our history, yet despite of all its uniqueness, we can't forget the Fatsa experience. During one of the forums held in a public park, we showed a documentary on the Fatsa experience, where we discovered that a lot of Turkish people didn't have a clue about it. It has been so neglected and left out of history.

AWB: Are the effects of the Taksim Square Gezi Park protests still resonating in Turkey, and in Istanbul in particular?

AC: There is no acute action at the moment, but that doesn't mean that people don't care about anything anymore. I believe it's calmer now because there is a needed incubation period, which has become a necessary step in creating an alternative political wing. In the latest election, the HDP [Democratic Party of the People] proved that not only the Kurds, but everyone who felt oppressed. My father voted for their candidate, Selahattin Demirtaş. My father said Demirtaş played the *bağlama* (a traditional folk-music instrument in Turkey) and sang very well. I think it's a great argument to vote for someone.

AWB: You work in so many ways—film, video, sculpture, installation, and performance. Where do these forms all overlap for you?

AC: There are no differences within the media I employ to produce my works. I consider them simply as tools that help me to unfold my ideas.

*A. Will Brown
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