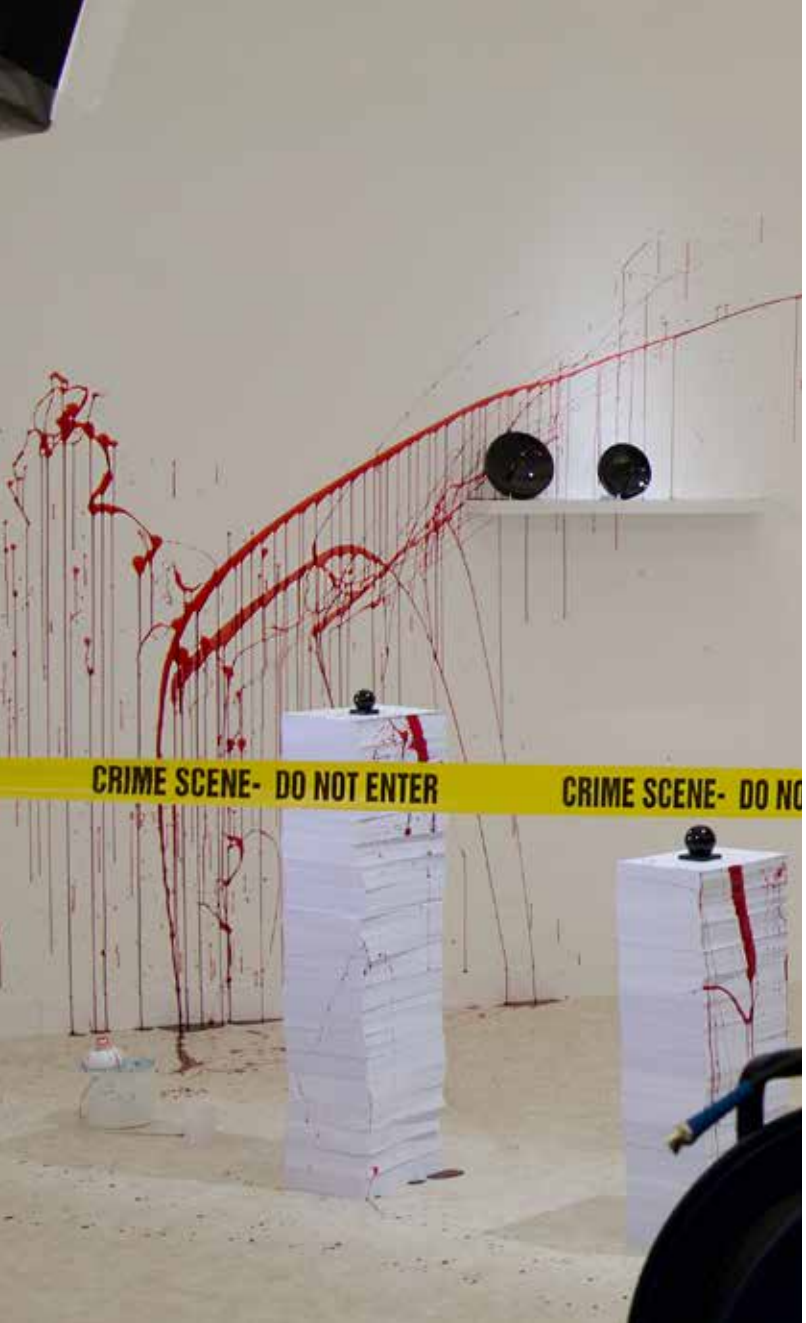


KATE SUTTON

We May Have Found Our Murderer: Aslı Çavuşoğlu's *Murder in Three Acts*

MENO: *And how will you inquire, Socrates, into that which you do not know? What will you put forth as the subject of inquiry? And if you find what you want, how will you ever know that this is the thing which you did not know?*

SOCRATES: *I know, Meno, what you mean; but just see what a tiresome dispute you are introducing. You argue that man cannot inquire either about that which he knows, or about that which he does not know; for if he knows, he has no need to inquire; and if not, he cannot; for he does not know the very subject about which he is to inquire.*

M: *Well, Socrates, and is not the argument sound?*

S: *I think not.*

M: *Why not?*

S: *I will tell you why: I have heard from certain wise men and women who spoke of things divine that-*

M: *What did they say?*

S: *They spoke of a glorious truth, as I conceive.*

— *Meno*[1]

Let's focus on something we can't speculate about: the evidence.

— Bass, *Murder in Three Acts*[2]

CRIME SCENE - DO NOT ENTER. There's blood all over the art fair booth. It drips down the white walls and over the pedestals, swirling over a somber set of shiny black sculptures. A Jackson Pollock comparison would

1 Plato, *Meno*. Translation by Benjamin Jowett. Written 380 B.C.E; available at http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/meno.html.

2 Aslı Çavuşoğlu, *Murder in Three Acts*, 2012. (Original screenplay, distributed during Frieze London 2012. Edition 1.000 copies.)

be unimaginative, and, for that matter, erroneous. The blood falls not in frenetic scrawls, but rather with the grand-gesture swoops of late DeKooning paintings. It contrasts against the rigid lines of police tape, strung up between the crime scene and its spectators. The crowd is equal parts camera crew and art collectors and their entourage, the freelance curators and art advisors who make up the foot soldiers of a dubious industry. The latter clutch at their tote bags, craning their necks for a glimpse of the proceedings or scanning crumpled fair maps for any sense of whether or not they should be panicking. Theirs is a fear not of what may have transpired here — it doesn't take much training to distinguish real death from theater, and only the fictional could die so artfully — but rather of becoming an unwitting part of an artist's punchline. From time to time, a collector interrupts to ask if perhaps, in all the commotion, there is something to buy.

What this crowd witnessed were the aftermaths of three murders, corpseless crimes with all clues leading to a common suspect: Caput Mortuum, known aliases *Dead Head*, or cardinal purple, an iron-based pigment that bears more than passing likeness to dried blood. It's also a term used to describe the "worthless remains" of failed alchemy. Its symbol — three solid circles contained within a larger ring — is intended as a stylized skull (i.e., the "dead head" itself.)

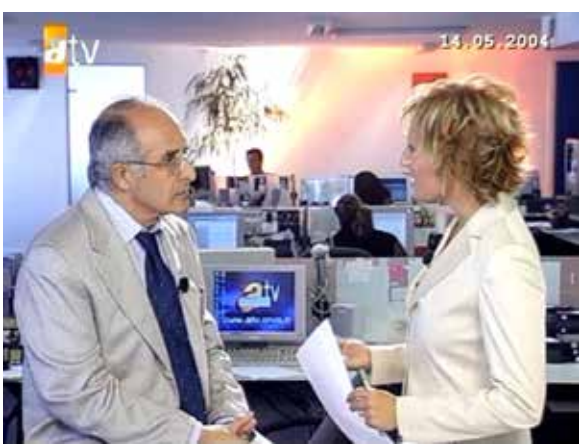
The audience is only privy to this information if they can keep up with the rapid-fire repartee of three forensics experts, who, on another day, in another booth, could be mistaken for gallery attendants. The lead detective stalks into the booth. Tall and brunette, she boasts the broad shoulders and no-nonsense attitude of a "Girl Detective," the paper-thin paperback persona cooked up as a contemporary rejoinder to the viscous sexism of film noir: Nancy Drew all grown-up and still no personality. Clad in a spartan white lab coat, her hair

drawn back in a ponytail, she quotes Wikipedia passages at length with a studied confidence and unwavering tone. Her emotional depth is limited to the veneer of "women's intuition"; surveying the crime scene, she mutters, "Something doesn't feel right here." The audience agrees.

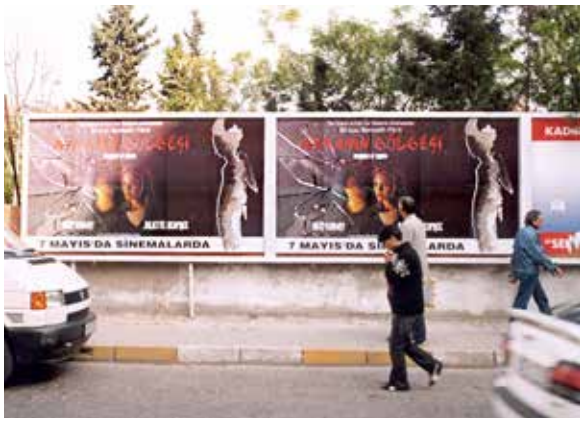
The live taping of Aslı Çavuşoğlu's *Murder in Three Acts* (2012–2013) was one of the Frieze Projects specially commissioned for the 2012 edition of London's Frieze Art Fair. The piece borrows its title from a 1934 Agatha Christie thriller (later republished as *Three Act Tragedy*), which follows beloved Inspector Hercule Poirot as he struggles to connect the dots between a spate of poisonings. Having made this nod to the classics, Çavuşoğlu models her murder mystery on the contemporary procedural drama format of the American blockbuster television franchise, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*. All footage was shot in front of fair-goers in a standard-issue gallery booth, reconfigured into a two-room set. The resulting video was later edited into three episodes, each sharing the cast and credits.

Originally trained in the Academy of Film and Television, Çavuşoğlu produces a near pitch-perfect satire of the genre from the very first moments, an opening sequence splicing sped-up shots of city traffic with close-ups of the three furrowbrowed detectives, all in various stages of squinting at evidence. The theme song samples sirens and the shrill violin shriek of stabbing knives alongside the kind of obnoxiously catchy beat that used to come pre-installed on electronic keyboards. The music drives the production, signaling scene shifts and punctuating the detectives' resolve. As for the investigators, they represent the MVPs of the genre's stock characters: there's flinty "Bass," the calm and collected female lead mentioned earlier, resigned to be the pillar of logic in the proceedings; gruff "McGee," who specializes in scowling and scoffing and only occasionally pitching

in; and impish "Rocha," a quirky quipster who — unlike the muted Bass — wears his personality like a haircut. The dialogue is riddled with bad puns and bloated declarations, intended to deliver the audience from one plot point to the next without having to resort to rationality, nor acknowledge the yawning gaps in logic or logistics (There is a two decade lull between murders.) But it is exactly this reprieve that makes the crime drama such a guilty pleasure for its audience. As a genre, the murder mystery does not take itself too seriously, shunning probability for spectacle and pulp, pumping out the stuff of grocery store novels. Çavuşoğlu deftly plays off the more absurd aspects of the format to embark on a deeper ontological inquiry, questioning the very mechanics of what and how something can be known. Along the way, this debate rounds up the most unusual of suspects, from Socrates and would-be Ottoman sultanas, to Armenian obsidian, "the stone of truth."



A Turkish Doctor: Ömer Ayhan
11 min, DV, Turkish with English subtitles, 2004.

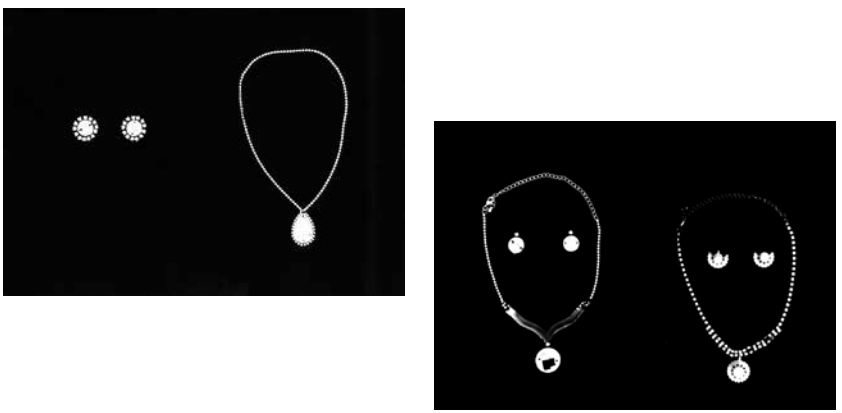


Dominance of Shadow
Offset print, 2 × 3 m, 2004.
View from the billboards in Bostancı, Istanbul.

When it comes to impersonating pop culture idiom, consider Çavuşoğlu a repeat offender. Her thesis for film school treaded a similar terrain in satirizing a mainstream entertainment format, casting a real doctor and a real television newscaster in a scripted documentary that bears all the markings of a legitimate interview, (station logo and all). Over the course of the eleven-minute video, *A Turkish Doctor: Ömer Ayhan* (2004), the doctor — "the pride of the nation," according to the host — is interviewed about his heroic steps in finding a (fictional) cure for (the equally fictional) Nortonomy, a kind of acute amnesia primarily afflicting Americans. That same year, the artist tested out another strategy for cultural camouflage, plastering the city streets of Istanbul with posters for *Dominance of Shadow*, a non-existent horror film. Like *Murder in Three Acts* and *A Turkish Doctor*, Çavuşoğlu had the formal elements down pat. The movie posters overlapped the familiar

motif of a jaggedly broken windowpane with a production still of a familiar, but not immediately recognizable Renee Zellweger, now presented as the invented actress "Juliette Deupree." The fictional director "Luc Benneth" is advertised as the brilliant mind behind such instant (completely fictive) classics as *Over Dreams* and *Evil's Flat*. There was even a website: www.dominanceofshadow.com. The plausibility was in the packaging; style *was* the substance.

Having demonstrated how readily certain forms of cultural authority could be impersonated, Çavuşoğlu then began to experiment with the historical implications of "imposter" culture. For the *Pawnbroker's Series* (2012), the artist namechecks the inordinately popular Turkish soap opera, *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* [Magnificent Century], a starry-eyed retelling of the golden age of the Ottoman Empire. Its would-be-sultanas are decked out in "Ottoman style," an artisanal blend one part historical fact, and two parts whimsy of the costume designers.



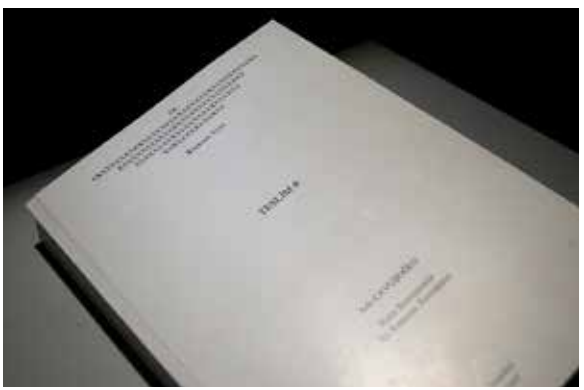
Pawnbroker Series
Photograms, 6 pieces 20 × 27 cm + 11 pieces 30 × 40.5 cm, 2012.

The jewelry became an overnight sensation, with "Ottoman style" knock-offs selling out across Istanbul (in doing so, amending how collective memory imagines this historical narrative.) Çavuşoğlu selected several of these pieces and produced a series of seventeen photograms, framing each necklace or set of earrings in a stark pseudo-museological display, in keeping with the few existing archival records of what adornments of that age might actually have looked like. By imitating the authority of historical document, the artist introduced a pretender to that history; indeed, a future Bass or Rocha might easily mistake the artist's images for those of artifacts, not imposters.

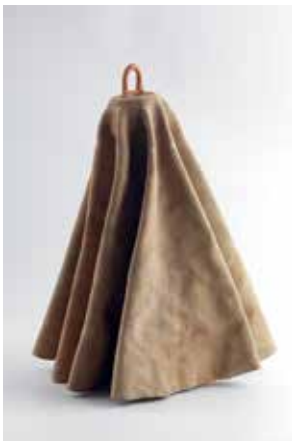
The reason Çavuşoğlu can pull off this sleight of hand is that pop culture draws from an increasingly common lexicon, transcending any one given language. The global entertainment industry — the mechanism pumping *CSI* and *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* into homes around the world — may be the closest contemporary society comes to embodying the collective knowledge base that Plato dreams about in his tract *Meno*. One of the philosopher's Socratic dialogues, the text tracks the title character, a wealthy (though not entirely wise) young Thessalian, as he comes to call on Socrates in an attempt to understand whether virtue can be taught. What follows is a discussion that touches on the very mechanics of knowledge, bumping against the quandary that has since come to be known as "Meno's Paradox." Socrates summarizes the dilemma as such: "man cannot inquire either about that which he knows, or about that which he does not know; for if he knows, he has no need to inquire; and if not, he cannot; for he does not know the very subject about which he is to inquire." If this *is* the case, how then can one ever encounter or assimilate new information? Socrates advocates for recollection, the hypothesis that everything mankind might ever know is already known, just not immediately accessible

to us; our lives, then, are but a process of recovering that knowledge. Consider it the ultimate whodunit.

Seeking other possible solutions to this paradox, Çavuşoğlu commissioned a professional ghostwriter to produce a thesis on the subject of looking for something, but finding something else. To aid him in his quest, Çavuşoğlu sent the author — whom the artist had never met — a suitcase packed with seventy books that had held particular impact for her, along with nine duly eccentric chapter titles, ranging from "Sometimes I Tell Myself: Go Settle in Guyana and Get Yourself an Iguana" to "Radio Saint Helena Island," to "'George, Tell me Buddy, How Come You Can Write Scripts This Well?' Asked Richard." As a text, *Delivery6* (2009) is at once mesmerizing and incomprehensible, with statements encoded or repeated in slight variation (perhaps in deference to the word count requirements) obscuring, rather than clarifying, the author's conclusions — or, more aptly, lack thereof.



Delivery6
Artist Book, 610 pages, Turkish and English, 2009.
Photo: Burak Erkil



The Stones Talk
Mixed media installation, 2013.
Installation view:
Arter, space for art, Istanbul (2013)
Photo: Serkan Tunç
Left: Hadiye Cangökçe

Çavuşoğlu attempted to find "something else" for herself with *The Stones Talk* (2013). Of all the sciences, archaeology is perhaps the one most mired in Meno's Paradox, as a discipline that purports to make new discoveries even as it hypothesizes as to how those discoveries might be forced into the molds of what is already known. In other words, when a crescent of brittle clay is uncovered, the archaeologist might search nearby for a jug missing its handle. Çavuşoğlu eschewed such fill-in-the-blanks conventions, culling seventy-one archaeological objects that had been deemed "study pieces" unfit for display — or to borrow the parlance of Caput Mortuum, "worthless remains" — and then recreating them without any deference to conventions nor concessions to symmetry or routine. Broken or missing pieces were embellished with a fanciful array of nontraditional materials like leather, foam and rubber. The display of

Words Dash Against The Façade
Performance, 2011.
Photo: Paola Court

the collected objects read less as an ethnographic display and more as a fetishist's arsenal, but who can say these whimsical additions are "incorrect"? Who decides that a clay crescent must always be functional, the handle of a jar, and not a shape for shape's sake?

As suggested above, direct observation or encounter cannot suffice as the sole source of knowledge. When Plato's Socrates replies to Meno, he mentions men and women who speak "of things divine" and "glorious truths." This description smacks of divination, a practice that has played a reoccurring role throughout Çavuşoğlu's own inquiry into what can be known, even as the artist maintains her personal hesitations about the method. "Fortunetellers say, "This is what the cards are saying" because they forget that they are the ones loading the cards with meaning," Çavuşoğlu observes in a 2012 conversation with curator Özge Ersoy.[3] The artist had a chance to gain firsthand experience with

3 *Mercury in Retrograde, Aslı Çavuşoğlu*. Editors: İz Öztat, Süreyyya Evren. Art-ist, September 2012, Istanbul.

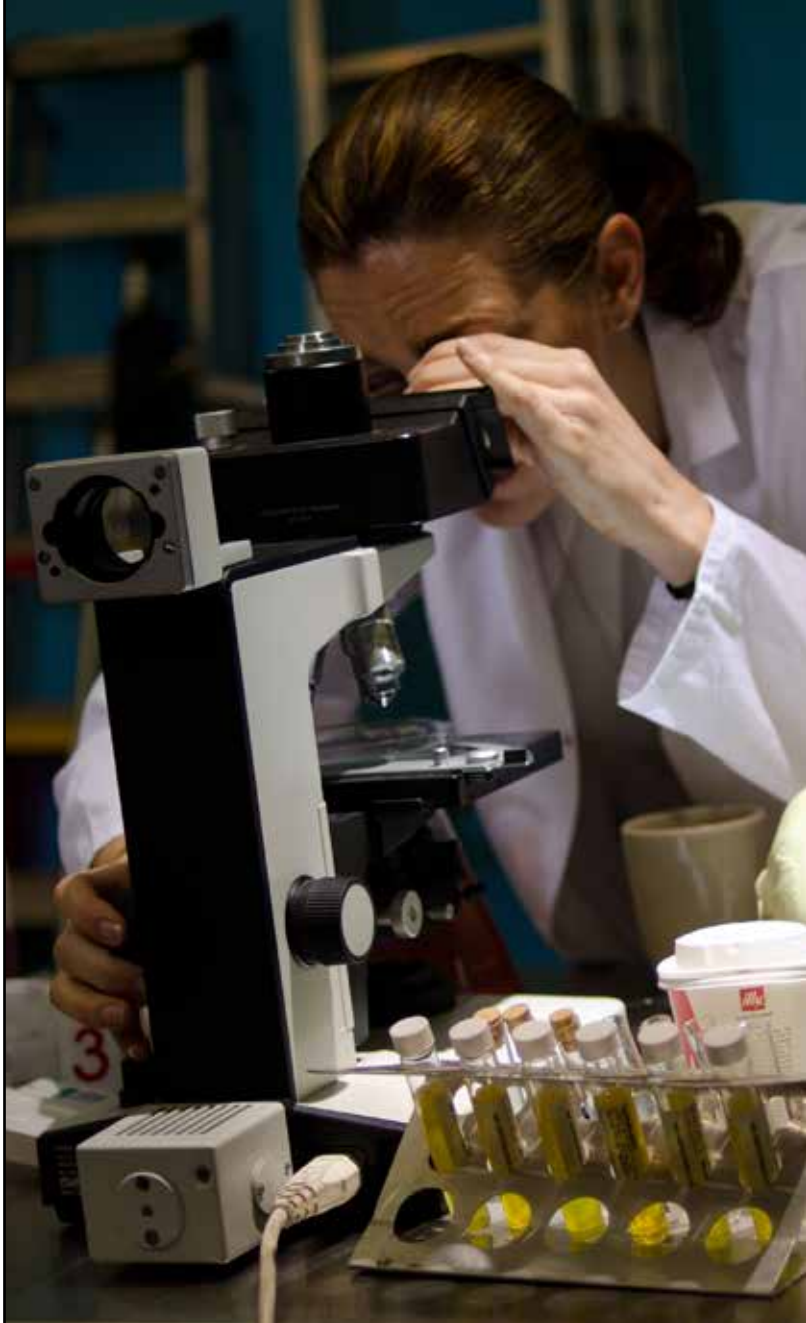
Words Dash Against the Façade (2011), her contribution to Performa11. The piece departed from the idea that objects — or even their silhouettes — could be capable of revealing glorious truths. At 11:11 on November 11, 2011 (11/11/11), the artist convened a crowd at Cleopatra's Needle in New York's Central Park. Participants then summoned the traditions of the ancient Greeks and Babylonians in their attempts to "read" reflective skyscrapers like the Hearst Tower. Of course, since little is known about these techniques, individuals were encouraged to venture their own interpretations. Dealing their own hand, as it were.

Divination makes a dubious cameo in *Murder in Three Acts*, directly informing the work of the absent artist (who may also be the victim.) The shiny black sculptures populating the first crime scene are identified as obsidian, a volcanic glass formed by cooling lava. The material's general scarcity and hypnotic, "black mirror" surface have made this so-called "stone of truth" a favorite for conjurers through the ages, though in the present moment, obsidian is more likely to be found serving as a paperweight in an executive office. In *Murder in Three Acts*, it is the artist's signature medium. The piece on display — a collection of nine lens-like obsidian objects — is titled *Future Conjured* (the irony that the artist might have been a victim intact.) When the ninth piece is declared missing and must be reproduced, Rocha squints at the fresh surrogate: "How much did you say this is worth?" Bass shoots back: "The truth. That's what it costs." She is, presumably, unaware of how apt her particular choice of phrasing is.

For the most part, the "knowledge" in *Murder in Three Acts* could be said to derive more from divination than deduction. The satire is in the slippages. Characters pour over second-hand printouts, dismayed at the purported grim prognosis of what is, in actuality,

a pie chart or schedule (a fact in no way concealed to the viewer.) In the second episode, Rocha is busy pinning up pictures of a crime scene not yet discovered. The forensic tools employed are deliberate misfits, the procedures casually preposterous. Upon spotting a suspicious object, Bass places it on Rocha's handheld device, which is, at that point, directed away from the camera. The shot switches to reveal that what Rocha is holding is in fact a marine navigational GPS receiver, timestamped at 17:58 on January 7, 1993. It bears the coordinates of the desert stretch where Birds Landing Road meets Route 12 in Solano County, California. Rocha glances at the screen, "Silica?" "Silicon dioxide," Bass corrects. In another scene, Rocha submerges presumably the same sample into a tank of clear liquid — bleach, we are told — then gingerly adds a few droplets of yellow liquid, stirring gently. Switching on a desk lamp, he straightens his back and announces triumphantly: "The luminosity suggests that the silica used to cut the fiberglass originated in the southwest part of Iceland."

While the obvious target of this humor is the genre of the procedural, with its know-it-all experts and the ever infallible reach of forensics, by setting her *Murder in Three Acts* in the context of the art fair, Çavuşoğlu opens the piece up to an insider-friendly form of slapstick. The silver-mopped museum director forbids a work — a potential crime scene in itself — to be moved on the grounds that it is site-specific and thus might collapse; works in storage are compared to clothes purchased but never worn; and a spectator called upon as a witness to describe a performance must answer the question: "Did you see anybody acting suspiciously?" But the most rewarding gags come with the expansion of the forensic specialist's all-knowing "expertise" to the evaluation of the art object, in which the given value is not immediately observable (If as Bass suggests, a work is worth "the truth," then what does that truth cost? By



the museum director's math, "more than you'll earn in a lifetime!") In one scene, Bass unflinchingly accepts that an artist's use of concrete "links his oeuvre to Post-War trauma," while in another, Rocha, upon learning that the sculptures were all made from obsidian, nods approvingly: "So the work's about transformation."

These kinds of leaps in judgment are exactly what hold the art object in the peculiar place it now occupies, reliant as it is on the "expert" to confirm the most flamboyant of its assigned intentions. And indeed, just across from the booth where *Murder in Three Acts* was filmed, a host of gallery attendants went about the business of peddling these intentions to would-be collectors, affecting the same deadpan delivery as the detectives when they drop their terrible puns. The detectives have the advantage, however. In procedural shows, expertise can be seconded by forensics, a science capable of stripping objects of their ambiguity. The gallery attendant is on their own, with only press releases, auction results and the occasional artist's statement to come to their aid.

It's a defining character of the crime genre that, while language may hover in the world of double-meanings, bad puns and blunt innuendos, objects remain adamant, definitive proof ready to be observed, decoded, measured, or deciphered. While language can be used to tell the story, in the setting of the forensics lab, the object *is* the story. And yet, while, in this sense, objects may supersede the spoken word, they still require that word to call them into being, via statements such as "I think we may have found our murder weapon" or "We may be looking at our killer's footprint." These declarations eventually overwhelm the objects, rendering them irrelevant. For the very first crime, there is not even a corpse, prompting Bass to resolve: "We'll have to conduct an autopsy without the body." What follows is a series of deductions, adorned in turn by affirmations and fictive findings. In the process, speculation becomes

confirmation. We may have found our murder weapon? We may have found our murder weapon.

In the realm of the contemporary art fair, the object holds a privileged status, as both the fetishized commodity good and the secondary accessory to the concept. (For if one reads, and, importantly, accepts that *Future Conjured* is "about transformation," what work is there left for the object to do?) But even this special status does not exempt the art object from the realm of forensics. A crime is an event that automatically overrides the existing values of its components, investing objects with new meaning as evidence, alibis, or potential murder weapons. Once the obsidian sculptures enter the crime scene, they are no longer art works but suspects.

Does an art fair have the same power to change an object's status? Bass reaches the conclusion that it can. Searching for a connection between the three murders, she notes that "all the artworks were somehow linked in the transformation process... They all lost their primal, sacred meaning and somehow became commodity objects. *That* is the connection." Letting her words sink in, she stares resolutely at McGee: "If we find out what this connection means, we'll find our murderer."

> **SOCRATES:** *I too speak rather in ignorance; I only conjecture. And yet that knowledge differs from true opinion is no matter of conjecture with me. There are not many things which I profess to know, but this is most certainly one of them.*
>
> — *Meno*[4]

> *One knows so little. When one knows more, it is too late.*
>
> — Mr. Satterthwaite, *Murder in Three Acts*[5]

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4 Plato, *Meno*. Translation by Benjamin Jowett. Written 380 B.C.E; available at http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/meno.html.

5 Agatha Christie, *Murder in Three Acts*. Dodd, Mead and Company, 1934.