

Asli Cavusoglu and Laura Barlow in conversation

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Doha, Qatar

*This conversation took place during the opening of the exhibition, **Asli Cavusoglu: Red/Red** at the Project Space, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, on 22 & 23 May 2016.*

LB: *Red/Red* has a number of layers to the project, one is research based on the history of the Armenian pigment and the history of its use in visual culture and national identity. A lot of the original manuscripts in Armenian national museums are being replicated by professionals for display in public, so there is the reproduction of a history that is in itself representing a national history or cultural production. How was it to work with this group of miniature painters, and what did it mean to them to be involved in the reproduction of this history on another level?

AC: I found out that there was not a single manuscript dedicated to this beautiful insect so I wanted to make a beautiful story about it and what kind of plant it was living in, through different styles of the Armenian miniature school. Working in Armenia with traditional painters was really a nice experience. I always collaborate with people and in almost all my projects there is no single thing I do by myself. I really like how people engage in the projects. We had a very good condensed two week experience working in a studio provided by an alternative art school. Of course the painters are very familiar with the colour because it's mentioned in the Armenian school books as part of their Armenian heritage. So they asked, 'Why are you interested in this colour? It's just a random thing, we have it – everybody does.' And I explained that there is only one person left who makes it and they were really surprised that it was endangered. So it is taken for granted. After working with these small bottles of the pigment they understood how precise and precious it is.

LB: Which works of yours, made before this, also investigate the way objects and artefacts change through reinterpretation by institutions and different kinds of spaces?

AC: Maybe not content-wise, but process-wise I would give the example of *The Stones Talk*, a work commissioned by Arter in Istanbul. I worked with archeological materials titled as study pieces that were not found beautiful or 'national' enough to be shown or exhibited and were always kept in storage. It was surprising to learn that about 95% of archeological findings are never exhibited. So my question was: who has the authority to decide what is worth seeing and how it should be narrated? This was one case where I looked at the establishment of national narratives through the lens of the archeological

objects and archeologists. I was curious: how can you change these narratives and play around with them to show that there are many alternative stories?

LB: You are often drawn to renegade practices, creating the sense of something rebelling that has been put in a place, a box, or a certain category and you're enabling it to escape. Where does your interest in interrogating those versions of the past come from?

AC: I think this is a temptation to rebel against established and unchangeable systems. I have a personal problem with the official history within Turkish schools. I am from Turkey but I would never say that I am only Turkish. The Turkish Republic was an empire composed of many different people of different backgrounds and it never feels right to forget about this past and how we become who we are. Through art you can at least alter or change art history and once you do this it becomes an alternative history. I think art works in this sense as well.

LB: As a vehicle or carrier of different sociological messages?

AC: Yes. My aim is not to show an alternative history and make people believe it. I want to open the discussion on a subject to show there are multiple readings and that I'm not the only one giving an alternative, nor is it perfectly screened.

LB: Rather than reflecting society, art is part of society, a composite of the many layers of existence. What's your approach to fictionalising the histories you are working with? Sometimes you take a literal approach and other times there is a playfulness in how you present stories.

AC: I enjoy thinking about the aesthetic outcome of a project because display is something political. It can be really sexist. It can be very fascistic. So it's very interesting to think about how to overcome some of these things and what the work really wants. This is what I find playful and challenging.

LB: How does the installation of *Red / Red* do this?

AC: The execution of the project is the easiest part. To get to the execution process you think through every aspect of the work, from the display, to the glass, to the table and other materials, and ask yourself the questions: why this material, why not another? *Red/Red* was made in a similar way. I was thinking about the work within the space. I knew the information about the space before.

LB: But you are always reading the space of the gallery or institution in the work itself. A lot of your work interrogates the way institutional structures can change the meaning of objects and artefacts over time, whether an anthropological or visual arts museum. The installation of *The Stones Talk* uses a number of plinths in a very contemporary reading of space and display. Are you always thinking about the alignment of the architecture of the space and the objects?

AC: Yes, and also the meaning of the space – if it's a museum or an institution – affects the meaning of an artwork, especially if the work is created for that space. This colour is a subject that could either go to a museum, ending its production, or go on to live, if the two parts can cooperate. That's why I displayed the entire piece as something between a museum work and something random, but not rare. You are invited to touch but you also feel you shouldn't. I wanted to create tension, by making a 'border' inside the space with a really long table because to get to Armenia from Turkey you have to go through Georgia. You can see the other side, but you cannot cross, so you have to make a really long 'U' for 12 hours, to go somewhere that would otherwise take 20 minutes. So the table means you can't cross the space easily.

LB: Your works are related to stories, histories, and geographies that reach Poland, Turkey, Armenia, and beyond. Have your encounters with subject and location developed organically or is there a set route?

AC: There is no set route. I wish I could be more organised about that.

LB: But the idea of borders and territory, whether it's the ownership of certain histories and narratives, is always present. In *Red / Red* you're very specific about the placement of the table and the drawings.

AC: But for *The Stones Talk*, it is not. The display is always changing. In *Red / Red* it was because I designed the work having the border idea in mind, one side representing Turkey and the other Armenia. I wanted to create an illusion that could only be seen by the audience when they came close.

LB: So the body in space is very important for you.

AC: Yes.

LB: And how much information about the work do you think is necessary to give to an audience?

AC: In school I was very much into scriptwriting so that's why I like thinking about what words mean through writing and editing text. When I write about art works, I like to give dry factual information and

not tell an audience what to think. I'll share things like 'This is what happened, or this kind of species lives here' so they can figure out the rest.

LB: It's a story, particularly in *Red / Red*, that you tell through the books. The Armenian ink fades in the work but in reality it remains pertinent. How have you reflected the passage of time with the pigments in the notebooks, and what kind of chronology are you looking at?

AC: The first book starts much before any of the idea of the border and the fifth book, where the painting on the left side is completely erased, represents 1915 for me. I wanted to use the notebooks like chronological entities, so in the beginning the colour is bright and the notebooks look old but as you move through them they begin to look newer. The paper becomes less worn and the colours on both sides of the spine start changing. I conceived the left part of the book as the Turkish side and the right side as the Armenian. In the first five books both colours are vivid and there is no distinction between the two sides. There are no sides actually, it's a whole. Then it starts changing on each side and they completely separate and by the last notebook the left side, the Turkish side, is completely covered with the Turkish red, which is also a great pigment and very important. I'm implying that you can do many things with colours – reveal or erase.

LB: The more literal representations of the pigment as flowers or plants in the story transition into angular, geometric, and modern shapes. Do they all reference existing patterns or are they from your imagination?

AC: They are from my own imagination, but the patterns are inspired by Armenian miniature art. We created patterns by putting the bug and plant at the centre of the designs.

LB: To open different entry points to this history in a certain way. So this leads me to ask, what kind of **emphasis** do you place on political interpretation? Do you think it's the role of the artist in society to provide this?

AC: I don't know if it's the role of the artist but as a human being – more than an artist – what I wanted to focus on in this work is the act of healing. It is not intended to emphasise the word 'genocide'. That's the least interesting part of it, the politics. I did this work because I wanted to prove that as human beings we are capable of healing each other. We don't need authorities or approvals to do this. It is just us and we need each other. This is maybe the most political message.

LB: There's an ecological concern too. What kind of reference is discourse on ecology, such as the Anthropocene?

AC: It is a reference. The insect and the plant show us a very simple, pure fact. When I first heard about it, the case was open and it was obvious what to do. I just hope that the bug and the plant will become an example, not only their story but this beautiful colour and culture they created.

LB: What is the fantasy outcome? Can the project bring communality and coexistence, maybe through realising one of your original ideas for a workshop?

AC: I think it can but it takes time for people to trust each other. For me this project is still ongoing. It will be finished when I am able to show it in Armenia.

LB: You have a very strong research practice but in your works you often perform different roles: historian, researcher, choreographer, or scriptwriter ...

AC: Choreographer?

LB: Well, constructing a narrative in collaboration with people to produce all different kinds of media. Can you speak about your interdisciplinary approach and the labour of production in your work?

AC: I studied film making and cinema in a school which gave access to all the elements of making films, sound, production, and editing. If you are a director and you can use anything as a tool, it is super-natural to collaborate with professionals, at an acceptable wage. Some people ask me, 'Why didn't you write the rap song?' and I'm surprised because if there are great people who can do something much better than me and we would like to work together, why would I do everything by myself?!

LB: So during your research for *Red / Red* did your collaboration with the miniature painters extend to research of the manuscripts in the museums? You didn't have access to certain documents.

AC: No, I did the research by myself and they were only involved in the painting part. The museums wouldn't show me the original recipe for the pigment, which was written in coded Armenian. The head of the department refused to show me any of it but the professor I was working with sent me a copy of one page.

LB: And you couldn't understand anything?

AC: Of course I couldn't!

LB: What's most interesting in *Red / Red* is how you collapse certain realities of this pigment's condition and production. It's like a meta story of this red.

AC: And there's another aspect of the story, all the beautiful encounters of the journey, which are very hard to reflect. I really believe that if you can change one person's perspective, you should be thankful. This is important instead of waiting for huge revolutions and transformations in society. I find it very precious in society to encounter somebody. When I was doing this project I met amazing people and maybe we changed our perspectives of each other through this. You can never really tell everything in the art work.

LB: Yes, there are so many layers of personal interaction, of collaboration, or non-collaboration. Maybe you need to make a book?

AC: Maybe! 'Memories of Red'?!

LB: Yes! Thank you so much.

AC: Thank you.

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