

A conversation between Hakan Topal and Adeola Enigbokan, in a bookstore in the SoHo section of Manhattan, on Monday, June 28th 2010, around lunch time.

Edited by Adeola Enigbokan

Hakan asks the first question.

SO WHAT ARE YOU DOING THIS FOR?

H: So what are you doing this research for? For your thesis? For the magazine? Or both?

A: I got stuck a while ago because I realized I wanted to do something that was not exactly social science, even though I'm in a social science degree program. So that became a problem, right? And then I decided that one way to kind of like loosen up would be to keep a blog about things I like.

H: Right...

A: So I started doing that, and actually, it's been really helpful, because I can just have an idea, or a thought, or see a fashion spread that I like, or whatever, and everything can just go into the blog—

H: Mm hmm

A: I don't have to think about organizing it into chapters, and stuff—

H: Yes, perfect, yes...

A: And since I'm interested in what I'm calling "archival practice," which is different than just what we traditionally think of as archival research, the website is actually a good archival practice for me—at least a good way to think of archives, in practice. And now, I've come to realize that I can't really think or read or write outside of blog format anymore...

H: Yeah, wow! [laughs]

A: Yeah I can't read [academic] JSTOR articles anymore. I can't read monographs, much less write one. So I started to realize my work has to be about this process—

H: Mm hmm, mm hmm...

A: About how I can't do it anymore, but I still want to do "it."

H: Right. [The blog] is forcing you to write something, even though it's scattered—forcing you to concentrate on bits and pieces.

A: Exactly

H: And once you sit down, you can combine them into something.

A: Yes, that's the thing: finding the form.

XURBAN COLLECTIVE STARTS WITH A COUPLE OF CATASTROPHES

A: I'm talking to people about their practice; people who I think of loosely as having any kind of archival practice, and who are connected to or interested in the experience of living in cities. I want to find out about their "process." So we can talk about some your projects that I saw on your website—

H: Do you want me to talk about the collective first, a little bit?

A: Sure!

H: We started this collective when I first moved to New York, from Ankara. I had a very close friend and we were doing these projects together, traveling to different sites in Turkey doing photography. And I collaborated with him on multiple projects prior to the collective. Actually, he was my kind of mentor, my professor, at one point. And so when I moved to New York, we were discussing and exchanging things online, and then we said why don't we establish a kind of a platform to work together? You know, like very loosely? Then [at the same time] things in Turkey started to happen, like it always happens, but for us it was a kind of turning point. One of them was the 1999 earthquake. I feel lots of similarities between [the earthquake and] what happened in New Orleans with [Hurricane] Katrina. It betrayed the very condition of the state apparatus. Although the state collects all this money, and claims that it provides security for people, when the time comes that people really need help, the state is not there.

For Turkish society, it was kind of a revelation, because as opposed to the US maybe, [talking about the] state is a kind of taboo, and you could not directly criticize the core values of the state itself, such as military prowess, or whatever else. People didn't really think about it much. Perhaps they thought the state apparatus is a given thing. Although we knew that it wasn't working properly, we didn't know that it was going to fail so drastically. You know, 20,000 people died... Why it happened? That was the question for us. Why, at a certain point in time, when the earthquake hits, does it become a catastrophe? When you have a human built environment, there is a catastrophe. If the earthquake happens in the middle of the forest, nothing happens, right? Like, it's not a catastrophe. Catastrophe has something to do with the built environment: urban development, construction quality, and how people live in a space. And so we decided to look at those things, basically. That's why we called [the collective] "x-urban:" it was relevant to what we were doing.

Urban, x-urban, was a very direct, very easy word to come out. But also "xurban" in Kurdish (you read it as "zurban," or—I cannot pronounce it well—"hurban") means sacrifice. We thought this afterwards [to be] an interesting association, because we kind of feel that doing an artistic practice is an intellectual adventure and you have to take certain risks. If you are living in a society, you have to think about what makes that society and you have to criticize the core values of that society, which involves a lot of risk.

One of the early projects that we did, for instance was "Containment Contained"--

A: Excellent! That was the project I was going to ask you about...

H: That project was about the Kurdish [War], another catastrophe for Turkish history. You may recall there is a war between PKK, which is the Kurdish guerilla group in the southeast of Turkey, and the Turkish military. It started in the [19]80's and it escalated at the end of the 80's and beginning of the 90's.

A: Right.

H: And it's claimed almost 40,000 lives, over a thirty or thirty-five year period.

A: Yeah, not to mention all the political prisoners and hunger strikers—

H: Definitely, yes. For us, the southeast of Turkey is a discursive category. Like, people look from Ankara and Istanbul, and problematize that region as “Southeast of Turkey.” Whereas you can see historically that region is called “Mesopotamia,” and Mesopotamia is the place that—Baghdad was part of it, and Syria; they call it the Fertile Crescent—

A: Yeah...

H: That area is basically the cradle of civilization as we know it. The first university was established there, etcetera, etcetera. At least 40 or 50 different civilizations came [and settled] on top of these lands, establishing fluid layers on top of each other.

A: Right, so all these layers of discursive formations have taken this place there, and now this [current] incarnation called “Southeast Turkey” is associated with “wild Kurds?” Is that it?

H: Exactly, because the reason is obviously that the Turkish state never recognized Kurdish identity, until recently. They didn't allow then to speak the Kurdish language. So looking from the US, it is very hard to understand.

A: [laughter] Not really! Looking from the US, it's not especially hard to understand.

H: But [in the US] people freely exercise their own ethnic backgrounds... in a certain way.

A: Well, it seems that way now, but I mean we had the “wild, wild West” as a discursive category.

H: Right, true

A: And the west began [laughter] just outside of—

H: Of New York!

A: Yeah, basically just outside of the Eastern colonies, as a discursive category. And then came the need to subdue the land, and subdue the people of the land, and for years, you know 500 years, there was strife and war.

H: Like Indians, Native Americans

A: Exactly. This war included the prevention of languages, the systematic destruction of culture, and then the final decision was basically to not include them in the state.

H: That's right. I agree with that. What I meant is today's US society is very multicultural

A: Discursively, at least...

H: Right. [US society] promotes different identities and multiculturalism, and it recognizes Spanish as a second language, and things like that. And this happens in Europe too, the recognition of cultures, at least in the last 30

years. For Turkey it was a very, very new thing. And the socioeconomic condition of [Southeast Turkey] is poor. On top of this, in the 1990's, because of the first Gulf War, and because of the UN sanctions on Iraq, the region got even poorer, because the trade between Southeast Turkey and Northern Iraq was the main source of income for those people. They were the truck drivers, they were the merchants, and things like that. Once you closed off the border, the possibility of doing trade diminished.

A: And as a result of this, was there a lot of displacement?

H: Displacement came at the hands of the Turkish military, because the Turkish military wants to control the territory, and the territory is huge. It's like [the size of] Holland, or like New York state. And how you are going to control people over a big territorial area? What they did is to empty thousands of villages and then push the people to the cities.

A: Right—

H: This created urban catastrophe, because suddenly you increase the population of one of the major cities, Diyarbakir, from 300,000 to one million in fifteen years. This is a crazy increase. And there are some little villages, [which] became cities, increasing in population from 10,000 to 100,000. And the village economy was based on raising cows and sheep, and people couldn't do that in the cities, so the main income sources dropped too. So basically, it's a catastrophe for the whole region.

A: A friend of mine is studying what's going on the Golden Horn area of Istanbul, with the displaced Kurdish people who have become a cheap labor source for the shipping industry there.

H: Yes, and a cheap labor source for the construction industry too.

A: Right

H: Yeah, in general they are the source of cheap labor. Like here, [in the US], Hispanic people are utilized in non-union construction business, where they don't have any—

A: Protection

H: Protection, yeah.

CONTAINMENT

A: I want to talk more about Containment/Contained, because it was interesting to me how the low-intensity humiliation [that's part of life in the War on Terror world], like in airports, can turn into high-intensity humiliation, pretty quickly depending on who you are, and how you react. It was interesting to compare that to being in Istanbul—

H: You've been in Istanbul?

A: Yes. So to compare what goes on in airports with what goes on in a place like Taksim Square, where everyone is out, with lots of people, you know, fun times, but at the same time there were police vans parked at the entrance to the main street, sort of screening people. I was watching the patterns of who they were stopping, and it became pretty clear that it was people who were thought to be Kurdish.

H: Right, umm hmm

A: Like they fit some kind of profile, which reminded me of the airport screening.

H: You know, it's very difficult to do this in Turkey because the population is very mixed, unlike the US for instance, where with the white population versus brown population [divide], you can racially profile people. But in Turkey, there are stereotypes obviously, but you can't do that very easily. So what they do in certain locations, they check the ID's and look where you are from, and most of the time it designates what is your origin. If you are from the Southeast of Turkey, then there's a 95% chance you are Kurdish, or Iraqi, so therefore you pose a threat. So maybe they are randomly choosing people—well not randomly—but if they check your ID and you are not from there, then you may not pose a threat.

A: Right...

H: So it's more a conceptual profiling, versus what happens in the US with the racial profiling. I think in Turkey, in one sense, it's more dangerous because there is no clear cut distinction [like obvious racial difference] between people. [Differences and profiling] becomes more immersed—they play an important role—in the discursive field. I think here [in the US], racism is more unspoken, but [occurs in] visually recognizable patterns. In Turkey, I think it works in the discursive field: people can make racist comments, discriminating against Kurdish people, out loud. That is the danger. This is the pre-multicultural part of the whole thing. Here, in the US and in Europe, at least in public discourse, racism cannot be pronounced.

A: At least it has to disguise itself in a variety of different ways.

H: But in Turkey it is so direct. It may become racism or fascism. It travels very freely in public discourse.

A: Right. At least in the US fascism is displaced and contained into particular places. Or it is displaced outside of the US, outside of the boundaries of the 48 states. It is something that happens “over there.” It needs to happen “over there.” Here, on the other hand, we are a “free country.”

H: I think the [airport] checkpoint example you gave is a good one, [compared] to Taksim Square, because it has to do with the management of small places. In the Containment/Contained project, we looked at the whole region [of southeast Turkey] and how you can contain people in a huge territory. So that was the idea of the checkpoint. In Gaza, or Palestine, they built walls and they established checkpoints, so that you contain people in a specific territory—in an airport, in a street. But in an open territory, how are you going to manipulate the flow of the people and the situation itself?

We compared this current condition to a historic, archaeological condition where there was no control in the territory. Looking at the region from an archaeological perspective gave us a clue about what is happening today. The idea of containment comes from the containers used to transport oil from Iraq to Turkey because Turkey is not an oil country. The main source of oil comes from Iraq. Turkish truck drivers cleverly found a way to smuggle oil from Iraq to Turkey in the 1990's, when Iraq was sanctioned and could not sell oil to Turkey. So Turkish drivers were going to Iraq and bringing oil from there underneath their trucks. They were custom building containers to fit under the truck, claiming they were only carrying oil for personal use. Each container could carry a couple tons of oil. As soon as they came to Turkey, they would distribute that oil to the Turkish market.

A: Mm hmm

H: But the UN pressured Turkey [to comply with the sanctions against Iraq, and control the oil smuggling], and Turkey had to put a 500 liter cap on oil for each driver. Therefore, all these custom-built containers became useless, and they were dispersed along the roads—thousands of them—these steel structures. These were very similar to archaeological findings for us, like pottery. You know, like when you dig a sunken ship, and you find grain, olive oil, and all these goods being transferred from one place to another. It gives us a clue about the trade people were doing 2000 years ago, from Egypt to Greece, to Syria, to Anatolia, and we can draw a picture of free trade.

ARCHAEOLOGY IS THE ART OF DIGGING THINGS UP

A: Ok, I have to say time out! This is too much! I'm having a brain freeze. You know, like when you have ice cream and it's too cold and you have—

H: Ha ha! Sorry, I have too much things going on so—

A: No no! It's ok, because the reason I'm having a brain freeze is that I just did my [doctoral oral] exam, and one of the things I was saying is that, for me, the dissertation is about the importance of the form our knowledge takes, and we ought to look at the form and the process of what we create. That's why I'm thinking about archiving in this way. I gave [my examining committee] two methodologies that I think will be useful for me and one of them is archaeology, and the other is montage. There was a big discussion of the relationship between archaeology and montage. I was thinking of archaeology as both [Michel] Foucault's "archaeology [of knowledge]" and archaeology-anthropology, and also [Walter] Benjamin's archaeology.

H: What's Benjamin's archaeology?

A: It's kind of like what's in [Benjamin's] Arcades Project, where he talks about it in those little blurbs he would write. He says your research—your real research—is always an excavation through these layers of self.

H: Exactly.

A: I also look a lot at his techniques of finding things, looking for debris, trash. One of my professors, who is an archaeologist, actually studies trash—current trash, as opposed to old-time archaeological trash. This is what archaeologists do anyway. Many of the things they dig up are trash. It's not just like Indiana Jones or something. Most of it is just finding piles of everyday things that people threw away, buried underneath layers of sediment.

H: Mmm hmm [33:02]

A: So this idea that Benjamin had of looking for trash, is related to an idea Benjamin had about history, which is that the past is never really past, but is always available in these "flashes." There are things you can do, techniques you can engage in to generate the "flash." [I talk about this on my blog in a post about the artists Heather and Ivan Morison.] This idea is important to me because it's kind of my feeling about research: Research is this digging through trash, systematically looking, although you don't know what you'll find. Also looking through trash, *because* it's been discarded; *because* it's what people want to put away. This is actually why it's important for me.

[At my exam] I didn't have a very good answer for why archaeology and montage are connected. I know they are connected within the work of Benjamin himself—he talks about archaeology and montage together—but for myself, I

haven't really worked out the connection. This is why I'm talking to you. I need to follow these kinds of resonances. Each person that I interview, or whose work I'm interested in, has this similar feel for archaeology—looking for what has been lost or thrown away.

OUR PERIPHERAL VISIONS OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

A: The other thing that has come up a lot [in my research] is “peripheral vision.” I've been keeping track of all the places I see peripheral vision mentioned—

H: Mmm... where the focus is not direct.

A: Yes. Where the goal is to see by looking sideways.

H: Yeah

A: With normal social science methods—the kind we refer to when writing a proposal for government funding—there is the need to really look, to isolate the object, look directly, zoom in, zoom out, to microscopically *look*. In this kind of research, the “frame” through which one looks has to be clear. I wonder how that approach differs from looking peripherally.

H: I think this is very interesting. In photography it is the frame that matters, not the object, especially if you are doing landscape photography, [which is] something that shows everything, but doesn't have a focus. Roland Barthes talks about the *punctum* in photography—the focus object that takes your attention immediately. Editorial photography, or journalistic photography always has a *punctum* that draws you in. But I agree that the peripheral vision is important when you are looking for something. The whole thing actually is important. For example when an event occurs in the Kurdish region, TV personalities or journalists go there immediately and cover the thing. Then serious journalists go there afterwards to report, yes? Then maybe a couple of years later there are the researchers, who go and do academic studies.

I feel that as artists, what we do is totally irrelevant to what is happening urgently, because we look at things that have no relevance to the current urgent conditions. We go there when nobody is interested [any more]. That is the point. This is my important point. If I have a mission as an artist, this is the mission: To look at the places that have no importance to anybody. Then bring that in to the discussion.

A: Mmm

H: Like that landscape of Mesopotamia, or the Anatolian landscape, becomes extremely important as it is. It covers, as you said before, the excavation project. [That landscape] invites us to excavate, because it basically holds the whole story in itself; layers of layers of layers of information, or civilization, or plants, or animals—everything that lived on that territory. This is true for everywhere. I am interested in there because I am from there and I feel a kind of responsibility.

A: You're from the southeast?

H: No I'm from Anatolia. Obviously it's impossible to remove yourself from what you belong to, in a way. It's a kind of belonging issue too. Like if you focus there, then it's not the peripheral vision at that point. My interests come from Anatolia, but I don't feel that they are very local interests because the nature of the discussion has to be brought back

to us again. If you are studying the earthquake in Turkey, its not different from studying Katrina in the US. I feel that they are very relevant [to each other]. There are connections between those two events.

A: Yes.

H: The understanding of a particular event has to be global.

A: I'd like us to talk more about the technique, or approach, or orientation that goes along with having peripheral vision, or finding what appears to be uninteresting to people right now and bringing that into the picture. I think this connects to Benjamin's approach, especially what he discusses in that famous essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In that essay he's talking about National Socialism [in Germany in the 1930s] and how what that politics is doing is to create a state of emergency, constant emergency to explain why horrible things have to be done all the time. And Benjamin says what our task is, is to bring about a *real* state of emergency. I think this is really connected to maintaining a peripheral vision, or as you pointed out with landscape painting earlier, a panoramic vision; to be able to bring in into the story things that appear irrelevant. Doing this must be part of bringing about those flashes, those moments of recognition, those flashes of 'Oh! *This* is what it is!

H: Right. True.

I think that Sociology and Anthropology are disciplines, and disciplines have to work within disciplinary practice. So while I am very much influenced by Sociology and Gender Studies, and things like that, I think that art, or an artistic approach is a kind of opening that I couldn't do in Sociology. Within the discipline, you have to be disciplinary and you have to tell the story in a particular way in order [for your work] to be understood as a sociological practice. Whereas artistic practice is itself a kind of discipline, especially if you think of the institutional art practices and blah blah blah, it has a certain anti-disciplinary opening that allows us to make these light assumptions. You see, I am not an archaeologist, but I can talk about archaeology. I wouldn't call myself a sociologist, but I can talk about sociology. I can bring in lots of different elements, and I can be a naïve scholar. This naivete is an opening for me. I can bring a lot of things together and present them, and take those risks and be a naïve scholar, or naïve artist or whatever it is. These things teach me a lot, during the process of playing.

MONTAGE IS THE ART OF CUTTING THINGS UP

H: Montage is a very nice metaphor, because in montage you can bring seemingly unrelated parts together to create a unity, right?

A: Mmm hmm.

H: With the montage you can actually be two places at the same time. For example, in one of the earliest editing tricks in film they would jump from Antartica to Africa with a cut, you know? You can actually create an otherwise impossible action through montage. I feel this is the moment which, in a way, we are actually looking for: the creation of jumps between different time zones, different historical layers, different cultures, and then showing the relevance to people.

A: Yeaah (dreamy, wistful)

H: Otherwise no one would think that US society and German society and Turkish society are very similar, unless you show them they are similar. Of course this is the fight, the discursive fight.

During the containment project this was our experience. We did 7000 km in 21 days following archaeological sites in this region. We took photographs of the landscapes of archaeological sites in this region that have nothing on it. You wouldn't see a monumental structure. We just show the earth as an archaeological site. This requires an imagination that people live there, underneath, throughout history. And also [the photos] show the fight going on, the fight happening now, although you are not seeing anything.

A: I think it would be interesting to think about how all this relates to “high-alert” places, places that are maintained in a constant state-of-emergency. What is the connection between these high-alert places? For example, I am thinking about Tel Aviv and Gaza—

H: You've been in Tel Aviv?

A: Yeah

H: I've been there once, in '93. Long ago!

A: Long ago, yes. But that was soon after the war...

H: The Second Intifada

A: The Second Intifada and war with Iraq.

H: Yes, that's true

A: A very high alert time! One of the things that always struck me about Tel Aviv is that people there really like to party. They love to go to the beach, and there is this imperative: ‘We have to have a good time!’

H: Right

A: And I imagine how it is so close, only about 23 kilometers from Gaza. I always wondered, what's the connection between these kinds of things? New York and say, Baghdad, or Mosul? I feel in Tel Aviv always “high alert”—

H: Mmm hmm because of the military presence...

A: No, not just military presence. Even the fun times are high alert. You know what I'm saying?

H: Huh

A: It's the same thing here for me in New York. I think that since this war began—it's been almost 10 years now—the city has felt very “high-alert.” For me the evidence of that is all these new buildings, condominiums, these new structures, and then this weird ‘cleaning’ of the city, reimagining and glossiness, and also the art people make here. There's something about it all that seems hyper—it just seems a little crazy.

H: Mmm hmm

A: And I'm wondering what you think of the transformations you see in cities like this. I'm not sure if it's the same happening in Ankara or Istanbul, but I see it happening here and in Tel Aviv: the evidence of war is different. [War] is not necessarily just about the demolition of buildings. The re-building of the city, the reimagining of the city, to me, is big evidence of a war going on.

H: Right, right.

A: Like in Jerusalem they are building a wall [to separate from Palestinian areas], but in Tel Aviv, they don't build walls, they build luxury towers that are just glass, very tall, in areas where everything was lower, human scaled. Those towers are glass walls, and have all the security features built-in, which is connected to all of the entertainment features, so the residents can feel entertained, secure, with their sea view. And I just wonder about that, you know? How war looks different in different places...

WE SHARE THE SAME SEA

H: I think that's a very good question. Recently we did a project between different cities. The first research we did was in Istanbul. Then we went to Marseilles, and then we went to Athens. We comparatively studied these cities. These are the port cities. Obviously New York and Tel Aviv are port cities. There are lots of port cities around the world. We looked at the port cities because we felt that what makes globalization possible is the actual movement of goods, of actual objects—the containers, the ships, all that. We always thought that globalization is an intangible thing, whereas it's a very tangible thing and it manifests itself in monumental structures.

In ports there are thousands and thousands of containers moving every day. So we wanted to look at the ports themselves and the development projects around the port. In Marseilles, a very old city, they were redeveloping the port as a tourist attraction. In Istanbul it's the same thing. Old ports become useless for global trade.

A: Yeah you can see the same thing in New York and Tel Aviv. They moved the active ports and re-did the old ports as tourist attractions.

H: Yeah, exactly. So in Istanbul they had to move the actual port outside of the city, and build a monumental structure there, and transform the old port into a place for tourists: shops, museums, whatever it is. Alongside this project they displaced all these people who used to work and live there. There is no remedy for those people, moved in the name of progress, yes? So they just erased the histories of the people who lived there for centuries. Another global phenomenon is the global tourism. So they built boutique hotels and chain restaurants and things like that. This is a global pattern.

Then we went to Athens where the port is huge, relative to the size of the country. Since Athens is the first sea port [when entering Europe], it has a great importance in the European context. Athens didn't benefit from this at all, so you didn't see any development. When we were there last May, the [European economic] crisis happened. It showed that this whole idea of globalization is about removing the goods from one place to another; about establishing something for global trade, industry and tourism, and for the people who are actually living there, it just erases their rights.

A: Well, it's about the movement of goods, and the stopping of people from moving—The border control, right?

H: Yes. This is the "Containment-Contained" project, actually.

A: This is so interesting to me, because it's something that I started thinking about when I first went to Tel Aviv in 2005. The next year I went was the war with Lebanon, 2006. You know you have all these ideas about what Israel is, and how homogenous it's cities are likely to be. I was surprised to find that 1 out of 5 Tel Avivis, at least according to

estimates, are not Jewish, not Arab, not Palestinian, just foreign people, there working. These people just get stuck there, usually, on their way to other points in Europe.

H: Yes, this happens in Greece

A: In Greece, and I'm sure in Istanbul as well.

H: Definitely

A: And these people are moving and they kind of get stopped there. So I started thinking about all these things that are about the controlling of movement of people. And about the Mediterranean itself, and how these countries are now all part of other regions. Like Turkey, which is in a weird position, wanting to be part of Europe, not wanting to be part of the Middle East, being in Central Asia, and kind of not. Israel is kind of similar, wanting to be part of Europe, but not able to be part of Middle East. You can see something similar in the positioning of North African countries as well.

I was thinking how there was a time when a lot of these places were a lot more connected, obviously. These new organizations and configurations of states and notions of "the family of nations" override the obvious connection of the sea, that we share the same sea, right?

H: Right

A: This was really evidenced in the aerial bombing of Beirut and southern Lebanon by Israel, by the Israeli Defense Forces during the Lebanon war in 2006. They were destroying oil reserves, they were destroying the airport, and it was resulting in all of these oil spills in the sea, constant fires and horrible pollution on the water. And it was so weird to be sitting on the beach in Tel Aviv, taking to people who are just enjoying the day on the Mediterranean—

H: Right, and then warheads are falling somewhere else at the same time...

A: Yeah, and then asking, so what's the point of all this? Because you know, Lebanon is just up the same sea, only a few miles away. I mean if you destroy the water there..., you guys share the same sea. It was funny that that wasn't even—

H: A question for them.

A: No, it wasn't a question for most of the people I was talking to. It was like what are you talking about? It's another world, a totally other place...

H: Like you don't even share the same air.

A: And it made me realize how much the sea itself has been overridden by these layers of, of statist discourse.

H: Wow, right.

A: That something for seafaring people, which is all the people of the Mediterranean, all people who go on the sea and have a history of connection, and share so much fundamentally in their cultures, and then it's like, who cares? Just bomb them into the next century, [laughing]

H: Yeah!

A: I like your idea of going to these port cities and looking at their development. In the new world under configuration, the goods are the only thing that can move really, and the sea is kind of a—I don't know—a conveyor belt!

H: Exactly

A: A conveyor belt for the movement of goods.

H: That's a good way to put it.

A: And the freezing of the people into their "states"—like the people of Tel Aviv who are frozen into their positions and could really give a fuck what happens in Beirut—that is what happens when these other histories are totally erased or overridden. Because we're busy turning everything into a nice conveyor belt that needs to be securitized.

H: Right, exactly.

A: It means that all of the people's relationships to the sea, as a way for people to communicate, to move, and whole cultures built around even the fish in the sea, are forgotten. It's just a conveyor belt, just fuck everything that's underneath, we're just moving stuff and not people.

H: Not taking care of the livelihood.

A: Right, not taking care of that livelihood, of that connection.

LUXURY IS BUILT ON THE MINING OF BONES

H: Yes. That's totally right. That's the whole idea of mining practices, like what's happens in the Gulf [of Mexico; the largest oil spill in US history]. We did a project in Pergamman [sp?], which is an archaeological site [in Turkey]. There is the Zeus temple in Berlin [which was excavated from the archaeological site in Turkey]. They took the whole Zeus temple from Pergamman in Turkey, to Germany at the beginning of the 19th century. They established a museum in Germany, and they established this temple as a kind of 'throne' for the new [German] state, claiming that Germany's origin is based in Ancient Greece. This is the importance of the archaeological object.

But this archaeological object, this valuable good, is uncovered from the earth, like [precious metals and minerals] in mining.

A: Like mining! It's so funny! We're really on the same wave length. I was actually getting ready to ask you what you think of the connection between archaeology and mining.

H: Mmm hmm. If you check online, "The View from Acropolis" we wrote about this, actually. We said that archaeology and mining are very similar processes: the destruction of earth to uncover the valuables hidden underneath. But, what is the difference? It's [a question of] legitimacy. Legitimacy in archaeology is based on the [discourse] of scientific research. Every act has to be registered and recorded in order to have a transparent scientific method. [On the other hand] mining usually happens without [those procedures of] legitimacy, because it happens behind closed doors. A mining company comes, makes deals with some officials, like 19th century archaeology, in a way. Archaeology changed, but mining has always stayed steady. What the German [archaeologists of the 19th century]

did in Turkey was similar to [mining today]. They came, got some quasi-permissions, took everything with them, and left whatever remained. What remained was a catastrophe, because [in digging] you fuck the land up.

Those archaeological objects were there for 2000 years. What justifies us uncovering that at this particular point? Who authorizes that? This is an ethical question, which turns into a political question. Who can authorize [this sort of digging] and what gives us the legitimacy for the destruction of the earth at a particular moment? But without the destruction of the earth life is not possible. With nature we always have to be in dialogue. When can we destroy the earth in order to survive? That is the question. But this question is always answered in terms of profit. When this question is posed [in a] capitalistic [mode], nature no longer matters. It is no longer a question of livelihood, but of maximizing profit. Maximizing profit means uncovering valuable objects from the earth [in one site] and then transferring [these objects] somewhere else.

A: Mmm hmm.

H: We were talking about the importance peripheral vision. Well the archaeologist already knows that. Peripheral vision is actually more important than center-focus in archaeological research, at certain points. The want to uncover the object, which is like gold...

A: Right

H: ...But they know that knowledge about the object has to do with context [in which the object is discovered]. So in order to understand the context, they have to uncover all the bits and remains around the so-called important object. They have to discover what makes that important object possible—how people lived at the time, what people did [to create it]. This is the important information. But [paradoxically] when you look for objects, you destroy context, you dig up the earth. You cannot reproduce the knowledge that is destroyed while you are uncovering the earth.

So in order to avoid permanent destruction today's archaeologists use non-destructive methods of observation, and uncover the layers in years and years of process. But in mining, they still just dig and dig, and what remains is the poisoned earth. For example, in the gold mine in Pergamman [the same site from which 19th century German archaeologist removed artifacts], they use a cyanide bleaching process, and cyanide is a poisonous material, which destroys the life of the whole thing. What happened in the Gulf of Mexico is the same thing: you destroy the whole Gulf, just to uncover something valuable. Like, who gave the authorization for this? The state. Who gave the authorization to the gold miners? The state. Now, who gives the authorization for the state to give its authorization? That becomes a very general ethical question that has to be discussed very intensely. The state thinks that it owns the land, or the water, but who can say that?

A: Yeah.

H: I mean, if you think in geological time, it makes it so funny. It takes 100 million years for something to form, and a state formed 100 years ago feels it has the power to authorize the complete destruction of that thing.

A: [Laughs] Yeah! I've been thinking about this for a while, but it really hit me a couple of weeks ago. I saw pictures of these remote areas in Afghanistan in the New York Times. They claim there's lithium underneath these desolate desert landscapes.

H: I know, I saw that. It's crazy, unbelievable.

A: Like all of a sudden the US government “discovers” lithium in the Afghan desert. The British missed it? the Soviets missed it?

H&A: [laughing] Yeah right! Nobody noticed!

H: Yeah, we are fighting there and suddenly we see, wow! There's gold too? That's good!

A: The pictures in the New York Times are very similar to your pictures of the desert landscapes. Those pictures in the New York Times, like yours, were there to make us to imagine what might be underneath. Except the US government has plans for those sites. I guess now they'll stay [in Afghanistan] for a hundred more years, to show people there how to tear up the earth, and search for valuables underneath.

Now what's interesting to me is that the major mineral here is not gold, which has been established as valuable for hundreds of years. What we're dealing with now is lithium, which is the stuff that powers our digital electronics, computers, mobile phones, and all that stuff. These are all new things, which didn't seriously exist ten, fifteen years ago.

H: That's true. Unbelievable, right?

A: All of a sudden, it's the future. You marveled at how the timing of the state, which only existed for 100 or 200 years could authorize the destruction of something that's been around for hundreds of millions of years. But what about the speed of technology? So they might tear up all of Afghanistan for lithium, which didn't really mean anything a decade or two ago.

H: Right

A: And who knows what the life span of these technologies are? Think about coltan, the stuff in cell phones and video gaming systems. That transformed a whole ecosystem, and the economic system of places like Mozambique and Uganda, but who even knows how stable the value of these things are going to be over time?

H: It's a curse!

A: [laughs] I know. My heart seized when I saw those pictured of the Afghan desert.

H: It's like the countries that have oil: they suffer. I'm not religious, but I feel this poetic moment: if you harm the earth, it will come back to you.

A: I feel you. I feel a lot of horror when I think of what oil is. I mean, what are we burning? Oil is an organic material. It is the remains of another catastrophe. It is the remains of old lifeforms, of the flora and fauna of a particular time in the earth's history...

H: Erased

A: Completely eradicated.

H: Amazing

A: We are burning the remains of other animals. Luxury is built on bones.