

**PHILLIPS**  
de PURY & COMPANY

AUCTIONS EXHIBITIONS PRIVATE SALES PRIVATE COLLECTIONS

## FILM

AUCTION 24 JUNE 2010 NEW YORK

# KUTLUG ATAMAN TURKISH DELIGHTS

INTERVIEW KAREN WRIGHT | PHOTOGRAPHS SHANE DEEGAN

[Back to Articles](#)



Kutlug Ataman, the video and film-maker artist, was born in Istanbul in 1961. In 2004 he won the top award at the Carnegie Open and was shortlisted for the Turner Prize. By then, Ataman's work was well established on the international contemporary circuit, having been shown in the 1999 Venice Biennale and the 2002 Documenta. His work can currently be seen in Rome in MAXXI, the new museum designed by Zaha Hadid, as part of its opening installation. Kutlug now lives between London and Istanbul.

**Karen Wright** Let's start with your recent filmwork series called *Mesopotamian Dramaturgies* (2009). Can you just tell me about the title?

**Kutlug Ataman** [Laughs] 'Mesopotamia' means 'in between the two rivers', I think! It is originally the place between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. I wanted to give the indication that I am moving away from working on how we construct our individual identities, as I did with *Küba* (2004) and *Paradise* (2006), into how we construct our communal identities. Now I am moving to how we construct our notions of geography and history. As an artist I think I have talked enough about how we make ourselves and how we make our communities; now I'm also curious about geography and history, about how we make those. In order to give that indication in the title, I decided to use this geographical reference. Of course, what you call the cradle of civilization was not strictly in between these two rivers: it was around that river all the way to the Nile Delta and also the Ganges in India. Mesopotamia was in the center, if you like, with the Assyrians –

**KW** Ancient cultures?

**KA** Yes, the ones we know. I'm sure there were other ones, but we base our identity on these ones. This is where dramaturgy – the art of writing narratives and staging theatre – comes in. These [old] dramaturgies continue today. How? For example, I'm very sensitive to it living in Turkey, being a product of that society. You have one society that comes from a completely different sediment, and yet you have a political power which is an ideology that wants to be something else. Take the Turkish revolution in the 1920s, when, overnight, [Kemal Atatürk's] government declared, 'You are not going to wear a fez, you are going to wear a western-style hat. You are not going to use Arabic letters, you are going to use Roman letters. The way you greet each other, the time, the dates, the calendar – everything will change overnight, with a revolution.' There is a history of change here: it took 250 years to start the [modernization] process, but then the brutal moment, the implementation of the new law, came. People who opposed it were imprisoned. My practice at the moment is about pointing to these limitations, to these prescriptions that we all live in, because I am interested in narrative; how we create these narratives, for each other, how we play out these narratives and how we prescribe these for each other, in society, which is ideology.

**KW** *Paradise* was your first step in the US, wasn't it?

**KA** Yes. After *Küba*, everyone was saying, 'Oh, you gave a voice to a community that would not have a voice otherwise, the poor Kurds, the poor Kurds.' Politically, I agree with them, but my work is not this one-liner. Just because I talk about how we construct identity, doesn't mean that I am an artist that defined by identity politics. All this politically correct stuff is just so blunt, so limiting. So I went and did *Paradise* in a very wealthy community in southern California to provoke [chuckles], to show them that *Paradise* functions exactly the same way as *Küba*. It is not about giving a voice to the poor – these are very rich people and I give them a voice – but about how we all construct our identities. It's all about construction. We need narrative as human beings, otherwise what you call reality becomes very raw and it becomes scary; it becomes incomprehensible, pornographic. History and geography are subjective notions. We are sure of our boundaries. But other people, other countries, might not be: for them, these borders don't really exist or make sense because their narratives

are completely different.

**KW** So you're basically saying what you said in *Küba*, which is 'We are some of many stories'?

**KA** Yes. I think that a common thing that connects all my works together is the fact that I'm always dealing with narrative, I'm always dealing with constructing narrative – that is what my work is about.

**KW** You do come from a place of great verbal history.

**KA** It is true, but also I'm trained as a film-maker and I'm constantly manipulating stories. I think for me it all started as a game. It was not very intellectual in the beginning. I was exposed to film crews as a very little boy, my parent's home was used as a film set – it really started from that moment. What I remember is always being behind the scenes to see how everything was made; I think this relates today to my position as an artist. I never believed in the illusion that was being created because I knew how it was made. It's like growing up in a kitchen: you know where taste comes and how it is created, so you are interested in making it or analyzing it. I lost my excitement about making movies because I didn't believe in them. I had a more critical and analytical position, which is why I think I turned out to be an artist.

**KW** That's a really interesting distinction, about being carried away by film-making.

**KA** No, I am not like that. I know that there are a lot of artists who are trained as artists and they are fascinated by films and they use film as an ingredient. Steve McQueen, in my view, is a good film-maker, as he demonstrated with *Hunger*. Also, even though I'm not so great a fan of his art, that film-maker... what's his name?

**KW** Douglas Gordon?

**KA** No, not Douglas Gordon. I like his work. Julian Schnabel. I think he's a wonderful film-maker. But they come from a different angle. They all start from their love of the film. I am not like that. I should have been trained as an artist, I guess, but I was trained as a film-maker and I grew out of it. I said, 'This is just formulaic, I do the same thing over and over. It's a métier.' It was not intellectual enough for me. I had to be able to analyze why the image is moving, I had to be talking about time, creating time, creating space with moving image – and it's not self-reflexive. There are very few Hollywood films that are self-reflexive, that analyze themselves. A good example would be Martin Scorsese's *The King of Comedy* [1982]. I think art, theoretically and in terms of experimentation, was attractive, and that is why I have ended up there. There is still a side of me that misses film: I still write screenplays and I make films once in a while, but they turn out to be festival films, not commercial films. I'm completely happy with that. It's like being a cook – you don't necessarily have to work professionally in a restaurant to be a cook.

**KW** You start off in your earlier films with very much coming from your own experiences growing up. For instance, you were a collector of orchids when you were young, so it seems natural that you did *The 4 Seasons of Veronica Read* [2002], about a collector of amaryllis, and *Stefan's Room* [2004], about the man who keeps butterflies in his room. Did it reflect your isolation growing up in Istanbul?

**KA** I ran out of exotic friends! I was talking about my own experience and my own life earlier on in my artworks. I found a way of talking about myself through these characters. Funnily enough, the more I did those pieces, the more I forgot about them. It was almost like therapeutic – I hate this very grumpy big therapy! Post-*Küba*, I have said goodbye to all that by doing this belly-dance piece – *Turkish Delight* [2007]. This is really the end of the first phase of my preoccupation, but it wasn't seen that way. It was seen as a joke by people who are used to kind of one-liners. In the Noughties, art became so shallow – it was about art as a system, not just artists. Critics, curators and museums – they all became shallow during the first decade of this century.

I made fun of this whole situation. I made *Turkish Delight* because I felt certain that everyone would see the joke. Strangely, the joke was seen in places like Turkey, places that were the victim of this kind of shallowness. But in places like London, it was taken as, 'Oh, this artist does belly dancing! Ha, ha!' They didn't get it – which is fine, but it also proves my point, because I was making fun just of that. It was a comment on how the market forces were influencing and directing art practice, and how a lot of artists were falling into that trap. A lot of very good artists who started out doing extremely interesting work – when I first came to London, there were so many interesting artists about. Where are they now? Completely disappeared. There's nothing that you can call young British art. A lot of people in the mid-1990s were doing a lot of video and film, they were doing great works. Their early works are still valid today, and but their produce since then is going to be thrown in the trash. It will never come back. It's an embarrassment. And it's not their fault alone. It is also the fault of the system, the gallery system.

Right, I said: I'm going to make two different pieces that are about my state of mind and how I am suffering. In the end, it's always about me! [Laughs] So the first work about my own alienation was called *Circle of Friends* (2007). It's one piece, seven very small screens, and each one is the same man who practices auto-fellatio. It is very pornographic, if you like, but cut and edited in such a way that it's like a ballet. The other piece was *Turkish Delight*, which is an act of defiance and protest. I didn't shave and I put on weight on purpose. In six months I gained 18kg, which took me a very, very long time to lose. Do you remember I was eating all that pasta? [Laughs] With butter.

**KW** Pasta! It was delicious?

**KA** Yes, but it was so difficult to let go. Even now, I'm addicted. I realized these things – chocolate, pasta – are addictions. I never had these addictions before.

I kind of made myself gain this image that doesn't really belong to me, then I went and got this red and gold – you know, seduction colors! – belly-dancing outfit! Then I dressed up with long hair, eyelashes and makeup, and did Turkish belly-dancing, which is, of course, Turkish delight. The whole culture is kind of reduced to that. I cannot dance. I was a clown, but I was talking about the market forces that make fools of us. After this, I thought, now I have to go in a completely different direction.

**KW** So where did you go next?

**KA** I see my practice like mining; artists are like miners. We have these picks and we go in these tunnels in complete darkness to try to find diamond, coal or whatever. Sometimes there are accidents and sometimes you die; sometimes, like in real life, you have a bad show or you get arrested. The museum director hates you and wants to kill you and then you don't practice for five years because you criticized them or their show. But at the end, you are still taking risks with the pick and you are digging and digging and digging and it is not necessarily for the public, is it? You are there alone. That operation has to be financed. Once in a while, when you find the gold mine. But if the search itself doesn't happen, then you will never get the gold. The galleries and the people who are interested in this popular art have to realize that.

**KW** Your work is so about observation. I was just thinking about Andy Warhol's films. Are they important to you?

**KA** I just watched Andy Warhol's *Screen Tests*. I like them because I thought I am going to fast-forward, but [I didn't. The films] become very meditative because they keep changing. Some of [the participants] are acting, even though they were told to stay still. It's not professional acting, rather, it is the real acting that we all do in real life – this moment the camera is pointed at you and you can't help yourself acting, even if you act in a blasé manner. You begin thinking about acting and it becomes such a simple idea. What I really like about these Warhol pieces is that they remind me that you don't conceive of something as an artist. You only discover it – something else tells you to do them. It's like having that miner's pick and experimenting: there's either some gem in there or not. Sometimes, a good artist has a nose maybe, like a good miner... I don't know in advance what I am doing. For me, my films are almost like reports that I make from my research, from my mining, and I make turns. I don't have any kind of important work – all my works I can talk about at great length because they are, for me, equally important. I don't think *Circle of Friends* is less important than *Küba*. Yes, the world perceives it differently for so many other reasons – political, commercial consideration.

**KW** Do you think where the works are shown is important?

**KA** Yes. You have people from all over the world rushing through MoMA just because they have so many other things to see. When I did my show there it was like a shopping mall. You can imagine with my work – which requires eight hours, four hours, it requires concentration, sitting and reading subtitles! No way! So I showed my animation pieces and *99 Names* (2002) – easily consumable and perceivable pieces. Those places are scary. There has got to be another way of exhibiting. I completely agree with you, because I think we are going through this whole thing again, the division between popular and – I don't want to call it 'high art', I want to call it 'experimental art'. The popular versus experimental. It's like Tate, Guggenheim, MoMA: they are like Hollywood for art. Then you have little museums, little venues, Kunsthallen and publicly funded little places where you can actually go and see something which really opens up new horizons. Which is what art, living art, has to do. It has to completely and constantly open up new doors to different ways of perceiving. This quality of experience is going to become more and more of a problem, I think.

**KW** Is that the difference between art-house cinema and mainstream?

**KA** We all had high hopes about cinema independent of the studio system. Unfortunately, it imitated this studio system and it became the studio system. There is no such thing as independent cinema.

So the question is: is the same force going to take over in the art world? If so, then you have absolutely no place where you can be an artist. Maybe we are like the dying remnant of an old system. I don't know. Unfortunately, this whole liberal system, which is fine and dandy in many ways, at least theoretically, is in practice fascistic. Look, for example, at public money. What is public money? Public money originally was created – the concept, the notion of public money – to make art; creation cannot exist in the commercial realm. This is the scary thing. Art is becoming more and more shallow; this high art or experimentation is becoming now limited to the bedrooms or the living rooms of great collectors. So intellectual production becomes an exclusive property that is hidden inside big fortresses. And you get so paranoid: all my political pieces are going to be in five people's hands and they are never going to be seen! That is scary. I want my pieces to be in museums.

*Mesopotamian Dramaturgies* is actually two cycles. The first cycle has eight components, and the second cycle I have not started yet. I haven't created it yet. Frame is all composed of found footage. The whole show is under the gaze of the Turkish generals. They are like headmasters. Attitudes towards the generals is different in each different work. They are themselves framed by the photographer – it's found footage so it's really evidential, I didn't do it that way. The most powerful man is centered in such a way that everybody else's head is cut off. So it is the logic of the hierarchy and the power that is predominant in this photography, and not the logic of the photography as we would have seen in western –

**KW** Bad photography! [Laughs]

**KA** [Laughs] Yes, in bad photography. Or in western photography. If you are taking the picture of the president you would still frame it from the logic of the frame that comes from the Renaissance, right? Whereas this time it is in clear evidence that the Renaissance didn't occur in Mesopotamia – even in today's Turkey, where they themselves are trying to impose this discipline and system. So under their careful gaze, I have this tower that was inspired by Trajan's

Column in Rome. I made this anti-tower and I compiled all these old TV screens on top of each other, and I made a tower of all these silenced faces. So it's a monument to non-talking faces from Anatolia, all the peoples who are not allowed to talk there.

**KW** So there's a silent video.

**KA** Yes, it's a silent video. It moves, obviously, it's not still photos, but people don't talk because they're not allowed to talk and so, in a way, they do not exist. But it's so powerful in their silence that it actually becomes a monument. I did this piece as part of *Mesopotamian Dramaturgies* called *Column* and then I did *Dome* [both 2009]. The dome was a ceiling and instead of putting up all these angels, I put these teenaged Turkish boys attached to construction machines, so you hear these machines, the boys shouting as they fly in their fake Dolce & Gabbana clothes, being very sexy. They're being really naughty and there's a bed on the floor. It's almost like a sexual thing. These construction machines are very prominent in Turkey, which is modernizing – this modernizing energy and ideology, obviously what the generals are imposing. And modernity cuts through these ancient cultures with no other considerations than its own.

Nearby is the *Pursuit of Happiness* [2009], which is a very talkative piece completely the opposite of the silent *Column*, in which I hear this woman who is trying to find the perfect husband and love for herself. Again, it's a very sexual piece; she's talking about her different husbands, and why she left each one; she's still searching. It is something so completely unexpected from a woman who lives in a village in eastern Turkey, because in the perception of the Europeans, she should be veiled, beaten up and abused. But she's not. It's funny. This is about modernity also, this freed woman. Freeing women was one of the ideals of the Turkish Republic. You know, we are very proud that –

**KW** She got rid of her veil?

**KA** Got rid of her veil. We are very proud that she's in public space and when you are in public space then she talks about these things that you are also against it, very much, because it is almost pornographic. Then in a separate room I'm showing this fake film, which ate up most of my fabrication budget. It's a feature-length film, but I show it in the form of installation in museums. I made up this fake story of a Turkish village in the 1950s attempting to go to the moon in a minaret. A completely unbelievable story. By attaching helium balloons! So, I went there, I created this fake village, I got all these people, photographed them, Photoshopped the photos, made them old, made this fake evidence and I pretended I found these photos. I got this fake narrator, to tell the story. But I also got some very real, famous Turkish intellectuals, scientists, historians and politicians and I told them what I am doing. I was completely honest, but I said, 'Had this story been true, taken it as true, how would you have processed this, and talked about it from the perspective of your discipline? How would you read it? What would be your reading from your discipline?' So they offered me their readings, the subtext you know, what the story really signifies in the history of Turkey. I intercut that with my photographic evidences. I called it *Journey to the Moon* [2009]. It's a feature-length documentary; everyone who watches it, believes it.

**KW** So it's not a documentary?

**KA** No, and it's really not mockumentary, either, because there is mockumentary. And then I have another room where I deal with language. I wrote the entire complete works of William Shakespeare on film. Handwritten. It took a little less than three years. The whole folio: all the histories, comedies, tragedies. In English. And one-to-one copying.

**KW** Unbelievable.

**KA** Yes. I sometimes wrote five or six hours a day, but when I was traveling, my assistant continued doing it. It deformed my finger! So, this, again, is also kind of a joke, but at the same time it also has a basis. Shakespeare is very important in western culture, because the Elizabethan values remain values in the modern world. And our notions of morality, justice, ethics – they were concentrated in Shakespeare. It is a big revolution, compared to the Middle Ages. It's like the Renaissance. I wanted to put it in my work, all, and yet when you project it, it's completely meaningless. It's all wiggly, because it's going at 24 frames per second, so it becomes like a painting. On the big screen, it lasts only four minutes, sadly.

**KW** Three years for four minutes!

[Back to Articles](#)