Ömür Harmanşah

Associate Professor of Art History: University of Illinois at Chicago

“The Materiality of ISIS”

On February 26th, 2015, ISIS posted a (now iconic) video on YouTube, showing the deliberate destruction of ancient sculpture in the Mosul Museum and at the archaeological site of Nineveh in Iraqi Kurdistan. Many users of social media had a visceral reaction to the video and quickly shared it both to inform others of ISIS’s barbaric acts and to declare their own cosmopolitan, humanitarian, civilized condemnation of these uncivilized acts against antiquities. This paper will discuss the Islamic State’s destruction of archaeological sites and museum antiquities from the perspective of political ecology and new materialism. Enacted as part of their scorched earth policy and place-based violence that aim to annihilate the local sense of belonging among local communities, Islamic State’s destructions are choreographed as mediatic spectacles of violence aimed at objects and sites of heritage. These take the form of reenactments of historical instances of idol breaking that are communicated to us through ISIS’s own powerful image-making apparatus, utilizing global technologies of visualization and communication.

Ömür Harmanşah is Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Illinois at Chicago's School of Art and Art History. He is an archaeologist and architectural historian specializing in the Ancient Near East. His work focuses on cities, the production of architectural space, critical studies of place and landscape, and image-making practices in the urban and rural environments. He is the author of two monographs, Cities and the Shaping of Memory in the Ancient Near East (Cambridge 2013) and Place Memory and Healing: An Archaeology of Anatolian Rock Monuments (Routledge 2015). His more recent work and teaching centers on the intersection between political ecology, new materialism, and the politics of heritage and archaeological practice in the Middle East. Since 2010, he has been directing the Yalburt Yaylası Archaeological Landscape Project in west central Turkey, a regional survey project addressing questions of Hittite imperialism and borderlands.