

# WHAT IS IT THAT YOU ARE WORRIED ABOUT?

Text by Sohrab Mohebbi

*Banu Cennetoğlu* (monograph), pp. 2-5

SculptureCenter

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Banu Cennetoğlu's moving-image work *1 January 1970–21 March 2018 • H O W B E I T • Guilty feet have got no rhythm • Keçiboynuzu • AS IS • MurMur • I measure every grief I meet • Taq u Raq • A piercing Comfort it affords • Stitch • Made in Fall • Yes. But. We had a golden heart. • One day soon I'm gonna tell the moon about the crying game* presents the totality of the artist's visual archive from June 10, 2006, to March 21, 2018.<sup>1</sup> The time span of the project is bookended by, at one end, Cennetoğlu's engagement with *The List* (see pages 6–10 of the current volume) and the conception of Cennetoğlu's daughter, and, at the other, the 2018 Nowruz (the Persian New Year, celebrating the vernal equinox), the artist's self-imposed production deadline for the work's premiere at Chisenhale Gallery, London.

Chronologically arranged, *1 January 1970–21 March 2018* comprises 128 hours and 22 minutes of still images and videos sourced from various devices— including Cennetoğlu's mobile phones, computers, cameras, and external hard drives—in an unedited stream of content. Cennetoğlu herself refers to the work as an “introspective” that brings together scattered, fleeting moments of a life lived, from the birth of her daughter to episodes of political upheaval and protest; documentation of her artistic practice; images sent to her by colleagues, friends, and family for various reasons and with different intentions; and the ordinary incidents of everyday life. She did not edit out any image, nor does she single out one title among thirteen, not unlike the Brazilian novelist Clarice Lispector in her *The Hour of the Star* (1977).

Most retrospectives tend to contextualize bodies of work through curatorial interventions that take the form of wall texts, critical ephemera, and archival material. Cennetoğlu's, however, takes us through the artist's oeuvre through the digital remnants of her activities. *Taq u Raq* shows the research and productions phases, the installation process, the final exhibition, the press walkthrough, the opening, the dinner, the

after-party, and the artist's plane ride back home. Curators, museum directors, other artists, and critics make their appearance. In this visual diary, we watch the artist's daughter grow up, we watch her friends and family, we watch her working, we watch her living. The work presents the social history of Cennetoğlu's practice, offering a daringly unedited portrait of the artist.

Not all the art in Cennetoğlu's introspective/retrospective is on view at the same time. Here the artist uses time as an exhibition device. It is unlikely that a visitor will ever be able to watch *Keçiboynuzu* in its entirety, or even see all the "works" featured: depending on when you walk in, you might see the preparation of one of the iterations of the *Library of Spirits*; a production of *29.06.2012*, 2012; footage of the artist as she collects newspapers in both parts of Cyprus; the installation of her 2011 exhibition at the Kunsthalle Basel; or *The List* presented in Berlin, Istanbul, Bonn, or Budapest.

In a typical retrospective, we see works that an artist has made but remain ignorant of their place in her life; here, a digital accumulation gives us a glimpse. There are recurring characters—the artist, her daughter Can, other family members, close friends—and all along we watch the artist engaging with *The List*, a growing document that traces information related to the deaths of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants within or on the borders of Europe. When Cennetoğlu facilitated the project's first presentation in Amsterdam in 2007, it contained 7,128 names; by September 2018, the total was 35,597. Throughout the film, we see Cennetoğlu working on the project for its presentation in a range of cities and together with different collaborators.

Cennetoğlu embarked on *I measure every grief I meet* as she was pondering what it would mean to present a list of the dead. Because she was processing her own mother's death at the time, as Kaelen Wilson-Goldie observes she "began working on the introspective from a place of grief and uncertainty."<sup>2</sup> Though she was torn "between the possibilities of mourning for someone so close to you and mourning for a community you don't know," she decided to focus on her own life as it transpired alongside the expanding List.<sup>3</sup> One of the most poignant passages of the work, in fact, shows the passing of the artist's mother interspersed with images of the artist's participation in documenta 14. The elderly woman lies on a hospital bed as her health deteriorates, artists interact animatedly in Kassel, Can dances for the camera, and then we're back at the hospital. Such dispositions run throughout the work, as it moves from UAE labor camps to the glamour of Art Dubai, from children playing to a panel discussion, from a protest to an opening reception, from austere conceptualism to a beachfront sunset, from a funeral to a holiday. The abrupt juxtapositions, simultaneously ironic and sentimental, show a life, with all of its entanglements and contradictions, drifting along unceremoniously.

Images are insufficient. As noted on page after page of image theory, they are selective, partial, deceptive, open to endless interpretation and contextualization, never able to convey the whole picture. *Stitch* invites us to reflect on our own image archive at a time when we over-document our lives and store them in the Cloud or on hard drives and social media. The culture of oversharing has made us spectators of each other's realities as we scroll through grams, tweets, and "stories," swiping left and right, liking, ignoring. Though *A piercing Comfort it affords* remarks on the trend, Cennetoğlu's images are awkwardly unselective. Unlike the content of social media, here the one iconic image encapsulating an event is replaced with images from every possible angle, with multiple exposures and without hierarchy, embarrassing and vain, at times boring, at others action-packed. All the photos that you delete to make room for more are retained. Downloading our photos when the phone reaches its storage capacity, we see a few months of our life sweeping by on the screen: things we did, places we've been, people and animals we've met, kept, lost, stopped seeing, or left. Platforms and apps, from Facebook to iPhoto, every now and then share with us unsolicited "memories" from our digital stockpile. There is a sense of mourning in going through images of the past, which is, after all, lost time even when it takes the form of a pop-up notification generated by an algorithm. The voyeuristic pleasure of watching images of someone else's life, in this case the artist's, mirrors the perverse melancholy of revisiting one's own. It is amusing to observe the absurd formalism of what is said to be authentic and idiosyncratic in each individual.

In addition to the monumental moving-image piece, the current exhibition includes *What is it that you are worried about?*, which emerged from a 2014 collaboration between Cennetoğlu and artist Yasemin Özcan. As visitors enter the SculptureCenter gallery, they are greeted with the titular words written on a mirror above head height, preparing them for browsing the installation of 142 volumes, each of which gathers together all the newspapers published on a single day in a particular place: Germany (70 volumes, 8/11/2015), the United Kingdom (46 volumes, 9/4/2014), 20 Arabic-speaking countries (10 volumes, 11/2/2011), Turkey (8 volumes, 8/20/2010), Switzerland (5 volumes, 1/14/2011), and Cyprus (3 volumes, 6/29/2012). In their physicality, the newspapers testify to the waning of the print medium in response to the proliferation of online sources. In their numbers, they point to population differences, but more importantly to sociopolitical conditions. At a time when the press is under incessant attack and discrediting by rising authoritarianism worldwide, Cennetoğlu's compilation pays homage to a fundamental anchor of democracy while exposing the differential between various countries' dissemination and mediation of information. In the case of Turkey, where the artist resides, many of the newspapers she includes in the work—particularly the pro-Kurdish papers—are no longer in print due to censorship or financial challenges. As fake news becomes a refrain of those in power who are threatened by investigative journalism, one wonders how safe Western democracies are from autocratic attacks on the press, and how well the latter can weather these hostile tides.

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Scanning Cennetoğlu's newspapers, we can observe the distinctive packaging and distribution of information by various (allowable) voices and regions of a country. While diversity of editorial positions reflects a country's tolerance of multiplicity and dissent, the weight of the paper, the print quality, and the nature of the advertisements speak to the finances of the publisher and the readers. Yet, observations of papers' structural idiosyncrasies aside, here again there is a sense of ingloriously lost time. Nothing major happens, but hundreds of minor events are documented on page after page. This collection of outdated newspapers shows the banality of history in the making.

*OffDuty* stems from the artist's contribution to documenta I4 in Kassel, Germany, in 2017, in which she replaced the words "Museum Fridericianum" on the building's frieze with "BEINGSAFEISSCARY," a phrase she took from graffiti she had seen on the façade of the Polytechnico in Athens across from a student-organized refugee help center. For the documenta project, she appropriated the nine gold-painted aluminum letters from the museum's façade that could be reused in the phrase, and had six more letters cast in brass in the same style. At the conclusion of documenta, the "original" letters were returned to the Fridericianum façade, and the six new casts became *OffDuty*.

*BEINGSAFEISSCARY* calls out the incapacity of the conforming systems of regulation, categorization, classification, and normalization to capture and contain the human condition, a concern that runs throughout Cennetoğlu's oeuvre. The List can never contain the dead; the 128 hours of *Yes. But. We had a golden heart* are only fragmentary traces of a life exposed to the camera, and not even all the newspapers of a country can capture one day in its history. The weight of the accumulation indicates the burden of the lack, and words and images are the remains of a life off duty that the artist calls to task.

## Notes

1 To respect the contents of the title, I've varied its abbreviation in this text. An untitled Emily Dickinson poem (no. 561) is the source of I measure every grief I meet and A piercing Comfort it affords. See *The Essential Emily Dickinson*, introduction and selection by Joyce Carol Oates (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 40.

2 Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "Today in History: Kaelen Wilson-Goldie on the Art of Banu Cennetoğlu," *Artforum* 57, no. 5 (January 2019), <https://www.artforum.com/print/201901/kaelen-wilson-goldie-on-the-art-of-banu-cenneto-glu-78003>.

3 Ibid.