

NOW UNREELING, AN ISTANBUL ARTIST'S TUMULTUOUS DECADE

Catching up with Banu Cennetoğlu in her first U.S. show, at SculptureCenter.

She calls it 'a collective history.'

Review by Siddhartha Mitter

The New York Times, Section C, p. 13

18 January 2019

Consider all the visual material on your devices, the photographs and videos on your phone and hard drive. Family pictures, cats, random visual notes. Images that friends sent and that you never deleted.

Imagine compiling them into a single reel. What story would it tell? What would it exaggerate or distort? What would it miss? And if you stretched the exercise to cover a long period — say, 12 years — what insight might emerge out of the noise?

That's what Banu Cennetoğlu decided to find out.

"The intention was going a little bit inward," said the Istanbul based artist, who turned to this project after a draining period of artistic and emotional labor. "But I realized in doing it that it's a collective history."

Ms. Cennetoğlu's montage of her own video and stills from 2006 to 2018, unedited, is the centerpiece of her new exhibition at SculptureCenter in Queens. It is mammoth: It runs for 128 hours, and Ms. Cennetoğlu expects she is the only person who will ever see it in full. There are comfortable, low-slung chairs in the gallery for those who wish to try.

This is Ms. Cennetoğlu's first solo show in this country. A onetime fashion photographer who lived in New York in the late 1990s, she gave up commercial work, studied at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam and then returned to Istanbul, where she opened an art space called *BAS*. Now 48, she has shown widely in Europe, including at Documenta 14.

Her work is concerned with documentation and its limits, how archives convey and scramble meaning. She sometimes collects, for instance, every newspaper in a country on a given date. All six iterations of this project — from the Turkish dailies of August 28, 2010, to the German newspapers of August 11, 2015 — are in SculptureCenter show, each set compiled alphabetically in black-bound volumes that visitors can handle.

Representing Turkey in the 2009 Venice Biennale, Ms. Cennetoğlu showed 500 photographs in the form of a printed catalog; visitors made selections on an order form and downloaded them from a website. For Documenta, she rendered the full text of the posthumously published diary of Gurbetelli Ersoz, a Kurdish journalist-turned-guerrilla killed in 1997, on 145 slabs of lithographic limestone, as if ready to print. One ongoing project involves gathering home-distilled brandies in the Balkans and serving them in an open bar.

“I care about coherence; it comforts me,” said Ms. Cennetoğlu, whose manner is warm and serious. “I also care about the limit between stubbornness, insistence, and obsession. And within that, coherence is important. I don’t know if it’s possible, but trying is interesting.”

She has long been entangled with one particular archive. Since 1993, a Dutch nonprofit, United for Intercultural Action, has maintained a list — with names, whenever possible — of migrants and refugees who died attempting to enter Europe, or while in detention there or awaiting asylum. The List, as it’s known, is inherently incomplete, yet every line in the database contains its own tragedy, with one field to describe the circumstances of death. At last update, eight months ago, it had reached 34,361 documented deaths.

Ms. Cennetoğlu has invested herself in taking the List beyond activist circles. She enlarges it — preserving the spreadsheet format in its actuarial sobriety — and displays it in various cities, working with local authorities. The List has blanketed Amsterdam (2007) and appeared on the Metro in Sofia, Bulgaria (2013). It went up in West Hollywood in 2017. Last year it showed in Liverpool, where it was repeatedly vandalized.

In November 2017, the entire List appeared as a newspaper supplement in Der Tagesspiegel, the Berlin daily. It was a moment of high visibility for the refugee cause, but for the artist, it was a kind of breaking point. While preparing the German version of the file for publication, poring over the roster of deceased strangers, she had also attended to her own mother’s illness, hospitalization and death. “I was grieving through this document,” she said. “For my mother, and for all these people in the last 10 years.”

SYLVIA KOUVALI

The atmosphere in Turkey only added to the stress. Since a failed coup in 2016, the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has intensified its policing of media and cultural life. Ms. Cennetoğlu said that many of her friends in Istanbul progressive circles have been detained amid the clampdown. “The possibility that it could happen at any moment is a strange way of living,” she said. “The scary thing is self-censorship. It shapes your thinking, your behavior, and in the long run it may be irreversible.”

When the Berlin newspaper published the List, it ran a cover photo of a darkskinned man apparently drowning. The sensationalism, at odds with the project’s deliberate austerity, rattled Ms. Cennetoğlu. An exhaustion took hold, a sense that her art, private life and political commitments had fused into something intractable, unhealthy. “It felt like a stone,” she said. “All this turbulence and amalgam. I said, ‘Maybe I need to stop and look at this.’”

The marathon compilation now on view results from this introspective turn. Revealing 12 years of visual intimacies is an unusual method of self-care “Not every artist could claim that space, and Banu can,” said Sohrab Mohebbi, who became curator of SculptureCenter last year. “Because a lot of her work has involved this promise of coherence, and through it, this radical incoherence.”

A few days before the show opened, Ms. Cennetoğlu watched a long video segment at the center. She explained that it was shot from a car — in Cyprus, it turned out. Once the sound was on, she said, visitors would hear her conversation with a Cypriot friend.

“It’s a nerdy pleasure,” she said. “I could do a film with only road trips.”

Items jumped around — the List on a kiosk in some European city, a blurry shot of a child (Ms. Cennetoğlu’s daughter) under party lights. Ordered by file creation date, the material followed its own digital logic.

Depending on when they walk in, viewers might catch vignettes from the birth of her child; meetings, protests or travels; even, she warned, a news conference in Turkish that goes on for two hours. Along the way life happens: Ms. Cennetoğlu divorces, meets someone new. Everyone gets older.

The life is hers; the alchemy is the mix of intention and accident. “You follow the decade through Banu, but it’s a vehicle to reflect on it on your own terms,” Mr. Mohebbi said.

Ms. Cennetoğlu said she felt vulnerable making the work, but no longer.

SYLVIA KOUVALI

“Now I feel very detached,” she said. “I made some space.”

Correction: Jan. 17, 2019

A previous version of this article referred incorrectly to the first time The List, a tally of migrants who died trying to reach Europe, appeared in a newspaper. It first appeared in collaboration with the Ist Athens Biennale and Ta Nea newspaper in 2007, not in Der Tagesspiegel in 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/17/arts/design/turkey-art-banu-cennetoglu-sculpture-centure.html>