

BANU CENNETOĞLU INTERVIEWED BY ALEXANDER MASSOURAS

Banu Cennetoğlu interviewed by Alexander Massouras
Art Monthly, Issue 418
July-August 2018

Alexander Massouras: *Your new work is an epic 128 hours and 22 minutes long with 13 titles. It comprises all the stills, video documents and files, personal and professional, that you have collected and captured and not deleted over a ten-year period, presented in chronological order by date created.*

Banu Cennetoğlu: Yes, everything over a period of 12 years – to be precise, 10 June 2006 to 21 March 2018 – at least everything digitised on electronic devices, so there is no analogue material. Some of the images were analogue some time ago, but they were scanned in 2006 for another purpose. I made quite a large work for the pavilion of Turkey at the Venice Biennale in 2007, *Catalog* – almost a polite version of this work – which was a 1,000-page catalogue of images from my archive, but very controlled and edited. Basically it was mimicking a mail-order catalogue, but it was performative physically – it was a heavy catalogue of soft paper, like a department store catalogue, dealing with the politics of memory and collections, and the way they get disseminated.

AM: *This new work sounds like a departure to the extent that it is highly personal.*

BC: This is the first time that I have done such a work, which comes directly with no filtration or editing. Since deciding to do it I of course keep thinking: why am I doing it? There was this very strong need to do this.

AM: *When did you feel this need?*

BC: I can only try to describe: in autumn last year, which was a difficult time for me, I was thinking a lot about death, for personal reasons, and also because of the fact that I had been working for many years

with *The List*, which documents the deaths of asylum seekers, and which I was editing a version of for the German newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel*. Then there was the death of my mother in July. I had spent so many years trying to understand, or talk, on behalf of the silenced and deceased, while bearing in mind the impossibility of doing that. So I started to think that the only interesting thing in this effort is the awareness of this impossibility. Whatever you do, it will never be right, because it cannot be right. We are here and they are there. So there is no comprehensive way of representing them, and there can't be.

AM: This coincides with the terrifying concision of The List, where people are reduced to just names.

BC: Well, not really. The List is compiled and updated by UNITED for Intercultural Action since 1993. The document traces information relating to the deaths of refugees and migrants who have lost their lives within or on the borders of Europe due to lethal state policies. We are able to see the people's names, age, gender, country of origin, cause of death and the source of the aforementioned news, to the extent that this information is available. The list dates back to 1993 and charts the different conflicts back then, including the former Yugoslavian war, where people could be traced and information about each case was more available. But in the past ten years, especially since the Syrian war, you have people moving from one place to another and most of the time there is very limited information about them. If the person died in a detention centre - there are many from the UK - or a hospital, or after he or she reached the destination, there is a possibility of more information, but if it is just a capsized boat in the middle of the sea ...

AM: So how did you decide how to present this material?

BC: I first encountered the list on UNITED's website in 2002 when I was researching border politics, particularly at the Dutch asylum centre Ter Appel, which is close to the German border. I found myself making a very quick decision: that these names and this information should be encountered by those who don't visit UNITED's website and those who do not want to even visit their website; and that this information should be in their life at least for a limited period of time - on the street, while waiting for the bus or with the morning coffee reading the morning paper. I refused to put it in art spaces. I wanted the interaction to be as un-negotiated an encounter as possible, but within a negotiated space - public spaces such as billboards, transport networks, newspapers.

AM: Why is it important that the space is negotiated, rather than having the piece be a more guerrilla-style intervention?

BC: We did that, but they removed it the following day.

SYLVIA KOUVALI

AM: So it is about duration?

BC: Duration, yes, and also about having legitimisation. I think that legitimisation is very important. The List is not an anarchist gesture. When it is allowed to be displayed, people think 'I should read it'. These are spaces where people are used to being informed, or to being told to buy something, so they don't dismiss it so quickly.

AM: So the decisions you are making are about maximising visibility?

BC: Yes, maximising visibility and also involving other parties - human-rights organisations, newspapers. As an artist, institutions, artists and curators are my resources. I was interested in how we can restructure our resources, together, to make this document more visible without calling it or turning it into an artwork per se.

For many years there were discussions around whether this or that is an artwork or not. And it is not. But the art comes from all these positionings and negotiations. As an artist what I can do is get people to work with me. It took me five years to convince the first partners to make a display in 2007. Of course it relates to the scale of the situation and the urgency one feels to respond.

For instance, this current list has been produced by Chisenhale Gallery and the Liverpool Biennial. In June, the *Guardian* published and distributed it in print and online, with eight pages of editorial content. This is first time we had such a long and collaborative support structure. Comparatively, UNITED has limited resources; it has never received extra funding to keep and update this database - the team has support for other activities but not for the list - and all work is volunteer based.

By its nature, the document is fragile. One has to fact-check, erase the duplicates, collate and edit down – all of this is a lot of work. Then there is copy-editing and translation, depending on the context of distribution. Because it is a multinational organisation - and often the volunteers might not be necessarily from English-speaking countries - language comes into it, grammatically speaking, but also in terms of the terminology around immigration. If you look back to the 1990s there is different terminology that has evolved, now we talk about whether you can use the word migrant, refugee or asylum seeker.

AM: How has the language changed since 1990s?

BC: Nobody was thinking about not using the word 'illegal', for example.

SYLVIA KOUVALI

AM: *So it wasn't loaded in the way it is today?*

BC: No. Today we discuss whether we call people migrants, economic migrants or refugees. This is the tip of an iceberg. There is a reason why people have to look for jobs somewhere else, it doesn't have to be a hot war, like Syria. Many countries see migrants as criminals and define them as criminals.

AM: *Your work Scary Asian Men, which depicted men in the green zone between Turkey and Europe, touches on this.*

BC: That work is actually from 2005. They were local men sitting on the highway in Istanbul that connects Asia to Europe. It was about the fear Europe had of a possible invasion of the 'idle man' from Turkey. What has happened since then is a longer discussion.

AM: *With a historical lens, it is striking how prescient you were, working on this material when you did. Now it is the determining force in politics across the world.*

BC: Yes, it has been instrumentalised by the far right and populist movements in every country. This is how the electorate is mobilised: nobody wants potential criminals. We are involved in what happened to these peoples' lives because we are complicit, consciously or unconsciously. I generalise.

AM: *Yes, and that's the nature of history. Particularly histories of empire. Our complicity isn't so hard to map. To go back to what you said about using a gallery space like Chisenhale in alliance with other charities, galleries and spaces of display have long had educational functions – are you reviving that, too?*

BC: It depends. I don't want to be an educator. What I think is important – we live in turbulent times – is that we influence each other more than we think. It was maybe always so, but technology and the effects of multinational companies make this clearer. Art isn't immune to turbulent times. Doing a political exhibition doesn't really question the role of an institution and the relationship it can establish with the public. The language is hygienic: the content might be there with its full force, but the way it is articulated in the space and the way institutions communicate with their audiences somehow might diminish its impact. Tensions between works, and what work sits next to what work, can effect the affect of the work, so I'm interested in other ways we can do things collectively without necessarily producing an artwork every time. I don't know what the *Guardian* would do if UNITED approached them, but it would be different or might take longer. There is a strange power and charm of art – sometimes – to open certain doors for certain propositions, because it doesn't come from an expected place.

SYLVIA KOUVALI

AM: I'm interested also in the way you sometimes resist imagery in your work. The List is an obvious example. But when the point is fundamentally quite an emotive one – about how terrible the refugee situation is and the public indifference to it – I have always assumed imagery is the way to motivate people and stimulate their emotions. The image of the child Alan Kurdi seemed so powerful, so briefly powerful.

BC: That's exactly where the power of *The List* is: you start to read and you can't stop. Or you read one entry and you leave. There is no middle way. In general, it has an editorial tone because it is a compilation of quotes from different sources, but it is also an assemblage because of different people's different hands and positions. Everybody edits in a different way with different political positions and different knowledge. We try to make it uniform over the years but its nature resists it: we only interfere with the mistakes in language or if we can find more information retrospectively. But who has the energy, resources and time to follow up? Art can allow that.

AM: And speaking about the non-image qualities of The List what do you think of other artists' efforts to address this crisis? The obvious one is Ai Weiwei.

BC: I don't think I have a position to 'address this crisis'. I don't even accept that it is a crisis – and by defining it as a crisis we allow a state of acceptance, and hence normalise imposed measures and policies. We can try to learn how to live together, mourn together and engage more with the causes of the displacements pushing our capacities. I might sound arrogant, but I can't stand efforts of representation like Ai Weiwei's: they are problematic, exoticising, despite the goodwill...

AM: To be as generous as possible, he is forcing the issue to people's attention in a way which roughly corresponds with how you described some of your intentions.

BC: Yes, but there is a certain kind of sovereignty there I find problematic. Certain things are impossible to represent; we surely know this from literature after the Holocaust. There is a perversity in this darkness – you want to say something, you have to respond to it – but while you are responding, you're trespassing. Because the one who should speak is not there, and you're there. There is already an unjust situation.

AM: Yes, created from an unjust situation: how it is that some people are born where it is safe and others are born where it isn't.

BC: But safety can change, often in a very controlled way. Some people even have a vested interest in a place being unsafe.

SYLVIA KOUVALI

AM: To return to the Chisenhale exhibition, which coincides with the Guardian publication of The List, there are contrasts between the brief descriptions of lives in The List and the comprehensiveness and intimacy of your new video work.

BC: Indeed. This contrast is probably one of the main reasons for me doing such a work. One can see it as a form of introspection as well, a collective introspection. And in terms of its format, the duration is challenging, even irritating – the entirety of it isn't going to be accessible to anyone because of its duration. What does it mean to have an artwork almost inaccessible in its entirety?

AM: In that respect it isn't so different from your series amassing every newspaper published in a certain territory or language on the same day. Those are accessible but nobody is going to read them all.

BC: Yes, but potentially it is possible. Also, those newspapers are for the future.

AM: But as far as a data set can be, it is quite an epic dump of data. And I wanted to ask: the dates of the newspapers you picked, were they accidental or picked for particular purpose?

BC: The newspapers were intended to be collected on ordinary days, where nothing dominated the headlines, but of course this isn't possible to predict. Making a comprehensive database of newspapers in a given country or region took a lot of time to research. Then you write to all of them and then there is a whole collection plan – some they sent us, some we went to kiosks to buy. It is hard to co-ordinate and there isn't a fully comprehensive list of local newspapers and during the research some newspapers closed or were bought by larger newspapers. So it is about what we can do with our resources, and that defines the result. It is similar to The List – people always ask: is this definitive? Is this it? There is a fetish for the whole.

AM: It is interesting to conduct these exercises within the art world, where collecting is a profound, instrumental impulse. And it reminds me that quite a lot of your work plays with collecting, especially commodities. The fact that your images can sometimes be bought in small, medium and large formats. And you called your first commercial gallery show 'Sample Sale'.

BC: Exactly, the idea was making samples and construct a power game between previous and new work. Each new sample on the wall was juxtaposed with one post-Venice *Catalog* work. My work doesn't have a huge market, as the work is difficult to commodify in terms of both its content and how the work is physically shown. With museums there are long discussions because they typically don't want people to touch, say, the newspapers. And I don't want them under a vitrine because the work is about touching,

SYLVIA KOUVALI

about the ink and that disappearance. I like to play with the idea of selling, so I sometimes produce work which is made only to sell, for instance *Wrappers*, which I made for Arco, the art fair in Madrid, in 2014. I feel comfortable when the relationships are clear. There are some works I would never sell and specifically there is no ownership to transfer. In Venice, *Catalog* was interesting because it was made as an offer for a limited time. Eventually they were available in small, medium and large sizes, but nobody knows who owns what, because it was not a clear edition – it is an unknown territory.

AM: *Were those were the same images, from Catalog, that went into Dealers' Picks?*

BC: Yes, and the *Directors' Picks*, which took place during my exhibition in the Kunsthalle Basel, I was invited by Adam Szymczyk, the director, to make his selection. It was interesting because Adam tore the images from the book, whereas the art dealer Sylvia Kouvali presented them in beautiful frames.

AM: *And the first newspaper was in Turkey in 2010?*

BC: Yes, 20 August 2010. Different times. . . there has been a lot of change since then and I would be interested to do it again.

AM: *Do you consider the work that you are presenting at Chisenhale as diaristic?*

BC: I am interested in diaries as a source for alternative historical narratives, particularly silenced ones, where private and public can merge purposefully, even forcibly. The work for Chisenhale is composed of 46,685 files – stills remain on screen for four seconds and videos are kept in their original length and language. It is a flux of inconsistencies. Some are finished artworks, some are there because they were recorded. What is interesting is how one shoots and how one records when you know about the possibility of showing and choosing the best bits to show. Instagram – which I don't use – does that, so it is interesting to create an unedited diary with no original intension of being shared. Trial and error, things looking the same which aren't the same or which have very small differences. I like this accumulation of recording with no hierarchy. There are about 600 files from Gezi Park in 2013 which continues to be a big taboo for a lot of us, and for me to share later as a piece of work – it was important for us to be there, existing, living. I initially didn't record anything because I didn't want that consciousness, I just wanted to be there. But after a while it became too fascinating. It was a dreamland, and very beautiful. So I started photographing, but never to share. It was personal. Now they are on show at Chisenhale. Right after my daughter's dances, we visited her grandma, then there's a birthday party and then there's a revolution. It shows a certain kind of vulnerability and idiocy that we're not generally ready to share – captivating and unbearable.

SYLVIA KOUVALI

AM: It is a narrative that isn't narrated. Histories are so carefully selected and narrated, whereas this is 'comprehensive'.

BC: Many times while editing this work I was thinking 'this is not my life, but our lives'. I was feeling constantly that there were all these tangents intersecting through one dot – not just myself. I was seeing a circle of time because things kept coming back in different forms – from the process of researching something, to making the work and documenting it, to then someone writing about it and re-contextualising the same content. It is chronological but it is not, by nature. I didn't realize this until last fall, and it made me think a lot about the conditions and contexts with which we carry things. There is something unconditional about both. My daughter and *The List* – they're two things in my life I carry, and care for, without asking questions.

AM: Do you think of yourself as an optimist? What's next?

BC: Yes, a very dark optimist. The past three years, they have been quite heavy so I need some rest. In September next year, there is the Bergen Assembly which proposes a new model – not a biennale or a triennial. It is composed of a core group of curators, artists, activists and philosophers, and a human-rights lawyer. It is a small group, and it is interesting to try to think together. Through all this, I don't think we should wait for the world to be better. It won't be better, and it never was.