

TODAY IN HISTORY

Kaelen Wilson-Goldie on the art of Banu Cennetoğlu

Review by Kaelen Wilson-Goldie
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EARLY ONE MORNING this past November, Turkish police rounded up and detained more than a dozen people involved in the arts, culture, and academia in Istanbul. It wasn't by any means the first time the authorities had targeted such figures. Artists, journalists, professors, human-rights activists, people who work on such sensitive topics as Syrian refugees or Kurdish issues or the Armenian genocide, leftists ranging from Marxist to mild, and countless others have all been caught up in a major crackdown, extending over several years now, by the government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Turkey's president and three-time prime minister weathered the mass demonstrations of Gezi Park in 2013 and survived an attempted coup in 2016. His ongoing countercoup has showcased his incredible aptitude for revenge. More than fifty thousand people have been imprisoned in connection with the failed coup, many held for long periods without so much as an indictment. These detainees include the charismatic businessman, philanthropist, and arts patron Osman Kavala. Erdoğan himself has reportedly called Kavala "the red Soros of Turkey," and the government has explicitly accused him of being the mastermind behind Gezi. H. G. Masters, who closely follows the Istanbul art scene, wrote in *ArtAsiaPacific* that Kavala's detention sent "a deep chill" through the country's cultural communities, civil-society organizations, and NGOs. Masters is one of the few journalists writing for an international audience to report on Erdoğan's campaign to "reform" Turkey's arts-and-culture sector, announced in March 2017.

The predawn raids in November are widely seen as part of this campaign, and they were immediately interpreted as an attempt to double down on the crusade against Kavala. Although he's been imprisoned without any official charges since October 2017, Kavala's primary offense in the eyes of the regime appears to be that he is the founder and chair of the organization

Anadolu Kültür, which works with and among marginalized communities across Turkey and also runs Depo, a tiny, vital, politically engaged Istanbul art center known for its attention to urgent issues of memory, repression, and urban transformation. Among the thirteen people detained in November were at least two of Anadolu Kültür's executive board members, as well as Asena Günal, Depo's program coordinator. Within two days, the police had released Günal and all but one of the others. But brief as the detentions were, their ominous significance shouldn't be underestimated. For perspective, imagine if the curator of a small but important arts institution in New York (Artists Space, for example, or the Kitchen) were yanked out of bed at 4 am and interrogated by the police for being vaguely critical of Trump.

Without acknowledging this context, it would be impossible to fully appreciate the work of Banu Cennetoğlu. Cennetoğlu, whose first solo exhibition in the United States opens this month at SculptureCenter in New York, runs an Istanbul art space even tinier than Depo. Its name, *BAS*, is a root word in Turkish meaning the imperative "Print!" Other forms of the word, such as *basmak* and *basılmak*, mean to print, to step on, to find, to be found, and—in a further elaboration of word clusters—to be caught in an act of transgression. With no sign outside and just those three letters splashed on a riser between two stairs, *BAS* is tucked into the upper floor of a nondescript office building in the Istanbul neighborhood of Karaköy. The space is lovingly if also stringently devoted to the form and function of the artist's book. It was inspired, at least in part, by the hours Cennetoğlu used to while away, years ago, reading and learning and not spending a dime at Printed Matter, back when it was on Wooster Street and she was a fashion photographer living in New York and working for magazines like *Dazed & Confused*, *Self Service*, and *Purple*.

At the time, Cennetoğlu was less interested in fashion per se than in subjects like the destruction of Sarajevo's national library or the war with the Kurds in the Turkish southeast. She had been studying psychology in Istanbul in the late 1980s when she stepped into a neighborhood photography class by chance. She kept at it. After college, she sold her car for a plane ticket to Paris and a month's tuition at Spéos, a school for professional photographers. She won a year-long scholarship and then a contract with an agency in New York. All of this happened very fast. Cennetoğlu found herself alone, under long-distance pressure from her family and frustrated by the limitations, dysfunctions, and inequities of her field. She did a campaign for a Japanese designer that allowed her to survive financially for a year. But she was resistant to much of the work on offer and, as a result, increasingly broke.

The sense that she had come up against an impasse in New York—able to do more interesting editorial work only by funding it with less interesting commercial work; able to see the politics of imagemaking but powerless to engage or change them— was responsible, at least in part, for her decision to quit fashion photography and throw everything at becoming an artist. (Other contributing factors were the massive 1999 earthquake in Izmit, outside Istanbul, which she experienced on her first trip back after a long absence, and 9/11, which she saw and photographed from Brooklyn.) At a critical moment, the artist Ayşe Erkmen urged her to apply to Amsterdam’s Rijksakademie. Cennetoğlu arrived there at a fortuitous time. Her studio years overlapped with those of Rosa Barba, Ryan Gander, Jill Magid, David Maljković, and Shahryar Nashat, among others. In 2009, in an interview with Michael Vazquez in *Bidoun*, Cennetoğlu characterized her decision as follows: “I’d started traveling in the former Yugoslavia and Georgia and here in Turkey, to the southeast. And it became problematic for me, taking this quite fragile material and contextualizing it in this pool of beautiful images [in fashion magazines]. It seemed too poetic in this very random way. I needed to be more concrete.”

Cennetoğlu started *BAS* in 2006, the year she returned to Istanbul from Amsterdam. The venue used to be located on a side street off *Istiklal Caddesi*, the long pedestrian thoroughfare that is both an open-air shopping mall and Istanbul’s preeminent public space. *BAS* houses a broad collection of materials, including the archive of Bent (“reservoir”), a publishing imprint the artist ran with the artist Philippine Hoegen until 2009. Cennetoğlu directed *BAS* as a decidedly solo effort until 2013, when she slowed down her programming and began sharing the *Karaköy* space with the artists Yasemin Nur and Seçil Yersel. From its early days until now, *BAS* has been no more or less political than *Depo*. The same can be said of Cennetoğlu’s work as an individual artist. Over more than a decade, she has developed an elusive conceptual language that is most obviously concerned with the fragile systems and archives we turn to for organizing knowledge—the spare index, the destabilizing list, the imaginary catalogue, the imperiled library. The information to which she is drawn tends to involve the brutal facts of war, dispossession, and injustice. Of particular interest to Sohrab Mohebbi, who is organizing Cennetoğlu’s show at *SculptureCenter*, is the way the artist’s investigations uncover a “residue”—of history, of violence, but also, on occasion, of some accidental beauty arising therein—that is then realized in her work “in the form of an object.”

I’ve been sympathetic to Cennetoğlu’s work since I first encountered it in the late 2000s. I am captivated by her ideas and processes. For purely personal reasons, I love her love of printed matter, even if I am sometimes mystified by the profusion of arcane details—by the attention

paid to fonts, for example, or to miniscule shifts in digital formatting. One of the two main anchors of the show at SculptureCenter is a room packed with old newspapers, offering viewers a survey of the frequent projects for which she gathers every daily publication printed in a country or territory on a given date. But the meaning of Cennetoğlu's newspaper projects (there are 142 in total) has also changed significantly over time. What began as a subtle critique of how history is written has become a kind of elegy for editorial judgment, newsroom ethics, and the world of hierarchically ordered facts. With print journalism teetering on the edge of obsolescence, these installations look increasingly like remnants of a lost ecosystem.

The last time Cennetoğlu collected all of the newspapers printed in Turkey was in 2010. Many of them, particularly the Kurdish and other minority papers, don't exist anymore. Either they have been banned, like the pro-Kurdish *Özgür Gündem*, or closed for financial reasons, like the liberal *Radikal*, or seriously diminished by Erdoğan's crackdown. The opposition paper *Cumhuriyet*, for example, is still technically publishing, but more than half of its staff has been imprisoned by the regime. Like all good archival endeavors, Cennetoğlu's newspaper projects, which are titled with the dates on which the collected papers were published, articulate a loss that deeply affects us, even if we have never acknowledged the objects, possibilities, or ideas that have now disappeared.

The seductions of Cennetoğlu's style—from *Catalog*, 2009, an ingenious artist's book masquerading as an idiosyncratically categorized mail-order catalogue of her stock of photography, to *The Library of Spirits*, 2013—, her collection of small-batch fruit brandies distilled in the Balkans and other locales and periodically realized as a bar—are the promise of coherence and the fantasy of completeness. Over and over in her work, those twinned desires prove remarkably effective in drawing viewers into stories of conflict and violence that they might otherwise wish to avoid, including stories of the many hot and cold, covert and overt wars that have proliferated globally since the mid-1990s (in the Balkans, against the Kurds, along the borders of Schengen Europe, and across the Middle East). Cennetoğlu's works do not presume to tell us what those wars mean, but they do begin to show us what they have done to our humanity, pointing to the marks they have made—of guilt? Complicity? Apathy? Indecision?—on our subconscious selves. Perhaps more importantly, by consistently questioning her own position in relation to the difficult issues she confronts, she compels us to consider, and possibly reconsider, ours (from, say, not giving a shit or being convinced we're right to at least starting to engage communities or areas of interest outside our own).

Cennetoğlu was as distressed as anyone by the November roundup in Istanbul (I happened to catch up with her right after it occurred). In her case, the events were anxiety-inducing not only because of her personal life—Cennetoğlu’s partner is a prominent human-rights lawyer—but also in light of her recent work. Several years ago, sometime after Gezi and before the attempted coup, Cennetoğlu began a project about the Kurdish journalist turned militant Gurbetelli Ersöz, known as Gurbet, which she later developed for Documenta 14. *Gurbet’s Diary (27.07.1995–08.10.1997)*, 2016–17, consists of 145 lithographic limestone slabs, prepared with the mirrored text of a journal Ersöz kept fitfully during the last few years of her life, before she was killed while fighting in northern Iraq, her legs blown off by a German-made, Turkish-operated tank. Taken together, the slabs hold more than eighty thousand words from 107 diary entries. For all of the work’s obvious physical heft, it still somehow conveys the weightlessness of difficult or dangerous histories as yet unfixed to the page.

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Ersöz was born five years before Cennetoğlu, in 1965. She studied to be a chemist, but the harsh conditions faced by Kurds in Turkey in the 1980s pushed her toward journalism. In 1993, she became the first woman to edit *Özgür Gündem*. Later that year, in another cruel season of roundups, detentions, and arrests, Turkish police raided the newspaper’s offices in Istanbul, detaining more than ninety people and arresting Ersöz along with seventeen of her colleagues. She was tortured for two weeks and jailed for more than a year. When she was released, she was banned from journalism. Denied her vocation, Ersöz picked up a Kalashnikov and joined the resistance.

In her diary, Ersöz described the fighting, wrote poems, and performed occasional self-critiques. Keeping a journal was both a political and a personal act, one that documented the bare facts of a history that would not be officially written anytime soon and at the same time expressed, for the sake of posterity or catharsis, her dreams, discomforts, and doubts. *Gurbet’in Güncesi: Yüreğimi Dağlara Nakşettim* (Gurbet’s Diary: I Engraved My Heart into the Mountains) was published in Germany in 1998, a year after her death. In 2014, an influential press in Diyarbakir, the de facto capital of Turkish Kurdistan, produced another edition of the book. This occurred during a moment of rare optimism and relative liberalism in Turkey. Books about the Kurdish struggle that had been banned for decades were suddenly available in Istanbul bookstores, and Cennetoğlu found a copy of Ersöz’s diary and was enthralled. As Negar Azimi

notes in the Documenta 14 *Daybook*, Cennetoğlu was so taken by the text that she started seeing a therapist for the first time in her life, seeking an explanation of why it had such a strong hold on her.

Cennetoğlu was on a residency in Berlin when she began producing *Gurbet's Diary* for Documenta. (As it turned out, the tank that killed Ersöz had been manufactured in Kassel.) Originally, Cennetoğlu had wanted to serialize the diaries in two daily newspapers, but all of the publications she approached turned her down. Cennetoğlu chose the limestone slabs as her form for *Gurbet's Diary* because of their print-readiness. They were the last step before publication. Several people around her worried that the work was politically sensitive enough to make returning to Istanbul risky.

Gurbet's Diary is, to my mind, Cennetoğlu's most obvious masterpiece, where the form most effectively cradles its subject. It is perhaps one of the great ironies of the fickle, scatter-brained, and forgetful news cycle—which both drives and kills newspapers—that a year after the work debuted at Documenta, its provocative potential was eclipsed by another project, *The List*, 2006–, which Cennetoğlu insists is no artwork at all but which, regardless, many friends, curators, and fellow artists argue is the best thing she's ever done.

The List is an actual list, maintained since 1993 by the Amsterdam-based UNITED for Intercultural Action, a network of more than five hundred anti-discrimination organizations in forty-eight countries. It compiles spare, utilitarian information (name, age, gender, country of origin, cause) pertaining to the deaths of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants on or within the borders of Europe. Cennetoğlu uses her resources as an artist to facilitate updates and distributions of *The List*, but she doesn't claim authorship of the project. It has been presented via newspaper inserts, on billboards, and in subway stations. In 2015, it was converted into a video that haunted the Istanbul skyline every night for a month. When she was preparing for one of its first iterations, as a supplement to the Athens newspaper *Ta Nea* in 2007, it took ages to convince her local partners that the fates of refugees and migrants were relevant to everyday life in Greece. At that time, *The List* had just under nine thousand entries on it. As of September, it had more than thirty-five thousand. As *The List* itself has grown, so too have the stakes of presenting it. It had never been vandalized before, but when it was presented at the Liverpool Biennial last summer, it was immediately tagged by graffiti artists and torn by passersby. Then it was totally and repeatedly destroyed, presumably because of mounting and emboldened xenophobia, fascism, and anti-immigration sentiment. Substantial outrage followed.

The second main anchor of the SculptureCenter exhibition is a moving-image work with not one but thirteen titles: *I 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*, 2018. Commissioned last year for the Chisenhale Gallery, the piece is an epic archive of all the photos and videos in Cennetoğlu's cell phones, computers, cameras, and hard drives, collected over a dozen years. She extracted these materials and organized them into rigid chronological order without any editing or selection. (Only a single file, a video she filmed on the condition that she never show or share it, has been removed.) The materials we might see on-screen include a vast trove of documentation relating to projects the artist produced in that period, from photos taken on site visits and research trips to snapshots of the openings and closings of exhibitions. Clearly, at 128 hours, the work is an exercise in endurance, and also in randomness and chance: Whatever sliver of time viewers glimpse will, for them, represent the whole of twelve years, and depending on what they see, they may find the experience pleasurable or painful, absorbing or tedious.

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As Mohebbi points out, there's definitely an element of voyeurism at play. "In a retrospective of an artist's work"—Cennetoğlu herself calls the work an "introspective"—"each piece is a portal to a moment in an artist's life." But if Cennetoğlu is showing people her life, her straightforward and unvarnished approach is clearly not geared toward self-branding. "It's a counter image to the kind of aspirational lifestyle that Instagram promotes," says Mohebbi. (For the record, the only social-media platform Cennetoğlu uses is Facebook, and that almost exclusively for posting news of events in Turkey—detentions and arrests, roundups and crackdowns. She's not on Instagram and has no plans to be.)

The twelve-year span begins in June 2006, before Cennetoğlu started working on *The List*—more precisely, the week she conceived her daughter, Can. It ends in March 2018, on the production deadline for the Chisenhale show. What is arguably *The List*'s highest-profile appearance to date occurred a few months later, in June, when it was published as a supplement to *The Guardian* to coincide with World Refugee Day. As it happened, the period between the public presentation of *Gurbet's Diary*, in the spring and summer of 2017, and the initial commission

from Chisenhale, which followed a few months later, was extremely difficult. Cennetoğlu did return to Istanbul after Documenta 14, without incident. But her mother was gravely ill. She lost her much sooner than she expected to, within a month, and didn't know if she had the heart for another big project. She began working on the introspective from a place of grief and uncertainty. The story that the piece with the thirteen titles tells is the story of her art and her family and of momentous changes and rolling crises in Turkey and the world, which steal in and out of view. Enter the piece at the right moment and you might see the euphoric early protests in Gezi Park, which drew some momentum from the demonstrations of the Arab Spring a few years earlier. You might see images of other protests, in other places, sent to Cennetoğlu's phone by friends via WhatsApp. You might see an agonizing public discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of Turkish civil society, in Turkish, going on for hours on end. And you might see, in the background, major changes in the landscape of Istanbul: a modernist landmark boarded up, a nationalist monument removed, urban-renewal projects started and stalled.

It's easy to forget, but Erdoğan, the former mayor of Istanbul, came to power as an opposition figure, an advocate for the poor, a representative of the working class, someone who inspired hope. His party once purported to offer an alternative to the authoritarian legacy of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the Turkish Republic, who was modern but repressive, a nationalist who secularized by force. What is remarkable about Cennetoğlu's work is the way it measures, on such personal and intimate terms, Erdoğan's complete dislodging of Atatürk's legacy. That Erdoğan would prove himself an undemocratic, autocratic ruler was no great surprise. But that he would completely dismantle the infrastructure of Atatürk's secularizing vision and replace it with a neo-Ottoman phantasmagoria—this was unthinkable, unimaginable, in 2006. And yet.

The old aphorism "The personal is political" never loses its relevance, but its impact is limited by the rigidity of language. You can't articulate the oneness of the personal and the political without paradoxically reinforcing their discreteness in the very act of naming each as a separate concept—at least, you can't avoid this pitfall if your communicative medium is words. As you become absorbed in Cennetoğlu's archive, the inextricability of the personal and the political is conveyed not through words but through a procession of images that have the cumulative force of a blustering storm.

"I was torn between the possibilities of mourning for someone so close to you and mourning for a community you don't know," Cennetoğlu says.

What is collective grief? What is personal grief? Who has the right to give a voice to all these positions? I decided to take a look and order everything. All the raw trips for *The Library of Spirits*. Whole ceremonies at Can's school. You see me pregnant and you see the birth. You see labor camps in Dubai and then I come home and you see [my daughter] eating tomatoes for ten minutes. It's totally schizophrenic but this is life and we need to look at it, all of these parallel realities. There are openings and closings and meetings and demonstrations. I see it as a collective history, but I am the "carrier".

Or, as she told Chisenhale's Ellen Greig last fall: "It might look like my life, but indeed, it is our lives."

<https://www.artforum.com/print/201901/kaelen-wilson-goldie-on-the-art-of-banu-cenneto-glu-78003>