

SAMPLING THE DOCUMENT OR DOCUMENTING THE SAMPLE: AN INTERVIEW WITH BANU CENNETOĞLU

Banu Cennetoğlu interviewed by Alex Freedman

Art21

11 March 2011

Banu Cennetoğlu's website has read "meşgul/busy" since the summer. And even after four months of emails, having never meet in person, Banu Cennetoğlu is still a source of fascinating mystery to me. Sources report that she's shy; a mutual acquaintance leaning over a freezer stuffed with a pre biblical stalagmite raved about how lovely she is; my best guess is that she's damn independent. Born in 1970, Cennetoğlu left Turkey in 1994 after receiving a BA in Psychology to study photography in Paris. What came next was a whirlwind of travel dates and photographic assignments, before trading in New York for the Rijksakademie in 2002 to do "something more concrete." Returning to Istanbul in 2006, she founded *BAS*, Turkey's first archive dedicated to contemporary artist's books, and Bent, the country's first artist book publishing house with Dutch artist Philippine Hoegen. Her early works articulate a desire to document, chronicles which bare traces of her photo assignments for mags like *Purple*, while her recent works circulate documents, or witnesses, rendered fragile and whisked with an ardor for saving and making material public. But check it out for yourself at *Guilty feet have got no rhythm*, now on view at Kunsthalle Basel through March 31.

Alex Freedman: *Last fall you had your first commercial solo exhibition, Sample Sale 2010 BC, at Rodeo Gallery in Istanbul. This is pretty unusual for an artist who has already shown at the Venice Biennale.*

Banu Cennetoğlu: For a long time, I was doubtful about showing work in this context, so the

only interesting way was for me to do this show was to deal with the subject of selling. Each “sample” was conceived individually, but is simultaneously expected to coexist with *CATALOG*.

CATALOG was originally conceived to function as a mail order catalog for 6 months in the Turkish Pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale. The piece contains 450 of my photographs dated between 1994-2010, classified under 15 categories, varying from personal photographs to iconic images such as 9/11, documentation of the Turkish Parliament, and of the UN zones between North and South Korea. They are all framed the same way, questioning the hierarchy among them, embedding a bit part of their content into the thickly bound book, while somehow trying to co exist with the others in keeping their self-referentiality. The categories are defined by subjective parameters, each holding a different number of images. During the Biennial, viewers could download any of the photographs for free from the catalog by taking a form home and imputing the photograph’s code.

For *Sample Sale*, I reconfigured *CATALOG*’s function within the gallery’s constructed setting: the exhibition consists of an “old” catalog and new “sample works”, with each “unique” juxtaposition creating a commercial and conceptual proposition for the audience. Sometimes you buy a magazine for its promotional item, or vice versa. I was interested in *CATALOG*’s re distribution, and in referencing issues such as complementarity, modes of reproduction, and authorship.

AF: *One sample which also engages the power of print to create an unstable history is 20.08.2010. In this piece you’ve assembled hundreds of newspapers published on August 20, 2010 from throughout Turkey.*

BC: *20.08.2010* attempts to look at one day in the nation through these newspapers’ content, graphic language, printing features, and all of the details that printed matter comes with. Turkish media is very particular. Each newspaper depicts a distinct agenda, and sometimes you need to read 8 newspapers to even get a general overview. In terms of politics of representation, *20.08.2010* is an intense body of collected priorities. Of course there is re-contextualization and an “almost” monumentalization. But this is always an issue in the archiving of printed matter meant to be ephemeral, with a limited material redistribution, but [that] already exists in an unlimited digital distribution system.

AF: *When I walked into Sample Sale, the first thing I noticed was Souvenirs from ‘Manifesta 8, The European Biennial of Contemporary Art Region of Murcia (Spain) in dialogue with North Africa’, an exhibition which hadn’t yet opened, sitting next to Baldessari for All, a faux John Baldessari museum souvenir. Tell me more about this metaphoric power game of fashion, travel, and memory building.*

BC: In a way, each sample carries its own story, and doesn’t really care about the others. But it’s possible to see the compilation as one work, as Antoni Muntadas commented on the gallery book: Congratulations for the group show! *Baldessari for all* is a “fake” museum shop original, a nice item for a collector with a big family. *Souvenirs* brings together all the items of during my research period for Manifesta 8, but also obviously on the touristy, colonial approach the art worlders have, in general, towards the rest of the world.

AF: *One of my October mornings actually started out with a call to the Manifesta office to confirm if Pavilion II’s marabou tail is detachable or not. Where did the idea to create this ode to impotence vs. monumentalism come from?*

BC: After the Venice Biennale, I was tired of big shows and biennales. So when I received the invitation from Manifesta 8, along with its conceptual framework, it was a difficult one for me to be engaged. After a few research trips, rather than not taking part, I wanted to be site specific and decided to try to do something to express this restlessness! The venue is one of the two artillery barracks in Murcia which were active between 1921-1995. The barracks were commissioned by the Ministry of War to accommodate the 33rd Infantry Regiment of Seville. When I visited the venue for the first time, I was struck by its intensity, not only in terms of architecture, but also its energy: suspended in time, austerity, symmetry. And the amount of dust. One of the assistants told me that because of Manifesta 8’s conceptual and economical framework, there wouldn’t be much changed within the space, just major cleaning with a big vacuum cleaner. So with the many different approaches to dealing with dust in art history in mind, I decided to focus on the dust of the pavilion, and to research on the means of containing or re-distributing. I came across one of Shiri Zinn’s designs in a blog called “My Funky Funeral.” Shiri is a great designer from St. Martins, London, who specializes in luxury sex toys. After many long and intense correspondences with her, during an interesting period of thinking about collaborations, authorship, and appropriation, I invited Shiri Zinn to officially collaborate with me, and that is how the piece became a joint project. The final piece is one of her “limited edition glass toys” customized into a cremation urn carrying a dust sample collected from the Pavilion II.

AF: *In an interview with Michael Vazquez at Bidoun, you said that you left professional photography for art because you were looking for something more concrete and less poetic.*

BC: I started to photograph while I was studying psychology and it all developed too fast. After graduation in Istanbul, I went to Paris for a month-long photography workshop and got a scholarship to study full term. While studying, I got an invitation for a group show in the Louvre with big names from the photography world, such as Klein, Roversi, Helmut Newton, and many others. It was 1994, and pretty overwhelming for me to be part of such an exhibition and context. Haha... I remember calling my mother and telling her that I wouldn't be coming back. I figured that by working as a professional photographer I could support myself while learning more about the production and distribution of an image, and its potential meaning... while of course changing the world! So naive. I was active for five years, mainly in New York, and was lucky to collaborate with very interesting people, but I understood that those set parameters are not for me. The assignments ended in frustration, and it did not matter how less commercial or engaged they were. I have problems with being in a very framed context, and I could not deal with the professional world in terms of its economical and social musts. I still have difficulties with it... I want to be on my own and say what I want the way I like to.

AF: *Last I heard, BAS has been expanding its programming. Can you give us an update?*

BC: In December 2009, we started to develop a series of talks and exhibitions at *BAS*, in order to focus on the historical and critical context of artists' books and printed matter. We started this program because there was a lack of local context on printed matter in artistic practice, so we've been inviting artists to whom this medium has been and is very present in their practice in different ways. There was an exhibition of artists' books by Sol LeWitt, a talk by Antoni Muntadas, an archival exhibition, and a discussion with the members of the mail art collective from Istanbul KORIDOR (1988 – 1995). As the fourth event of this series, we were very happy to host AA Bronson. It was really great.

AF: *Until a few days ago, posters of The List were hung in 70 outdoor locations to coincide with your solo show at the Basel Kunsthalle. In 2007, The List appeared also appeared as poster campaign in Amsterdam, and in a collaboration with the 1st Athens Biennale and the daily Greek newspaper, TA NEA, a 16 page version was published as a supplement. How has the project been received in these locations? Has the country's individual immigration policy played a*

role in the public reception?

BC: For those unfamiliar, The List is not an art work. It is a list of the 13,824 (known) refugees who've died within, or on Europe's borders (Documentation on 17-06-2010). It is compiled by UNITED for Intercultural Action and is updated every year. Since 2006, Huib Van der Werf and myself have used our professional positions to create a means for publicly displaying and disseminating the compilation. In terms of reactions, it's very difficult to be precise since it is about the silent exposure of intense material in a large public space, but with time, I think and hope that it will engender a reaction.

AF: *And for those who can make it, what treats are in store for visitors to Kunstalle Basel for Guilty Feet have got no rhythm?*

BC: I've brought together several works from 2009-2011 and am showing them as naked and direct as possible, almost like their own documentation. Samples from *Sample Sale 2010 BC* and *CATALOG* will be on display, but completely stripped of their previous performative duties. There will two Swiss additions, the director's picks, and *14.01.2011, Pavilion II, Within Limits 1921-1995* (in collaboration with Shiri Zinn), and a new sound piece, *Suzanne Gabriello/ Z'avez pas lu Kafka ? 1966 - 2011*.

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