

BANU CENNETOĞLU: ‘AS LONG AS I HAVE RESOURCES, I WILL MAKE THE LIST MORE VISIBLE’

Text By Charlotte Higgins
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From stickers on ATMs to full-blown countrywide campaigns, this artist has spent 16 years of her life making the world wake up to Europe’s migrant crisis.

The artist Banu Cennetoğlu can remember precisely the moment she was overwhelmed by The List, a catalogue, made by volunteers, of those who had died in their attempt to make a new life in Europe. It was 2002. She was based at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, studying photography. Researching the architecture of border posts for a project, she stumbled across it on the website of United for Intercultural Action, a network of NGOs supporting migrants and refugees. Back then, it was a document of 15 pages and 6,000 names; now it has over 30,000. “I started to read, and that was it,” she says. It was the start of a relationship that still continues in all its original fervour. “I know,” she adds, “that as long as I have resources as an artist I will continue to make this list more visible.”

Cennetoğlu, an intense, warm woman in her mid-40s, immediately realised that she wanted – needed – people to encounter The List, in all its terrible rawness and cumulative power. She printed it out and pressed it on to people she met, left copies in cafes, made stickers and stuck them on ATMs around the city. It didn’t seem enough. She liked the idea of hiring billboards – not enormous hoardings but the kind of eye-level, poster-size advertising sites that were dotted around Amsterdam. The question was where to get the money, though that seemed easy enough – the Netherlands, at the time, had plenty of money for artists. “But then there were

five years of constant attempts and they all failed,” she says. The conversations with potential funders played out repetitively. “People would ask me, ‘Is it an artwork?’ I would reply that it wasn’t. And they would say, ‘Well, if it’s not art, we cannot give you the money.’”

Finally, in 2007, support came from a foundation in the US. She had already moved away from the Netherlands, back home to Istanbul, where she works as an artist and runs a nonprofit organisation devoted to publishing and collecting artists’ books. There was funding enough to publish sections of The List on 150 poster sites, and to hold discussions and events at the Stedelijk Museum. The night before the posters went up, she says, she felt the world would change. She remembers hovering nonchalantly near the billboards in a park, waiting to see how people would react. “I got angry when I saw people walking by. I’d judge them. Or if a woman was going to her yoga class instead of coming to our talk. In the end I had to say to myself, ‘Banu, chill. The main thing is it’s out there in the world.’”

Since then, The List has appeared in Greece, Bulgaria, the US, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Turkey and now the UK. It has been distributed in a variety of forms – poster campaigns in railway stations, printed in newspapers, emblazoned on hoardings. There is a particular power, she thinks, to The List presented as a physical object. “When you can hold it there’s a way to relate to it that’s better than an infinite scrolling experience. When there is a screen, you have somehow the power to isolate yourself.” As a printed document, there is the idea that someone might pick it up, or randomly come across it years from now. Or you might start to read it out loud, in all its appalling repetitiveness. “Because of politics, of course there are similarities in the way people die – through suicide in detention centres, or in boats.” But its power, she believes, is actually really in the way that it forces the reader to confront the fact that each of these deaths is singular. And that perhaps one’s own personal choices might be implicated in the complicated web of politics that causes these individual tragedies.

“I still think about why,” she says. “Why The List has been with me for the past 16 years and why I cannot stop, why I carry it with me.” It is even more inextricably entwined with the life of her young daughter, for whom there has never been a time before The List. There are two aspects to it, she thinks – the first is deep and instinctive and is entwined with its emotional force as a lament, an act of mourning. “The other side is very pragmatic. It’s a database, compiled by an NGO since 1993 and it’s done only by volunteer work – but it needs to be visible. Governments don’t keep these records for the public; they don’t want the public to see these records because it exposes their policies. So you have NGOs trying to put the data together, and that data is

incomplete and fragile, but there again someone has to do it. And I want to contribute to that with what I have and what I do – but not by aestheticising it. You cannot represent this kind of darkness through art.”

However, there is, as she acknowledges, a connection between *The List* and her own practice as an artist: her art has often taken the form of some kind of witness-bearing. For example, at last year’s Documenta, the major exhibition of contemporary art that takes place every five years in Kassel, Germany (and in 2017 also in Athens) she exhibited two works. One was based around a diary made by a Kurdish fighter in the 1990s. Another consisted of the words “being safe is scary” fixed to the neoclassical facade of Kassel’s Fridericianum, one of the oldest museums in Europe – a phrase she had seen graffitied on to a student-run refuge for migrants in Athens. The refugee crisis looms large, needless to say, in Istanbul. “When the Syrian war got worse and worse and millions started to come, and Europe paid [Turkish president Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan to close the doors, suddenly you started to see people and babies and families on the street. On such a level that I might have to step over a baby in the morning when I go to work – this in Taksim Square. This is a whole large situation in Turkey, not least of abuse of refugees in terms of labour and work. And in terms of everyday life, we all live together and we are melded to each other ... For some, the people are guests. For some they are invaders. For some they are dirty beggars.”

The work that she has made for her new exhibition at London’s Chisenhale Gallery has an even closer connection to *The List*, she says. After years working to be a vehicle for marginalised voices, with all the problems and ethical questions that that involves, she found herself thinking, ““Why do I keep trying to talk for others? Maybe it is moment for me to look inside myself.”” So the new work consists, very simply, of all the images she has collected from all her digital devices over the past dozen years. There is no editing and no selection; she has simply placed everything in chronological order. She has ended up with 128 hours’ worth of material, which will run in six-hour chunks at the Chisenhale over the course of the show – everything from intimate images of her family (her child was born and her mother died during the period) to photographs she was taking as part of her work, to PDFs, to silly pictures she was sent by friends and somehow didn’t delete.

Though she calls it an “introspective”, a pun on the idea of the retrospective, it is also an act of looking outwards, rather than inwards at herself (at a literal level, there are very few selfies). You might think of it as a document of the world from a singular perspective. “The

past 16 years has, I think, been quite a peculiar period, and not just for Turkey,” she points out – although major events she witnessed, such as the Gezi Park protests of 2013, are not especially prominent, simply because at certain times she preferred to experience a moment intensely rather than to document it, especially when surrounded by others with phones and cameras. She tells me that now that she has seen the work dozens of times (it was yet to be installed when I visited the gallery) she can detect not only the obvious fact of the linear passage of time – her child growing, the ageing and death of her mother, the arrival and departure of lovers – but also its circularity. Over the years she has been drawn back to similar scenes and places, and some images, or variations on them, recur time and again. She laughs, and tells me that at times it is “actually quite boring – all those school events”. Though boredom, I suspect, might be something to be grateful for.

The List was being given away as part of a supplement with the 20 June print edition of the Guardian.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/20/banu-cennetoglu-interview-turkish-artist-the-list-europe-migrant-crisis>