

CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: BANU CENNETOĞLU

Banu Cennetoğlu

1 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

29 June – 26 August 2018

Ellen Greig: We've been working together for some time now on two related, but distinctly different 'projects'. One is an artwork, presented in the gallery, and the other is The List. Let's start by talking about The List. What is The List?

Banu Cennetoğlu: The List is a database that was initiated and is maintained by an NGO called UNITED for Intercultural Action, which they have been collating since 1993. By combining different sources from around 500 organisations, they try to keep a database of documented cases of the death of individuals attempting to enter Europe; deaths that happen while individuals are in Europe and are in detention centres, hospitals and refugee accommodation, or those facing hate crimes.

I first encountered the database in 2002 when I was living in Amsterdam and researching border politics and the spatial representations of these spaces, broadly speaking. During this period, I found UNITED's website and encountered this PDF of The List, which was obviously a shorter document than it is today. It was a very clear and quick decision that it should be more accessible somehow, in the wider public realm, without requiring people to only go to UNITED's website. People should be able to see it despite themselves, and despite that they are caught up in their daily lives; the fact they have to go to work, come back from work, get on the subway, walk on the street etc. I wanted to put it out there without any announcement, without any direct negotiation with the audience but somehow in a negotiated space.

I really wanted to do this as an artist with my resources; using my position as an artist and all of the possible collaborators, partnerships, resources that are born out of working with art institutions, curators and fellow artists but not 'appropriating' The List as an artwork.

It took five years to find and convince the first partners for the distribution of The List in 2007, as it is not an artwork. During this time, we tried different modes, such as more clandestine or DIY dissemination in public spaces, which was removed immediately. This made me sure that I needed a legitimised space for a dedicated period of time in order to be certain that The List would have broad accessibility.

During the first instalment in March 2007, The List was displayed as a poster campaign in 110 outdoor advertising signs throughout the city of Amsterdam in close collaboration with curator Huib Haye van der Werf, Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam and SKOR.

The List has recently been distributed as a 48-page supplement in the national daily newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel* and simultaneously as a poster campaign on 24 cylinders scattered around Berlin. It has also been distributed in Milan with *La Terra Inquieta*, which was co-produced by the Fondazione Nicola Trussardi and Fondazione Triennale di Milano, and in 2013, the document was translated to Bulgarian and was on display as a poster campaign in Sofia metro stations in collaboration with Övül O. Durmuşoğlu and Sofia Contemporary 2013. In 2015, The List was translated into Turkish and made visible in Istanbul through, YAMA, a large public screen on top of The Mamara Pera Hotel in Tepebaşı. In October 2012, as part of the exhibition, *Measure-Europe'n* in collaboration with Salt, Istanbul, The List was distributed via 150 outdoor advertising boards all around the city including the metro line which carries 230,000 people every day. In 2011, the 36-page document was translated into

German and was on display as a poster campaign in 72 locations in Basel-Stadt and in Baselland in collaboration with Kunsthalle Basel. And in 2007, in collaboration with the 1st Athens Biennale and *TA NEA* newspaper, the 16-page list was published in its entirety translated to Greek and distributed as a supplement in the daily newspaper.

I feel that a fixed timeframe of dissemination is important, and also a surprise encounter is important. This is why *The List* should not be represented or aestheticized in an attempt to make it an artwork. The visibility that I can facilitate is supported by different collaborations and negotiations within art institutions and art workers, because that is what we have.

EG: Chisenhale Gallery has partnered with Liverpool Biennial to produce an updated version of The List. We have also worked with The Guardian to distribute The List in print and online, which took place on 20 June, in recognition of World Refugee Day.

BC: You and Polly invited me to work with you around 2 years ago now. On 9 November 2017, *The List* was disseminated in Germany via the daily newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel*, in collaboration with Gorki's *Berliner Herbstsalon*. Therefore, I was not keen on distributing it in a new context so urgently since I needed time to reflect on the conditions and effects of such a large-scale distribution. But then there was the possibility of combining forces with Liverpool Biennial, which presented the possibility of two institutions in the same country making *The List* present in two different contexts for the first time. The possibility of multiple locations gave us the motivation to work on updating *The List* for UK distribution.

We then approached *The Guardian* to work with us on disseminating *The List*. We worked with them for several months, going through different stages with the newspaper, until they agreed to distribute it on 20 June, in recognition of World Refugee Day. The editors made no intervention to *The List* itself. They didn't take credit for it, they didn't change the layout, they didn't interfere with the headlines, they didn't change the language or the articulation of anything, and they published an introduction. They also created an editorial context and provided data analysis on the situation, which is part of their ongoing editorial approach to the migration crisis.

One of the challenging aspects of these collaborations has been the need to trust the partners, and not always try to use them as couriers or as hosts, because they know their audiences better than me, and they know how this information can have a wider reach. The major aim is the visibility. This document carries the weight of all these people who cannot really speak for themselves. And while we're talking about all of this, people are dying.

EG: Can you talk about the process of updating and maintaining The List?

BC: I wanted to use this opportunity to update *The List* more accurately. We worked with two copy editors, Edward Luker and Lizzie Homersham, in order to do this. In terms of editing *The List*, the main document comes from UNITED for Intercultural Action. They started to work in collaboration with us to update the period from June 2017 to May 2018. Every year UNITED update *The List* for 20 June, World Refugee Day. I worked in collaboration with UNITED in their hard copy archive in Amsterdam in order to update retrospective inconsistent cases. Meanwhile, Ed and Lizzie were copyediting the cases, and updating the document with the most recent cases.

I've been reading *The List* for the last 16 years, and, by its nature, there are holes and mistakes in it, which one doesn't necessarily see, the document might resist...

EG: Mistakes that one might never be able to fix because we don't know the full information.

BC: It's not only about the content, it's about the formulations, it's about the terminology. This has changed a lot since the nineties. The words used, and the concepts used in the world of immigration

have changed, as have the measures. From one side, people try to be politically correct since no wording is innocent, at the same time policies and the way people are treated has nothing to do with correctness. There is a responsibility when using terms such as 'illegal' or 'detention centre', or 'accommodation centre'. Is it 'refugee camp' or 'refugee accommodation'? Are people 'guests' or are they 'asylum seekers', 'refugees', 'migrants', 'immigrants', 'economic migrants'? As we saw from the tweets in response to the distribution in *The Guardian*, all these terms are very questionable. When we don't know the local or native context, who defines someone's status? We don't know how desperate someone might be. How can we judge their desperation? Who can judge who deserves to be somewhere safer?

EG: In parallel with updating The List, you have also produced a new moving image work that is presented at Chisenhale Gallery. Shall we talk about how you developed this new artwork in relation to working on The List?

BC: The attempt to talk on behalf of someone else comes with a burden. In general, one will never know if you are doing something good, or if you are taking advantage, or if you are really talking about yourself when you are talking about them. These are blurry borders. How to not fully occupy the agency or space of someone who is silenced? When one says I love the silence, the silence is already disrupted. On the other hand, in the middle of atrocities, staying silent is a form of complicity.

The work for Chisenhale Gallery came from a place where there is an ongoing, both physical and mental, attempt and need to record death; to remember hence resisting to forget. It is not only The List. I grew up and I live in Turkey where systematic state violence is normalised with the help of the erasure and denial of memories, for centuries. As we know, dead bodies come with political lives and state violence doesn't stop when the person is not alive anymore. It continues to be exercised in how the body is perceived and treated.

So, for example, I have a child. I go to a demonstration of a murdered child killed by security forces whilst he was sent to buy bread, I come back home, there is a birthday party. The following day, I travel for a research trip for an upcoming biennale with 'political content' with the luxury of traveling all over the world because I have a Canadian passport. Throughout I am reading and editing the 'information' of dead people who are dying because they were forced to leave their home and tried to cross borders.

Meanwhile, the bigger picture is that I live in a country that has an ongoing 40-year-old war, with countless deaths that we are not even 'allowed' to see the faces of those lost and mourn for them. I like to think I have Orpheus and Sisyphus as my companions, one has to act from that muddy darkness, whilst the act cannot possibly be immune to it.

EG: The work in the gallery is a moving image work that is compiled from every digital image and video you have received or created over the last 12 years and it lasts for 128 hours and 22 minutes.

BC: Yes, so, I decided to compile all the digital images and videos I have – taken from phones, camera's hard-drives, also several internet downloads and the ones sent to me – from the last 12 years, one year before the first dissemination of The List, and one year before I conceived my daughter. A lot of shit has happened in the world over the last 12 years, back in Turkey and in Europe and in the US, in the whole world's politics. Images range from holidays, to the death of my mother, to installing an exhibition, to finished artworks, to birthday parties, to extensive research trips, to The List, protests and documents... It might look like my life, but indeed, it is our lives.

This collection comes with several questions around ethics. The work features my daughter and close family; it involves friends, encounters and strangers and comprises complex questions about 'border' and shared politics. I think those questions are also relevant to the way in which the moving stream of images have no hierarchy to their order.

EG: *How have you compiled all this digital content?*

BC: It is compiled in chronological order, which is based on the date created information of each file. The work is made up of 46,685 individual files, of still and moving images. Still images stay for four seconds, moving images are kept in their original duration and in their original language. There is no translation and no regulation of the sound.

This refusal to translate into the given contexts language – i.e. English – is unusual in my practice as I have often focused on increasing the accessibility of content. Yet, I decided to leave the language as it is with no translation. There are at least eight different languages in the work, several hours of foreign languages... What do we do with this content? What is the content? Do we erase the content? These are questions that the work at Chisenhale Gallery will generate, I hope.

EG: *Have you edited or removed any of the content to preserve your, or others, privacy?*

BC: There is only one file that I didn't include because I promised last year when I filmed the footage, that I would not show it anywhere, ever. I immediately put that outside and then I continued. I never even questioned this one edit.

In terms of methodology, I only edited out the same file when it's shot in two different formats, because I used to photograph RAW and JPEG, especially for work. So, I deleted one format because it's exactly the same image, but the camera creates two formats. In the film you have hundreds of similar looking images, but they are all singular files with very small changes.

When a visitor watches the work, they may feel like they are seeing the same image – or the same content – rearticulated in different forms throughout the years. When I get ready for an exhibition there is a lot of photography beforehand and then the work is put out in the world. Then, images of the work and of the installation context, and of the press context also start to accumulate. All these images have different formats and different frames.

When you enter the gallery, and you look at the screen, you have to deal with what you have in front of you. There is no immediate comprehensiveness.

EG: *Each day that the gallery is open, a new series of images and videos are shown. In this way the work is very 'site-specific'. How have you programmed each daily file?*

BC: I worked with an editor, also a friend, Barış Oktem, in Istanbul. We edited the entire duration of the work – which is 128 hours and 22 minutes – into 22 parts. Each part is edited in response to the opening hours of the gallery. Every day it will start at noon and it will run until around six o'clock. Depending on the day, some files are five hours 59 minutes and 30 seconds, some are six hours two minutes. Except on the first opening night, which is edited to two hours because the opening is two hours-long. The durational programming of each file was a practical solution to the amount of data I was working with in relation to the gallery opening hours.

The end date and time was obviously not under my control. When I compiled all the files from all my electronic devices over the past 12 years, there were 46,685 files and it ended up being 128 hours and 22 minutes. The last day of 22 days of parts or fragments is four hours and 40 minutes, which is less than the gallery opening hours. So, I combined this part with the opening part, so it becomes six hours and 40 minutes.

The whole film will repeat once during the exhibition's duration, because of how many days the exhibition is open for. It is a 43-day exhibition.

EG: Every audience member's experience of the exhibition is going to be completely different from the next person. No one will ever see the complete work.

BC: Oh, they can! It's there. It depends on your time commitments, but it is possible. This is the thing, it is in constant flux, but somebody could watch the whole thing if they want. There isn't an impossibility of access. It's there. There's no hiding.

EG: You have displayed the work as a single-screen projection onto a large wall at the far-end of the gallery space. You have also opened up four windows in the space and controlled the light conditions through solar-filters that are placed directly onto the windowpanes.

BC: It is a very naked installation, there is no black box, there are no black walls, no cinematic experience. The screen is a large wall - an object, or carrier. No image will be viewed full frame on the screen, each image is a frame within a frame... One can walk around the screen.

The light in the space will interfere with the screen and with the lighting of the images, which is important to me to interfere with the installation, and not be a completely dark viewing space. It will do this in a controlled way, but it will interfere. The seating is comfortable and hopefully invites visitors to sit, watch for a while, take a break and come back for another episode.

In the gallery foyer we are also displaying the metadata of each file as a printed compilation. It is presented in a simple ring binder file on a shelf for visitors to look through.

EG: What is the 'metadata file'?

BC: It is an excel file, that outlines all the information pertaining to each digital file that is included in the moving image work. Through a very simple application – File List Export – the existing information about each file is listed. It also comprises the file name, the duration of each part, date created for each file, date modified for each file, screening date, kind of file, size of file, dimensions, DPIs, colour profile, and the creator, and what kind of software the file was created with.

If you are into these kind of classification politics, you can map the range of information. For example, if you came to see the exhibition on 29 June at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, you could work out – more or less – the information of the files that you are viewing. The files are named sometimes personally, sometimes with related keywords; except the numbering at the beginning, they are kept with their original 'file names'.

EG: In this way, the work maps changes and developments in digital image circulation and production over the last 12 years.

BC: I used to use a lot of analogue photography back in the nineties but there is no analogue photography in this work. You can see different technological developments in terms of resolutions and via different cameras. You can see the kind of source camera that the file was shot with. It is also interesting to consider what has happened over the past 12 years in terms of these technological developments. You can see this range of changes in the metadata.

EG: Let's talk about the title of the work. It is multi-titled. There are 13 of them: 1 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. Why have you chosen to title it this way?

BC: These are all the titles that have stayed with me over the past five months, while I have been working on this new piece, which I just couldn't forget. I kept thinking about them. You can see that

most of them deal with notions of guilt or consciousness, or the ambitious act of trying to do something with very little outcome. One of the titles, *Keçiboynuzu*, which means carob in Turkish – encapsulates this idea well; you chew and chew and chew the plant, and eventually you only get a tiny bit of flavour.

The title was also inspired by Clarice Lispector's *The Hour of the Star* (1977). Lispector uses multiple titles in the beginning of the book, titles that could be 'instead of' *The Hour of the Star*. She describes how she went through different titles before *The Hour of the Star* was chosen, she was thinking of one, or the other, or another – but for me it is 'and', not 'or'.

Throughout the whole process of making this work, every night I was moving over the years from different parts of my life and different feelings, but also facts and people and nonsense. Every time I thought 'Ok, the name should be this!' or 'It should be this!' and I had very strong feelings for that particular fragment. That title was coming from that source. Then the following morning it would be another situation. I kept thinking, 'I cannot do this', 'I cannot do this'. I think trying to reduce the work to one feeling or one perception made me realise that it cannot be just one.

I also took inspiration from other writers and musicians for the titles. 'Guilty feet have got no rhythm', is taken from George Michael's song, *Careless Whisper*. 'I measure every grief I meet' and 'A piercing Comfort it affords' are both quotes taken from Emily Dickinson. While, 'One day soon I'm gonna tell the moon about the crying game' is taken from Dave Berry's *Crying Game*.

EG: *And, also, the impossibility of correct categorisation, because the first title is a date: 1 January 1970 – 21 March 2018. What is significant about 1 January 1970?*

BC: The collation of digital images and videos included in this work starts on 10 June 2006 to 21 March 2018. The file order is chronological based on the creation date and not the modified date.

1 January 1970 is the 'epoch' date in Unix systems, i.e., the beginning of time for this computer operating system. It is quite complicated, but basically, if the creation date for a certain digital file is blank or zero, the file ends up being automatically titled, 1 January 1970 or 1 January 1980.

The first 1073 files, which is 2 hours, 15 minutes and 12 seconds of the moving image work, has material from mixed years. This is because their creation dates are all 1 January 1970 or 1980. As I have compiled the work chronologically, to the creation date of each file, the first 1073 files are all files dated to 'Unix time'. This 'Unix time' part is the first part of the work and is presented at the opening.

You can see the 'original' date of these files on the metadata sheet, and I could have converted or taken the modified date for the ordering criteria, but I like the nonchronological chronology imposed by Unix. For me, it further addresses the impossibility of complete categorisation, and politics of digital image production and circulation.

EG: *It also disrupts the validity of information, which is interesting in relation to The List and this ongoing discussion around validation and truth.*

BC: It's circular. In terms of the whole linearity of time, it's a circular situation, a circular narrative. There is not really a beginning or an end.

EG: *Or a resolution.*

BC: No.

Interviewed by Ellen Greig, Curator: Commissions, Chisenhale Gallery, on Thursday 21 June 2018 at Chisenhale Gallery, London. Chisenhale Interviews, series editor, Polly Staple, Director, Chisenhale Gallery.