

# Banu Cennetoğlu

SculptureCenter

you + lose your mind  
COME BACK!

# Banu Cennetoğlu

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# What is it that you are worried about?

Sohrab Mohebbi

Banu Cennetoğlu’s moving-image work *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* presents the totality of the artist’s visual archive from June 10, 2006, to March 21, 2018.<sup>1</sup> The time span of the project is bookended by, at one end, Cennetoğlu’s engagement with The List (see pages 6–10 of the current volume) and the conception of Cennetoğlu’s daughter, and, at the other, the 2018 Nowruz (the Persian New Year, celebrating the vernal equinox), the artist’s self-imposed production deadline for the work’s premiere at Chisenhale Gallery, London.

Chronologically arranged, *1 January 1970–21 March 2018* comprises 128 hours and 22 minutes of still images and videos sourced from various devices—including Cennetoğlu’s mobile phones, computers, cameras, and external hard drives—in an unedited stream of content. Cennetoğlu herself refers to the work as an “introspective” that brings together scattered, fleeting moments of a life lived, from the birth of her daughter to episodes of political upheaval and protest; documentation of her artistic practice; images sent to her by colleagues, friends, and family for various reasons and with different intentions; and the ordinary incidents of everyday life. She did not edit out any image, nor does she single out one title among thirteen, not unlike the Brazilian novelist Clarice Lispector in her *The Hour of the Star* (1977).

Most retrospectives tend to contextualize bodies of work through curatorial interventions that take the form of wall texts, critical ephemera, and archival material. Cennetoğlu’s, however, takes us through the artist’s oeuvre through the digital remnants of her activities. *Taq u Raq* shows the research and productions phases, the installation process, the final exhibition, the press walkthrough, the opening, the dinner, the after-party, and the artist’s plane ride back home. Curators, museum directors, other artists, and critics make their appearance. In this visual diary, we watch the artist’s daughter grow up, we watch her friends and family, we watch her working, we watch her living.

The work presents the social history of Cennetoğlu’s practice, offering a daringly unedited portrait of the artist.

Not all the art in Cennetoğlu’s introspective/retrospective is on view at the same time. Here the artist uses time as an exhibition device. It is unlikely that a visitor will ever be able to watch *Keçiboynuzu* in its entirety, or even see all the “works” featured: depending on when you walk in, you might see the preparation of one of the iterations of the *Library of Spirits*; a production of *29.06.2012*, 2012; footage of the artist as she collects newspapers in both parts of Cyprus; the installation of her 2011 exhibition at the Kunsthalle Basel; or The List presented in Berlin, Istanbul, Bonn, or Budapest.

In a typical retrospective, we see works that an artist has made but remain ignorant of their place in her life; here, a digital accumulation gives us a glimpse. There are recurring characters—the artist, her daughter Can, other family members, close friends—and all along we watch the artist engaging with The List, a growing document that traces information related to the deaths of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants within or on the borders of Europe. When Cennetoğlu facilitated the project’s first presentation in Amsterdam in 2007, it contained 7,128 names; by September 2018, the total was 35,597. Throughout the film, we see Cennetoğlu working on the project for its presentation in a range of cities and together with different collaborators.

Cennetoğlu embarked on *I measure every grief I meet* as she was pondering what it would mean to present a list of the dead. Because she was processing her own mother’s death at the time, as Kaelen Wilson-Goldie observes she “began working on the introspective from a place of grief and uncertainty.”<sup>2</sup> Though she was torn “between the possibilities of mourning for someone so close to you and mourning for a community you don’t know,” she decided to focus on her own life as it transpired alongside the expanding List.<sup>3</sup> One of the most poignant passages of the work, in fact, shows the passing of the artist’s mother interspersed with images of the artist’s participation in documenta 14. The elderly woman lies on a hospital bed as her health deteriorates, artists interact animatedly in Kassel, Can dances for the camera, and then we’re back at the hospital. Such dispositions run throughout the work, as it moves from UAE labor camps to the glamour of Art Dubai, from children playing to a panel discussion, from a protest to an opening reception, from austere conceptualism to a beachfront sunset, from a funeral to a holiday. The abrupt juxtapositions, simultaneously ironic and sentimental, show a life, with all of its entanglements and contradictions, drifting along unceremoniously.

Images are insufficient. As noted on page after page of image theory, they are selective, partial, deceptive, open to endless interpretation and contextualization, never able to convey the whole picture. *Stitch* invites us to

reflect on our own image archive at a time when we over-document our lives and store them in the Cloud or on hard drives and social media. The culture of oversharing has made us spectators of each other’s realities as we scroll through grams, tweets, and “stories,” swiping left and right, liking, ignoring. Though *A piercing Comfort it affords* remarks on the trend, Cennetoğlu’s images are awkwardly unselective. Unlike the content of social media, here the one iconic image encapsulating an event is replaced with images from every possible angle, with multiple exposures and without hierarchy, embarrassing and vain, at times boring, at others action-packed. All the photos that you delete to make room for more are retained. Downloading our photos when the phone reaches its storage capacity, we see a few months of our life sweeping by on the screen: things we did, places we’ve been, people and animals we’ve met, kept, lost, stopped seeing, or left. Platforms and apps, from Facebook to iPhoto, every now and then share with us unsolicited “memories” from our digital stockpile. There is a sense of mourning in going through images of the past, which is, after all, lost time even when it takes the form of a pop-up notification generated by an algorithm. The voyeuristic pleasure of watching images of someone else’s life, in this case the artist’s, mirrors the perverse melancholy of revisiting one’s own. It is amusing to observe the absurd formalism of what is said to be authentic and idiosyncratic in each individual.

In addition to the monumental moving-image piece, the current exhibition includes *What is it that you are worried about?*, which emerged from a 2014 collaboration between Cennetoğlu and artist Yasemin Özcan. As visitors enter the SculptureCenter gallery, they are greeted with the titular words written on a mirror above head height, preparing them for browsing the installation of 142 volumes, each of which gathers together all the newspapers published on a single day in a particular place: Germany (70 volumes, 8/11/2015), the United Kingdom (46 volumes, 9/4/2014), 20 Arabic-speaking countries (10 volumes, 11/2/2011), Turkey (8 volumes, 8/20/2010), Switzerland (5 volumes, 1/14/2011), and Cyprus (3 volumes, 6/29/2012). In their physicality, the newspapers testify to the waning of the print medium in response to the proliferation of online sources. In their numbers, they point to population differences, but more importantly to sociopolitical conditions. At a time when the press is under incessant attack and discrediting by rising authoritarianism worldwide, Cennetoğlu’s compilation pays homage to a fundamental anchor of democracy while exposing the differential between various countries’ dissemination and mediation of information. In the case of Turkey, where the artist resides, many of the newspapers she includes in the work—particularly the pro-Kurdish papers—are no longer in print due to censorship or financial challenges. As fake news becomes a refrain of those in power who are threatened by investigative

journalism, one wonders how safe Western democracies are from autocratic attacks on the press, and how well the latter can weather these hostile tides.

Scanning Cennetoğlu’s newspapers, we can observe the distinctive packaging and distribution of information by various (allowable) voices and regions of a country. While diversity of editorial positions reflects a country’s tolerance of multiplicity and dissent, the weight of the paper, the print quality, and the nature of the advertisements speak to the finances of the publisher and the readers. Yet, observations of papers’ structural idiosyncrasies aside, here again there is a sense of ingloriously lost time. Nothing major happens, but hundreds of minor events are documented on page after page. This collection of outdated newspapers shows the banality of history in the making.

*OffDuty* stems from the artist’s contribution to documenta 14 in Kassel, Germany, in 2017, in which she replaced the words “Museum Fridericianum” on the building’s frieze with “BEINGSAFEISSCARY,” a phrase she took from graffiti she had seen on the façade of the Polytechnico in Athens across from a student-organized refugee help center. For the documenta project, she appropriated the nine gold-painted aluminum letters from the museum’s façade that could be reused in the phrase, and had six more letters cast in brass in the same style. At the conclusion of documenta, the “original” letters were returned to the Fridericianum façade, and the six new casts became *OffDuty*.

*BEINGSAFEISSCARY* calls out the incapacity of the conforming systems of regulation, categorization, classification, and normalization to capture and contain the human condition, a concern that runs throughout Cennetoğlu’s oeuvre. The List can never contain the dead; the 128 hours of *Yes. But. We had a golden heart* are only fragmentary traces of a life exposed to the camera, and not even all the newspapers of a country can capture one day in its history. The weight of the accumulation indicates the burden of the lack, and words and images are the remains of a life off duty that the artist calls to task.

1	To respect the contents of the title, I’ve varied its abbreviation in this text. An untitled Emily Dickinson poem (no. 561) is the source of <i>I measure every grief I meet</i> and <i>A piercing Comfort it affords</i> . See <i>The Essential Emily Dickinson</i> , introduction and selection by Joyce Carol Oates (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 40.	2	Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, “Today in History: Kaelen Wilson-Goldie on the Art of Banu Cennetoğlu,” <i>Artforum</i> 57, no. 5 (January 2019), <a href="https://www.artforum.com/print/201901/kaelen-wilson-goldie-on-the-art-of-banu-cennetoglu-78003">https://www.artforum.com/print/201901/kaelen-wilson-goldie-on-the-art-of-banu-cennetoglu-78003</a> .
		3	Ibid.

# Listing

Thomas Keenan and Sohrab Mohebbi

*The List traces information related to the death of more than 35,597 refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants who have lost their lives within or on the borders of Europe since 1993. It is compiled and updated every year by the Amsterdam-based organization UNITED for Intercultural Action. Since 2006, in collaboration with curators, art workers, and institutions, Banu Cennetoğlu has facilitated up-to-date and translated versions of The List in several countries using public display structures such as ad-boards and newspaper supplements.*<sup>1</sup>

What is it to “list”? Etymologically, the word points in three apparently unrelated directions. Ships and other vessels list: they tilt or sway to one side or another, when passengers or cargo shift abruptly and when winds and waves overtake them. And when they list, they run the risk of capsizing. An announcement of listing, then, is an alarm or warning. Beware! To list also means, in an older English, to hear or hearken, to listen. List! I am calling for your attention, asking you to notice and respond, to acknowledge what is being said. Finally, to list is to bring things together in a column or row. This meaning of the word is derived from the Middle English *liste*, meaning “border, edging, stripe,” and from Old French and Old Italian words meaning “strip of paper.” Listing brings things together in a line or a strip, treats separate items as related to one another, assembles them into a territory of their own.<sup>2</sup>

Boats list and sink, and their passengers and crew drown, all the time. The forces of nature are often to blame. The phenomenon charted by The List is anything but natural. It results from the deliberate choice of European governments and electorates to restrict legal entry into the EU by those seeking refuge, asylum, or a better life. Fleeing people are forced to undertake dangerous journeys across inhospitable deserts, seas, beaches, and cities, often ending in detention centers and refugee camps. The engine that drives The List is the weaponization of the sea, land, and weather in the name of what is cynically called “deterrence.” And the events it documents are not limited to Europe: The List could certainly be expanded to include North America as well,

where more or less the same thing happens at and on the way to the southern border of the United States.

The List features the names of the dead when they are known and placeholders when they are not. Many names are yet to be learned and entered. The entries are counted and enumerated, so the names become numbers as well. The qualitative and the quantitative meet—The List says two things at the same time, joining them in a dynamic rhythm. All the dead deserve to be known and recorded individually, to have their identities preserved as the markers of the lives they alone lived. The entries speak of singularity. But the names are gathered together in this list because the individuals died, in effect, together. The enumeration brings them into relation, it equalizes and generalizes them. And it reminds us of how many lives have been lost to policies of cruelty and indifference. The ever-growing number is another sort of marker, an index of the scale and scope of the catastrophe that has taken place, and still is taking place, within Europe and at its borders.

Banu Cennetoğlu calls herself the caretaker of a graveyard. There is no proper resting place for many of the lost on The List—some bodies are never found, others are found but not identified before being buried in unmarked graves across Europe. What kind of cemetery is a list, and how does one take care of it? The name, gender, and age of each victim is added to a spreadsheet, along with the date, location, and cause of their death. Note is made of where they came from, if known, and the source of the information about their death. The logic of the entries’ organization must be consistent, so the caretaker edits the document, checking the spelling, grammar, and syntax. Because the data is recorded in different languages, the task often involves translation. It’s an administrative process. The presentation is bureaucratically austere, neutral, factual, banal: six columns are filled in along the new rows added each time the document is updated.

The List has been growing for more than a decade. When Cennetoğlu first presented it publicly in March 2007 in Amsterdam, it contained 7,128 confirmed entries. When she facilitated its publication in *The Guardian* as a special supplement in June 2018, the headline read: “It’s 34,361 and rising: how The List tallies Europe’s migrant bodycount.”<sup>3</sup> Its most recent presentation in Barcelona in September 2018 showed 35,597 dead. The creation and maintenance of The List is a private, voluntary, civic effort initiated by the Dutch NGO UNITED for Intercultural Action. Cennetoğlu’s projects aim to publicize it: “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.”<sup>4</sup>

The List is a public document that aspires to readability and visibility. The names it bears should be known, seen, heard, beyond the realm of those who have already noticed. They appear in print and on walls and billboards, not just spoken to a friend or whispered to a neighbor. Because, as Cennetoğlu notes, “a surprise encounter is important,” we are confronted by The List when we look out the windshield or open the newspaper at the breakfast table or a café.<sup>5</sup> Far from the border, or the sea or the desert, the names of the dead confront the living. The List demands attention, it insists on being heard. Cennetoğlu says: “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.”<sup>6</sup>

Monuments are often erected in the name of nation, race, faith, or clan to remind those who survive of those who did not. Like any memorial, The List seeks to restore the dead, as Thomas Laqueur writes, “into a remade world of the living.”<sup>7</sup> It alerts us—regardless of whether or not we want to know—that we are both living without the deceased and existing alongside them, creating a new community of the living and the dead. In this way The List challenges the monopoly that organized powers have sought to exercise over the memories and disposition of the dead. Beyond or despite the borders customarily erected around institutions and their memories, The List aspires to what another activist has called the “more egalitarian citizenry of the dead.”<sup>8</sup>

The List is ephemeral and unfixed. It keeps changing, when people die, when the formerly nameless are identified, and when factual errors are corrected. The List’s size and shape shift, as do the sites of its public presentation. It is a sort of counter-monument in constant formation.

A nation is similarly composed of a list of people, one that is restricted to those whom the state recognizes and counts as its own. The List challenges the distinction with its stark rewriting of the borders of contemporary Europe and the nation-state form it has bequeathed to the globe. Any list creates a border, as it distinguishes those who are on it from those who are not. The List negatively defines Europe as the place of those who are not on it—those who walk by the document in Liverpool, London, Basel, Athens, or Budapest. In a sense, Los Angeles and Istanbul are also part of this place. The List does not belong to any single nation-state, and it is presented not in the place where the deceased originated but rather where they ended up—“within, or on the borders of Europe.” As such, it designates a new geographic concept: the frontiers of the European continent, its reach, are defined by people who are now dead. The border is no longer an arbitrary political marker, but the track of lives lost

along the way. The people who are named no longer belonged to any place at the time that they died; they will not be returned to a homeland and are seldom ceremonially buried or memorialized. The List is their distinctive itinerant resting place.

Cennetoğlu observes: “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.” There is urgency in recording the names and making them public, yet this objective, technical, administrative undertaking carries ethical risks. It is unilateral: no one can ask the dead for their consent, or even their opinion. “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?”<sup>9</sup>

The List distributes this burden among all of us who were previously unburdened. There is no way to stay clear of these “blurry borders,” between speaking and silence, generosity and exploitation, knowledge and ignorance. But to take a moment to listen and to mourn at the site of this migratory mass grave can contribute, in the words of Allan Sekula, to “laying the groundwork for a collective memory of suffering.”<sup>10</sup> How to grieve for the dead of others, the dead to whom one is not related, the dead who come from elsewhere? How to mourn those who wanted to live among us? In the words of Laqueur, The List asks the question, “How do we come to feel that we should care?”<sup>11</sup> And, if we do, how do we become caretakers?

Cennetoğlu insists that The List is not a work of art. This is not only an effort to foreclose an aesthetic judgment—does the list look good or bad, is it beautiful or sublime? It is also an attempt to deprive us of the recourse to some alleged indeterminacy of artistic interpretation. The List makes a claim on us, an ethical one, yes, but also a fact-based one. The names are facts. The List lists “refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants who have lost their lives.” What we do with this fact is up to us.



1

The List website, <http://www.list-e.info>.

2

*Oxford English Dictionary* online, December 2018, s.v. “list,” <http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/11125>.

3

*The Guardian* (London) website, June 20, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/20/the-list-europe-migrant-bodycount>.

4

In Charlotte Higgins, “Banu Cennetoglu: ‘As long as I have the resources, I will make The List more visible,’” interview, *The Guardian* (London), June 20, 2018.

5

Ellen Grieg, “Interview with Banu Cennetoğlu,” “Banu Cennetoğlu at Chisenhale: 29 June–26 August 2018,” exhibition handout, n.d., unpaginated, [https://chisenhale.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/BC\\_Exhibition\\_Handout\\_FINAL-1.pdf](https://chisenhale.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/BC_Exhibition_Handout_FINAL-1.pdf).

6

In Higgins, “Banu Cennetoğlu.”

7

Thomas W. Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

8

Madeleine Fullard, “Missing Persons Task Team (South Africa),” cited in Cassidy Parker, “The Missing Persons Task Team: Fleshing Out the Bones of the Apartheid Era,” news article posted on the Cradle of Humankind website, June 20, 2016, <https://www.maropeng.co.za/news/entry/the-missing-persons-task-team-fleshing-out-the-bones-of-the-apartheid-era>.

9

In Higgins, “Banu Cennetoğlu.”

10

Allan Sekula, “Photography and the Limits of National Identity,” *Grey Room*, no. 55 (Spring 2014): 31.

11

Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*, 45.



Banu Cennetoğlu, *1 January 1970 – 21 March 2018 · H O W B E I T · Guilty feet have got no rhythm · Keçiboyunuz · 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, detail.







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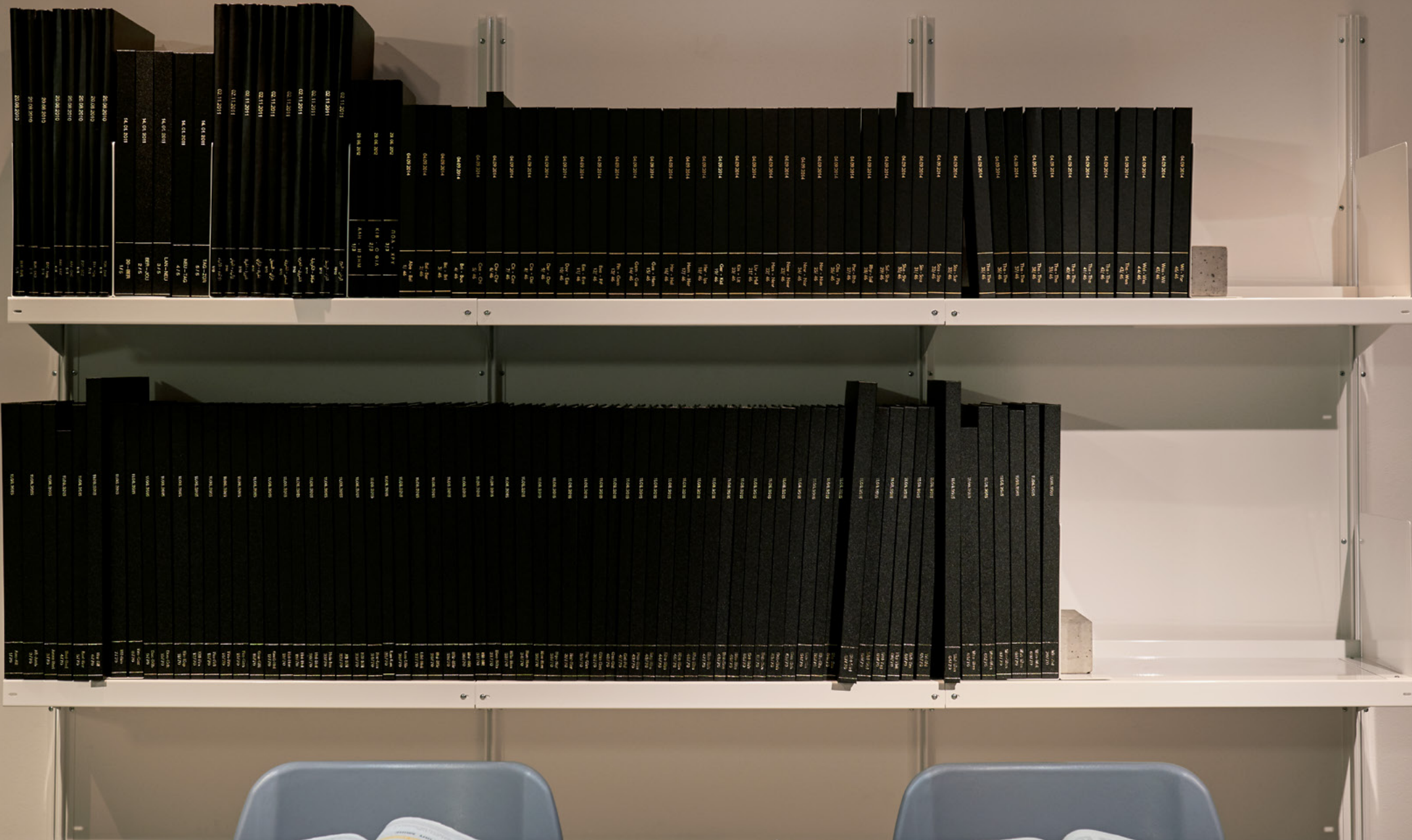


*OffDuty Y*, 2017, installation view.



*What is it that you are worried about?*,  
2014, installation view.





Checklist

20.08.2010, 2010  
Daily newspapers from Turkey,  
all dated 20.08.2010  
8 hardbound volumes, each  
22.4 × 15 inches (57 × 38 cm)

14.01.2011, 2011  
Daily newspapers from Switzerland,  
all dated 14.01.2011  
5 hardbound volumes, each  
19.7 × 14.2 inches (50 × 36 cm)

02.11.2011, 2011  
Daily newspapers from 20  
Arabic-speaking countries,  
all dated 02.11.2011  
10 hardbound volumes, each  
23.6 × 16.5 inches (60 × 42 cm)

29.06.2012, 2012  
Daily newspapers from Cyprus,  
all dated 29.06.2012  
3 hardbound volumes, each  
16.5 × 11.8 inches (42 × 30 cm)

*What is it that you are worried  
about?*, 2014  
Sandblasted inscription on mirror  
19.7 × 27.6 inches (50 × 70 cm)  
In collaboration with  
Yasemin Özcan

04.09.2014, 2014  
Daily newspapers from the United  
Kingdom and the Channel Islands,  
all dated 04.09.2014  
46 hardbound volumes, each  
15 × 11.6 inches (38 × 29.5 cm)

11.08.2015, 2015  
Daily newspapers from Germany,  
all dated 11.08.2015  
70 hardbound volumes, each  
20.5 × 14.2 inches (52 × 36 cm)

*OffDuty A*, 2017  
Brass  
23.6 × 19.7 × 0.4 inches  
(60 × 50 × 1 cm)  
coleção Moraes-Barbosa, São Paulo

*OffDuty B*, 2017  
Brass  
23.6 × 19.7 × 0.4 inches  
(60 × 50 × 1 cm)  
coleção Moraes-Barbosa, São Paulo

*OffDuty G*, 2017  
Brass  
23.6 × 19.7 × 0.4 inches  
(60 × 50 × 1 cm)  
coleção Moraes-Barbosa, São Paulo

*OffDuty S*, 2017  
Brass  
23.6 × 19.7 × 0.4 inches  
(60 × 50 × 1 cm)  
coleção Moraes-Barbosa, São Paulo

*OffDuty S*, 2017  
Brass  
23.6 × 19.7 × 0.4 inches  
(60 × 50 × 1 cm)  
coleção Moraes-Barbosa, São Paulo

*OffDuty Y*, 2017  
Brass  
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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  
Video, images, sound  
22 parts, 46,685 files;  
128 hours and 22 minutes  
Metadata: 687 pages, 11 × 17 inches  
(279 mm × 432 mm)  
Commissioned and produced by  
Chisenhale Gallery, London

Except where noted, all works  
courtesy the artist and Rodeo,  
London/Piraeus.



**Banu Cennetoğlu**

Jan 14–Mar 25, 2019

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