

CHASING SPIRITS: A CONVERSATION WITH BANU CENNETOĞLU

Banu Cennetoğlu interviewed by Negar Azimi
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The first time I met Banu Cennetoğlu was in Istanbul at Sylvia Kouvali's space, RODEO. I think I was surprised that someone who was so famously exacting, and who had spent previous lives in Paris, New York, and Amsterdam, looked so youthful (she still does).

As a book nerd, I had enthusiastically followed the work Banu had done through BAS, a pioneering space and project in Istanbul that puts rare and covetable artist books out into the world. Her own artwork, tethered loosely to regimes of representation—care of words and images—won me over, too. Rigorously researched and yet imbued with the crooked beauty of personal histories, the art's unlikely poetry was intoxicating.

Still, the prospect of conducting an interview with Banu is an intimidating one. We are both perfectionists, so after some vague and half-hearted gestures toward having a phone conversation (she is in Istanbul, I am in Paris) we settled on email as a medium. Much safer, we agreed. "But we can still have fun," Banu added.

Negar Azimi: *Dear Banu, I've heard an irresistible rumor: the work you're about to show at RODEO involves spirits and came to be in Sarajevo?*

Banu Cennetoğlu: *Yes! It's a collaborative piece with Yasemin Özcan, an artist from Istanbul. The video work is called *What is it that you are worried about?* It's a 35mm video recording of an energy scan and cleansing at a nuclear bunker secretly built by Tito between 1953 — 1979 at Konjic, a small town near Sarajevo.*

NA: *That's incredible. What sort of place does the bunker occupy today?*

BC: It's an artefact to start with, so it's obviously heavily charged politically and socially. The bunker is a permanent tourist attraction, packed with local tourists. At the same time, it's a military zone. You can't just enter as you wish, or when you wish... the biennale that brought us there, the 2nd edition of Project Biennial D-0 ARK Underground, has added another layer to it. It's a complex condition; the bunker as an artefact, with its spectacular being and content, co-exists and maybe competes with invited art works. There's also the question of how this forced intimacy is experienced by the local art scene and local tourists. Anyway, the work tries to "hear" what the bunker has to say. Did I mention its code name was Istanbul?

NA: *Ha! How fortuitous. So it's fated. You found Istanbul in the former Yugoslavia. And the question of spirits: spirits feel very connected to fear, which I suppose in a way the bunker represents. The architecture of fear anyway. Tell me about the cleansing? And do you personally believe in spirits?*

BC: We worked with a Habitat and Human Energy Rebalancing coach named Zeynep Sevil Güven, otherwise known as ZSG. For this project, she simultaneously used something called the Inner-Speak protocol and her self-developed ZSG healing method. She applied a holographic energy scan through the architectural plan of the bunker, which means she didn't actually go there, but realized a remote operation! But yes, the piece is relevant in thinking about fear and paranoia and its layered manifestations through architectural "spirits". And yes, I do believe in spirits.

NA: *Moonshine. This is also something you're working on ... vernacular spirit making, in a way. Again, that word: spirit. I am so curious, how did this come to be?*

BC: Actually, I started to think about a "library of spirits" composed of homemade moonshine when I visited Tito's bunker in 2012. The past and present practice of making rakia—that's the name of the distilled booze in the Balkans—and its relevance socially, economically, and politically was interesting to me... plus the underground-ness of it. According to the dictionary, the vapour given off and collected during an alchemical process is the "spirit" of the original material.

NA: *I love that. How did this connect to Tito's bunker?*

BC: The bunker has a specific relationship to the future... I was interested in the permanent presence of a spirit compilation. Permanent, in part, as there's a prospect of converting the bunker into a museum after 10 years.

NA: *You must know a lot of arcana about spirits at this point... give me some?*

BC: Sure, for example: the best part of a distilled spirit is called the “heart,” collected at the perfect temperature— not too early. With a “head,” one could end up with acetone or methanol. “Tails” are pretty much rubbing alcohol. During the energy scan, we found that the bunker had some issues with its heart meridian, if you could believe it.

NA: *I know you extended this work in Romania and will also take the project to Gwangju for the biennial there?*

BC: Yes, I collected 115 homemade spirits in Romania between June and December 2013 and eventually showed them as an open bar and library, composed of extracts. I guess I’m fascinated by the art of “distillation.” I’m still thinking about how to balance the process of collecting, which carries with it many stories, and the collection itself. Each bottle in the library I’m putting together has a label with comprehensive information about its production: who produced it? When and where? Who collected it? I’m still not sure what form it will take in Gwangju, but I’m interested in building a larger compilation from different geographies based on practical and personal itineraries. I’d also hopefully build a bar again ...

NA: *I’m pretty confident South Koreans will appreciate the gesture. Okay, so we share a passion for printed matter. I think we, at Bidoun, first learned about your work via fabulously hirsute Masist GÓl, the now-deceased actor who made these radically idiosyncratic graphic novels. Where does that project stand now, as I remember there was other archival material related to his life and work to sift through?*

BC: We (with Philippine Hoegen) recently showed his work and archive at Kunstraum, Klagenfurt. It’s a pretty strangely calm place for Masist but an interesting program run by Christian Kravagna and Hedwig Saxenhuber. We also showed a video piece which tried to articulate our concerns about posthumous publishing and our respective roles as his “facilitator”. As you say, there’s a manuscript by him that is an unpublished graphic novel from the 1980s. Our encounter with GÓl’s work, the responsibility we assumed for it and the case of this book in particular, give rise to questions about the ethics of publishing and of not publishing posthumously, on issues of translating slang and colloquialisms, on the role and responsibility of the publisher, the choice of context and the positioning of pornographic content, etc. So we sent some questions to several artists, writers, publishers, and translators in order to open up these issues and worries. Two round table discussions on these topics were held in two different cities. The first was in April 2012 at Rongwrong, an Amsterdam-based space for art and theory, the second, hosted by The Collective Gallery, took place in May 2012 in Edinburgh at The White Horse. The discussions were pretty productive and challenging, but we still didn’t come up with a satisfying answer about whether to publish or not...

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NA: *It's so interesting to think about the ethics of treating what he's left behind. Is there anything he left that might indicate his future desires? How much do you worry about this? I mean, by formalizing the worrying in these discussions, you did some work in thinking through these ethical questions. It reminds me of my own relationship to Van Leo, an Armenian-Egyptian photographer who left behind his life's work in 2002. The difference for me, I guess, is that I knew Van Leo sought fame, we all did, even a dedicated museum and his name in lights, etc. Still, the specific way we memorialize him is up to the archivist or curator—you or me in this case—and this is fraught and endlessly interesting. I mean, it's really about power, isn't it, the power of the living over the dead, the power of the institution over the individual ...*

BC: Well, Masist once wrote a letter to a potential or imaginary audience that represents our hopeful guess or wish that he had a desire to be read or seen. Yes, I agree that it's about power, but at the same time, it depends on how you deal with that power. And of course, an extreme will to care or protect might lead to another kind of invasion or domination...

I'd love to talk to you about a project I've been working on, on and off, which does come through Masist's spirit, although it's not directly related to him. During the roundtable discussion at White Horse, [writer/ publisher] Kevin [Williamson] shared an anecdote with us about the writer Richard Brautigan's daughter, Ianthe Brautigan. It was roughly about the question of whether to smoke papa's ashes or not after his death. Afterwards, I wanted to revisit Brautigan and his work, a writer whom I knew only through *Trout Fishing in America* from 20 years before. Brautigan had a restless journey in terms of work, love, and life. He committed suicide in 1984.

Here is a bit of text on the subject:

*In his 1971 novel, *The Abortion: An Historical Romance* 1966, Richard Brautigan (1935— 1984) described a library for "the unwanted, the lyrical and haunted volumes of American writing." Inspired by Brautigan's vision, Todd Lockwood, of Burlington, Vermont, started *The Brautigan Library* in 1990 and began collecting manuscripts from authors keen to share their narratives, regardless of quality of writing or topic. The original Brautigan Library was closed in 2005 and its collection of manuscripts placed in storage. In 2010, the library and its contents were moved to Vancouver, Washington.*

In December of 2012, I visited The Brautigan Library and began the process of photographing the first three pages and the last page of all 304 of the physical manuscripts. The photographs had been in hibernation, but last February— actually the last time I saw you—I conceived a poster work for the exhibition *Frozen Lakes at Artists Space*, which is an enlarged version of a text

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written by Genevieve Jacobs who is a psychotherapist and who was part of the group who supported the actual library. The text is called *The Brautigan is a Taurus* and is originally published in *The 23* (Volume 2, Number 3, June 1992), a quarterly newsletter by The Brautigan Library.

NA: *Yes, I still have mine. What's the next step with the Brautigan Library exploration? What draws you to this idea of the discarded and the unwanted? I find that it's also existentially related to Masist, i.e. what to show and what not to, audiences imagined and real, the question of worth, etc.*

BC: I wouldn't call it discarded or unwanted because I don't think what's out there or available or visible is necessarily wanted! Worth is a contingent, sequence of moments and spaces...

I'm fascinated by the autonomy of that excessive concentrated energy, maybe it represents a radically personal urgency—back and forth between brain and stomach and not really interested in the economy of distribution, you know?

NA: *I know. Marginalia, or whatever you want to call literature that is either not mainstream or that is somehow "unseemly" say porn or mad men's manifestos or even supermarket novels—is often the most revealing about a culture. What will you do with this material?*

BC: I'd like to eventually work on a Brautigan Library catalogue built from excerpts I've photographed, which can perform simultaneously as a kind of informative source and a forced narrative composed of those urgent singularities. I have no answer when it comes to "urgent for whom?"

NA: *Relatedly, you bring completely unique books and editions to life through BAS ("print!"), which I guess exists as a publishing house, meeting space, and also a way of being. How did the project come to be in the first place?*

BC: BAS has a changing rhythm based on available personnel and public resources and priorities. As you know well, independent publishing is a crazy business. Also, we're in Turkey, where "the way it is" can make you doubt everything you're doing or reverse your priorities many times daily.

Between 2006 and 2009, BAS published *Bent*, a series of artists' books co-edited by Philippine and myself. *Bent* deliberately focused on collaborations with artists from Turkey. After Philippine moved to Brussels in 2011, we decided to stop the production of the *Bent* series, though projects that resulted from, or relate to *Bent*, still continue. In October we released a new title by Daniel Knorr as the first book of the post-*Bent* production period. As BAS, we would like to continue to think about printed matter, even when sometimes there is nothing to print... Books as artworks, artists' books, art books, book works, book objects,

you name it... *Uneasy to define, hell to translate.*

NA: *That's genius: UNEASY TO DEFINE, HELL TO TRANSLATE. This is how I often think about Bidoun: remarkably inconsistent, consistently remarkable (to blow our own horn). That fuzzy space between forms and genres is the most dynamic one isn't it?*

BC: Remarkably inconsistent, consistently remarkable! That is much better! I guess the dynamism you're talking about might generate itself from this kind of permanent "unsettled"-ness.

NA: *Yes. I wonder, where does your interest in the various ways things are presented, classified, stored, and exchanged come from? The taxonomies of existence, in other words. I am thinking about the show you presented in Basel as well as your Venice project in 2011, which both tackled these questions.*

BC: I think I'm just a very organized person. **NA:** *So you have a Swiss gene?*

BC: It must be in the stars. Another crucial footnote: what is commonly known as the Zodiac sign for Virgo, in alchemical terms, stands for "distillation". I am a Virgo.

NA: *Everything comes together, doesn't it? Thanks Banu.*

BC: By the way, just for you and me, the moment I finished the last sentence—I'm on a plane—I looked at the information screen and we were flying above Timisoara in Romania. Unfortunately, I have no sample spirit from there in the "library"...

NA: *Soon!*

BC: I'm very exhausted after some days of talking and lecturing in Bergen, full of questions about purpose and existence. I was away for only two days but it feels lot longer and larger. Still, it was very nice to correspond with you. I tried to edit it all a little but please accept my apologies for ridiculous technical and logical mistakes.