

The Question of Transmission and Artistic Representation of Political Death: Witnessing the 2015/16 Curfews in Turkey*

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Abstract: Throughout the hostile political transformation that began in 2013 in Turkey, a number of massacres and mass murders remained untraceable. The Curfews period of December 2015- February 2016 in South-Eastern Turkey was a time of collective violence in multiple forms, among which Cizre Basement Massacres are the most known. Some social media material shared from the basements in the region, such as phone calls by representatives of the Kurdish party, caught international attention and provoked artistic as well as political responses. In this article, I will first provide an overview of the key events during the Curfews period, then analyze the artistic work of Songül Sönmez, with whom I have worked during the conceptualization of the sound work of her installation *Forensic Body* (2015-2020). Based on one-to-one discussion and participant observation, I will then discuss her witnessing and her creative process regarding these serial events of mass violence.

Keywords: political death, massacre, creative-research, installation, sound-art

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Introduction

The period during the election campaigns and after the general elections in June 2015, until the later and most recent attempt to carry out a military coup in July 2016 covers multiple curfews and military operations in the south-eastern regions of Turkey, as well as the most harmful terror attacks of ISIS in the country, such as the “Suruç, Diyarbakır and Ankara Bombings”, together with the events reported during the military operations such as the “Cizre Massacre”, “Cizre Basement Massacres” (Şırnak), “Siege of Sur” (Diyarbakır), among others¹. The inhabitants of the country have

¹ “Chronology of key political events in 2015-2016,

28 February 2015: Dolmabahçe agreement, culminating a 2-year process of negotiations between the PKK and the Turkish government

Break-up of the peace negotiations in March - April

5 June: Bombing in Diyarbakır against a gathering of HDP supporters: 5 victims

General elections in June: AKP loses the absolute majority and HDP wins 13% (80 seats) in Parliament

20 July: Suruç bombing against Kurdish activists kills 33 [...]

10 October: bombing in Ankara of a ‘Peace gathering’ of HDP, various NGOs, trade unions and peace activists leaves 100 dead

1st November: General elections, AKP regains absolute majority but HDP maintains above the 10% threshold

28 November: assassination of M. Tahir Elçi, President of the Diyarbakır Bar Association, IHD member, founder of the HRFT and a prominent human rights defender”

[<https://euromedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Turkey-Human-Rights-Under-Curfew-ang.pdf>], accessed 30.06.2020.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/December_2015–February_2016_Cizre_curfew], accessed 30.06.2020.

witnessed a series of mass killings, furthermore, in the southeastern regions ongoing lockdowns blocked communications with the outside world for certain periods of time. The inhabitants of these regions have witnessed and experienced a long-term “State of Emergency”, that has prevented their access to food, water, and electricity. With block lockdowns longer than 20 days in a row, the information circulated on social media in Turkey together with the postings by international viewers has created an audience, that became the witness of a pornographic exposition of footage from the region, some shared through special forces unit’s social media accounts, including the “Police Special Forces (*PÖH*)” footage that contains examples of human rights violations, excessive use of force, humiliation and violation of dead bodies, and especially those of women ².

² “S.K. (18 years-old) I go to 12th grade. I couldn’t go school this year. I live with my grandmother. We went to my grandmother’s sister’s house in Kumçatı on the 20th day of the curfew. I will be entering YGS. I chose Şırnak and Diyarbakır as location of the examination. When we went back to our house, we saw that our house was blasted, and all of our furniture was broken. They threw our underwear around and stick them on cupboards with needles. Also, they put our underclothes inside the wardrobe’s door and stick our pictures on them. Our elders have seen these, we were very embarrassed. They have done this in many houses. They did it in our neighbor’s houses too. Police officers are behaving like we have created the trouble, we took it to this stage. They blamed us saying ‘Why were you silent before?’. We were trying to reach to a supermarket in order to meet our nourishment needs during the curfew. We had food provisions, but they became moldy. This is why I jumped from our roof to go to the supermarket several times. To reach the market I followed holes opened in the houses. Because they would shoot us if they saw us. We don’t have water, or electricity. We called 155 on the 20th day of the curfew. We said

Customized video collages and certain images, as well as graffiti in the region, have been circulated further by the users of several platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube³. Together with the official military operations after the breaking of peace negotiations, the information produced by the Turkish media as well as the material circulated on social media about the events, remained subjective, yet violent enough to be used in reports of many local and international human rights organizations as proof of violation of several basic rights such as the “right to live”⁴. Furthermore, the circulation of certain images on social media platforms created a civil and artistic response in the Turkish and Kurdish society, which resulted with the peace campaigns of

that sounds of guns and attacks were getting heavier and we needed to get out of our houses carrying white flags. We left our houses to go to Kumçatı. Nevertheless, our neighbor Şükrü was shot in the middle of the street behind our house. He stayed on the ground wounded for 12 hours, from 20:00 in the evening until 8:00 in the morning. In the morning, neighbors took the risk of getting killed and took Şükrü to the hospital wrapping him up in a blanket.” [\[http://www.nuhanovicfoundation.org/user/file/rep.2016_monitoring_committee_-_79-day_curfew_cizre_field_report.pdf\]](http://www.nuhanovicfoundation.org/user/file/rep.2016_monitoring_committee_-_79-day_curfew_cizre_field_report.pdf), accessed on 25.06.2020.

³ An example of this sort of customized video clips can be found on the link [\[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVhV8wpdmuU\]](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVhV8wpdmuU), accessed 29.06.2020.

⁴ “Apart from unlawful deaths and the excessive use of force (such as shelling densely populated areas with heavy artillery and tanks), OHCHR has also documented numerous cases of enforced disappearances; torture; destruction of housing and cultural heritage; incitement to hatred; prevention of access to emergency medical care, food, water and livelihoods; violence against women; and severe curtailment of the rights to freedom of opinion and expression as well as interference with the right to participate in public life”. [\[https://www.ohchr.org/documents/countries/tr/ohchr_south-east_turkeyreport_10march2017.pdf\]](https://www.ohchr.org/documents/countries/tr/ohchr_south-east_turkeyreport_10march2017.pdf), accessed on 25.06.2020.

“Academics for Peace”⁵ together with “Musicians and Filmmakers for Peace”. These were followed by the detainment of several Kurdish and Turkish artists along with scholars and journalists. In this article, I will examine an artistic response from the position of a distant witness, by the artist Songül Sönmez, who lives, studies, and works in Vienna.



⁵ “11 January 2016: over 1100 academics of Turkey and elsewhere sign a statement entitled “We won’t be a party to this crime”. President Erdogan short after calls them the ‘fifth column for terrorists’ and calls for their punishment. Administrative investigations are opened against all signatories, a smear campaign develops and some face threats and judicial proceedings, while some others are dismissed from their positions” [<https://euomedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Turkey-Human-Rights-Under-Curfew-ang.pdf>], accessed 30.06.2020.

Figure 1: General view of the installation (From the exhibition “Krieg Kuratieren” in Kunstraum Innsbruck, photo credit: Daniel Jarosch, 2020)

Forensic Body

Sönmez contributed to the exhibition *Curating War* with her installation *Forensic Body*, curated by Ezgi Erol, first as part of the *Wien Woche* Festival in 2016 in Vienna. In 2019, a second exhibition has been presented in Innsbruck (curated by Ezgi Erol and the current director of *Kunstraum Innsbruck*, Ivana Marjanovic). *Forensic Body* is about the stories of five women victims⁶ of the above-mentioned events, from different regions and generations. As material, Sönmez uses the hair strands of her own family members, hanging them from the roof of the exhibition room in Plexiglas tubes. Each tube is linked to a headphone left on the floor, inviting the audience to sit and listen to the story of the subject represented by the given piece of hair. The sound work contains autopsy reports of the chosen five victims, some additional narration, and some processed field recordings of the same events.

Forensic Body can be compared to other multimedia works that memorialize Black women who were victims of lynching and rape during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When Jennifer D. Williams analyzes Kim Mayhorn’s installation *A Woman was Lynched Every Other Day* (1998), she refers to a certain “aesthetics of absence” as a common aesthetic found in the

⁶ The woman guerilla Kevser Ekin Eltürk from Van (she died in Varto, Mus), Taybet Ana (Mother Taybet / Taybet İnanlı) from Silopi/Şırnak, Cemile Çağırğa from Cizre/Şırnak, Sultan Irmak also from Cizre/Şırnak and Rozerin Çukur from Diyarbakır.

literary works of Clifford, Toomer and Grimké which “employs narrative strategies that underline the ethics of unrepresentability” (Williams, 2011:84). The same ethical and aesthetic principles apply in Sönmez’s work. *Forensic Body* creates a contrast between the narrative of the real autopsy reports heard in sound and the absence of real footage in visual work. The autopsy reports decipher the details of the murder with an additional first-person narrative used in the sound work. Real footages and body figures are absent. This points to the representational problems regarding dead bodies by strengthening the abovementioned aesthetics of absence.

Thus, being a narrative of political death, *Forensic Body* refuses to represent death itself, while it does not provide a healing process either: It rather takes death as the unrepresentable, the unfathomable, and so realizes a certain kind of “acting out” and “working through”⁷ (Lacapa, 1994:205) for the trauma caused by the killings.

During her preparations for the first exhibition in Vienna, I had the chance to work with Sönmez briefly as a sound artist, to contribute to the sound work. However, the process was interrupted due to some technical and logistical limits, and my uncertainties about staying in Vienna. Sönmez was kind enough to send me the final sound work of the installation (processed by Doğuş Kotay, Songül Sönmez). Later in 2020, after the outbreak of COVID-19, I have visited the virtual exhibition on YouTube⁸,

⁷ I am referring to these terms in the context of the discussion that Lacapa intensifies in the words of Freud and Lacan.

⁸ An audio-visual presentation of the exhibition can be found here: [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2o09ByLf6KQ&t=34s&fbclid=IwAR19E HXUSD TDM2bNMLQWs-M-0LZ5kmFSbxxvOUdLT8yTZdCtBBicluDyc>], accessed 28.03.2020.

and this gave me the chance to listen and watch from the perspective of an attendee. After this experience, I decided to conduct a thematic interview in the form of a one-on-one discussion with Sönmez, about the question of artistic transmission of trauma and the representation of political death in the context of the over- and understatement of these events in Turkish media sources and state discourses.

I sent Sönmez my questions in advance and we had a Zoom meeting in Turkish, which I recorded and then translated. The interview lasted over an hour and a half, and our dialogue evolved somewhat spontaneously with new questions arising from her answers. Instead of integrating her responses into an analysis of her work, I choose to present the interview in full form. The interview will be discussed in the closing sections of this article in the context of the artistic transmission of political death.

Interview

Z: Songül, your work *Forensic Body* has a lot to do with the representation of death, yet it is not limited to that. I would like to ask you first, can we in general say that there are at least two subjects of representation here, one that speaks of the woman's body and the other of death, or furthermore, of political death?

S: By representation, do you mean a theme being reproduced within a purpose of achieving an artistic aesthetic? It has not been produced only around an aesthetic idea, I was especially careful about it, because the theme does not allow itself to be approached that way, in my opinion. So it is more direct, like Rancière says, the work does not allow the audience to interpret it further, it talks very directly: I am giving all the information in the sound work and to represent their bodies I use hair, but hair is an organic part

of the body as well, so, all this was built far from a perspective of aesthetics of the relativity of meaning and it was quite a conscious decision, pointing to the “exceptional” situation that the state has brought us into. Here the subject cannot see and cannot speak... So I, the person who does the work (*here she starts to joke*), whoever has done this work (*she starts to laugh*), or whoever made me do this (*we both laugh*) ... OK, let’s put it this way, this is very clear, here we see a subject (actually not only one subject) who cannot die. It means, she has been killed, then tortured and there is no news about it as a killing in the media, yet a rhetoric by the state as to why and how she should be killed, why it is necessary or religiously appropriate to kill her. This is the situation we are talking about. So, my main starting point was the information I had collected myself, furthermore some autopsy reports that we could see with the efforts of Şebnem Fincancı, as you know, among others a few details that have resonated in the media. My objective was rather to create a work that also functions as an archive of information, as our role as witnesses makes us responsible to do so. Because the state has shared its crime with us, made us part of it, we could only watch but not speak about it, we could not show any presence but witnessing. So, it comes from a feeling of responsibility laden with guilt, that is the main problematic.

Z: So, you mean that this guilt was laid on our shoulders on purpose?

S: Yes, I mean, I do not think that the state has worked on such a detailed psychological plan, but that was the result and they have managed to lead this process quite successfully. As you remember we had another exhibition back then (Vienna 2015) titled *Before and After Gezi*, and I remember I was talking to my colleagues

suggesting that we should also do something about this massacre going on at that time.

Z: Yes, I do remember that.

S: So, what happened was terrible and we were watching, unable to do anything, which led to a kind of forced relaxation, like it was the responsibility of “history”, of those who will “write history”. So, in this sense, yes, I do believe that we were guilty, as witnesses. And you know, it is an ongoing process, there are bodies being carried out of the region and [secretively] buried at beaches like Kilyos in Istanbul for example, which we hear nowadays, of vandalism or deconstructions of their graves... I believe that the state could have already reached its aim with only one victim like Taybet İnan she was a 70-year-old conservative woman and they left her body lying in the street for a week. The meaning of this for a Shafi-Kurd is an unforgettable and unacceptable trauma. This could have led to great cynicism, yet people still resisted, but what I mean is it was a highly symbolic, representative event of death. It is part of the necro-politics, which has been used by the state as an effective tool against the Kurds. So, my aim was to give an idea about the region, all the victims are from different regions, that we know are close to each other but still, it is not only “one village”. Cizre, Silopi, Diyarbakır and Muş are included in my work as regions of the victims, it is a big geographical area, where the killings have been systematically run by the state. I take the story of 5 women but there are enough examples there, in this sense (*laughs sarcastically*). And the woman's body serves there as the perfect object of downgrading, discrediting, like we saw in the case of Ekin Van, how her body was carried along in the streets, naked, tied to the back of a tank and we were invited to watch this as well, as they (special police forces – PÖH and gendarme special forces JÖH) posted the

images from their own social media accounts. That was done with the aim of creating mass terror and disillusionment.

Z: As you put it in your other interviews as well as in your work description, you chose 5 Kurdish women's stories, who lost their lives during the curfews in 2015 and 2016, which covers the event known as the "Basement Massacres", that has been later reported as the "Cizre Massacre".

S: Yes, there are victims from Varto (Muş), from Diyarbakir there is Rozarin Çukur, and Sultan Irmak was found in one of the basements in Cizre. So, there is a variety of people from activists, fighters to teenagers like Cemile and elderly civilians like Taybet İnan. For example, in Cemile's case, it was not necessary to show all those images, Cemile's teenage body being held in a freezer, of course it is a shocking image for everybody, and it was a viral image on social media. The death of civilians like her, has psychologically devastated society.

Z: But you build your installation by using the hair of your own family members to represent these women. How did this idea occur to you and how did you decide to choose those five victims of the massacre and these three women from your family? And how did you start to conceive your work with the idea taking shape around their hair?



Figure 2: Detail of hair strands (From the exhibition Krieg Kuratieren in Kunstraum Innsbruck, photo credit: Daniel Jarosch, 2020)

S: It is four women. I once cut my mother's hair and kept it with me. After some years when I went to visit my aunt, she showed me four other cuttings of hair. She could not or did not identify them one by one, but she said they were from her sister, my elder sister and one from her other sister or from herself, that part was not clear. But let me come back to your question on how I associated these women with the victims. There is no common fate to follow between their stories but there is a shared identity, which is being Kurdish and Alevi at the same time. My family's trauma is more about being Alevi rather than Kurd and the migration. There is no connection in this sense with the situation of the Kurds in the region because my family immigrated to the west a long time ago and they do not associate themselves with the Kurdish resistance and they are actually very scared of this war. My aim here by using the hair of my family members, was to avoid any ethical issues that could occur if I had used some other subject's hair, which is another person's body part. If I did not make it clear that this hair belonged to my own family

members, it could lead the audience to certain confusion, such as whether I bought the hair from other women in the villages by paying them, etc. I somehow had to make it clear that I had been working on this material for a while and it is a personal artistic process. I am still doing it, collecting hair from other people and friends.

Z: And how did your family members react to your work?

S: Well, I feel that they are somehow pleased because it also carries their stories, but we never really talked about it. Next time I see them I want to ask them more about that.

Z: What is the function of representation in this kind of knowledge transmission, in your opinion, that is full of cross-references? What is being transmitted during your artistic process, where you play with highly potent symbolic references such as the hair of women, that sends a layered and subjective information of references to the audience, together with real autopsy reports that speak of historical and political facts at the same time?

S: In the end this kind of artistic knowledge production serves better as a transmitter of certain events, and it must be carried further.

Considering my work, there also exist fictional parts, like the additions between the autopsy reports in the sound work. There was a state of emergency in the region and Şebnem Fincancı was one of the people who was able to go there yet they could not really enter the basements. However, they were able to collect some information, and this then circulated in the media as well. So, that part, where I use this information, the information is being transmitted in scientific language in the sound work, because these are the facts that were found in the autopsy reports.

What I especially aimed to achieve, was to create a language for the subjects that were being silenced and this language was far from any aesthetic or performative form, this is why we used the texts as found in the reports.

And then there is the hair. Hair has a highly symbolic value amongst Kurdish women. Women fighters were cutting their hair and burying it before leaving to fight at the front, it is a well-known tradition. It is a regional practice; Yezidi women have been doing it during the Syrian war as well. Also, for the women of Anatolia in general, it is an act of mourning, giving up your gender identity and your body, closing your senses to the pleasures of the world.

Z: It exists in many cultures, especially in the history of slavery, the cutting off of hair usually means giving up the identity and becoming socially dead. Furthermore, it exists in the religious or mystical practices of some Sufi sects.

S: There are also variations of it like nailing the cut piece of hair on to cloths.

Z: I did not know that.

S: It is unique to find this in central Anatolia. But as for the resistance fighters, it has a ritualistic function. And if you think about it, it is a very strong symbol, being an actual part of the body, yet it is not so disturbing to see it cut, apart from the body. Still, it surely produces a shocking image when the audience see it inside Plexiglas, hanging from the roof of the exhibition room. What I wanted to show in my work, was the unseen part of these bodies, these bodies not being able to be present there, their non-presence even as dead bodies, their bodies not being buried properly and we know they are dead, yet we don't know where the

“other parts” of their bodies are, the parts of their bodies that we cannot show there, but we have been shown, so, it is rather a fragment that represents a destroyed, erased image of the woman's body.

Z: How do you think we can create an archive for the artworks or how can works of art be included in historical accounts of the period?

S: I think it can only be managed online, as we are forced to accept it as the new medium of sharing art since the outbreak of COVID-19.

Z: Can you give more insight into the creative-research process of this work, concerning the research you made on the victims and the massacre? Did you have your questions in hand, for example did you already know what you wanted to collect as information about their deaths, or did you select the most pertinent and common information that came out of your research?

S: First I carried out a lot of research and I tried to figure out how I could create a language without falling into the language of propaganda of any kind, I tried to keep an objective point of view by using those reports and adopting their language. For the fictional parts we added in the subject's self-presentations: We switched between the first singular person talking about herself and the narrator (third person singular) who read the reports. It has something to do with what we observe in the language of the state. On the one hand, there is a documentation and circulation of these events and on the other hand, controversially enough, there is absolutely no statement made by the state, taking responsibility for these violent actions, which means total denial. So, the main challenge of the artist here, is to be able to maintain a language that will not allow for an interpretation along the lines of political

agitation. Staying loyal to the stories of those who lost their lives is crucial on the one hand, but on the other hand, as artists we tend to represent them in another fraction of reality, maybe it is because there is no other way to do it. I think this is the main problematic aspect about creating a political artwork. I sincerely want to talk about their stories, these are the subjects I want to bring into my work, though it always remains incomplete, compared to what has really happened. Political art today often faces the criticism that it is mere political agitation.

Z: Have you also received this kind of criticism?

S: In Vienna it was different than the experience I have had in Innsbruck. In Vienna I realized that there had been no direct criticism towards me, but it was strange enough not to hear anything from anybody at all. There was a lot of ignorance towards the exhibition, yet it was full of great works, made by international artists but no big interest from the audience. In Innsbruck people were more into it, maybe it is because there are less events going on there compared to Vienna, but still, the audience was quite direct and posed a lot of questions.

Z: I want to ask more about the experience of the exhibition later but maybe it is better if we continue to discuss your creative-research process now, can you give more details on your research? How did it all start?

S: First I did a lot of research on the internet. There are existing resources that give firsthand information from the Kurdish side, though this information is not always fact checked. There is also the information I collected from the Turkish media, news I started to collect. I also talked to my friends from the region, naturally, because I wanted to hear from them. I do not clearly remember the moment I started to see it as creative research, but I did not

start by searching for autopsy reports. I think I had seen some reports at a quite early stage of my research and so started to focus on that idea of collecting more institutional reports. But after all, I took most of the information from the Turkish media. The information I collected from my friends in the region served rather as a motivation to create something about it. In the end, I felt obliged to use objective language and therefore I continued with the reports and news. As you also know, it was more of an automatic reaction, I found myself doing something with this material I had been collecting in a natural way.

Z: And when exactly did you start to link it to the hair you had been collecting?

S: There is already an existing link in my previous works. I have been working on lost bodies, using hair. I have worked with hair since 2010. But I think in this work it has found its place, finally, in a right way. I was actually pretty sure that I will use these pieces of hair, my aim in the research was rather to find the best way for the integration of hair in this work. When Ezgi Erol invited me to take part in the exhibition “Curating War”, it was clear for me that I will do something with this hair. To be honest, I took the invitation as a chance to finally do something with it, together with the information I had been collecting.

Z: Your installation is interactive. There is a sound work that accompanies the installation, a woman's voice (Betül Şeyma Küpeli) that reads the information about the victims through the headphones given to the audience while they move around the hanging strands of hair in Plexiglas tubes. Do you match each of the 5 victims' stories with a hanging strand of hair or does the audience hear the stories in a random order and so associates the

victims each time with a different piece of hair, meaning a different family member of yours?

S: I made an association between the victims and the hair strands, between the characters and the characteristics of the hair. For example, when you stand in front of the longest strand of hair, you know that it must be the hair of Taybet İnan, so it was not random, but it could have been another interesting idea to work further on... I was literally following the information on the age, etc., to associate the hair with the victims. Cemile's hair must have been the thickest, because you know, she is the youngest (*smiles*). And so on...

Z: It means you developed an intimate relation with the victims, an imaginary yet very intimate relationship.

S: Yes, that is true.

Z: In the sound work, we also hear a processed sum of some field recordings. What was the source of these recordings? How and with which intention did you decide to process them?

S: There was a shooting of a journalist, do you remember? A video... We used the sound from that video as well as the phone call with the HDP deputies that you also used in your work. There are sounds of armed clashes and sounds coming from the basements, material found on social media mostly shared as firsthand information. We chose to process the field recordings because it risked creating a double shock together with what is being heard in the text performance of the audio track. We wanted to create a balance in this sense, to give it a function of making the story more audible and understandable. We slowed down the samples and so softened the effect of explosive sounds, it was not

really a sound work, that could have been different if we could have continued it with you.

Z: Yes, we worked together for a short time on the sound part of your installation. Do you see a common information flow in our work, and besides, do you think that our work contributes to a kind of knowledge production or transmission, or even, can we call this a form of writing or journalism, in the age of post-truth and false news? What is the function of your work in the context of overstatement and understatement of these events?

S: It is a *girift* [complex and layered] thing, like Ekin Van's case for example. There is one group sharing her images with a great sorrow, and there is another group sharing the same images as a victory story. It says a lot about the psychological state of the society as being paralyzed, and the hate caused by permanent violence. It all goes hand in hand, especially in this digital age, it is neither foreseeable, nor totally controllable, yet it ends up serving the most powerful. Because it offers a great scene for manipulation and brain washing and they can lead this process quite successfully in my opinion, since they have the necessary resources. At the same time, social media has become the only platform for us, the opponents, to express ourselves. The story of the victims which I chose to work on, were mostly overstated cases in this sense, fueled with hateful propaganda, but they also devastated another part of society. The stories I have found were also found on mainstream media after some time. It served as state propaganda, rather than as coverage, but later it also served as proof of the events, that are today recognized as massacres.

Z: But we still feel the oppression, when we call it a massacre, because we are not allowed to, but the state is proudly standing by its actions. I think this is the dimension of the post-truth.

S: There is one other aspect: they kill, and they do not allow the bodies to be buried. Then they use them for propaganda, by calling them terrorists.

Z: And it does not allow you to say anything else about the topic.

S: Exactly, you must keep silent.

Z: Would you say that your creative process for this work started with a foreseen methodology, i.e. first to carry out artistic research on that massacre, see what is triggering you, or was it more an artistic reaction that started almost automatically, after becoming the witness of this massacre, directly because of the triggering mechanism of becoming a witness as a person, like many other artists have been expressing and experiencing and even have had law suits (against them) for doing so? Were you taking a personal risk as well?

S: It was the manner of the killings and the showing off, that triggered my creative process and as I said, I was waiting to begin to do something with the hair I had. As I have presented other details before, in the case of Taybet İnan her body being left in the street for days, the shooting of the people who went to collect her body, basements and people being burned alive... Rozerin Çukur's body, being kept away from her family for 105 days... Cemile's body being kept in the freezer... All of these urged me to further understand the function of the woman's body in the politics of war. The state in Turkey was working on it on purpose, so it was all happening right in front of me. And about the risk, you know, there is always a risk. But I can say that the risk is bigger now, after the exhibition in Innsbruck. I think members of Turkish tariqas [in this case some fractions of extremist political Islamism] in Innsbruck must have seen it too.

Z: But it must function to the contrary, I think it is the success of the work, that it is obvious that you are not aiming to make any sort of propaganda. You put the story quite as it is. I mean, in this sense, they also see it as it is, detached from the religious and political propaganda around the victims.

S: Yes, it is obvious who is using these subjects for propaganda, yet it is so difficult to make people believe...

Z: Can we say that you ended up creating an alternative form of existence for these subjects, i.e., the five victims, against the manner of their killing? Creating a resistance by undoing what the state has done?

S: I do not know if it was a form of resistance, but it surely created an alternative telling of the same story... (*She forgets what she wants to say*). It does not stop, as you know, it does not stop by killing, it goes on after the killing, cursing of the body, the body being displayed naked for days on social media, as a story of victory. So, there is a person who is not even allowed to die, she must be raped further, must lose all symbolic values as well. It is part of the state's policies based on the humiliation of the body. I do not think that it will change but I think I still find it shocking. There was a parallel war against women's bodies together with the real war. Downgrading, dismissing their value from the viewpoint of patriarchal morality such as the posts on social media containing the underwear of the victims of the basement massacres, or, hashtags like, "there is no love like love in the basement".

Z: Your research must have been going more in the direction of finding visual material, since you are a visual artist...

S: Yes...

Z: I have just observed that you still have a very vivid image memory of the events, like I have with the sounds I have been collecting. I suppose the effect of the visual image in the memory of the artist must be heavier to carry.

S: Yes, and on the top of it, I question the politization of the image, this is also part of the work. In the end, the state knows very well how to create a social function for these terrifying images when they decide to circulate them. They know the affects they will cause.

Z: So, it is an actual resistance, in the sense of creating an alternative telling of the story together with an alternative image for the memory to add to the horrifying images, maybe even to replace them, at least, at the imaginary level. It is a refusal to be further traumatized as well as giving them back their dignity, by telling their stories. It even suggests a healing.

S: Thank you.

Z: How was your personal experience in general during this process? Do you think that you have achieved a healthy balance, considering the traumatizing effect of being the witness and to keep on working with those very traumatizing details?

S: I feel quite responsible as a witness, for doing something about it. It was not my career plan or anything like that. I think *Forensic Body* has been a mature work that functioned as intended, in this sense it is a successful work. But in general, it is very hard to work on this issue, therefore I do not produce much, but ethically, I am satisfied with this work. On the other hand, it is an ongoing process, so I do not feel any therapeutic effect, I still question everything, I have not calmed down. I do not think I harmed

myself because I see it as a responsibility, although I cannot tell if it is healthy.

Z: How was the opening of the exhibition in Innsbruck for you? Can you talk about any therapeutic effect that you acquired from the research-creation process itself or during the opening? Did you feel different aspects of your own work when it was viewed by the audience?

S: The reaction of the audience during the opening in Innsbruck was exciting, interesting, very dynamic. There was one girl who thought that the hair parts had belonged to real victims, so she started a debate with me. I think it was overwhelming for the audience in general, to see such an amount of hair together (*she laughs*), maybe it is the different texture and the amount and the length of the hair, that European people are not used to seeing that often (*laughs*). In general, they were all highly affected by the reality of the stories moved by the fact that it is happening only 20 hours driving time away from their reality.

Z: So, it helped them to absorb this horrifying reality in an alternative way, allowed them to understand and enabled them to watch and learn about it, without being traumatized.

S: Yes, it surely did.

On the Artistic Transmission of the Political Death

The process of Sönmez's creative-research, as discussed during the interview, shares similar paths with the creative-research process that I started around the same time, which later evolved into a PhD project. Although one of the secondary objectives of this article is to compare two similar artistic responses given to

similar events from the witness position - two similar processes of creative-research - the information provided by Sönmez proved to be almost identical with my own process as a sound artist. As for the collecting of data and information, we used some common resources and institutional reports, which is presented in the bibliography and notes. The information found in the news links supported the information presented in the reports of local and international human rights organizations. Since my main objective is to examine these results in the context of artistic transmission and production of knowledge, I would like to discuss here some aspects reported by Sönmez about the reception of her work during the two exhibitions and comment on a few points about witnessing and transmission.

The first aspect is the notion of ignorance that Sönmez described as the main experience of the first exhibition in Vienna. Considering that it was the first presentation of this material, first meeting with the public, it was at the same time the first completion phase for Sönmez to finalize her creative process. The non-reaction and the absence of feedback has left a “strange” feeling in Sönmez’s own words, which is resolved after only four years at the opening of the second exhibition in Innsbruck.

What was interesting to observe about these two different experiences, was her timeless and continuous feeling of guilt. In various societies, geographies and cultures, the transmission of guilt and trauma on to the coming generations is a common psychological reaction amongst the survivors of genocides and massacres. It is, however, beyond the aim of this article to analyse Sönmez’s insights provided during the interview within a psycho-analytical perspective. On the other hand, that “strange feeling” caused by the absence of feedback, points out a similarity with the

“guilt of survival”, shared by the survivors of genocide⁹, caused by being in the position of witness, that is, the position of the “survivor”. So, what was happening in the first exhibition, was in this sense very significant, when considered together with the collective memory of WWII in Vienna, that is carried by the younger generations, which were probably among the audience members in Vienna. One could argue that exposing the audience to a traumatic series of events, even if in its most abstract and narrative form, might have triggered a mechanism of denial or disavowal among the audience of Vienna who hold various subject-positions with respect to those involved in the events of the Holocaust. Through the absence of reaction from the audience, the feeling which she describes as “responsibility of doing something” against the “forced relaxation” frozen in time, thus causing an incomplete phase of acting-out and working through.

The second aspect is the notion of transmission, as Sönmez described in response to my questions, as one of the positive outcomes of the exhibition in Innsbruck; that is the function of the installation as the transmitter of a traumatizing series of events without further traumatizing the audience in the exhibition room. Her work’s ability to make the audience listen to the real stories

⁹ “[...] the children of perpetrators take on a burden of guilt for the destiny of the victims and *their* children. It is in this sense that I think my generation bears a responsibility for the destiny of Simon, the child in Grimbert’s memoir who was killed in Auschwitz. This, at least, is how we should rethink the notion of collective guilt through the transmission of a transgenerational legacy of violent histories”. Gabriele Schwab, “Replacement Children: The Transgenerational Transmission of Traumatic Loss”, *American Imago*, Volume 66, Number 3, Fall 2009, pp. 277-310, p.289

with the absence of the real images of dead bodies but by replacing them with strongly symbolic hair strands, gives their dignity back to the violated dead bodies, detaches them from the humiliation, violation, and political propaganda, and so realizes a ritual for their memories as well as for the collective memory of the actual viewers, an international audience who shares the same position of secondary witnessing. This kind of transmission can be analysed in the context of a reflexive secondary witnessing as well. Lacapra speaks of the secondary witness position of Langer concerning his work focusing on Holocaust testimonies, as the position of the subject “who is presumed to transparently render the experience of the original witness as victim – a position that is particularly untenable given the riven experience and the belatedness of witnessing for victims of trauma themselves” (Lacapra, 1994:194). Sönmez’s work somehow succeeds to create a *milieu* for that “untenable” position and puts light on how different subject positions of political death are intersubjective. The concept of her work is based on dichotomies such as understatement vs. overstatement, presence vs. non-presence, murder vs. not being able to complete the process of burial, aesthetics vs. direct forms of narration and the effect of the trauma vs. the potential working-through by the transmission and processing of the terrifying memory (knowledge). These dichotomies are not clear within the work at first sight, yet they hold it together by building subtle connections between the sound work and the installation.

The aftermath of the mass terror showed a historical dichotomy as well: A hateful propaganda that becomes proof of the events denied by the government. In addition, these events which are defined as massacres later, did not cause only a paralyzing effect as aimed by the persecutors but it rather transformed into many forms of political resistance as well as into art works for those

who chose to work through it with their creativity. One should also note that some artists and journalists who have depicted the events from their positions of local witnessing, have been later imprisoned for long periods such as thirty-three months.¹⁰



Figure 3: Sönmez together with the audience (From the exhibition Krieg Kuratieren in Kunstraum Innsbruck, photo credit: Daniel Jarosch, 2020)

Conclusion

Political death, massacres, genocide, and social death create their own intersubjective and performative ground for their witnesses, victims and persecutors (Card, 2003). For each subject position, the experience is traumatizing and can manifest different types of

¹⁰ For example, Zehra Doğan was imprisoned for painting and sharing the landscape of Cizre on social media after the operations during the curfews. Her works, including the paintings she made in prison can be seen here: [<https://zehradogan.net>].

reactions caused by the impossibility to explain what is being done and why, which then create a certain type of scapegoat mechanism caused by the contagious affect of the violence, as Girard explains¹¹. This is the basic phenomenon to observe in the examples of propaganda footage shared by the special [police and military] forces of Turkey. The common pattern to observe here is that the physical death of the victim does not function as an end to the action of killing. For any culture, an event of physical death is an event accompanied by various processes to be completed with a ritualistic function, for a transformation of the social identity of the dead individual (Macho, 1987:351). When this process is not completed, mourning of the death becomes impossible for the survivors, and when a ritual for the dead is not achieved, the trauma of the loss is destined to be passed on to the next generations. Thus, the trauma of loss can create multiple secondary witness positions and melancholia caused by the uninterminated mourning processes shared by the generations to come (Lacpra, 1994:115).

¹¹ “Girard argues that violent rivalry is contagious. It spreads like a plague. When the tension reaches paroxysm, the undifferentiation moves from individuals and groups toward the social hierarchy and institutions. The social response to the collapse of differences tends toward the attribution of cause. The community, previously totally disintegrated, now becomes deeply unanimous. At the most intense moment of conflict a violent resolution emerges. As Girard argues, such mimetic impulse is then directed against the victim, “the scapegoat”. The collective violence of all against all, which threatens with the social collapse, is spontaneously transformed into the violence of all against one. Thus, the collective unity is rebuilt”. Strączek, Bogumił., 2014, “René Girard’s Concept of Mimetic Desire, Scapegoat Mechanism and Biblical Demystification. *Seminare. Poszukiwania naukowe*. 2014, 10.21852/sem.2014.4.04, p.35.

During the Cizre Massacre, the level of cruelty and daily violence had been traumatizing enough for all the witnesses along with the families of the victims, to pass it on to the next generations, as it has been the case for the previous generation after the military coup in the 80s and the operations during the 90s in the southeastern region, that makes up a large part of our generation's collective memory together with the Wars of Iraq and the fall of Ex-Yugoslavia, among other ongoing wars. With this information at hand, one could expect the younger generation of Turkey's artists to come out with works of art that transmit these carried feelings and witnessing, yet the growing oppression does not allow young artists in Turkey to express themselves freely.

In the work of Sönmez, one can observe a ritualistic process that starts with a chosen object, that is the hair of her family members, as the object of transmission and representation. This can also be seen as a "transitional object" in the sense Winnicott (1953:6) describes it, yet the relationship here between the hair, the artist and the audience are more complex than that of a child's with a transitional object. The hair here does not only replace the lost, or the detached ones, but it also represents a chosen victim of mass violence and introduces them to a "foreign" audience. Her approach to hair, as natural as cutting her own mother's hair, opens the door for a more intimate relation with the chosen victims. She associates them by their physical features, by imagining victims' faces, ages, their stories, and the physical characteristics of those hair strands, to create an object that is organic enough to be respected as "body parts", as a belonging of the subjects.

By transforming autopsy reports into a first-person narrative in sound work in contrast with an aesthetics of "absence as presence" (Richardson, 2001) in the visual work, she creates an

“embodied simulation” (Gallese, 2005) that functions as the main ritualistic aspect through the mirroring of the voice in the audience’s body-mind.

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