

Platform 008

A Century of Centuries

November Paynter and Didem Pekün in conversation with Basak Senova

Basak Senova



Bahar Temiz, Natalie Heller and Eriř Aslanbog, *Trailer*, 2015.

Courtesy SALT Istanbul.

A Century of Centuries is the cumulative end result of a research process based on dialogues with Hera Büyüktaşçıyan, Chto Delat, Shilpa Gupta, Kapwani Kiwanga, Maha Maamoun, Jumana Manna & Sille Storihle, Yasemin Özcan, Didem Pekün, Judith Raum, Dilek Winchester, Erinç Aslanboğa, Natalie Heller and Bahar Temiz. Curated by November Paynter at **SALT Beyoğlu** in Istanbul, the exhibition gathers intersected positions and artistic responses artists are presented within a framework that considers: 'transformative moments, traumatic experiences and social transitions of the past that continue to resonate in and shape the present'. Paynter's research process started with artist Didem Pekün, and a lingering dialogue between them. In this interview, Basak Senova talks to November Paynter and Didem Pekün about the development of A Century of Centuries.

Basak Senova: How did the A Century of Centuries exhibition come about?

November Paynter: Didem and I met several years ago and I had seen Of dice and men (2013–ongoing) at various stages as the work progressed. We met fairly frequently and I presented early versions of the work in two screening programs I curated at the Oberhausen Film Festival and in Sheffield Fringe. A year ago it started to become clear that the work was ready to be presented in an exhibition context. I really wanted to share this moment with Didem and find a meaningful way to present the work, so that the dialogues found within it could resonate further and be embedded in a broader set of historical references.

Didem Pekün: My video installation is part of a practice-based PhD I have been pursuing at Goldsmiths since 2011. That is also how I started researching at SALT and our collaboration started. The process of my involvement in the exhibition really was an organic one whereby November saw the video, went away for weeks and months, then came back with ideas for her show. Once A Century of Centuries had begun to crystallize in her mind, we started to meet even more regularly. But, up to that point, as November mentioned, there were a couple of smaller programmes in which she had asked to include the work in progress.

BS: In that vein, how do you locate Of dice and men in A Century of Centuries in relation to your initial dialogue?

NP: Didem's work sits in the center of the building and hence the exhibition, and is encountered as soon as you exit the first elevator level. It is both spatially located in the exhibition as a pivotal piece, but also conceptually because it emits a kind of central energy in the way that it loops relentlessly and also refers to recent events that are very much still in daily conversation

and remain unresolved. While, Didem's work definitely helped direct the angle of the exhibition, there were several other artists I had been hoping to work with for some time and if possible commission, and these were the next conversations I had.



Yasemin Özcan, *threehundredone*, 2008.
Courtesy SALT Istanbul.

BS: Why did you choose to describe this installation, along with the other artist works, as a solo artistic position?

NP: Knowing that I wanted to present Didem's video installation in a broader framework of artistic positions that shared similar concerns, I started talking with several artists I was keen to collaborate with who I knew had a work or works that somehow stemmed from a factual event or period of time, which resulted in major political implications or transformed society.

As each artist had worked with such specific references to create a response that was so precise and personal, I very much wanted to allow these statements to be positioned independently enough to be clearly appreciated by the audience as solo positions, yet at the same time they are of course in dialogue with the other works in the exhibition. One of these

positions is presented as a single channel installation, but in many cases a selection of works, occasionally with a newly commissioned addition, have been gathered under one title in conversation with the artist.

BS: How did these positions influence the design of the exhibition?

NP: The exhibition was structured to create three different rhythms through space. On the first floor Judith Raum very much wanted to divide up the space with new panels and columns of wood to create an environment that both supported and structured her work. On the second floor I wanted to create a run of works by three artists who have affiliations with one another. Either through having worked together, or in the case of Hera Büyüктаşçıyan and Dilek Winchester, a more personal interaction as they live on the same island and so often converse on their boat journey into the city each day. We worked together for over a week in the space with Hera and Dilek to balance the configuration of very different media and references, as well as two new works, one of which is in this context site-specific. To create a different rhythm again, the top floor is much more structured with dividing walls between each artists' work and yet there is always a view into or hint of the next work to come, from space to space.

BS: Of dice and men can be perceived as a diary with very personal entries. Based on this aspect and by also taking other included entries and works into consideration, how do you position your work in the exhibition?

Didem Pekün: Of Dice and Men actually stands in the peripheries of diary and essay film. So I used a diariesque method in the video in my collecting of material, in the random daily entry mode, but the content is mostly formed of a critical gaze to the outside. As such, I try to keep a very fine line in terms of what I reveal of the private sphere of 'Didem', and the persona I create that looks outside, to the world that surrounds us. But, they all share common characteristics of a repetitive nature of history and how joys and surprises of life are interlaced with more symbolic and real violence. To me, what connects all these entries that I showed in this exhibition, is their shock, the 'awe' effect they created on me on that specific day.

BS: How do you see the relationship between the acts of keeping, preserving, and presenting a diary within the context of history?

DP: What I am doing is actually an unofficial archive, for an unforeseen future, so if anyone looks back at these entries, say in 2034, they will get a glimpse of, a taste of what it was to live in this time period in these geographies, the feelings, the tensions and the fascinations.

Repetition is like a throw of dice: there is a limited number of combinations that can fall, but each time it is different, because each time and each place and all people are different. In other words, repetition is like watching the same theatre play mostly tragedy, again and again, but each time in a different place with different actors, always remaining 'hopelessly hopeful'.

BS: Speaking of repetition, November, how do you compare the past with the present?

NP: I had been conversing with several artists about how our need to commemorate, mark, or at least remember certain calendar dates and in particular climatic moments such as centenaries, creates a rhythm that is inescapable, the is repetitive and often far too insular. Added to this, it feels like recent traumatic events, particularly in this region, understandably appear to be marked even more frequently in order to keep their meaning alive. I was interested in building an exhibition that expressed the rapid accumulation of events to be marked, that looked beyond those that are familiar to a certain culture, or time, and to add layers to a past we perhaps feel we know. Several dates do appear in the exhibition, but they move beyond being purely notations within a calendar and instead have been threaded by the artists into a much longer trajectory of history. Days, weeks, months and events merge and are cross-referenced to show a much more complex web of how history unfolds and repeats itself.

BS: Could you explain the process of selecting works and/or artists in relation to this very specific emphasis on repetition?

While references to repetition are apparent in many of the works, the aim was rather to gather a selection of responses to certain transformative or traumatic moments that would converse in a way that allowed the audience to embed each one in relation to others - both those that appear to be analogous, but also to find echoes in those that despite being distant in time, geography or cultural significance, can still affect us.

BS: Could you exemplify this dual situation by referring a work in the exhibition?

Hera Büyüktaşçıyan's initial reference for her installation Destroy your house, build up a boat,

save life (2015) was a quotation taken from the "Story of the Flood" found on "The Epic of Atrahasis," a Babylonian cuneiform tablet. The description of this imaginary boat, also known as "Noah's Ark," became an instrument for Büyüктаşçıyan to connect land and sea, life and death, loss and perseverance, past and future, known and unknown. The boat also acts as a metaphor for the rescue and preservation of belongings, as well as fragments of memory, that are gathered up and taken from one context to another in the event of traumatic upheaval, exile, deportation and other forms of societal breakdown. An ancient story thus appears to repeat itself time again, from the forced exodus of the Greek population of Turkey in the mid 20th Century, to the current migration of hundreds of thousands of people from Syria to neighbouring countries and beyond.

BS: Many of the works also show the interdependence between personal and external effects on our daily life experiences.

NP: Yes, in a similar way to *Of dice and men*, several chapters in Chto Delat?'s work *The Excluded. In a Moment of Danger* touch upon how both intimate and universally acknowledged events, located in both distant or local space and time, nevertheless affect us as individuals. In the production of this work Chto Delat? invited friends and students to participate by asking them to describe how they are able function in a collective situation today. Despite their frequent collective presence on camera, each participant is also represented alone to reflect independently on various issues as well as on the deluge and impact of information from social networks and the web.

Reverting back to a very individual response to a tragic event, Yasemin Özcan's work *threehundredone* (2008) was made almost immediately following the assassination of Armenian-Turkish journalist Hrant Dink following his prosecution under Article 301. Her paradoxical statement, of creating a necklace from the numbers 301 – a symbol of beauty, value and durability from within one of the historical commercial centers of Istanbul – amplified her tone of dispute with this Article that continues to be contentious today.

BS: Could you touch on the reason you chose to work almost solely with female artists?

NP: Early on it became apparent that the list of artists was all female and while that was not a decision I had taken intentionally it felt right and seemed somehow emblematic of a certain feeling determination of spirit and aesthetic, that I was hoping to express through the works selected for the exhibition. At the same time it was incredibly inspiring for me to work with a group of women, a number of who I should add have small children, who are committing so

much focus, drive and attention to their work, often in fairly difficult politic climates. In the end, bar Chto Delat?, all the artists selected were female.



Chto Delat?, The Excluded. In a Moment of Danger, 2014.

Courtesy SALT Istanbul.

BS: Last but not least, I would like to ask about the new commissions in the exhibition, including a lecture performance work. How did this transient element of the program function within the exhibition as a whole?

NP: It was through long conversations with several artists that four new works were introduced, including the lecture dance performance Trailer. Following their participation in a workshop SALT hosted with Simone Forti and Jeremiah Day in 2014, Erinç Aslanboğa, Natalie Heller and Bahar Temiz approached me with a proposal to develop a work based on their interpretation of this experience. As the exhibition started to take shape and our conversations developed, their ideas for Trailer, which became a compendium of personal and collective memories reorganized in a performative frame, seemed to align more and more with the attitude of many of the other works. It also felt extremely important to have a 'live' element within the exhibition; a way to incorporate a set of real events that would adapt and be responded to in a variety of ways by different audiences at different moments. With this in mind, Trailer existed in the framework and mediation of the exhibition as one of the artworks. And it was through this performance, that the nuances of urgency, rhythm and repetition that were already gathering momentum through a reading of the other works in the exhibition became activated and simultaneously realized.

A Century of Centuries is on view until 24 May 2015 at SALT Beyoğlu: www.saltonline.org

November Paynter has been Associate Director of Research and Programs at SALT, Istanbul and Ankara, since its founding in 2011 and sits on the Editorial Board of L'Internationale, a confederation of six European museums. Following receipt of a BSc in Architecture from The Bartlett, UCL and a Masters degree from the Royal College of Art in Curating Contemporary Art she moved to Istanbul in 2002 to work with Vasıf Kortun as Curator of Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Center. In 2005 she also took the position of Assistant Curator of the 9th International Istanbul Biennial. In 2007 Paynter returned to London to work as Consultant Curator at Tate Modern for the exhibition Global Cities and then worked for a period in a freelance capacity curating exhibitions for venues internationally including the Bluecoat and Open Eye Galleries in Liverpool, the Philadelphia Museum and the Asia Pacific Triennial at the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. Among other achievements Paynter has been a recipient of a Fund for Arts Research from the American Center Foundation and was winner of the Premio Lorenzo Bonaldi per l'Arte – EnterPrize 2004.

Didem Pekün's work explores both research and practice; conceptually it deals with the production of subjectivities within violent geographies, displacement, and contemporary border politics. Her studio practice includes documentaries and video installations, and her work have screened internationally at festivals and galleries, (Berlinale, Arnolfini, Oberhausen, Punto de Vista, WOMEX, MUSAC, SALT Istanbul) have received and been nominated to awards, (British Council), and attended residencies (Delfina and Greenhouse). Following a BA in Music at SOAS, and an MA on Documentary at Goldsmiths, she is currently a practice-based PhD candidate in Visual Cultures, Goldsmiths and a faculty member at Media and Visual Arts Department at Koc University.

About the author

Basak Senova

Basak Senova is a curator and designer. She studied Literature and Graphic Design (MFA in Graphic Design and Ph.D. in Art, Design and Architecture at Bilkent University) and attended the 7th Curatorial Training Programme of Stichting De Appel, Amsterdam. She has been writing on art, technology and media, initiating and developing projects and curating exhibitions since 1995. Senova is the editor of art-ist 6, Kontrol Online Magazine, Lapses book series, UNCOVERED, Aftermath, Yane Calovski. Obje'ct and Scientific Inquiries among other

publications. She is an editorial correspondent for ibraaz.org and Flash Art International and one of the founding members of NOMAD, as well as the organizer of ctrl_alt_del and Upgrade! Istanbul. Senova was the curator of the Pavilion of Turkey at the 53rd Venice Biennale. As an assistant professor, she lectured in various universities in Istanbul such as Kadir Has University, Bilgi University and Koç University. At the moment, she is lecturing at Bilkent University. She curated Zorlu Center Collection for two years (2011-2012). She co-curated the UNCOVERED (Cyprus) and the 2nd Biennial of Contemporary Art, D-0 ARK Underground (Bosnia and Herzegovina). In 2014, she acted as the Art Gallery Chair of (ACM) SIGGRAPH 2014 (Vancouver) the curator of the Helsinki Photography Biennial 2014 and the Jerusalem Show. Recently, she was appointed as the curator of the Pavilion of Republic of Macedonia at the 56th Venice Biennale.