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# VISUALIZING TRAUMA- HONOR KILLINGS, HOMOPHOBIA AND PREJUDICE: CHALLENGING SOCIAL INJUSTICES & NORMS IN A CONSERVATIVE SOCIETY

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Since its foundation Turkey has always been a country that suppresses the variety and multiplicity of identities because of the deeply rooted nation state ideals and religious beliefs. Both these views are taught at the very early stages of education and memorized by each individual living in the country while growing up, so an examination or an investigation of the nation state identity is eradicated at the very beginning. But identities are plural and vary, has an ever growing and outspoken nature.

Also very recently the increasing effect of religion and the rise of Islamism has made a strong impact on the population more than ever and the issues of gender and sexual orientation has become another important topic to discuss. Though these issues were always critical in Turkey, they have become much more significant due to growing conservatism in society.

This study aims to discuss images and artworks, photographs and actions by artists, activists and photographers from Turkey that challenges the conservative nature of society and gives voice to minorities while dealing with issues of gender, sexual orientation and identities. They have a critical approach, a message or a parable hidden elegantly inbetween their lines, words or colors that touches upon gender roles, social norms and injustices in a society that hardly discusses such issues. The paper aims to explain how a few people giving hints on acute social problems slowly evolve into huge crowds, while gradually changing the minds of artists, activists and people alike.

**Keywords:** Identity, Gender, Conservatism, Pluralism, Images.

This study; that aims to investigate the issues about gender, identity politics, violence and homophobia; is a research focusing on contemporary art from Turkey, and images of activism- images from protest marches, and demonstrations after the year 2010. Since from that moment on the art scene in Turkey has grown so global, it was even referred in certain articles as a “boom”, but also a bubble<sup>i</sup>. The resources regarding the art scene in Turkey, as publications, printed materials are very much limited, that is why most of the quotations in relation to artists declarations are generally taken from private conversations, correspondences, and interviews with the artists/and activists, the citations generally refer to a few online magazines that publish articles about the art scene and gender politics in Turkey. This paper does not intend to come to any conclusions; it is hard to come up with certain solid, concrete results especially when the issue is gender and identity politics. But it rather points to certain facts regarding the issue of gender and arts, how they feed on each other, and the impacts that they create on the streets and on people.

The term “honor” is a term that is fixated on women, and a term often referred to when men talk about women. Honor is measured, valued and defended by men yet it’s something that is considered to belong to women. Conservative societies, strong patriarchy, and religion ignores the character, the identity and the individual that is the woman and seems only to care about her sexuality. In Turkey and probably in most of the other countries honor is the reason why women face abuse, violence and and in many cases, it is mostly whom they consider to be very close to their circle that does the deed. Husbands, partners, brothers, fathers were mostly the guilty part on such terrible incidents and unimaginable kinds and cases of violence have taken place and shown in the news, if the women were somehow injured heavily or dead. Most of the cases are unknown, since the violence generally takes place in the “holy” grounds of the “house” or the “family”; like the Russian proverb “Do not take the thrash out of your hut” Turkish has its own; you do not criticize your family issues outside, it is considered to be a “private” matter so women generally feel shame and keep quite. They are basically silenced, and even though they face abuse; no one will mention their names in the news because they are unknown cases.

Turkish women have a men problem like the most of the world, whereas men also have a men problem too. To start the gloomy and sad topic about human rights and honor killings is a bit hard yet to begin talking about it, a work by the artist Betül Akzambaklar would be an easy and a lighter way to explore the situation. The work contains 25 pieces of ceramics with a moustache drawn on them, the shape of the mouth and the moustache looks strangely familiar to audiences in Turkey, even though the work shows no apparent face, traits or no reference to someone in particular but it’s easy to recognize the gesture because it’s printed on newspapers and broadcasted live on TV everyday. The moustache and the mouth belongs to the president of Turkey (at the time prime minister) who has known to have the habit of treating women or talking about women as the inferior gender and poking into the affairs and ways of being a woman whenever he can. He referred to women as “not equal to men” on many occasions and claimed that feminists reject the idea of motherhood which he cared for, of course, very deeply, as most men claim to do so.

<sup>i</sup>“Motherhood is something else’, he said, claiming that it should be a woman’s priority because Islam exalts women as mothers. He went on to say that women and men could not be treated equally “because it goes against the laws of nature”.<sup>ii</sup>

In many cases he described birth control as “treason” and advised women to have at least three children, which caused outrage among the feminists in Turkey; “One (child) means loneliness, two means rivalry, three means balance and four means abundance. And God takes care of the rest”<sup>iii</sup> he said.

Just as every man in the country the president believes he has a right to have an opinion on the issues related to women; their sexuality, body, birth control; he is against the “feminist” identity and it all starts with this. So the image of masculine power, the moustache, becomes a symbol for all the women in Turkey something to be detested, someone telling you what to do and interfering with everyone’s life. It begins in the way that seems a bit light but behind close doors the effects are horrifying. The numbers are so terrible that the domestic violence in Turkey is a struggle women have to face, and the massive number of women killed in the country is often referred as “femicide”. For example in the year 2014, July 2nd, three women were murdered in a single day by their husbands and the next day another young woman was killed by her 16 year old brother. Gülsüm Kav, a representative of the platform; “Platform to Stop Female Murders” explains why the death rates are so high with these sentences:

“The problem stems from women taking hold of their modern rights in a culture of male dominance. Right now, Turkey is going through a transition period; actually, I believe this is happening throughout the world, but what Turkey is experiencing is a very bloody transition. I believe the root of this is that men are finding courage at how easy this [killing women] is for them to do with the current government.”<sup>iv</sup>

The list of names that is murdered by men every year are generally kept as loose statistics, state does not really care, or doesn’t manage to protect so it doesn’t really keep the statistics. There appears to be a few civil right organizations and some alternative media channels that are described to make an independent and an online journalism that tries to collect the names. And every year a long list of names, since they are part of the statistics of the annual evaluations, are broadcasted by a few media channels. It is such a long list of names no one reads them, once or twice someone finds a name that is familiar, or some touching story behind it to remember but that’s generally it. These names are to be forgotten.

There are two artistic works that deals with the issue of such lists, using the same long lists that are not accurate yet something to begin with. In year 2013 the artist Zeren Göktan exhibited a digital monument in her solo exhibition “Counter” in Istanbul’s Galeri Zilberman, “where the dead women are remembered by their names [the work] includes contributions in data gathering by ‘Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu’ (Platform To Stop Female Murders)”.<sup>v</sup> The names come side by side and on top of each other, like the bricks forming up a wall, though it is a wall of shame it brings to mind a kind of solidarity even in death, the women keep their efforts to commemorate and mark each others’ presence in the world once they existed. “The Monument Counter” is an on line (internet) monument to commemorate women who lost their lives due to domestic violence. It is also a counter that is updated every day.”<sup>vi</sup> On the homepage each brick, shows a name and when clicked on the names details regarding the person’s death appears, the age, the reasons for her homicide, and by whom she was murdered. To create the webpage requests about the data regarding women homicides were claimed to be submitted to the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Family and Social Policy and General Directorate for Security<sup>vii</sup> but there seems to be no response. So the compiled lists of women murdered each year were gathered with the information of independent organizations or civil rights organizations such as Platform to Stop Female Murders. In this case the list is not the official list but the existence of such an official list and its accuracy is unknown. The wall shows only the cases of domestic violence and since most of the cases are considered to be unknown remaining inside the household; only the proven cases have taken place on the Monument. Still the numbers and the massive wall brings together a huge pile of names, and shame for everyone who has the capability to be ashamed and be horrified by such things.

Similar to Monument Counter, another work that indicated such a list of names was shown by Neriman Polat and Arzu Yayıntaş, who covered the windows of a typical male dominated coffeehouse with the names of women who were killed by men. Their data is provided by an independent journalism network; Bianet, that keeps the statistics for some while. Two issues about this work were significant: First the work was exhibited in a male dominated area; coffeehouses have a specific name in Turkey (“kıraathane”) so it’s a bit different than a cafe, that’s why to make a distinction these cafes will be referred as a “coffeehouse” throughout this text. The coffeehouses are places where only men hang out, pass time away from their family houses, playing cards, drinking tea. It’s considered to be a man’s haven, if he’s unemployed, he could still spend time there, because the tea is cheap, and no one questions his successes in life. So a coffeehouse is a cafe but a bit different, it is a place where only men are welcomed. It’s not forbidden to women but women are not welcomed, it’s one of the unwritten rules of the place.

Vip Cafe is a place around the Tophane area; where the artist/activists covered the windows with names; and Tophane is a problematic neighborhood, not only because of its well known conservatism and gentrification processes that it’s been going through but because of its willingness to impose its conservatism on others.<sup>viii</sup> Because Tophane is close to the central cultural and touristic Taksim area, most of the galleries and artists’ studios preferred Tophane to be the ideal place to settle, the rents were cheaper and it was close to the center. But the cultural differences created clashes inside the community, the drinks served at the opening nights, the kissing couples, the noise were the excuses for people’s attacks on the galleries. Two women, Polat & Yayıntaş chose this conservative neighborhood for this specific work somewhere between art and activism.

Secondly, covering the windows of the coffeehouse was not the only action they planned they also occupied the space (the coffeehouse) for a short period of time (an hour). With an open call on March 21st, 2013 women occupied the male dominated space even for some short time it is a place where women also can gather and drink tea and coffee. In an interview Arzu Yayıntaş claims:

“Coffeehouses especially on such small neighborhoods are places of oppression, while women walk past its doors they feel they have to lower their heads and look down on the floor irritated by the male gaze staring at them from the inside, they feel the urge to run away. The men watch the neighborhood all day long, controlling, judging, gossiping. It’s a place for men and for women its borders are closed. When we cover the windows with the names of women, we wanted to limit the male gaze out the window, so they could only see outside as much as these women’s names let them. Moreover, while they look outside each name that limit their vision is the name of a woman whose life’s ended by the hands of a particular man.”<sup>ix</sup>

One could argue that a pile of names listed here and there could hardly create compassion and understanding in society, especially when the list is massive, in such cases people would ignore each name, its existence in the world, and consider it- just another name. Recently an article on New York Times, suggested that people get numb and indifferent when they hear such huge numbers of people dead or killed everyday, but they can relate to it if there’s one example, one person with a story; just as it was in the case of Alan Kurdi, the boy whose body found ashore in Turkey.

“Consider the recent death of the Syrian child Aylan Kurdi when his family braved the choppy seas off the coast of Turkey. The image of Aylan lying face down on the beach captivated the world’s attention and even, in short order, resulted in refugee policy changes in countries as far away as the United States. But 14 Syrian children drowned in the Aegean Sea the next day. Did you notice? Did you care?”<sup>x</sup>

So one can somehow relate to such human tragedies if the numbers are not big; and they see the visual and learn about the story; according to the article they even grow sensitive and feel touched: “The poet Zbigniew Herbert calls it ‘arithmetic of compassion.’”<sup>xi</sup>

The pile of names in cases of domestic violence on women in Turkey are in most of the cases collected from different sources and even the almost complete list of names is hard to get. Moreover, these two works do not ask for your compassion they ask for rebellion; Yayıntaş adds:

“Women need other different kinds of activisms and interactions to make their voices heard. They cannot anymore tolerate the male violence growing gradually everyday and are ready to react to it. With this project we invited women to such activist actions to speak out and cry: “Stop the Violence Against Women.” Now it is time to speak out! What we have learnt with this project is that anything is possible with the solidarity among women.”<sup>xii</sup>

And it is true that the crowds are insensitive to femicide in Turkey, the list of names even, is hard to get and most of the time it is what the artists/activists want to show; the huge number and our insensitivity towards the situation. Still honor killings and domestic violence is not just about lists in Turkey there are cases that people can relate to if they are not numb or insensitive towards the tragedies. The cases of Güldünya Tören and Nevin Yıldırım are the names that is etched into people’s memories. Güldünya Tören was shot by her two brothers in the middle of a street, and then again murdered in her hospital bed by these two men. The most recent case Nevin Yıldırım is about a women who’s been constantly abused and raped for years and finally killed her rapist. Though she acted in self defence Turkish penal code punished her with a life sentence. Artists in Turkey started to hung sheets from their windows and balconies with her face stencilled, looking directly at each passer by.<sup>xiii</sup> Each of these women’s names and faces are direct slogans and images printed on flags and placards in feminist protests since then. There are also words that etched into women’s minds because all women hear them at some point in their lives and relate to the situation that created the sentence.

“Her mental and physical health remains stable”, these are the words generally mentioned in the doctor reports and then in court cases, after incidents of molestation, abuse and rape. It’s known to be a quick doctor consultation and verdict totally ignorant of a women’s psychology after such incidents. The artist Neriman Polat in a short video investigates the phrase with a fictional disturbed women. She also created the exhibition HomeWatch in the year 2013, full of grim landscapes and interiors following women in every step they take. Images of gravestones, the angel of death, madness, sticks, knife, force, victimhood follows an unknown woman wherever she goes. Dozens of windows showing the interiors of dozens of houses with stories unknown to each and everyone, hidden from the world, they keep many secrets.

The Gravestone with the name “Homewatch” carved onto it, somehow bears witness to the femicide throughout the country; situated at the entrance of the exhibition hall, it investigates “the trash” in every house. The top of the stone is also shaped in a triangular form; very similar to a house which is generally considered to be a safe place but with the cold marble; far from it, house recalls death.

The situation with women and violence in Turkey may considered to be really bad and bloody, but there’s worse: The Rights of LGBTI is constantly violated and since a huge number of people face exclusion from the society, the violence, abuse and homicide rate is vague. “There have been documented cases of “honor killings,” such as the 2007 murder of Ahmet Yıldız, and the attack of Rosin Cicek, a 17-year-old who was beaten then shot 17 times by his father and uncles for being gay.”<sup>xiv</sup> Moreover, it is harder for the transgender people who are less able to hide their identities: “Thirty transgender people were killed in Turkey between January 2008 and December 2012, according to a report released in 2013 by Transgender Europe.”<sup>xv</sup>

Turkey is probably the less problematic country when compared with other Muslim countries, but still homosexuality brings abuse, and hate crimes:

“Homosexual conduct between consenting adults is legal in Turkey, unlike many other Muslim countries. In Iran, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen, for example, it is punishable by death. Yet intolerance is still widespread. Eighty-four percent of Turks said gays or lesbians were among those that they would least like to have as neighbors, according to 2011 research conducted as part of the World Values Survey. This widespread prejudice often spills into discrimination, abuse, and violence. Advocacy groups say that Turkey has higher levels of hate crimes against LGBT individuals than any other member of the Council of Europe.”<sup>xvi</sup>

LGBTI groups always suggest that because they were targeted and face exclusion by the society their first gatherings and Pride demonstrations were always with not more than a bunch of people at the very beginning of the movement. But the world is changing, many countries passed the laws of equality and seems to be against indiscriminate and intolerance. LGBTI movement was also one of the first to support the Gezi Park demonstrations in Turkey which started as a peaceful protest then turning wild by the attacks of the police. Since then almost all LGBTI Pride gatherings seem to be more visible, thousands of people gather in Istiklal Street specifically to join the march, the demonstrations are supported by many other groups and individuals that are not gay, lesbian or transgender. One might suggest that the atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance of the “other”, ideas of living together and tolerance that was strengthened during the Gezi protests somehow seems to make a shift on the prejudices of the population. How it changed the views of protesters might be explained in a better light by the artwork titled “Another Hero”; a drawing of a figure carrying someone in his arms, similar to iconic Pieta, but illustrative with lines in synch and cartoon-like. The work just like a typical graphic novel panel has captions and text, narrating the story behind the image, based on the expressions of E. S. bearing witness to the story:

“I’m a man of strength. I carried two other lads. I was trying to move forward even though with great struggle and dragging my feet behind. One of the lads regained consciousness and moved on by himself. Then I started inhaling the pepper gas in serious amounts. Felt exhausted. The lad said: “Bro, I’m alright, you go on”. And I took shelter somewhere away from the smoke. Just to stay away and feel clean then take back and carry him, but then I realized again he fainted and there was a 10 meter distance between us. There was a serious amount of smoke in the air that I could barely see the kid but I knew he was on his knees trying to get back on his feet but failing at every attempt. Just told myself, “Go back Firat. There’s nothing you can do, you’re gonna inhale that gas anyway.” Meanwhile I was still coughing. But at that moment as I was trying to go back to the smoke I saw a silhouette, an image. A woman picked up the lad and started running. I just saw the silhouette, with high heels and all. At the background there’s smoke and light; places were all burning up in flames. I was just watching the silhouette there nicely, then asked myself: ‘What the hell?!’ She came close and she was a transvestite. I said: “You know what, you’re amazing!” Probably I never said any good word about transvestites before, I always had a prejudice but from now on, I mean that situation, that was legend. I’ve never seen anything like that. I was shocked by the sight of it, woman picking up the lad. Just like that. Easily. Coming closer, I realized she was almost 2 metres in height. That was amazing.”

The text belongs to an anonymous hero named E.S., and his bearing witness to an incident about a LGBTI individual carrying a man across the teargas canisters. The artist describes the Gezi Resistance as: “Gezi Protests, where the involvement was on the basis of singularity and over a million people of various social classes stood up to the government, has a historical significance on the roots of societal consciousness in Turkey.”<sup>xvii</sup> While depicting the story with cartoonish images, he addresses the characters as heroes, and the exaggerated muscled figure of the LGBTI character completes the narrative while revealing an unlikely hero in a very real and strange scene. Though Saray’s work is his own drawing and creation inspired by the excitement and strange incidents happening on the streets; other artists chose a documentation technique. Ahmet Ögüt exhibited a photograph taken during the Istanbul Pride gathering, a scene of people climbing over a statue by the artist Ayşe Erkmen at the end of the Istiklal Street. The statue is a strange one; colorless, and sometimes even invisible through the typical daily hassle in the city, a passer by might not recognize it; but with rainbow colored flag and the protesters it suddenly comes alive. There was a similar photograph taken by the Vice News reporter John Beck in 2014 very close to the protesters, and many more other journalists and photographers have such images; and Ahmet Ögüt’s photograph, (may be translated as “A Monument for A Day Less Ordinary”) is not different from those in that sense, yet it marks a person’s own contribution and involvement in the gathering; his own account and testimony. It is also an occupation of a piece of land, and looks like a conquest with people climbing the top of a towering statue. Nilbar Güreş also uses a similar method, using the image of a graffiti that was in circulation on social media quite a lot, with the text: “Ayşe Fatma’yı Seviyor” (Ayşe loves Fatma). Ayşe and Fatma are of course both names of women and with probably a representational Ayşe and Fatma in the picture.

Before and after Gezi protests, there appeared to be a lot of graffiti on the walls, with a great sense of humour that directly criticize the roots of society and the way it functions. The artists probably with a sense of wonder and amazement documented those moments and were inspired by the texts written over the walls. These phrases were literally ahead of their own time and society, challenging its norms not only because it was a society of conservatism but because its conservatism was empty, idiotic and meaningless. The words that might shock a typical everyday passer by on the road such as “vulva”, “clitoris”, “penis” was rapidly written all over the walls around the city, since its writers are anonymous no one can be charged with obscenity in public places.

The traumatic effects of homophobia and honor killings inspired the artists to go back on the streets and create works that investigate the rebellion, criticism and humor taking place on the outside, pushing them away from their safe haven that is the studio. The streets were full of examples of creative thinking, forcing the artists to work in the public sphere, in the landscape, not to be simple witnesses but active individuals in the process, using the images, the graffiti, the flags, the symbols. At the same time the protests, the marches, gatherings became more and more creative and

colorful calling everyone to go out to streets and defend their rights. But the streets are not the pinky romantic idealist environment; crowds exactly know what they will be facing; the police brutality, public lynchings, water cannons, plastic bullets, gunshots, tear gas cannisters, and possible jailtime.

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