

## The importance of witnessing

An interview with Deniz Eroglu



These days in the media one can read about people from Eastern countries trying to reach Europe often as a “flood” or in abstract figures. Even the people who drowned on their way are reduced to figures: 14, 50... Meanwhile economists try to quantify how many people a state is able to integrate successfully. After the recent European election the far-right-wing in the EU parliament grew to the number of over a hundred seats, and now AFD seems poised to become the biggest political party in Saxony. One of the most interesting aspects about art is that it can find other, more personal and sensual ways of approaching an issue. In artist Deniz Eroglu’s works things get personal as he ambiguously interweaves his own story and the oftentimes also fictional stories he presents into a bigger picture. Deniz’ father arrived as an immigrant from Turkey to Denmark, where he ran a kebab place in the 90s. His sculptures, but foremost videos and installations explore different forms of life in the margins of contemporary social spheres by playing with clichés, genres such as “cinéma vérité” and often contain a touch of dark humor. For his project *Witness (Şahit)* for Brandts Museum in Denmark he researched the xenophobic National Socialist Underground (NSU) murders that took place in different kebab places in Germany in the 2000s, leaving ten people dead and one wounded. His careful observations from a trip around Germany in the last year led to a four-channel video installation in which more than 30 actors took part. In it we have the chance *witness* the everyday life of the kebab sellers, in Germany through a beautifully unassuming, multi-perspective portrait. Juliane Duft spoke with Deniz for KubaParis to explore the background of this work.



**Tell us something about your research about the NSU murders and your travels in Germany?**

The NSU murders struck me as interesting for many reasons. These racially motivated murders were carried out in a very meticulous way over a period of six years. The concept of making road trips all across Germany with the aim to commit random and brutal face-to-face assassinations seemed bizarre and enigmatic to me. When it comes to violence - in all its transgression: the taking of another person's life - the ensuing interest often lies with the murderers, and not the victims, because the murderers are the transgressive individuals. Slowly however, my interest shifted from the perpetrators towards the faceless victims. I'm reminded of the term "the ungrievable" that Judith Butler coined, which applies here. No one in the media landscape seemed to care much about these persons. This is essentially what moved me to make the work. There is a blind spot here, both cinematically and socially. In my online research all I could find about the victims were a few hazy black and white photographs. Immigrants are talked about, but they rarely have the capacity to utter themselves in public arenas such as in politics or the news media. Gradually I began to focus on the people who were targeted in these murders. I looked at maps of where the assassinations had taken place, and I realised that the perpetrators had struck in all corners of Germany. I decided to travel around in the same way, but of course with a very different purpose.

**How did you find, choose and approach the protagonists of your films?**

People weren't always trusting of our intentions. There are many possible reasons for this. Some suspected us of being sent by the Turkish government to prod voter loyalty. Others feared we had

come to pry into their accounting or to check residence permits. Turkish society in the present moment is affected by an almost sectarian conflict among certain groups. These conflicts, which have their roots in circumstances in Turkey are also very prevalent among the Turkish diaspora in Germany. This undoubtedly heightened people's suspicions, but we would slowly and patiently introduce ourselves and meticulously describe our intentions. Then of course it was a matter of personal chemistry and whether they had any artistic aspirations. If and when a sense of trust was established we could go on to think about creating something there. In the end we selected four protagonists out of several candidates. From that point onwards we started visiting these people regularly to get to know them better.



**How did they react to you? What do you think their perspective is on you – you and your protagonists share a common background, right?**

Quite often people became very emotional when they realised we showed a genuine interest in them. As they started to grasp my intentions with making this work, they understood my motivations. It was a matter of getting to know them, but also of inviting them into the process. I wanted to listen to them. I said to one of them: "I can't tell your life story in a 15 minute film, but if I do what I'm supposed to do well and we are able to express something genuine together, then the audience will feel that. They will feel who you are, and what you have been through." We were a bit concerned before we began filming. We wondered if all these visits had really had an effect in terms of building actual trust. Would these people really open themselves? And would we be able to reveal anything intimate and profound about them? When we arrived to shoot the first film, we were shocked to discover that our collaborator wasn't there. He had gone on holiday! He knew we were coming, yet he didn't care to let us know. We tried to call him without luck. When we finally got



through to him, he said “just film someone else till I’m back.” This was very perplexing to us. We had to work around that, and we had to think hard in order to incorporate him. In the end the very thorough preparations is what saved us.



**What is your attitude as a documentarist? Or would you call your work documentary at all?**

I guess you can say there is a political or social consciousness in that I focus on people who are marginalised or “de-classé”. I don’t regard this work as a documentary though, because my aim lies elsewhere. The work of Abbas Kiarostami means a lot to me. His ideas of shunning storytelling for something more akin to poetry is something I adhere to in my work. There is an elliptical economy to his films that moves me a lot. His use of non-professional actors, staging scenes in everyday-like settings, un-concluded endings, and abstract narratives places his films in a limbo between documentary and art.



### **How was the process to find the concept / final form of the films?**

I had planned to have an additional narrative trope in this work which would have been a film about the murderers. But as I read more about these two men I began to realise that their motivations were extremely one-dimensional and ideological. Besides so many films are “propped up” with violence to make them more intense and affecting. It’s a very cliché ridden territory. Hollywood has portrayed these kinds of people for decades. I wanted the work to be about something more affirming than the banality of political extremism, so in the end it seemed superfluous to include them.

### **Can you tell me a bit more about the installation of the films in the Brandts Museum? Why do you show it in that way – why not in a “normal” black cube or on a screen anywhere? How and why would you like to distinguish your work from short films or documentaries?**

What is important here is the juxtaposition of the films and the expanded meaning that is achieved with this relatively simple gesture. Because of the circular way the films are installed (a 4-channel installation in the same space) the audience is able to move back and forth between them. There is no imperative to watch any of the films in their entirety. If the films were projected in a traditional sequential way, I would lose this aspect of immediate synergy between stories, people and locations. We built a round podium that is a hybrid between a red Turkish ottoman and classical movie theatre seating which becomes part of the experience, and I guess my deeper point with that was to comment on these protagonists’ identity; do they belong to German society or to something else? Are their nationalities something in between or hybrid? I thought these were interesting questions to try to pose in the form of a piece of furniture.



Witness at Brandts Museum in Odense, Denmark.

**Can you tell me something about the meaning of the title *Witness*?**

We are all subjected to media coverage of people who are defined as being “outside” of society. Whether it is immigrants or citizens on the bottom of society (perceived to be a burden), or refugees (the symptom of an impending catastrophe that will destroy Western civilisation). Such a reduction of other people doesn’t correspond with my understanding and for me this dissonance with the so-called reality that we are presented with, has grown over the years. It becomes a serious problem when we are duped by prejudiced newspapers. I feel aware that there is an intimate and social reality that is never depicted. By trying to shine a light there, I’m hoping it can serve as a catalyst for the audience to reflect about society in another way.

**Which parallels do you draw between what you were able to witness in your film’s production and your childhood / your family?**

Seeing the father and his enormous love for his sons in the film *Main* really struck a chord with me, and gave me flashbacks to my own childhood. The father in the film is very consumed by his work, almost to an obsessive degree, where he can’t let go of the daily chores and supervising, but clearly his other obsession in life is his children. My father was like that too. When I saw this I knew that this would be relevant for a Western European audience to experience. I think this kind of love is very foreign, almost exotic to most people here.





**What tensions did you feel/see?**

I guess in the end I was surprised that the films ended up being so much about fathers and sons. Three of the films reflect this kind of relationship in different ways. I was reminded of my own alienation from my father when I was very young. I was affected by a culture that deemed my father's culture inferior to theirs, and in some ways I embraced that stance. I looked at those boys (in the film), and wondered if they would eventually go through similar struggles with their identity and their view of their father. I saw one of the boys who is a six-year-old correct his father's German. I remember doing the same to my father at that age. Already at that age you have grasped that your father is disadvantaged.

**What did you learn by doing the films?**

I liked the idea of traveling around the country and encountering people by chance. Setting out without knowing what to expect. The social reality that these people face is pretty hard. Working in a kebab shop is often a matter of survival. The recent influx of refugees from Syria and Afghanistan have largely replaced Turks and Kurds in the kebab shops. This means that the owners have become a sort of middle class group, although still on the margins of German society. I think in time this work will be regarded as a valid and important perspective on these people and their existential conditions.