

belit sađ: Excessive Ideas

by Chi-hui Yang

In belit sađ's video practice, the photographic image is an excessive object—an object whose meaning is shaped by forces beyond its frame, wields and condenses social power, and controls bodies and behaviors. The image is also one which demands. It structures seeing as a political act and insists on response, analysis, and accountability. It is capable of violence, of telling truth, half-truth and falsity, and of reproducing itself. It possesses radical possibility.

sađ is a collector and deconstructor of images. Central to her practice is an inquiry into how state power and violence flow through the image; how production, circulation and interpretation of photographs and video reveal optical regimes, shaping the visible or invisible, the accountable or forgotten. sađ builds her videos from images which mold and reinforce social behaviors and narratives: newspaper archives, social media, cinema, propaganda tapes, surveillance video, television news. Through gesture, collage, abstraction, and most importantly, text, her works examine how ideology is embedded in representations of reality, and the spells these forces are capable of casting.

sađ is concerned with the nation, race and ideology—social formations which are often called upon to justify violence. An artist from Turkey based in Amsterdam, the subjects of her first-person video essays are the charged dynamics created by the relationship between Turkey's borders and national identity: Ayhan arkın, a paramilitary policeman understood to have killed hundreds of Kurds on behalf of the Turkish state; memories of conflict on the Turkish-Syrian border; and in her most recent work, the murder of Turkish and Kurdish individuals by a German Neo-Nazi group. The titles of her videos reflect that her inquiry is not just about politics, but the complicity of the image within: *my camera seems to recognize people* (2016), *and the image gazes back* (2014), *overexposed* (2017), *cut-out* (2017), *grain* (2016). Her videos are staged as encounters with images whose real and symbolic power require interrogation, self-reflexive conversations between her and fragments of video or grainy photos about the creative and political act of filmmaking itself, and the role and precarity of the artist in conducting it.

In *Ayhan and Me* (2016), sađ examines notions of artistic production, censorship, and control through her relationship as an artist with the images of Ayhan arkın. A video about its own making and a critique of social and artistic institutions, it charts the trajectory of the video from being one about arkın, to one about the symbol of arkın, and its power to censor. In 2015, sađ was asked to create work for an exhibition supported by the Istanbul arts center Akbank Sanat. When the gallery learned that the piece would concern arkın, it bowed to political pressure and censored the project. In the fourteen-minute piece, she crumbles, bends, over exposes and obscures a photograph of arkın, exercising her own power over it even while the photograph determines the parameters of her video. She muses "questioning who manipulates who, is a part of [her] practice, even perhaps has become its backbone in this climate of war."

In an earlier work, *and the image gazes back* (2014) she examines the relationship between the political act and mass-circulating media images, real and fictive, by asking what informs and distinguishes one's actions from the representations of them. Weaving together references to ISIS, Twitter, *Dog Day Afternoon*, photographs from the occupation of television stations during the Romanian Revolution, and the television broadcast of the 1982 Spanish Parliament Coup, she asks whether there is a distinction between images capturing us and us being captured by images, pointing to "images that reimagine the real and on the other hand, realities that look like they are faking fiction."

In her most recent videos, *(Against) Randomness*, *overexposed* and *cut-out* (all 2017), sađ examines the National Socialist Underground (NSU) murders, where between the years 2000–2007, Turks and Kurds were targeted and killed in Germany by this Neo-Nazi group. The three together form an inquiry into the construction of history, memory, and the optics of justice. *(Against) Randomness* calls for the necessity of narrativization—the linking of related histories together to reveal patterns of violence and abuse of power. In this text-driven video, amidst fragmented images of everyday life, she muses on remembrance, forgetfulness, and what allows traces of lives made invisible to be seen. In the video she writes, "storytelling is resistance against the perception that life is a series of random events."

This idea of forging connective tissue as resistance animates *cut-out*, an examination of the media photos of individuals murdered by the NSU. Moving through each individual's newspaper image, she asks what they tell us—what the lighting, background, quality and cropping reveal about the individuals. Intimate portraits of the victims' lives are offered through holiday photos, studio portraits, and passport images. What do the excesses of these images say? What isn't included in the images that we can draw out, what does a background color or a gesture reveal, and how are these separate lives linked? While sađ intentionally omits images of violence, its spectre is conjured in the mind of the viewer, through the act of sewing together the connections between the disparate yet intimate lives on display. What cannot be seen but only

imagined often exceeds reality and can operate as a powerful political tool and creative device.

The architectural and cultural biases built into the criminal trials of the NSU murders are explored in *overexposed*. saĝ uses a schematic of the Munich courtroom where the trials were held, choosing to dissect the tightly controlled lines of sight between those occupying the room. The denied visual connections between victims, their families, witnesses, lawyers, and public are accounted for while transcripts reveal embedded biases favoring the accused. The relationship between optics and justice is suggested: to deny the emotional and political insights that come from access to facial expression and eye contact is to deny solidarity, accountability and legibility.

saĝ's videos are incantations orchestrated to demystify the photographic machinery of ideology, to not only hold power accountable, but to counter it with critical deconstruction. They ask how images accumulate meaning and influence, what imprint they have on us and how this mark can shape actions and intentions both present and future. Confrontations both urgent and necessary, her essayistic encounters press for greater truths in a moment when the image's hold on veracity has been obscured.