

Talya Feldman
And Our Cities Change
EIGEN + ART Lab, Berlin
March 2 - April 8, 2023

In 1982 in Hamburg, Semra Ertan, a 25-year-old poet born in Turkey and a migrant worker (a so-called *Gastarbeiter:in*) who emigrated to Germany in 1972, undertook an act of protest against racism. This act was imbricated in symbology and utterly final: public self-immolation. In the 350 plus poems and satirical pieces that she penned, Ertan chronicled her life and experience as a Turkish migrant.

In 1984, a racist arsonist attacked a migrant neighborhood in Duisburg, murdering seven members of the Satir and Turhan families whilst seriously injuring further family members and residents. The officials investigating ignored the body of evidence demonstrating that racism motivated the attack.

In 2012, 22-year-old Burak Bektaş convened with a group of friends on a street in Berlin-Neukölln. An unidentified white man approached the group and, without uttering a word, fired at them—killing Bektaş and seriously injuring two of his friends. The perpetrator has still not been identified.

In 2016, the German police arrested 24-year-old Yaya Jabbi, accusing him of being in possession of 1.65 grams of cannabis. Jabbi was raised in Gambia and had travelled to Libya in 2013 and, as a refugee, had then migrated through Italy before settling in Germany with his brother. Shortly before his release, Jabbi was found dead in his cell. According to the Justice Department, Jabbi had committed suicide, despite the judicial authorities admit that there were no signs of suicide risk in advance.

These cases, like so many, often go unnoticed by reporters and their coeval media constituents, let alone structurally analyzed. If and when pundits have had their say and the flitting images have drifted past television and computer screens, what is it that endures? Often, it is *statistics* and stilted photographs of the victims, desaturating the fullness of their lives into commutable avatars. The burden of fighting for justice and a justified remembrance, therefore, falls entirely on the bereaved families, survivors, and friends. Since 1982, the family of Semra Ertan alongside the *Initiative in Gedenken an Semra Ertan* have demanded the renaming of a street and square in Hamburg to properly commemorate her. In 2019, the newly formed *Initiative Duisburg 1984* organized the first commemoration of the victims alongside the bereaved family and survivors. Since 2012, Bektaş' friends and family have organized with the *Initiative for the Clarification of Burak Bektaş' Murder* (Initiative für die Aufklärung des Mordes an Burak Bektaş), continuing to demand that his murder be properly investigated. Alongside Jabbi's family, the *Initiative in Remembrance of Yaya Jabbi* (Initiative in Gedenken an Yaya Jabbi) arduously organizes to demand clarification of his death and to claim Yaya Jabbi Circle at Park Fiction in Hamburg as a space for remembrance.

In each case, we see self-organizing efforts stepping into the hollow fold occupied by a perfunctory state apparatus that proves itself to be not only incompetent but utterly apathetic towards the structural framework that motivates racist and antisemitic violence. The narrative provided by media outlets often plays a role in the normalization of violence rather than focusing on the perspectives of the murdered and their families.

It is this normative logic of the becoming-statistic that this exhibition counters with the full, fleshy force of the human. 'And Our Cities Change' is a new exhibition by Talya Feldman, a time-based multimedia artist who weaves together a plexus of documentary narratives, prints, and installation pieces imbued in episodic memory and the phenomenology of remembering in public spaces. The audio in Feldman's video pieces come directly from the Ertan, Satir, Bektaş, and Jabbi families and initiatives. Feldman underscores the importance of not only openly listening to their demands, centering their voices without filter, but also recognizing their work's role in fighting for systematic changes.

These works, collectively, do not rehearse the past but function as activist aesthetics—they cultivate a possible future. The late, great visual cultural studies scholar and AIDS activist Douglas Crimp argues that the writer and artist's branding their own subjectivity into their work not only illuminates their inherent partiality but primes a political position. This debars the writer/artist from the traditional keep of a putatively “objective” position—the same position flaunted by journalistic authorities. It instead imbues them with *intention*. In her own featured works, Feldman's artistic purview is brazenly intentional, echoing Crimp's call. Activism and artistry here dovetail. Feldman's screen-prints serve as psycho-geographic topologies, visualizing physical coordinates that have withstood white supremacist attacks in recent years.

Feldman's work focuses on the concatenation of violence through the voices of survivors. This approach informed her 2020 work, *Global White Supremacist Terror: Halle*, an interactive web platform that serves as a forensic archive, linking to witness reports, narrated surveillance, and an overview of online radicalization and the rise of far-right terror locally and globally. Each act of violence is here visualized not as a mere parcel of cold data but part of a genealogy that, in its dialectical form, includes and sublates the noxious textual history of propaganda and visual culture that mainstream media is complicit in. Feldman's video art piece, *WIR SIND HIER* (2023), is a synergistic piece. The video imagery of cities like Berlin, Duisburg, and Hamburg, serves to make concrete the affective reality of that which cold data merely reduces into statistics. In a letter to her sister, the audio voice of Zühal Bilir-Meier recites Semra Ertan's poetry while the video pans towards the city in which they subsist. This poetic act of naming, remembering, and claiming is in keeping with the efforts by the aforementioned initiatives fighting for change.

Through the phenomenological relation of viewing and receiving, we come to novel threads of understanding. These variegated threads of remembrance require serious and dedicated consideration if we are to counter the manifold reductions that continue to abound with each new act of violence and the coeval media responses-cum-reduction—the, to borrow Colin Koopman's parlance, “datafications” that dampen and trade on victims and survivors. While activist aesthetics may, per the lessons of standpoint epistemology, never relay the exact phenomenology of the survivor or bereaved family members, these artworks nevertheless perforate the patina of statistics and cold data. This is precisely what this exhibition fosters: antithetical to the public mourning ritual it is, instead, a reverberation that arrives after the media and its congeries have moved on.

Text by Ekin Erkan