

Listing

Thomas Keenan and Sohrab Mohebbi

"The List traces information related to the death of more than 35,597 refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants who have lost their lives within or on the borders of Europe since 1993. It is compiled and updated every year by the Amsterdam-based organization UNITED for Intercultural Action. Since 2006, in collaboration with curators, art workers, and institutions, Banu Cennetoğlu has facilitated up-to-date and translated versions of The List in several countries using public display structures such as ad-boards and newspaper supplements."¹

What is it to "list?" Etymologically, the word points in three apparently unrelated directions. Ships and other vessels list: they tilt or sway to one side or another, when passengers or cargo shift abruptly and when winds and waves overtake them. And when they list, they run the risk of capsizing. An announcement of listing, then, is an alarm or warning. Beware! To list also means, in an older English, to hear or hearken, to listen. List! I am calling for your attention, asking you to notice and respond, to acknowledge what is being said. Finally, to list is to bring things together in a column or row. This meaning of the word is derived from the Middle English *liste*, meaning "border, edging, stripe," and from Old French and Old Italian words meaning "strip of paper." Listing brings things together in a line or a strip, treats separate items as related to one another, assembles them into a territory of their own.²

Boats list and sink, and their passengers and crew drown, all the time. The forces of nature are often to blame. The phenomenon charted by *The List* is anything but natural. It results from the deliberate choice of European governments and electorates to restrict legal entry into the EU by those seeking refuge, asylum, or a better life. Fleeing people are forced to undertake dangerous journeys across inhospitable deserts, seas, beaches, and cities, often ending in detention centers and refugee camps. The engine that drives *The List* is the weaponization of the sea, land, and weather in the name of what is cynically called "deterrence." And the events it documents are not limited to Europe: *The List* could certainly be expanded to include North America as well, where more or less the same thing happens at and on the way to the southern border of the United States.

¹ *The List* website: www.list-e.info.

² *Oxford English Dictionary* online, "list."

The List features the names of the dead when they are known and placeholders when they are not. Many names are yet to be learned and entered. The entries are counted and enumerated, so the names become numbers as well. The qualitative and the quantitative meet—*The List* says two things at the same time, joining them in a dynamic rhythm. All the dead deserve to be known and recorded individually, to have their identities preserved as the markers of the lives they alone lived. The entries speak of singularity. But the names are gathered together in this list because the individuals died, in effect, together. The enumeration brings them into relation, it equalizes and generalizes them. And it reminds us of how many lives have been lost to policies of cruelty and indifference. The ever-growing number is another sort of marker, an index of the scale and scope of the catastrophe that has taken place, and still is taking place, within Europe and at its borders.

Banu Cennetoğlu calls herself the caretaker of a graveyard. There is no proper resting place for many of the lost on *The List*—some bodies are never found, others are found but not identified before being buried in unmarked graves across Europe. What kind of cemetery is a list, and how does one take care of it? The name, gender, and age of each victim is added to a spreadsheet, along with the date, location, and cause of their death. Note is made of where they came from, if known, and the source of the information about their death. The logic of the entries' organization must be consistent, so the caretaker edits the document, checking the spelling, grammar, and syntax. Because the data is recorded in different languages, the task often involves translation. It's an administrative process. The presentation is bureaucratically austere, neutral, factual, banal: six columns are filled in along the new rows added each time the document is updated.

The List has been growing for more than a decade. When Cennetoğlu first presented it publicly in March 2007 in Amsterdam, it contained 7,128 confirmed entries. When she facilitated its publication in *The Guardian* as a special supplement in June 2018, the headline read: "It's 34,361 and rising: how The List tallies Europe's migrant bodycount."³ Its most recent presentation in Barcelona in September 2018 showed 35,597 dead. The creation and maintenance of *The List* is a private, voluntary, civic effort initiated by the Dutch NGO UNITED for Intercultural Action. Cennetoğlu's projects aim to publicize it: "It needs to be visible. Governments don't keep these records for the public; they don't want the public to see these records because it exposes their policies. So you have NGOs trying to put the data together, and that data is incomplete and fragile, but there again someone has to do it."⁴

The List is a public document that aspires to readability and visibility. The names it bears should be known, seen, heard, beyond the realm of those who have already noticed. They appear in print and on walls and billboards, not just spoken to a friend or whispered to a neighbor. Because, as Cennetoğlu notes, "a surprise encounter is important," we are confronted by *The List* when we look out the windshield or open the newspaper at the breakfast table or a café.⁵ Far from the border, or the sea or the desert, the names of the dead confront the living. *The List* demands attention, it insists on being heard. Cennetoğlu says: "People should be able to see it despite themselves,

³ McIntyre and Rice-Oxley, "It's 34,361 and rising."

⁴ Higgins, "Banu Cennetoğlu."

⁵ Grieg, "Interview with Banu Cennetoğlu."

and despite that they are caught up in their daily lives; the fact they have to go to work, come back from work, get on the subway, walk on the street, etc. I wanted to put it out there without any announcement, without any direct negotiation with the audience but somehow in a negotiated space.”⁶

Monuments are often erected in the name of nation, race, faith, or clan to remind those who survive of those who did not. Like any memorial, *The List* seeks to restore the dead, as Thomas Laqueur writes, “into a remade world of the living.”⁷ It alerts us—regardless of whether or not we want to know—that we are both living without the deceased and existing alongside them, creating a new community of the living and the dead. In this way *The List* challenges the monopoly that organized powers have sought to exercise over the memories and disposition of the dead. Beyond or despite the borders customarily erected around institutions and their memories, *The List* aspires to what another activist has called the “more egalitarian citizenry of the dead.”⁸

The List is ephemeral and unfixed. It keeps changing, when people die, when the formerly nameless are identified, and when factual errors are corrected. *The List*’s size and shape shift, as do the sites of its public presentation. It is a sort of counter-monument in constant formation.

A nation is similarly composed of a list of people, one that is restricted to those whom the state recognizes and counts as its own. *The List* challenges the distinction with its stark rewriting of the borders of contemporary Europe and the nation-state form it has bequeathed to the globe. Any list creates a border, as it distinguishes those who are on it from those who are not. *The List* negatively defines Europe as the place of those who are not on it—those who walk by the document in Liverpool, London, Basel, Athens, or Budapest. In a sense, Los Angeles and Istanbul are also part of this place. *The List* does not belong to any single nation-state, and it is presented not in the place where the deceased originated but rather where they ended up—“within, or on the borders of Europe.”⁹ As such, it designates a new geographic concept: the frontiers of the European continent, its reach, are defined by people who are now dead. The border is no longer an arbitrary political marker, but the track of lives lost along the way. The people who are named no longer belonged to any place at the time that they died; they will not be returned to a homeland and are seldom ceremonially buried or memorialized. *The List* is their distinctive itinerant resting place.

Cennetoglu observes: “This document carries the weight of all these people who cannot really speak for themselves. And while we’re talking about all of this, people are dying.” There is urgency in recording the names and making them public, yet this objective, technical, administrative undertaking carries ethical risks. It is unilateral: no one can ask the dead for their consent, or even their opinion. “The attempt to talk on behalf of someone else comes with a burden. In general, one will never know if you are doing something good, or if you are taking advantage, or if you are really talking about yourself when you are talking about them. These are blurry borders. How to not fully occupy the agency or space of someone who is silenced?”¹⁰

⁶ Higgins, “Banu Cennetoglu.”

⁷ Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*.

⁸ Fullard, “Missing Persons Task Team (South Africa)” in Cassidy Parker, “The Missing Persons Task Team.”

⁹ *The List* website: www.list-e.info.

¹⁰ Higgins, “Banu Cennetoglu.”

The List distributes this burden among all of us who were previously unburdened. There is no way to stay clear of these “blurry borders,” between speaking and silence, generosity and exploitation, knowledge and ignorance. But to take a moment to listen and to mourn at the site of this migratory mass grave can contribute, in the words of Allan Sekula, to “laying the groundwork for a collective memory of suffering.”¹¹ How to grieve for the dead of others, the dead to whom one is not related, the dead who come from elsewhere? How to mourn those who wanted to live among us? In the words of Laqueur, *The List* asks the question, “How do we come to feel that we should care?”¹² And, if we do, how do we become caretakers?

Cennetoglu insists that *The List* is not a work of art. This is not only an effort to foreclose an aesthetic judgment: does the list look good or bad, is it beautiful or sublime? It is also an attempt to deprive us of the recourse to some alleged indeterminacy of artistic interpretation. *The List* makes a claim on us, an ethical one, yes, but also a fact-based one. The names are facts. *The List* lists “refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants who have lost their lives.” What we do with this fact is up to us.

¹¹ Sekula, “Photography and the Limits of National Identity.”

¹² Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*, 45.