



## On the Skirts of the Ballerina: Trans X İstanbul

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In Maria Binder's *Trans X Istanbul*, her camera follows trans activist Ebru Kirancı and exposes the struggle for survival of trans individuals in Turkey who face exile, harassment, rape and murder.



*Trans X Istanbul* (2014) chose as its subject trans individuals' struggle to hold onto their living spaces in Avcılar Meis Housing Complex, Tarlabası and Gezi Park. It was directed jointly by Maria Binder and her mother, both of whom had moved to Turkey from Germany. Its main focus is the activist, Ebru Kirancı. This very personal documentary follows Kirancı both in her political efforts and in her personal life. It depicts the impossibilities of living as a trans individual in Istanbul while also clearly describing the urban transformation that Istanbul is going through. Kirancı's very strong presence on screen, her strong will and capability, as well as her connection with the audience, ensures that the documentary is fascinating and absorbing. The documentary, part of the multi-platform effort "Transxturkey" which aims to raise awareness and increase participation for equal rights of trans individuals, continues its journey at Documentarist Istanbul Documentary Days after being premiered at Istanbul Film Festival.

We had a chance to chat with Maria Binder and Ebru Kirancı on various matters including how they met, how the film was made, and their personal story as part of the trans rights struggle in Turkey.

### Shall we start with how the idea to make *Trans X İstanbul* came about?

**Maria Binder:** It is actually in the beginning of the film. We met with Ebru nine years ago. Back then, I was shooting a documentary on women who were subjected to rape and harassment and I asked for Ebru's help. The film was eventually kept from theatres since the women in the documentary did not consent to its screening in Turkey. I had shot the movie for European audiences anyway. The number

of immigrant women in Europe, e.g. Germany, was constantly increasing, but governments were still failing to understand their circumstances. This is why I wanted to make a film describing the conditions that the immigrant women left behind and their motivations for leaving their homes. Ebru and I met during the shooting of this documentary. That is when I saw that trans people have no rights in Turkey. They are raped and killed and those guilty of these crimes are always set free. The government's insistence on leaving these crimes unpunished was what drove us to make this film. We started having a conversation about hate murders. Hate is more than what someone feels; it is more of a structure, a system. In this movie, we tried to explain this system. We wanted it to be different from a documentary in the classical sense. We tried to reflect our positions while also providing a background for these murders. Showing only the victims and the aggrieved is not sufficient for the viewers to understand this subject. I wanted to use my own point of view so that I could make the viewers feel that they are a part of the discussion. Ebru and I have been working together for years. We are friends and lovers and we have made tremendous efforts to found Istanbul LGBTTT Solidarity Association together. There was a trans killing in Turkey every week in 2009, when I lived in Germany. One day, news of Ebru's murder came. I was receiving calls from everyone; it felt horrible. Then I found out that it was a different Ebru who was killed. That was the exact moment we decided to make this film. We set out to describe hate crimes, the government's complicity in them, and how everything in the system including hospitals, police, gentrification processes and other government institutions are all aligned.

**One of the most impressive aspects of the documentary is that it describes trans individuals' living space and the urban transformation/gentrification process together, in places such as Avcılar, Tarlabaşı, Gezi Park. Did you set up the documentary this way from the beginning?**

**Ebru Kiranci:** It all happened while we were shooting. We could not possibly know that the Gezi events would happen while we were shooting! But we saw that LGBTTTs were fighting in Gezi Park. People who label themselves socialist or democrat but who have never been in the same environment with trans individuals also saw this. They saw that, like everyone else, the trans also slept in tents, ate bread, fell in love and – when the time came – rebelled against the government. We are actually you. We did not come to this country from outer space. Avcılar Meis Housing Complex, Tarlabaşı... They are part of our life. And we went through the same scenarios before on Ülker Street, Kazancı Road, Pürtelaş and Sormagir. Our friends in Avcılar were the same people who lived in those places before. We were all exiled. Let us not forget the time of Süleyman the Hose or Doğan Karakaplan or the times when our heads were forcefully shaved. When we were made to stay overnight at the police station; we slept through the fear that they were going to shave our heads. All events were connected to each other and we arrived at this point by the natural flow of things.

**MB:** Ebru is sort of the main character in the film but when we started out in 2009, I intended to follow four people. These people did not want to expose themselves though. We talked about what kind of film they wished for at the association but most of them declined to be in the movie out of fear that their families could see them. This was a very important matter for me as a director but I also wanted to see the friendships and interactions between them. Finally I told Ebru that "this film is going to be all about you. You can show everything because you are a brave soul. Plus, my Turkish is not great, and we understand each other very well so we can make a decision about something quickly, which is important for a documentary. Then I wrote another script. My mind was set on seeing the families but

Ebru was not so sure in the beginning. After some time, she was also enthusiastic about showing me where she lived, Zonguldak.

### **So the decision to go to Zonguldak was shaped during the shooting of the film?**

**EK:** Actually, it was a randomly made decision. I always wanted to go to my family but my family never invited me. This has always been a sore subject for me. Why should I not spend one night at home? I went two years ago and told my mother that I was staying in a hotel. She said “your hotel is really nice.” I was angry, so I retorted, “how many nights have you spent at that hotel?” I said “let’s go” to Maria and my mother never said “just stay home for tonight, you have not slept in this house for thirty years.” I helped construct that house; I helped the workers, when she was living in Germany. I built that house. I am still furious. Family means nothing to me. Family, mother, father, children... I am past those things. I lived here all by myself for thirty years. People close to me are my family. Maria’s family is my family now.

**MB:** Ebru showed me her wounds in this movie and I think this is very important. This way people will understand that trans individuals are not always happy and jovial. They will see that these are real people with real emotions; that they suffer and are ostracized from their families. They will also see that they can easily find solutions to these problems if they could just turn their heads and look. For example, my mother is from Bavaria. She had never met a trans individual before and was totally confused. But she kept asking questions and they formed such a close relationship with Ebru that they started to understand each other. Trans individuals are very strong people. They can save themselves and do not need anyone’s pity. They are the ones who can transform society and educate the people.

**EK:** Could the trans survive, if they were not so strong willed? Could I have survived? I went on the E-5 highway (soliciting sex) when I first Maria. One day a friend of mine died and sometime later, another one of my friends died. Maria said “there is death here.” That is when it came to me and I started to hold back. I needed to make money though. I am a high school graduate. I could not make it to college but that too is the government’s fault. It would be hard for anyone to go to college with the education I received at the vocational high school. I still feel sad for those young kids, the traumas they lived through and the disappointment they felt when they took the university entrance exams. The government is guilty for all these things. The government does not allow trans individuals to be anything but sex workers. Being a sex worker is a job, not everyone can pull it off. There are those who do it willingly and those who do not but this is a problem of the system. Until today, the media presented trans individuals as prone to violence and that too is a part of the crime. We want love but even our lovers come back to kill us. I am not trying to agitate the issue here, I am just talking truth.

### **How did you balance Ebru’s personal story with what the trans individuals go through in general?**

**MB:** I realize that the film is sort of divided into two pieces. For example, we went to Zonguldak to visit Ebru’s family two years ago, but I placed it towards the end of the film because I wanted to tell her story in Avcılar first. Ebru’s storyline with her family was so strong that it was impossible to say something after it or come back to another story afterwards. The story of Avcılar rises throughout the movie, and the viewer gets into it more. The neighbors start out saying “we do not want prostitution,” then change to “we do not want trans people,” then beat people with sticks. We witness clearly how

hate speech transforms into hate crimes. Neither police, nor the prosecutors, do anything about the matter. This had become routine and it had to be shown. This is why the film is a bit divided but it was necessary to make it that way in order to do justice for those who lived in Avclar. If I had cut other things in, we would not be able to follow their lives as well. First we are introduced to Ebru as a political figure, then we start getting into her personal life more. We have a better understanding of what she went through when we observe her relationship with her family and we start believing her more.

**How did the idea to include your mother in the movie come up?**

**MB:** It was quite a difficult decision. I thought about leaving her out of it but my mother and I live together and I believed it was important to include this in the film. Ebru washes the dishes, my mother comes in, they chat. I really want to include these shots in the film but in the editing you see that these scenes can diminish the effect of the film. Eventually that is how you start to see things; if it disrupts the flow, if it diminishes the effect, just throw it away. I still managed to hold on to some of it though. My mother is a nurse so she and Ebru were talking about the nursing home. My mother was really excited about it and I kept those scenes. The part about Gezi was also very powerful. She said "I wish we were able to do something like this against Hitler." She thanked me for bringing her there.

**About the way you include yourself in the film; you clearly express your point of view. Sometimes you are there with voiceovers but you are never in the middle of the story.**

**MB:** This film is a project against hate murders and that is why I did not wish to include myself. However, I chose to express that this was my own point of view. I came here from Germany and that is my special situation. I refrained from constantly telling my thoughts with a voiceover. I do not especially like that use of voiceovers.

**In one of your trips to the Meis Housing Complex, the neighbors also express their wish to talk but we do not get to listen to what they have to say. What is the reason behind this choice?**

**MB:** My objective was not making a news documentary. That is why I never thought that we needed to see both sides of the argument. Since this was a personal movie, what the neighbors had to say was not important. For me, it was important to see things through Ebru's eyes and stay with her. Since my main goal was not to be objective at all times, I did not feel the need to include other arguments.

**Is the image of the (fairground) ballerina, seen both at the end of the movie and the poster, a figure identified with trans individuals? What made you use it?**

**MB:** This image was on my mind from the beginning when I wanted to shoot the film with four different people. All four trans would go to the fairground at the end, take a seat on the skirt of the ballerina and the skirt would begin to spin. I had spotted a fairground when I visited two years ago and noted it but it was closed when I wanted to shoot in September last year. Then we saw that there were almost no fairground ballerinas remaining in Istanbul. We located one near Sultangazi. This woman is a very strong and rotating figure. All trans individuals are wrapped in a confidence-inspiring skirt... Life goes on, everything revolves, everything may turn around and this skirt can inspire confidence. We learned afterwards that the story of the ballerina was a trans one. It came to Italy as a man at first and became a woman later. So she is trans too.