

# LGBT



## Crimes Against Love

An artist explores LGBT rights in Turkey. By **Meagan Day**

**C**yriaco Lopes came to Istanbul in September as an artist in residence at the Halka Art Project. His purpose in Turkey was to continue a project he exhibited in Brazil (where he's from) and New York (where he lives) called Crimes Against Love. In this series, Lopes researches homophobic and transphobic violence in the country he's asked to work in, then pairs brief notes from his findings with isolated photographs of damaged historical sculptures.

For this iteration of the project (called "Crimes Against Love: You Are the Problem")

Cyriaco chose to portray close-ups of statues' heads, which in some cases are so eroded that only the suggestion of a human face remains. He then arranged these arresting photographs en masse beneath placards bearing details of violent homophobic and transphobic crimes.

At the recently opened art space Kabine Nadire, located on a relatively quiet street in Kadıköy, the effect was macabre but powerful, a harrowing reminder of the underreported violence against Turkey's LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender)

minority population.

The piece is no longer available for viewing at Halka, but nonetheless I wanted to hear Cyriaco's perspective on LGBT art and activism before he left the country. "Dialogue is a crucial part of this work," he told me before we began. "Even if you publish nothing, the fact that you and I are talking means that the work is doing what it's supposed to do."

**You've done this project, or something similar, in Brazil and the United States. What are some major differences you've noticed doing this project in**

### Turkey?

For one thing the number of reported homophobic and transphobic murders in Turkey is much smaller than in the other countries. In the US there were about 70 reported homophobic and transphobic murders in 2012. In Brazil it was about 200. For Turkish statistics I relied on reports from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Turkish organization Kaos GL. According to the statistics

cited in those sources, Turkey sees fewer homophobic and transphobic murders per year than the US or Brazil. The evidence for 2012 is twelve reported homophobic and transphobic murders in Turkey.

### Does that mean fewer murders or fewer reported murders?

My guess is that there is an underreporting problem at play. I'm forced to go here into a speculative mode a bit, because we just don't know. But underreporting is an issue across the board.

Murders can be underreported for a few different reasons. Sometimes families don't want to report the murder as homophobic or transphobic because they don't want to admit that the victim was gay or transgender. Another reason is that there's often more than one factor in a murder, so hate can be hidden underneath other motivations. Police in all countries occasionally suppress evidence of hate crimes because if that evidence became very visible it might force them

to respond to the needs of the LGBT community, which is perhaps something they'd rather not have to worry about.

So of course I can't say for sure how many homophobic or transphobic murders happened in Turkey last year, no one can. But considering that there is a lingering repressive quality about gay life in Turkey, these may be some potential factors in why only twelve homophobic and transphobic murders were reported. And of course, when I say only twelve... twelve is a lot. Too much. The number that we're looking for is zero.

**You mentioned on the opening night of your exhibit that your research shows a paradoxical spike in homophobic violence**

### that occurs alongside advances in LGBT rights. Does greater visibility produce more violence?

That seems to be the case. Society has tactics to put people in their place, and when the situation changes often those tactics change, occasionally becoming more violent as people become more desperate to restore the social order.

Every society has LGBT people. But in societies with no LGBT rights, other means of repression are used to keep populations of LGBT people under control. When gay people start advocating for their own rights, violence emerges as a means of control where shame and denial used to work instead. When LGBT people say "I want to participate in society as a full citizen," and when we become visible constituents, we are breaking this unspoken contract in which we accept our place as second-class citizens. This makes some people very angry, and they search for other means to preserve the social order.

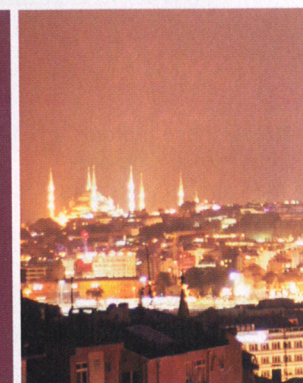
Sometimes those means are violent.

### What are some reasons the media might ignore this violence?

One reason is that, specifically in Turkey but elsewhere as well, a lot of this violence is perpetrated against transgender people, who are very often left out of national dialogues about gay rights. Of Turkey's twelve reported victims in 2012, six were transgender. A major shortcoming of the gay rights movement is its tendency to sidestep transgender issues in order to expedite progress for homosexuals. Add to this the fact that many victims of transphobic violence are also sex workers, and you see why

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unfortunately these murders might constitute a blind spot for the mainstream gay rights movement.

Another reason is that, in Turkey especially, a pattern emerged in my research that suggested that the authorities, particularly the police, are sometimes complicit in the crimes. Kaos GL's 2012 report features stories of police homophobia and transphobia. So obviously that's going to stifle some of the public conversation about this violence.

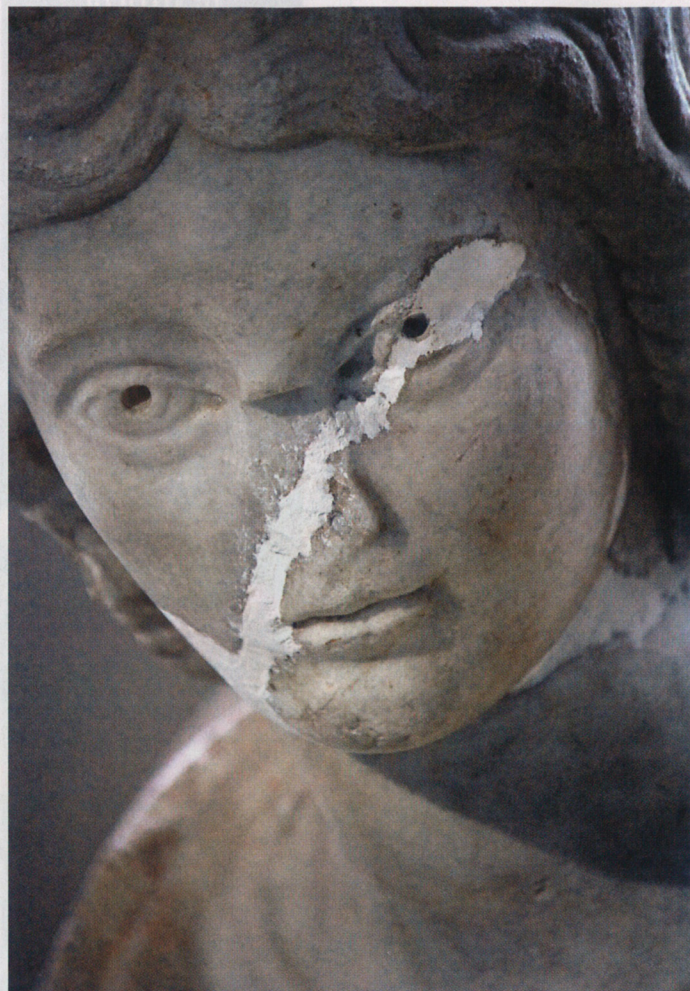
### What sort of progress do you think is being made for LGBT people in Turkey at the moment?

As with anywhere that's witnessing progress, it begins with grassroots movements. This year for instance there was a letter sent to the United Nations, signed by many intellectuals and activists, decrying the fact that there had already been six homophobic and transphobic murders on record in 2013 when the letter was written. The LGBT rights movement here has been very strong—it has to be, increasingly, because the government is becoming more socially conservative in Turkey.

The Gezi Park protests also saw a great boost in visibility for LGBT people in Turkey. In fact, many protestors were yelling homophobic things at the police, and other protestors from the LGBT platform intervened to correct that approach. The Gezi protests were a space in which a lot of people who would otherwise not know or care about gay issues became more familiar with and sympathetic to with the problems facing the gay community.

### Let's turn to your work for a minute. Can you talk about your experience reading through the reports of violence for this project?

It's not easy. Every time I



read a report I have to remind myself that this is an individual. And that's the point of the project—to create awareness of both a group of victims and also the fact that each victim is an individual.

### How do you conceive of your role as an artist here? Do you think of yourself as a documentarian, a mourner?

I made a point of not doing documentary, partly because it's not my artistic personality, but also partly because documentary style assumes a level of transparency that simply doesn't exist in these cases. So much is shrouded in mystery; so much is hidden about the lives and deaths of these victims. So I think of this as a poetic work about things that make me indignant, as opposed to an exposé.

As far as mourning goes, the role of art for the longest time was to remember. The Egyptian pyramids were instruments of memory, commemoration. As an artist today, as opposed to in ancient times, I don't work for a pharaoh, so I have the luxury of being able to choose who to remember with my art, who to mourn.

One of my main models for this work, when I started the project in Brazil, is the monument to the Unknown Soldier. Many countries have one, and I lived across from a beautiful one in Rio de Janeiro. I think of this project as my monument to the unknown soldiers in the struggle for equal rights and full legal and social citizenship for LGBT people.

All of these statues that I've photographed were built

### Dig deeper into LGBT rights in Turkey

The resources Cyriaco Lopes relied on for "Crimes Against Love" can be accessed by anyone. Explore them if you'd like to learn more about the situation of LGBT people in Turkey in the last few years.

A PDF of Kaos GL's groundbreaking "2012 Human Rights Report for LGBT People" can be accessed at [www.kaosgldernegi.org/resim/yayin/dl/lgbt\\_human\\_rights\\_report\\_of\\_2012\\_in\\_turkey\\_by\\_kaos\\_gl.pdf](http://www.kaosgldernegi.org/resim/yayin/dl/lgbt_human_rights_report_of_2012_in_turkey_by_kaos_gl.pdf)

Amnesty International's comprehensive 2011 report on Turkish LGBT issues is called "Turkey: Not an Illness Or A Crime: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People in Turkey Demand Equality." You can download it at this website: [www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR44/001/2011](http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR44/001/2011)

In 2009, Human Rights Watch published an influential report called "Turkey: Pride and Violence" which you can read here: [www.hrw.org/news/2009/06/22/turkey-pride-and-violence](http://www.hrw.org/news/2009/06/22/turkey-pride-and-violence)

to be monuments that embody everlasting history. The fact that they are now damaged or eroded speaks to an ambiguous legacy, or a forgotten one, as is the case in many of these murders. My aim is not to document the crimes—there are many heroic NGOs that do that—but to commemorate these victims, so that their names and stories will flicker a little bit more in the world.

### Why do you call this project Crimes Against Love?

I wanted the word love in there specifically. I wanted to emphasize what's the same about you and me and these victims and everyone in the world, which is the capacity to love. In this sense all our legacies are tarnished whenever a person is killed because of who they love.

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