

On never taking your career for granted



Photographer Ebru Yildiz discusses seeing every project as important, the human element in artistic mistakes, and how to get used to rejection

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3588 words.

Tags: [Photography](#), [Beginnings](#), [Process](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Collaboration](#).

How'd you first get interested in photography?

I grew up in Turkey. Not only in Turkey, but in Ankara, which is like one of the most boring cities in Turkey. I mean, I shouldn't say boring, but it's like the Washington DC of Turkey just because there's lots of government institutes and stuff, so it is not necessarily a creative, inspiring place to be.

When I was growing up there, I had no interest in photography, but my brother had always collected *Life* magazines and I remember I loved the covers, these vintage *Life* magazine covers. That was, I think, the first time I was interested in photos.

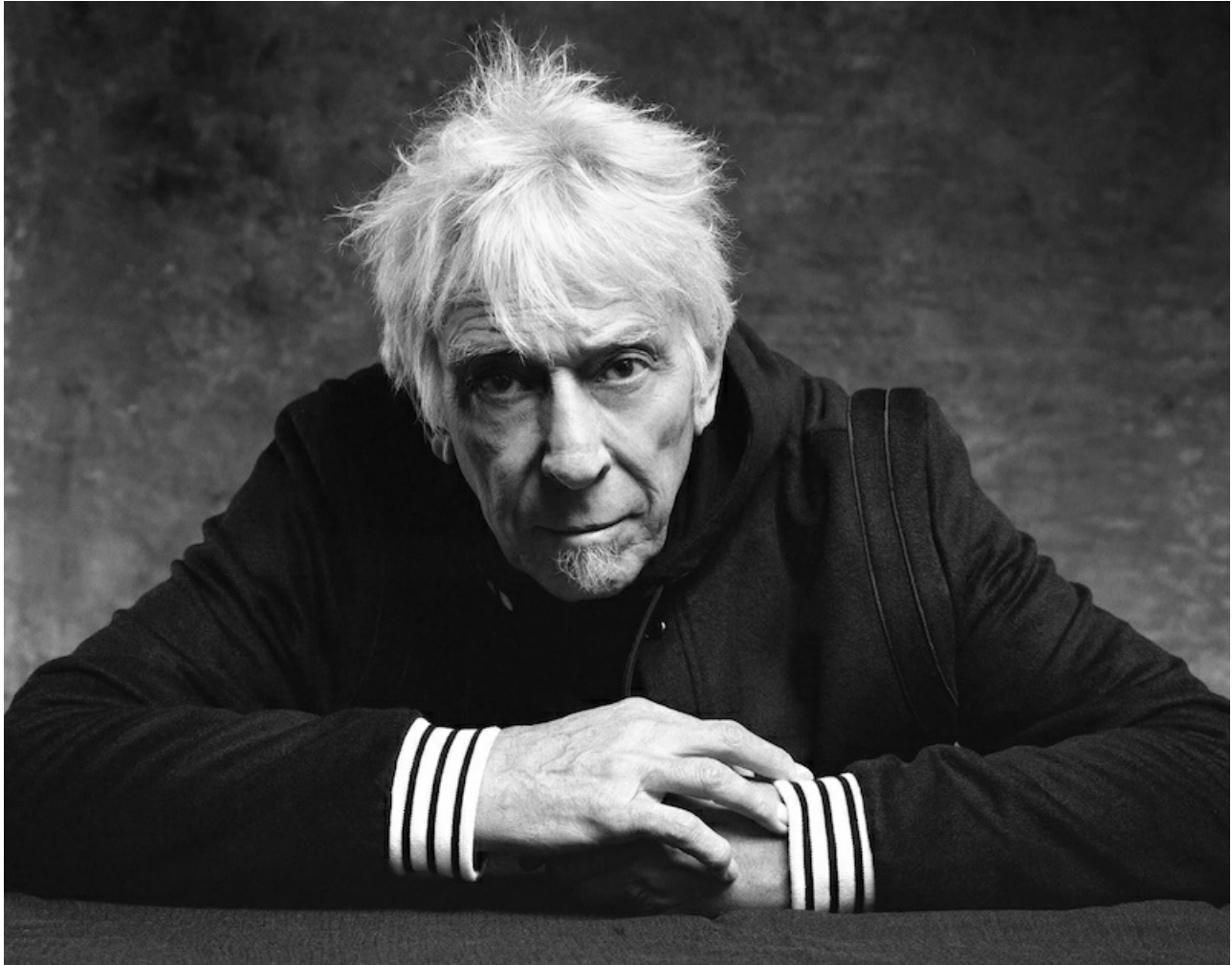
When I moved here to New York City, I came to study marketing. Everything was so inspiring, just walking on the streets, even if it was a simple graphic, I got so excited.

And then I was like, "I wonder if I have talent for anything." I wanted to see if there was anything I could do. The things I picked were photography, graphic design, and drawing. Drawing proved to be like—I suck at it. It was really terrible.

I remember my photography teacher, who became a dear friend later, saying, "Your photos are so boring. I don't know what you can print from this. They're just so boring." I remember he said, "Find something you like and get close." Those are the only two things he said. So, even though I sucked at it at the time, there was something about photography that stuck with me.

I kept taking photos just for fun.

Music had been in my life, even when I was in Turkey. It has always been like the mainstay of my life. I love going to live shows. When I moved here, I was going to shows all the time. I was out literally every night, so one night I took my camera to one of the shows and that was the first time I shot something I was excited about. So that's how I kept going.



John Cale by Ebru Yildiz

I remember a long time ago when you photographed John Cale for *The Creative Independent*, you told me that one reason you moved to New York was because of the Velvet Underground. So, while you moved here for marketing, you chose New York specifically because of the music history?

Yes. Every musician I liked had a connection to New York. The minute I heard the Velvet Underground, I felt like my whole life transformed. It was their song, "Sunday Morning."

It is funny to say this because it also feels pretentious, but it's one of the moments that I remember where I was. I remember how the room looked. I remember why I was there. It wasn't a significant moment: I was picking up my friend from her apartment and her sister happened to be playing that song. It wasn't a specifically special moment, except for hearing that song.

So, that was one of the reasons I moved to New York.

And, also CBGBs, everybody that came out of CBGB. I was so interested in that punk scene. The first time I ever showed my photos was at CBGB's gallery, which was so special. I couldn't believe they accepted me.

When I first got my green card, at that time, I'd been photographing for probably 10 years, but it was always for fun. Like it was a hobby. So then I wrote to Pitchfork, and I received an email back. I couldn't believe it because I thought, "It's just not going to happen." People always think that you have to know people to get to

places, but all my jobs, every single one of them, including *New York Times*, including *NPR*, they all came out of from sending stuff out there, which was very surprising. It worked.



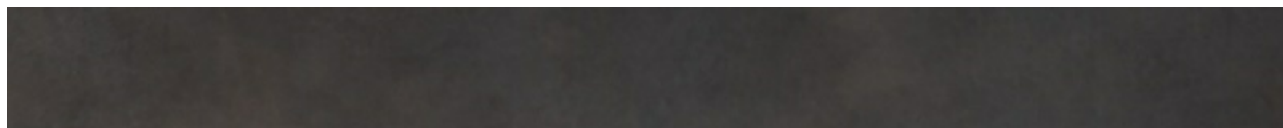
Laurie Anderson by Ebru Yildiz

One thing people don't always realize, I find, is that so much of it is luck. If your email arrives when someone is having a terrible day, they may not get back to you. If the email comes on a day when they're actually checking email, and in a good mood, you may hear from them. You just have to put it out there, over and over, to make sure someone can see it.

You seem to have an endless love for photography, but I have to ask: Have you ever had a day where you don't feel like doing a shoot?

No. It's one of those things sometimes my friends don't understand. They're like, "How could you be working this long? How could you be willing to want to work every day?" But I think what they don't understand is I started getting to do this so later in my life that I feel like I've been given this opportunity that can be taken away any second. For that reason, there's nothing that makes me feel like, "Oh, I don't want to do this today."

I mean, I get so nervous. I work myself up to a point of a frenzy where I have to go into a child's pose to calm myself before the shoot, but even that—now I'm managing better—even that doesn't make me say, "I don't want to do it." I'm almost on the verge of a panic attack, but I'm like, "No, I'm ready. Let's go."





Neko Case by Ebru Yildiz

I know from having worked with you, you research the people you're going to photograph and present a mood board to them before the shoot. Do you research every person you photograph?

Every person. For me, every project is as important as the next one. Sure, some of them can be more demanding in terms of what I need to deliver and all that, but even for a simple shoot, I want to know how that person was photographed before so that I can see for myself what worked for them and what didn't work. Also knowing a little bit about their background helps me.

When you're talking, it is not as if you show up and show off what you know about them, but if something comes up, it shows you know. And then I think that gives people a sense of, "Oh, this person took the time to research me," or whatever.

I think that also goes into building trust. And being prepared. I have a shoot for tomorrow and I've been preparing for it, and it is the first shoot of the year, so I always put more pressure on myself. I'm like, "This is going to set the mood for the whole year."

When I prepare, it makes me feel more relaxed knowing I did everything I could. Then, of course, the shoot starts, and none of the things that we plan happens, which is fine, but you're relaxed enough to pivot in a different direction or a completely different setup, or something.

That's all to make myself and the other person comfortable.

There are so many photographers out there, especially in the digital age. Did you find it hard to develop your own style and set yourself apart?

Martin Parr, who recently passed away, I was just listening to the interviews that he did. One of the things he said was, "Look at photos and figure out why you like that photo. If there's a photo that you love, just pinpoint what it is that you love about that photo and do that to all the photos that you seem to like."

Eventually you realize you're taking a little bit from here, a little bit from there. At the end of the day, it is kind of your taste, but it's a combination of everything you've seen and heard and felt.

I genuinely think that everybody has their own filter. How many other photographers are there in New York that grew up in Ankara, went through the life journey I went through, and liked the same type of photos or photographers I like? I think everyone's journey is so different. Without even knowing if people are consistent about what they like, it becomes their style.





P!NK by Ebru Yildiz

As a photographer, there's a technical side, and as you've mentioned, there's the social or emotional side, the side where you engage with the subject. Can it be difficult focusing on the technical side if you're also trying to bring something out of the subject? It feels like two very different things at once.

Thankfully, I'm not a very technical person. One of my favorite photographers says light is a feeling; it's not technical, but it really is like that. So from one side, I know what I need to know, that I don't have to think about those things. Most of the time I look at my photos, I'll think, "We have to redo this," because I get so

excited that something looks so pretty. I don't even pay attention to my settings or whatever. I'll be shooting at a wrong setting that I'm not supposed to be on, but I tend to catch on those thankfully.

But it is part of it. And then you make these mistakes which are really beautiful. I love the human element of the mistakes. The kind where I don't think I can ever get it again just because I wouldn't even know how. So being open to those mistakes is really cool. That's the fun part and that's why like I like shooting on film, because I never know what I'm going to get. It could be completely messed up or it would be too pristine.

The social part can be draining. It's a very interesting mindset because you're talking with the makeup people, you're talking with the managers that are in the room, you're talking with your assistant, you're talking with the person you're photographing. So there are all these social interactions that you need to be managing, while you are also thinking about what you are going to photograph next. At the end of every shoot I feel drained. Sometimes people ask like, "Do you do more than one shoot a day?" That's impossible, like physically impossible, even if the shoot is only for an hour.



Mdou Moctar by Ebru Yildiz

The way you're talking about technicality makes me think of punk rock—there's that element to punk where people don't have to be the perfect technician. That's one of many reasons AI is stressful because people are like, "We

can make things perfect." Which is so boring. When I was in grad school, I taught a video class and I remember saying, "Hey, we should white balance with different colors or smear vaseline on the lens." Or, whatever. You can mess around with limitations. It's important, too, learning that mistakes are part of what's interesting. You don't want things to always be perfect—or at least I don't.

Yes. Also, as digital cameras evolve, they become so much better at what they do. Once I switched to newer cameras, I'm like, "What's going on?" Everything is so much more in focus and it's so perfect—you can see everything, everything. So I've had to find ways to soften it and go back to what I was shooting before.

I think what makes photography really fun is all the mistakes. It's all the chance stuff that happens where you can constantly learn new things and make new mistakes. I love that. I really do. I think that's the fun part. It is not for everybody. I mean, every artist I work wouldn't be cool with a blown out photo where you can't see their face, but it's fun for me.

You've had a long-standing collaboration with Mitski, and recently created a book with her. What is it about collaborating with her, specifically, that's worked so well?

With her it's so easy. This book, we shot it in three days. I don't think I ever experienced such a flow state for that prolonged of a time. It was so easy. We never even talked about anything. We were just moving through, shot to shot. Granted, we planned it in advance, but there are people that the minute you lift the camera up, it is like, they're just so present and it's so natural. There are people who enjoy the process, respect photography, and they have a sense of what they like. Those people are like a dream. She's one of those people.





Emma Ruth Rundle by Ebru Yildiz

How do you make it work with folks who are less comfortable being photographed?

I personally hate being photographed. I'm making my living from directing people what to do with their hands, but when I'm being photographed, I have no idea what to do with my hands. Being photographed is an interesting psychology. I have so much empathy for people who are not comfortable in front of the camera.

I think my trick is that I'm so excited about photography and I'm just so excited about having the opportunity to get to do this and then I get so animated and so excited and I think it translates—the subject gets it.

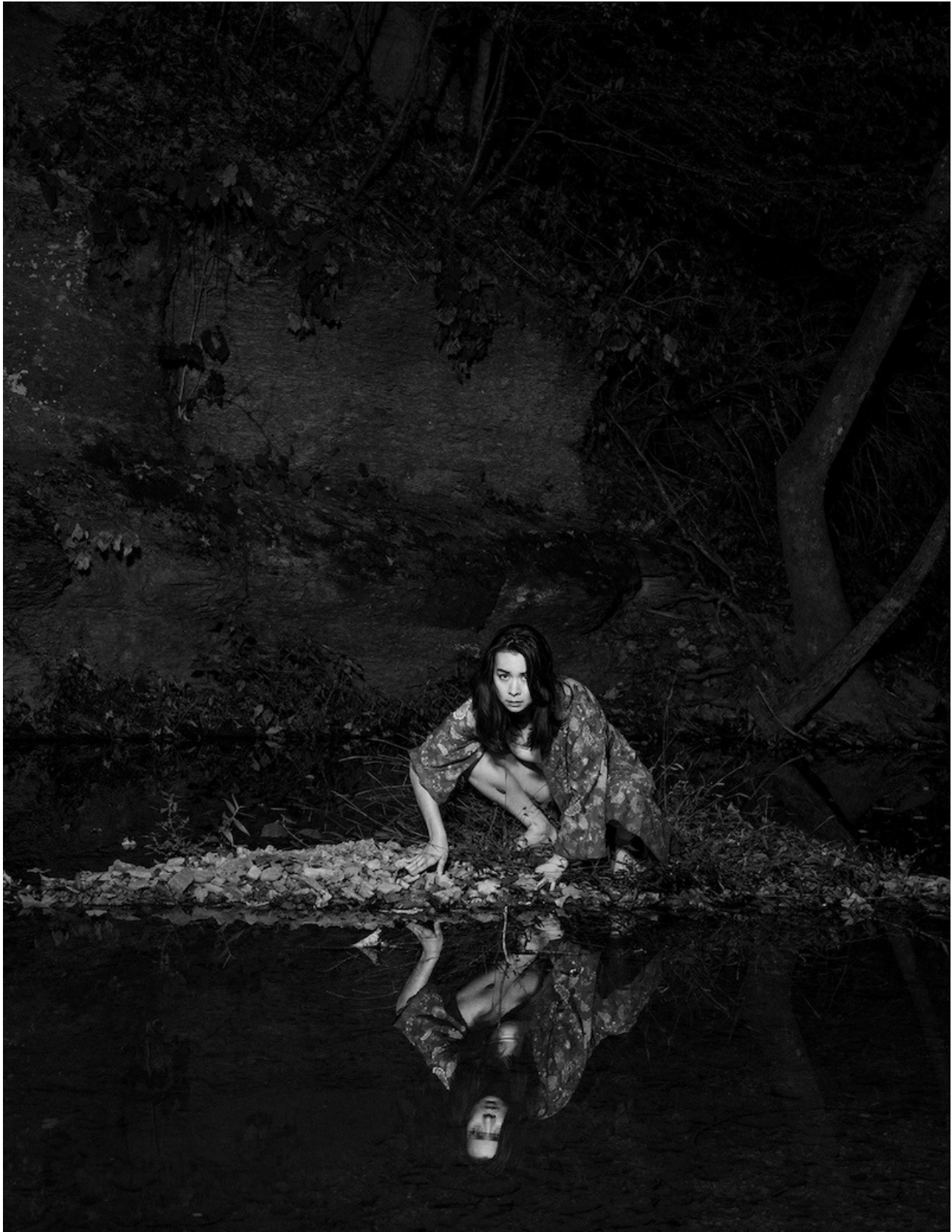
If you care, like in every relationship, it shows. Like, this book with Mitski, every detail is considered, and I hope that it comes across.

With your personal relationships, if you're checking in on people, if you care, the other person knows. Being photographed is the exact same exchange in a different situation. If you show people that you care about what you're doing and you care about how you present them, I think they feel it, too. Then they, all of a sudden, give you trust. It works that way with us, too. It is all about the person trusting you and it doesn't happen that way all the time.

In your mind, what makes a shoot successful?

Well, I'm actually never happy. I have all these things planned in my head. The minute, literally the minute the shoots end, my head is like, "Oh, I didn't do this. I didn't do that." It's always, always the things that I should have done. So genuinely speaking, I never walked out of a shoot saying, "Wow, that was great."

But I feel okay with not being happy with shoots, or like being nervous at the beginning. I feel like those things really keep me on my toes and I like being on my toes. I don't want to get too comfortable or take anything for granted. I like trying to make it better somehow.





Mitski by Ebru Yildiz

I get it. I always think, "This could have been better." I think too, it's kind of like the way we started talking, about just putting stuff out there and consider that people might get back or might not. Maybe they don't get back one day and then you try again.

That's one of the things: I'm persistent, hopefully not in an annoying way, but whenever I don't hear back from people, I justify it in my head, like as you were saying—you don't know what kind of a mood this person was in when they received your email or maybe they never even received your email because it's in their junk folder. This gives me the courage to send another email at another time. Like, maybe this new email will give me a different result.

It is really tough, though We all are dealing with so many rejections on a daily basis. Even Instagram is like, you get micro-rejected all the time. Let's say you're posting something and a thousand people sees it and 100 people likes it. How about the other 900? It just means that the other 900 didn't like that photo. But after a while doing it over and over, you just get used to the rejection. That becomes part of life and you just move on to the next thing.

It's also not really about taste—these platforms keep shifting the algorithms as to what performs better or worse.

Yeah, it's such a science, and that's one of the things that I don't feel interested in figuring out because then you're just calculating and I don't want to calculate every single thing how it might come up.

Yeah, we can't make art for the algorithm. One thing about being an artist, and part of what I like about human beings, is that we all have flaws. We all get stressed out, we all have nights where we can't sleep... that's what makes art, being up at 3:00 AM but still managing to make the work. I don't want my aesthetic guided by trying to please a platform's algorithm, just as I don't want to have a perfect robot making my art.

Yeah, pumping out photos all the time to satisfy the algorithm. When I was working on the Mitski book, I couldn't take on any other work. I just had to focus on these photos because they were so important to me. My friends were like, "What are you going to do for rent money?" I'm like, "I'll figure that out."

I want to make sure that my attention and my love and care is in it. Otherwise, why have I spent that much time only to take a job that's going to pay me however many dollars, that's going to make me feel relieved for a second, but takes attention from what I love doing, especially at the time I need to pay the most attention to it?

There are times where I consider, "Okay, is my time better spent on this or is this money more important?" And you know, you just need to figure it out.

That time was very hard for me because I didn't make any photos. That's the first time. I had like two shoots that I really wanted to do. They were friends that needed the photos, but it made me so tense that I didn't make any photos. I don't know, it was a different mindset. So now this year starts off with this shoot, which is tomorrow, I'm so nervous, so nervous about it.



Interpol by Ebru Yildiz

I think the thing about being an artist though is that you're always nervous.

That's really true. Another photographer that I love, he wrote this thing. It said, "Do at least one thing every day that is photo related. If you do that, you'll be just fine." When I wasn't making photos, working on the Mitski book, I kept thinking about that. I'm like, "This is photo related. This is photo related." That's how I manage. But especially in places like New York, you have to make so many decisions and sometimes they're hard.

There are things that I said no to at the times that I needed the money most desperately. I don't look back at them ever. For example, one of them was when I was working on the *Death By Audio* book. Around that time, *Live Nation* and *Vice Magazine* partnered on a website. They were doing these long-form photo essays with bands and I think they must have been going through a list of *Pitchfork* photographers because they kept reaching out to me.

And, ironically, also around the time, Vice had taken over the building where *Death By Audio* and other DIY venues were housed, and had put them out of business.

Right. I was like, "I can't accept the job right now. I'm working on a book and can't accept the job because I don't have the time." But, I was really like, "I'm never going to work for *Vice*." I mean, it didn't feel right. The money that they were offering sounded great, but I just didn't want to do it. It is hard to say no to money when you need money.

And, the funny thing is they kept changing editors, so every few weeks, somebody else was reaching out again and again and again. Finally I said, "Look, I don't think I want to work for *Vice*." And the person responded and said, "Yeah, I totally hear what you're saying, we're working to change it from inside." I was like, "Okay, I hope that works out. When the change happens, just let me know."

At the end of the day, I never missed the money I was going to make from that, and I felt like I kept my integrity.

Ebru Yildiz recommends:

These photographers

Julia Margaret Cameron

Diane Arbus

Sarah Moon

Deborah Turbeville

Julia Hetta

Sally Man

To keep it together

Transcendental Meditation

Morning Pages

Long aimless walks in the city with headphones on

Get better at letting go and forgiving both yourself and others

Always remembering nothing good comes out of comparing yourself to others

Name

Ebru Yildiz

Vocation

photographer

□

self-portrait by Ebru Yildiz