

GALERIE
CHANTAL CROUSEL

Lydia Ourahmane

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Flash Art

Lydia Ourahmane

Harsh Meditations

Words by Gea Politi



Installation *Harsh Meditations*, 2026. Larch wood, chestnut wood, and galvanized iron. 160 x 150 x 975 cm.
Installation *Harsh Meditations* at Nicoletta Fiorucci Foundation, Venice, 2026. Photography by Marco Cappelletti.
Courtesy of the artist; Nicoletta Fiorucci Foundation, Venice / London; and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Lydia Ourahmane/ADAGP, Paris (2026).



Rock Soup, 2026. Aluminum pot, gas ring, 15kg gas bottle, water, stock. Variable dimensions.
Installation view of "5 Works" at Nicoletta Fiorucci Foundation, Venice, 2026. Photography by Marco Cappelletti.
Courtesy of the artist; Nicoletta Fiorucci Foundation, Venice / London; and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Lydia Ourahmane/ADAGP, Paris (2026).

Becoming liquid has crossed my mind several times. So often, in fact, that I've started wondering what type of liquid I could become, and more often than not I imagine myself as a highly alcoholic broth, a Bullshot, basically. During my morning meditation sessions, when they happen, this is how I tend to calm down: by imagining myself slowly becoming a scalding Bullshot. Hot liquids break ground as easily as they connect it.

Lydia Ourahmane's practice works, for me, a little bit like a harsh meditation, giving you both the toughest and the deepest sense of existence precisely as you take your deepest breaths.

Harsh, because it offers none of the consolations we've been trained to expect from meditation: no soft voice, no permission to let go. Her work asks you to stay alert precisely when you'd prefer to let go, and to remain aware even as the world falls to pieces at the level of our shared humanity. And yet it shares with meditation one conviction: attention is a discipline. The things we refuse to look at continue to reshape our lives whether we acknowledge them or not.

Lydia and I began talking, some months ago, in the least literary way possible: voice notes. It was the eve of a challenging year for her — shows opening in Paris and Venice opening a week apart, and another one in Porto arriving just as this essay was being finished. My questions went out as audio, at odd hours, and her answers came back the same way: her voice in my kitchen, mine in her studio. Somewhere in those messages she drew a line I have been walking ever since, between liquidity and the exacting study of rules, bureaucracy, confines, borders, and humanity as a process. For her the two are not opposites: instinct tells her what to ask, and whom. She makes it sound natural. It is not.

What Ourahmane refuses to let us look away from is the border. Not the border as metaphor, which the art world has metabolized into harmlessness over decades of biennial catalogues and press releases, but the border as paperwork, as an X-ray machine, as a customs stamp, as the price of a boat. And — this is the part I did not expect when I began writing — not always the border as something to be broken.

My liquid fantasy is not innocent here. To imagine oneself as liquid — flowing, seeping, passing through — is a luxury available to those of us who cross borders with the right passport. For everyone else, liquidity is not a relaxation technique; it is the sea. Ourahmane has spent her career mapping the distance between these two liquidities: the one we choose and the one forced upon us.

Her biography is a case study in the arbitrariness of lines — one geography clipped to the next, as if a life were an itinerary. No single map contains it: childhood in Algeria, adolescence in Britain, present life in Barcelona. Ask her where she is from and what you get is not a place but a negotiation. Even her English holds no fixed address. Displacement, in her case, is not a theme adopted for a residency application. It is the ground.

The founding parable is *The Third Choir* (2014): twenty oil drums from Algeria's state-owned fuel company, hollowed and rusted, each sheltering a cheap phone tuned to a pirate radio frequency, so that the metal murmurs with voices arriving from elsewhere. I met the work at Manifesta 12 in Palermo — a city that has always lived with one ear to the Mediterranean — and those snapping sounds felt like familiar voices at the far end of long-distance calls. But the steel is almost a decoy. The real material is the years of refusal that preceded it: Algeria would not let the barrels go. To customs they were worth nothing, and being worth nothing, they could not leave. A state does not certify the departure of what it cannot price, and legislation written in 1962 to keep the country's artistic output at home now stood between twenty empty drums and a degree show. So she argued: through offices and ministries, application after application, until the law itself bent, and what had been garbage in triplicate crossed the sea as art — the first work, it turned out, to do so legally since independence.

The negotiation left behind a shadow-body: 934 emails, proposals, authorizations, other documents that she considers as much a part of work as the barrels themselves, and that hang over everything she has made since. When I ask whether she sensed the threshold in advance — the moment paperwork stops being logistics and becomes the work — she says she understood it as it was happening: "I was collecting this material because I literally had to. And of course it's the work — how else is this happening?" The state demanded proof; the demand became the archive.



(45.3820696, 12.3294242), 2026. Larch wood, chestnut wood, and galvanized iron. 160 x 150 x 975 cm.
Installation view of "5 Works" at Nicoletta Fiorucci Foundation, Venice, 2026. Photography by Marco Cappelletti.
Courtesy of the artist; Nicoletta Fiorucci Foundation, Venice / London; and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Lydia Ourahmane/ADAGP, Paris (2026).



1.3 tons of decommissioned bed linen from 200 Venetian hotels, 2026. 13 metal cages and bed linen. 182 x 80 x 70 cm each.
Installation view of "5 Works" at Nicoletta Fiorucci Foundation, Venice, 2026. Photography by Marco Cappelletti. Courtesy of the artist, Nicoletta Fiorucci Foundation, Venice / London; and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Lydia Ourahmane/ADAGP, Paris (2026).



"Barzakh": Installation view at Kunsthalle Basel, Basel, 2021.
Photography by Philipp Hänger. Courtesy of the artist. Lydia Ourahmane/ADAGP, Paris (2026).

She has a word for what borders require of a body: "Identification is really a choreography that we have to enact in order to be able to exist in the world." Oil crosses that border every day without friction; twenty empty oil drums could not. The border, she understood early, is not a wall but a filter. It does not stop movement; it sorts it.

Then comes the tooth.

For *In the Absence of our Mothers* (2015–18), Ourahmane had a gold tooth surgically implanted in her jaw — gold bought from a stranger, a young man selling his chain to fund his crossing to Europe. The gesture responds to her grandfather, who pulled out his own teeth to fail the medical exam that would have conscripted him into the French colonial army. Two generations, two mouths, two mutilations negotiating with the state over who owns a body. The border, in her work, runs through the inside of the mouth. This is why I call it a harsh meditation: it locates the border where meditation locates the breath — inside you.

The implant has never entirely settled; it still gives her trouble, years later, and she accepts this as part of the work. The discomfort becomes the memorial, a daily renewal of what her grandfather's body paid for the war. Her practice does not suspend you above the suffering contained within other people's possible lives. It sets that suffering inside you and leaves it there.

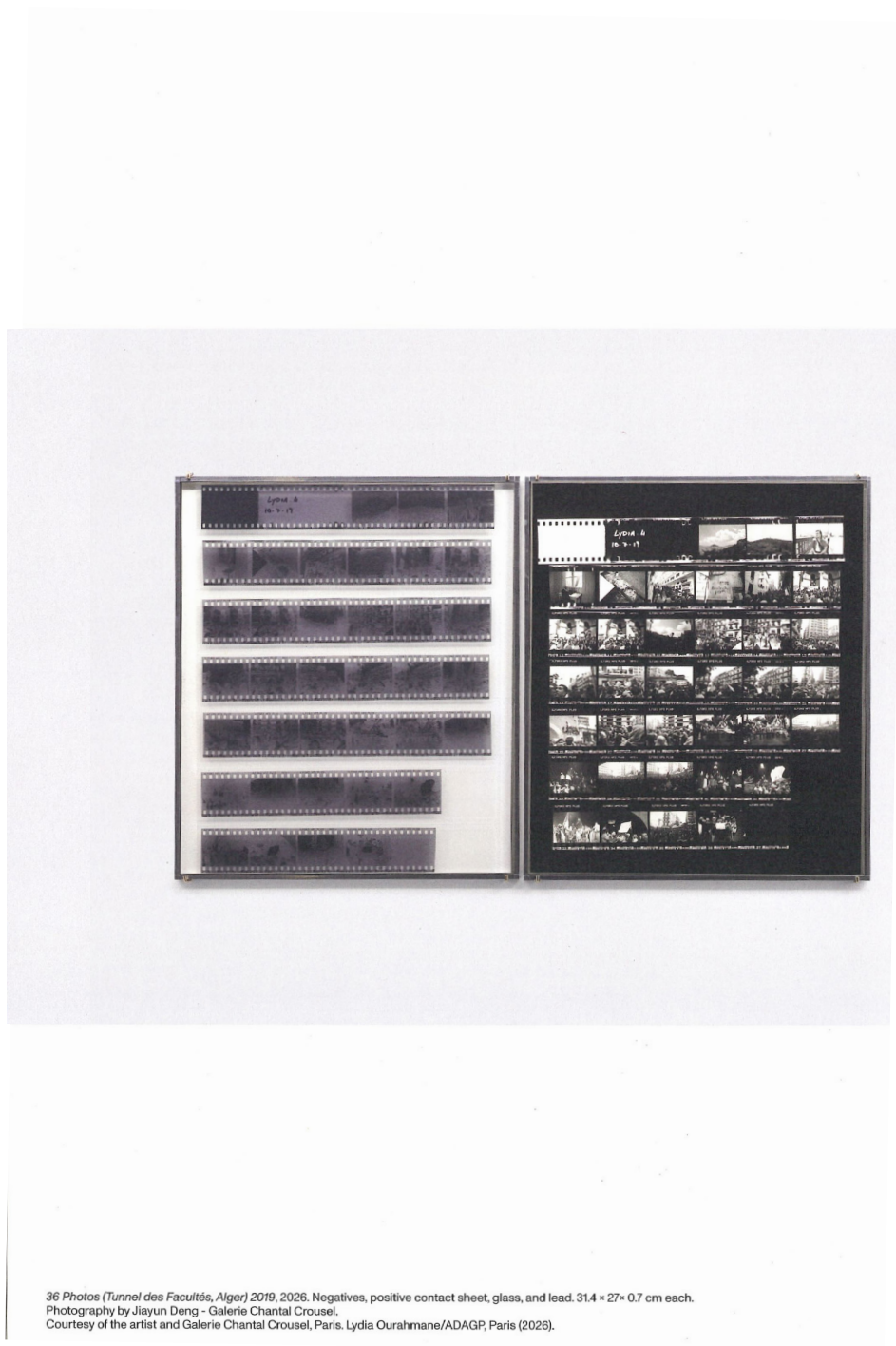
For *Barzakh* (2021), she shipped the entire contents of her Algiers apartment — furniture, the accumulated belongings of the landlady who had lived in the house prior to renting the home to Ourahmane — to Kunsthalle Basel, naming the work after the Islamic concept of the interval between death and judgement: a waiting room between worlds, but also a fair description of a visa queue. There the apartment was reassembled room by room, faithful to its original floor plan — the bed still a bed, the locks still on the doors, nine of them, accumulated by successive tenants like sediment — and visitors moved through it as guests, or as intruders. What lent the gesture its finality was not culture but bureaucracy: the shipment moved under an ATA Carnet, a mechanism through which items may cross into another territory for a set duration before being brought back to their point of origin, Ourahmane's flat in Algeria.

At Galerie Chantal Crousel in Paris this spring, "1752 Photos" (2026) presented photographic material made over more than a decade around the edges of past projects in Algeria and never before exhibited: negatives and contact prints pressed between glass, framed in lead. Instead of a press release, visitors were presented with a letter Negar Azimi wrote to the artist, asking what it means to exhibit images that were never meant to be seen — and to show them in France, of all places. Lead is what you wrap film in to shield it from X-ray scanners at airports and borders, machines that render every bag and body transparent to the state. Each lead frame symbolizes a small zone the scanner cannot penetrate. The images are tiny; you press your face to the glass, and they still withhold more than they give. Ourahmane casts that refusal in metal: the lead grants the images their opacity not as refusal but as a condition of survival. And at a moment when the appetite of European institutions asks artists from the Global South to arrive wound-first, converting biography into evidence, she stages the rarer gesture. The archive is present, but it is not available. You may stand before it. You may not have it.

Venice extends the same logic from images to territory. For "5 Works" (2026), curated by Polly Staple at the Nicoletta Fiorucci Foundation, Ourahmane went out to Poveglia, the island in the southern lagoon that Venetians prefer not to name. Its reputation is well earned.

Quarantine is a Venetian invention — *quaranta giorni*, forty days, the interval the Republic imposed between the world and itself, the first border Europe drew in water rather than on land. Poveglia entered the system late, at the end of the eighteenth century, and never recovered a neutral use. After the *lazzaretto*, the quarantine station, came a hospital, and with the hospital the darkest strand of the legend — a psychiatric ward, and a doctor said to have experimented on his patients, killed them, and ended his own life by falling — or being pushed by something — from the bell tower. The island has been empty since 1968. None of this needs to be true to do its work; nobody has bothered to dispel it, for reasons that will become clear.

A couple of years ago some acquaintances began negotiations to acquire a place near Ca' Dario. Only then did I learn about the cursed history attached to that palazzo. It has been associated with at least seven deaths. Ourahmane arrived at Poveglia sideways, while researching Ca' Dario, and what struck



36 Photos (*Tunnel des Facultés, Alger*) 2019, 2026. Negatives, positive contact sheet, glass, and lead. 31.4 × 27 × 0.7 cm each.
Photography by Jiayun Deng - Galerie Chantal Crousel.
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Lydia Ourahmane/ADAGP, Paris (2026).



"1752 Photos." Installation view at Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, 2026.
Photography by Jiayun Deng - Galerie Chantal Crousel.
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Lydia Ourahmane/ADAGP, Paris (2026).



Angel, 2026. Plaster, 56 x 36 x 23 cm. Installation view of '5 Works' at Nicoletta Fiorucci Foundation, Venice, 2026.
Photography by Marco Cappelletti. Courtesy of the artist Nicoletta Fiorucci Foundation, Venice / London; and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.
Lydia Ourahmane/ADAGP, Paris (2026).

her was not the legend but its economics: the ghosts, she observes in her conversation with Staple, had been doing the work of disrupting prime real estate. Venice has learned to price every dry surface it owns; Poveglia stayed whole because it stayed feared. The exception now has a legal form — Poveglia per tutti, a citizens' cooperative more than a decade into its campaign, holds a six-year concession to open the island's north as a park. Ourahmane's contribution is characteristically literal: a working pier, ten meters of it, built for the exhibition and titled with the coordinates of its destination, waiting to be carried across the lagoon so that boats can land on Poveglia again. The only functioning border in Venice is a ghost story. She is building it a pier.

When the planning application is approved, the pier will move to the island so that people can arrive by boat, leaving behind only eight holes in the floor. In the Mediterranean of 2026, where the passage from water to land is the most contested threshold in Europe, a pier is the infrastructural opposite of a pushback. The echo of *Haraga — The Burning* (2014), her video made with young Algerians preparing for the crossing, shown again in Paris this spring, is deliberate: the *haraga* are "those who burn" their papers, their pasts, their own border histories.

On the foundation's upper floor, the smell reaches you before the work does: *Rock Soup* (2026), a large stockpot over a burner fed by a gas cylinder, simmering throughout the exhibition's seven-month run. The title points to the stone soup fable — the traveler who arrives with nothing but a stone and a pot and coaxes a village into contributing ingredients, one by one, until a communal meal comes into being. The fable is the operating logic of the whole show; several of the works are the direct residue of negotiations with Venetian associations and micro-economies: a historic laundry's decommissioned linen, antique sculpture molds, church lighting, and a lottery circle. But stone soup is also, quite literally, a border story — the stranger arrives, and the village must answer the question every border poses: What do we owe the one who arrives?

The smell answers before any argument can: it pulls you back to a mother's kitchen, to a table already set. In the next room, a cast angel mold embedded in the wall, *Angel* (2026), extends that same hospitality into its sacred register.

Ourahmane's subject is not just the breaking of borders. It is something rarer: their redistribution. A pier is opened while ghosts are kept in service; an archive is exhibited and sealed in lead; an entire floor rises rather than conceding a ramp at its edge. In her hands, possibility is never a figure of speech. It arrives with a gas bill, a government concession, 934 documents — the full administrative weight of the world it intends to change.

As for my liquidity, I begin to understand why the broth was always going to be alcoholic. It is a hospitable liquid that keeps its own opacity. It is also a kind of primordial soup. To immerse oneself in it is to return to the elementary conditions of life. It warms, it preserves, it never quite lets you see the bottom — and it is not to everyone's taste, which may be the point.

I have stopped trying to decide what liquid I would be. Ourahmane leaves me with a better question: What is a liquid for? Who does it feed? What does it withhold? Which grounds does it break and which ones does it connect?

Lydia Ourahmane (1992, Saïda) lives and works in Barcelona. Ourahmane's installations, sculptures, moving image and sound work create situations that have consequences beyond the walls of the institution, while negotiating the terms within. Recent solo exhibitions include: Castello di Rivoli, Turin; Somerset House, London (with Sophia Al-Maria); Spike Island, Bristol (with Sophia Al-Maria); MACBA – Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona; Ordet, Milan; B7L9 Art Centre, La Marsa, Tunisia; Mercer Union, Toronto; Les Ateliers Sauvages, Algiers; Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris; Progetto, Lecce; S.M.A.K., Ghent; and SculptureCenter, New York. Her work has been included in group shows at: Espoo Museum of Modern Art; Gothenburg International Biennial of Contemporary Art; Tate Britain, London; Emalin, London; CAPC Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux; MIMOCA, Marugame; 15th Gwangju Biennale; 60th Venice Biennale; Julia Stoschek Foundation, Berlin; Belmacz, London; The National Museum of Art, Osaka; ZERO..., Milan; Le Magasin, Grenoble; Museion, Bolzano; Nottingham Contemporary; KW Institute of Contemporary Art, Berlin; De Appel, Amsterdam; Triangle France, Marseille; and Kunsthalle Basel. Ourahmane's solo show "For Voice" is on view at Galeria Municipal do Porto through October 10, 2026, and "5 Works" is on view at Nicoletta Fiorucci Foundation, Venice, through November 22, 2026.

Gea Politi is publisher and editor-at-large of *Flash Art*. She lives and works in Milan.



Stick a euro in the slot for the lights! The mesmerising, strictly Venetian works of Lydia Ourahmane



© I have to be able to see a way for a work to be reabsorbed into the world' ... Ourahmane with her pier. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

From the pier built for a former quarantine island to the sculpture made from 1.3 tonnes of hotel bedlinen, the British-Algerian's coin-operated show feels like it has sprung from The Floating City itself

L ydia Ourahmane has been living in Venice this year, in an apartment on the Giudecca with gorgeous views over the lapping, flickering water to the main Venetian island. The British-Algerian artist has been making an exhibition that will open to coincide with the **Venice Biennale**, the art world's biggest global gathering. For months, artists and curators from every corner of the planet have been shipping and installing thousands of artworks on the little archipelago. Then, in November, when it's all over, they will disperse again. There is something both amazing and dreadful about this vast circulation of *stuff*.

Charlotte Higgins

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The Guardian, May 6, 2026.

<https://urls.fr/2nI2tg>

This is not, however, what Ourahmane, 33, has been doing. Instead, it is from Venice itself that her show has sprung. Itinerant by habit – she lives in Barcelona and Algiers, and spent her childhood “ping-ponging” between the UK and north Africa – she is a conceptual artist, in the proper sense, an artist of ideas. She tells me that she needs her art to follow the grain of the world, to be part of it. “Before I even make something, I have to be able to see a way for it to be reabsorbed into the world,” she says. That’s why previous artworks have involved, for example, a gold dental implant set among her own teeth, and a pair of [Ghislain Maxwell](#)’s old curtains. This year it has involved, among other things, building a pier.

**■ ■ One work is based on
her sniper grandad
pulling all his teeth out –
without anaesthetic – to
avoid frontline combat**

That pier is the end point of a set of intuitive and imaginative connections that she has been following like a paper trail since she arrived in Venice. She became entranced by the [story of Poveglia](#), an island in the lagoon, little-known to outsiders. During times of disease it was used as a quarantine island; later it housed an asylum. To locals, though, it’s a refuge of another kind – a place they take their boats to swim and sunbathe. A decade ago it came on to the market. Fearing it would become another luxury resort, the locals formed a cooperative and, against all the odds, succeeded in acquiring it.

With her Venice-based producer Giorgio Mastinu, and British curator Polly Staple, Ourahmane visited the island. The tempting thing to do, she points out, might have been to gather some materials from the strange and fascinating place, and then use them to create a work. But, she says, that would be “extractivist” – and the community has “done so much work to resist extraction. So I decided to work with them by making a pier.”

The day after we meet in Venice in March, the cooperative votes to accept her offer. A pier – making it easier to moor boats and reach the island – has duly been designed and built by local craftspeople. It is now part of her show at the city’s [Nicoletta Fiorucci Foundation](#) before it goes on to its permanent life. “It’s like a village, Venice. It’s like you’re meeting the butcher, and then the architect, and then the priest. The whole show is made like this,” she says.

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<https://urls.fr/2n12tg>

What is the priest's role? I wonder (the butcher, in this case, being a figurative entity). She tells me she is talking about the priest of the church of San Giovanni Crisostomo, where a remarkable Bellini altarpiece of St Jerome is illuminated if you slip a euro coin into an old-fashioned machine. Charmed by the contraption, she has acquired it for her exhibition - swapping it with the priest for a newer machine for the church. To get the lights put on in her show, you'll have to stick a euro coin in the slot. "You see the machines in every church," she says. "It's an encouragement to make an offering. But it's also true they keep the painting or the work in the dark so that you can't see it unless you can afford to see it - which is the basis for most museums."



☛ Cough up ... the old coin machine from the church of San Giovanni Crisostomo, now in the show. Photograph: Marco Cappelletti/Courtesy of the artist and the Nicoletta Fiorucci Foundation.

Ourahmane is overflowing with ideas, some of them practicable, some of them marvellously unfeasible. She has succeeded, she tells me a few weeks after we meet in Venice, in her plan to borrow 1.3 tonnes of decommissioned Venetian hotel bedlinen for what has become an oddly mesmerising sculpture; but an idea to build an instrument to play the light of the sun has been parked, for now. "My practice is so elastic at this point that I just make it work," she says. "I don't really have a fixed set of expectations: reality determines what the work is. I came here with a blank slate."

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This extreme flexibility is, she speculates, partly a function of her upbringing. She is the daughter of an Algerian father and a Malaysian mother, both of them devout Christians. She grew up in the port city of Oran in Algeria, during its “[black decade](#)” of civil war. Her loving home became a sort of “hippy commune” for Christians, she says, “an alternative reality to what was happening outside”.

She always felt safe, she says, but in reality that was far from the case. One night, “terrorists broke into our home. We happened not to be there because my mum had an instinct to leave.” There were death threats. On one occasion she says that her father went to the police station and there was a photo of someone who had once helped with building work at their house. It turned “out he was the head terrorist in the area. He used to come into work ... and tell my dad what happened last night - because he was doing it.”



📷 Oddly mesmerising ... the Venetian hotel bedlinen.
Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

When things got too dangerous the family moved to England - but her parents, feeling a sense of duty to their community, returned to Algeria. “My dad is always saying, ‘Your British passport is my biggest gift to you,’” she tells me. It took years, persistence and a lot of queueing to get it. Perhaps Ourahmane has inherited his gift for negotiation; she often calls on it in her work. Her degree show at Goldsmiths in 2014, for example, included [20 Naftal-branded oil barrels](#), which took months of bureaucratic wrangling to import from Algeria to London - becoming the first legally exported artwork since Algerian independence in 1962. “As an immigrant, there’s so much negotiation that happens internally,” she says. “So it almost becomes a muscle - a question of how you reconfigure yourself around this space, or this set of rules.”

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📷 A gift to Poveglia ... the pier for the island that locals bought. Photograph: Marco Cappelletti/Courtesy of the artist and the Nicoletta Fiorucci Foundation

History, colonialism, immigration: all are examined in her work. As a child, she was told a story about her grandfather – a tale she took for granted until it dawned on her how remarkable it really was. He was a crack sniper in the French colonial army. But during the second world war, when he learned he was to be ordered to the eastern front, he balked. The sure way to be excused service was to be disabled. He thus extracted, without anaesthetic of course, his entire head of teeth.

That resonant tale came together with another story, experienced by Ourahmane directly. One day in Oran she met a young man who tried to sell her a gold chain, which he said belonged to his mother, for €300, then the going price for a passage to Europe. As part of an [exhibition](#) she staged at London's Chisenhale Gallery in 2018, she bought the chain, then had it melted down and transformed it into an implant among her own teeth. "It was about making a story from these two very disparate realities," she says. "It was a way of making them register each other." She's had trouble ever since with that implant, she says. The bone became infected. As a metaphor for the traumas of migration, it is somewhat on the nose.

As for Ghislaine Maxwell's curtains, they showed up in an [exhibition](#) she made about Britishness for Bristol's Spike Island in 2024, in collaboration with her friend [Sophia Al-Maria](#). "We start thinking a lot about how objects can witness events, historical events," she says. Maxwell's curtains were retrieved from a bin by a friend of Ourahmane's when her London mews house was being cleared during the pandemic. "There's an energetic field to anything that is handled, you know," she says. "And when you live with something, with anything, it absorbs a certain amount of charge." And yet – "it's just a set of curtains".

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📷 'There's an energetic field to anything that is handled' ... Ghislaine Maxwell's old curtains (Grey Unpleasant Land) at Spike Island in Bristol in 2024. Photograph: Rob Harris

For Ourahmane, art is “a natural way of ordering a disordered reality. And that partly comes from speaking multiple languages and ping-pong between two or three positions - it’s then that the work becomes the constant.” In the end, she says, she thinks of her art as another language: one that’s “active in the world, and going through just the same reality that we experience every day”.

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FRIEZE

Profile: From a plague island in Venice to
a gold tooth embedded in her jaw, the artist traces the
afterlives of migration, memory and possession
by Evan Moffitt

Lydia Ourahmane



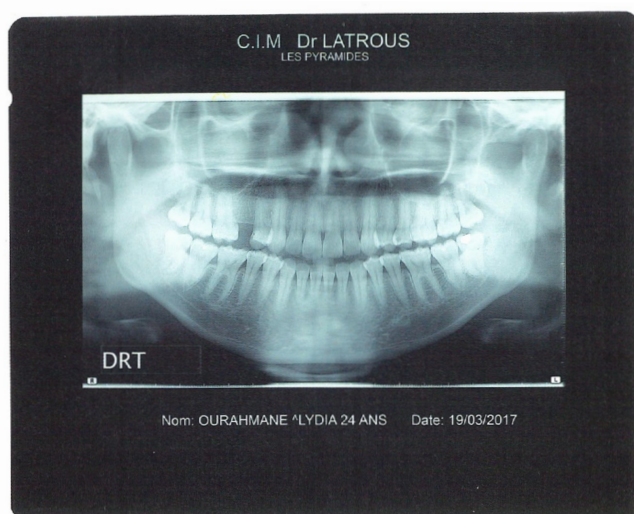
Evan Moffitt
Lydia Ourahmane
Frieze, N°259, May, 2026, p.88-95.

On a cold, rainy morning in January, the artist Lydia Ourahmane boarded a water taxi and set off across the Venetian Lagoon towards the island of Poveglia. She was joined by the curator Polly Staple, the art dealer Giorgio Mastinu, the collector Nicoletta Fiorucci and a local skipper, who ferried them reluctantly. Most Venetians believe Poveglia to be haunted: an anomaly in the overcrowded archipelago, the island has been abandoned since 1968. In the late 18th century it was the site of a quarantine for sufferers of the plague and is believed to be one of the region's largest mass graves.

Poveglia does not have a functioning dock, so the party disembarked with caution. Thorny weeds and trees had grown thickly around the crumbling hospital and red-brick campanile. Inside, the building was a wreck. 'Most of the staircases have fallen, so you can't really go up beyond the first floor,' Ourahmane later tells me. 'The furniture is splayed out everywhere,' including metal bedframes from when the building housed a geriatric hospital in the mid-20th century.

Ourahmane became interested in Poveglia while conducting research for her exhibition opening this month at the Nicoletta Fiorucci Foundation's Venice location. After a more than ten-year campaign, the community group Poveglia per Tutti (Poveglia for Everyone) won a six-year concession from the government to turn part of the disused island into a cooperative park accessible only to fellow residents. It was an extraordinary victory in a city visited by 30 million tourists each year, where every dry square centimetre presents an opportunity for profit – and it may not have been possible had Poveglia's cursed reputation not likely scared off prospective buyers. 'It's impossible to resist tourism,' Ourahmane says. 'How do you keep people away? Taxes don't work – but I think the spiritual can.'

When she tells me this, we're halfway through a salad of pork crackling, fennel and mustard seed at St. JOHN, the trendy central London restaurant. Ourahmane is staying nearby, at a rented apartment in the Barbican, in order to discuss plans for the show with Staple, and there is much still to be decided. The material aspects of her exhibitions tend to come together last minute,



The kind of move I've come to expect from Ourahmane is a simple yet audacious idea, complicated to execute.

Evan Moffitt



she explains, affording more time for research and deep thinking. As part of the show, she wants to leave something on the island, like a new dock or bridge that the community might use, rather than take anything away. But for the gallery in Dorsoduro that most biennale-goers would visit, she has other plans. 'They told me we needed to put in ramps to make a floor in the building wheelchair accessible, so I said, "Why don't we make accessibility everyone's problem?"' she tells me. 'We're trying to get the floor to lift up to meet another floor, like an elevator.'

It's the kind of move I've come to expect from Ourahmane: a simple yet audacious idea, complicated to execute. I first encountered her work in 2018 at Manifesta 12 in Palermo, where she exhibited *The Third Choir* (2014), the sound sculpture she made for her BA degree show at Goldsmiths, University of London, four years earlier. Twenty empty, rusted oil barrels from Algeria, arranged in a grid, buzzed with the sound of



Opposite page above
In the Absence of our Mothers (detail), 2018, X-ray scan, two 18-karat gold teeth. Courtesy: Chisenhale Gallery, London; photograph: Andy Keate

Opposite page below
The Third Choir (detail), 2014, 20 Naftal oil barrels imported from Algeria, CZ-5HE radio transmitter and 20 Samsung E2121B phones, 3 x 5 m. Courtesy: the artist

This page
Barzakh, 2021, installation view. Courtesy: Kunsthalle Basel; photograph: Philipp Hänger

a pirate radio station, playing from burner phones which sat inside them. On a Mediterranean island where dozens of refugees come ashore each week, the work seemed like an eerie elegy for those who had drowned while fleeing the violence and poverty wrought by extractive colonialism. But the work's most potent aspect was invisible: the legal change that had enabled the barrels to travel at all. The Algerian customs authorities rejected her application to export the drums to the UK, refusing to accept that they had any market or sentimental value. So Ourahmane appealed to the ministry of culture to reclassify them as art – a process that precipitated an amendment to a 1962 law designed to prevent Algerian cultural heritage items from leaving the country. *The Third Choir* became the first artwork to legally depart Algeria since its independence. Her correspondence with the government is included in a trove of 934 documents which she considers as much a part of the work as the sculpture I encountered.

The Third Choir also had a personal dimension for Ourahmane, who was born in Saïda, Algeria, in 1992. Her Algerian father and Malaysian Chinese mother had fallen in love while studying at a school for evangelical missionaries in the UK. Ourahmane spent much of her childhood living on their commune near the Moroccan border, where, she says, they taught an open-hearted gospel – but when she was nine years old, threats from the local Muslim government made it no longer safe for them to stay. The family moved to England, where Ourahmane finished her education and acquired her unplaceable British accent. She tells me she never felt fully at home in the UK. I imagine the crackling voices at the base of those oil drums sounding a bit like her relatives at the other end of long-distance calls.

After graduating from Goldsmiths, Ourahmane moved to Oran, Algeria's second-largest port, where she began researching *harragas* (literally, 'those who burn'), undocumented migrants who cross from North Africa



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into southern Europe after burning their identity papers, making it harder for authorities to repatriate them. That's when an uncle told her the story of her paternal grandfather: she had heard that Tayeb Ourahmane was a sniper in the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62), but she hadn't known that, a decade earlier, he had extracted all his own teeth to avoid being drafted by the French to serve in World War II. She couldn't dislodge this gruesome form of self-mutilation – an act of protest that claimed the body as a territory that could not be colonized – from her mind. When a *harraga* offered to sell her his mother's gold chain at the souk one afternoon – perhaps to raise funds for a journey to Europe – it reminded Ourahmane of the extreme measure her grandfather took to stay. Teeth and necklace alike were artefacts of either feared or desired crossings. Ourahmane bought the chain, melted it down and had it cast into two identical teeth: she displayed one at Chisenhale Gallery, London, in 2018, while the other is permanently implanted into her jawbone.

Like Tayeb's protest, the work, titled *In the Absence of our Mothers* (2018), is impossible to forget. Ourahmane's teeth have always given her trouble, and the gold molar still pains her. It has fallen out three times, and she carries floss with her in case food gets stuck around it. It is a constant, palpable reminder of her grandfather and the sense of loss that marks any experience of migration. Ourahmane doesn't know what happened to the man who sold her the necklace, but she has lost count of how many times his heirloom, now carried inside her mouth, has completed the journey he dreamt about.

Ourahmane was living in Algiers when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020. She had rented a flat from the family of a woman who had recently died, and the previous occupant's belongings were all still inside. It was a paranoid time, when any contact with the outside world carried the threat of contagion, and the apartment began to feel possessed. After she finally left, Ourahmane bought its contents from her landlord and reassembled them in the galleries at Kunsthalle Basel. She called the exhibition 'Barzakh' (2021), meaning 'barrier' in Arabic, to underscore the irony that furniture could then move much more easily than people. A remnant of the show was included in the 2024 Venice Biennale: the entire front entrance of the flat – a carved French door from 1901 and a second, metal door festooned with locks dating from the Algerian Civil War (1992–2002) – ripped from the wall and installed free-standing in the middle of the Arsénale. It was a palimpsest of Algeria's 20th-century history, and one that effectively closed the book on a chapter of Ourahmane's life. The doors were kept slightly ajar: too narrow for a human body to pass through, but just wide enough for a spirit.

I had long thought that Ourahmane practised a kind of institutional critique popularized by artists of her generation such as Cameron Rowland and Park McArthur, who present legal documents and readymade objects in order to shed light on the political, economic and social context in which they were made. There is a clinical quality to such work, as if it has been entered into evidence in a court case. But after speaking with her, I am no longer so sure. 'The institution is just the diving board,' she tells me. 'I never know where I'm going to land.'



The institution is just
the diving board.
I never know where I'm
going to land.

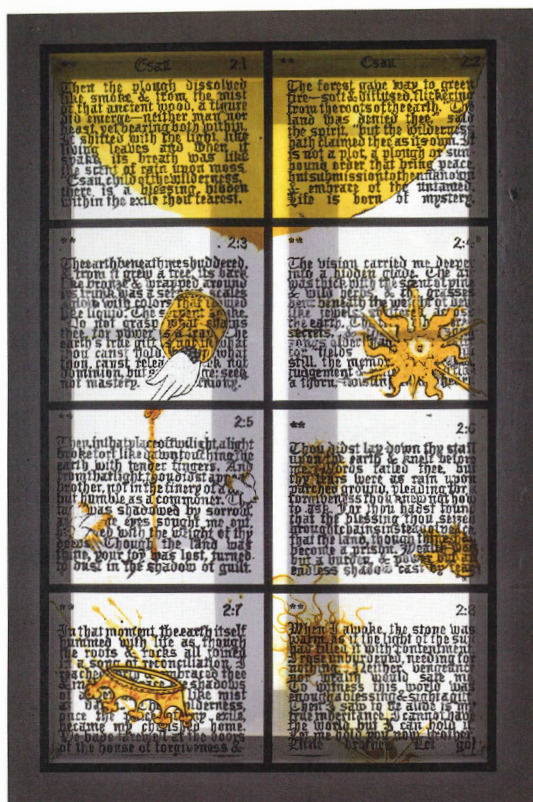
Lydia Ourahmane

I ask her to describe her process. 'David asks me all the time, "What do you actually do all day?"' she laughs, referring to her boyfriend, the activist David Adler. Last July, Adler sailed across the Mediterranean at the head of the Freedom Flotilla, which he organized along with several others, including Greta Thunberg, to break Israel's blockade of Gaza. When the Israeli navy boarded his ship, Ourahmane was in Paris preparing for an exhibition and did not know whether he was alive or dead. She seemed keenly aware of the contrast between his very public direct action to prevent a genocide and her own highly subversive works, which can be so unassuming that many people might not even notice they're there.

Lately, Ourahmane's practice has become more collaborative in nature. 'It's always a conversation,' she says. 'There's nothing I do that can be 100 percent dictated. Half of the work is about communication.' In 2024, she applied for a year-long residency at London's Somerset House with her close friend, the artist Sophia Al-Maria. Their time in a shared studio there culminated in two projects: *The Pits* (2025), for which they made a lobby gallery available to members of the public to use as they wished, and a joint exhibition at Spike Island, Bristol, that they called 'Grey Unpleasant Land' (2024–25).

Opposite page
35mm film photo-
graphs taken in
Médéa, Algeria, 2015.
Courtesy: the artist

This page
Haraga (The Burning),
2014, video still.
Courtesy: the artist



If *The Pits* was an exercise in democratization, the show in Bristol was an ode to a country they argued was a democracy only in name: England, a place both artists had called home, on and off, for decades. It was full of wry jokes about the British class system. A collection of antique chamber pots inherited by the son of pub owners in Liverpool (*Job Lot*, late 1700s/2024) sat alongside two chests of Georgian silver bequeathed to the 9th Baronet Bellingham (*Silver Service*, 1774/2024), as if to visualize the gulf between those born with silver spoons in their mouths and those born without pots to piss in. The most caustic work circulated far outside the gallery: an advertisement taken out in *The Spectator* soliciting disaffected gentry to dial the museum's landline and void the deeds to their estates. Ourahmane and Al-Maria called the scheme *Terra Nullius* (2024), the term given to supposedly 'unclaimed' land later colonized by the British Empire.

Then there was the set of unassuming red velvet curtains hanging by the entrance, sun-bleached around the edges of an absent piece of furniture (*Curtain*, 2024). The wall label identified them as having been acquired in the 2020 clearance of 44 Kinnerton Street, the former London address of convicted sex trafficker and Jeffrey Epstein associate Ghislaine Maxwell. Here was a haunted artefact of high society, a material witness to modern British crimes.

A few weeks after our dinner, Ourahmane calls me back. Maxwell has just been deposed following a new release of the Epstein files. I ask her what happened to those curtains. 'They're hanging in my studio,' she says. 'They need to be shown on their own somewhere, but only in the right context.'

Above
Sophia Al-Maria and
Lydia Ourahmane,
A Blessing and A Betrayal,
2024, exhibition view,
'Grey Unpleasant Land',
Spike Island, Bristol.
Courtesy: Spike Island,
Bristol. All photographs
on spread: Rob Harris

Right
Sophia Al-Maria and
Lydia Ourahmane,
Curtain, 2024, exhibition
view, 'Grey Unpleasant
Land', Spike Island,
Bristol. Courtesy:
Spike Island, Bristol





At the end of the day, I'm just trying to tell stories.

Lydia Ourahmane

Ourahmane tells me she's been thinking about hauntology in preparation for Venice. Jacques Derrida's concept proposes that after the fall of communism, alternatives to capitalism now stalk the earth like zombies. It's a poignant reference for a world that feels stuck in a doom loop. I think of Virginia Giuffrè, Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor's accuser who was allegedly trafficked by Maxwell and Epstein and who, with the former prince's arrest in February, has claimed some small measure of justice from beyond the grave. Most of the time, the dividends of death go the other way. From Bristol to Venice, the land left behind by the victims of plague helped facilitate a massive transfer of wealth into aristocratic hands. Perhaps the ghostly corridors of the hospital at Poveglia offer a way to reverse that dialectic over a tiny, floating patch of earth. I begin to think that Ourahmane might be trying to summon a spiritual repossession. 'At the end of the day, I'm just trying to tell stories,' she tells me.

On a certain level, she is already possessed – as all of us are. 'You don't have to believe in the supernatural to recognize that the family is a haunted structure, an Overlook Hotel full of presentiments and uncanny repetitions,' the late cultural theorist Mark Fisher wrote in *Ghosts of My Life* (2014). Ourahmane carries a talisman of her own family history which constantly nags at her like a phantom limb. I ask her if the tooth really still bothers her, since she hadn't appeared to struggle with that pork crackling. 'Actually, just the other day I was biting into a piece of bread and the tooth next to it split in two. It's still broken in my mouth. I can't help but think it has something to do with that implant.' It seems a terrible price to pay for a work of art, so I ask her what she thinks of when it gives her pain.

She answers without hesitation. 'It's worth it' ●

Evan Moffitt is a writer and fronts editor at *The Observer*.

Above
Sophia Al-Maria and
Lydia Ourahmane,
Job Lot, 1700s/2024,
exhibition view, 'Grey
Unpleasant Land',
Spike Island, Bristol,
2024. Courtesy: Spike
Island, Bristol



Vue de l'exposition « Lydia Ourahmane : 1752 photos » à la Galerie Chantal Crousel.
Courtesy de l'artiste et Galerie Chantal Crousel. Photo Jiayun Deng

Lydia Ourahmane : 1752 photos

Les « 1752 photos » qu'expose Lydia Ourahmane couvrent une période de 11 années, du début de sa carrière artistique jusqu'à aujourd'hui. Les images se présentent sous forme de planches contact avec en vis-à-vis les bandes de négatifs correspondant. Planches et négatifs sont encadrés séparément, le tout formant 75 œuvres faisant une seule ligne qui court sur tous les murs de la galerie. Dans leur très grande majorité, les photos ont été prises en Algérie, mais on aperçoit aussi Le Caire, Lecce ou la Kunsthalle de Bâle. Devant ces traces d'une somme d'expériences, le spectateur se sent un peu intrus, un peu enquêteur. Une grande place est donnée à une exploration des grottes du Tassili, auxquelles on sait que l'artiste a consacré un film, une insistance mise à documenter la combustion d'une voiture dans le désert puis sa carcasse calcinée. Les photos en noir et blanc sont minoritaires, mais parmi celles-ci on remarque une pellicule consacrée à un cimetière en Algérie, et une autre aux manifestations du Hirak en 2019.

La petite pièce que l'on trouve à droite en entrant dans la galerie est restée vide et il faut approcher son téléphone du mur du fond pour visionner *Haraga (Burning)*. C'est une vidéo d'une minute et trente secondes qui a servi au diplôme de fin d'études de Lydia Ourahmane au Goldsmiths College à Londres en 2013. Elle lui a été envoyée via Bluetooth par Houari, rencontré dans le cadre de ses recherches. Haraga est le mot arabe pour « brûler » et se réfère à la pratique de destruction de leurs papiers par les clandestins pour entraver leur procédure d'expulsion. Dans la vidéo, on voit douze personnes sur un canot à moteur qui célèbrent leur arrivée imminente sur la côte espagnole. Celui qui filme, c'est Houari. Dans la salle principale, dans le passage, Lydia Ourahmane a fait déverser 85 kg de terre d'Oran importée en contrebande. Les différents éléments exposés forment une constellation. Ils parlent d'identité, de filiation, de fraternité, dans un pays où le droit du sol est régulièrement remis en cause.

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SPOTLIGHT

Lydia Ourahmane & Fabio Cherstich

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Barzakh, installation view, Kunsthalle Basel, 2021 Photo: Philipp Hänger /
Kunsthalle Basel Courtesy: the artist, Kunsthalle Basel (pp. 207-215)









This conversation emerges from an invitation by CURA, to reflect on soft power through artistic practice. When asked to contribute, Lydia Ourahmane immediately came to mind. Her work has been followed for several years and made a strong impression at the 60th Venice Biennale, where it appeared as a practice operating not only at the level of form, but through systems—logistical, bureaucratic, architectural, and affective—that reorganize the conditions of experience. In her work, soft power does not appear as a declared theme but as a method: a way of mobilizing trust, negotiation, invitation, and shared responsibility. Her projects unfold through infrastructures rather than objects, through processes rather than fixed forms, activating temporary communities and redistributing agency within institutions. What emerges is a relational approach to power, grounded in presence, duration, and participation.

This is evident in a constellation of recent works that redefine the relationship between institution, community, and authorship. At the 60th Venice Biennale in 2024, *21 Boulevard Mustapha Benboulaïd (entrance)* (1901–2021) presented a structure composed of doors and architectural fragments from the artist's apartment in Algiers, reconstructed within the exhibition space. The work stems from the relocation of the apartment to sustain a sense of home across closed borders, turning a domestic threshold into a political and emotional device. Installed within the Biennale, it functioned less as a sculptural object than as an infrastructural presence, condensing bureaucratic processes, transport networks, and intimate histories into a single form.

A related understanding of power as embodied and temporal emerges in *sync* (2022–2024), a durational performance structured around amplified heartbeats and shared listening, where attunement replaces spectacle. Similarly, *108 Days* at MACBA, Barcelona (2023–2024), transformed the museum into a space inhabited by 108 invited participants, unfolding as a durational occupation in which the work existed through encounters and presence, positioning participation as an infrastructural condition rather than a format. This approach extends to earlier and parallel works where soft power emerges as a relational and geopolitical force. *Barzakh* (Kunsthalle Basel, 2021) was built around the reconstruction of the artist's apartment in Algiers and the displacement of thousands of personal objects, forming an archive suspended between domestic intimacy and geopolitical history. The film *Tassili* (2022–2023) engages with remote territories and layered temporalities of presence and absence. *The Third Choir* (2014–ongoing) is structured through the complex bureaucratic process required to export oil barrels from Algeria, where documentation, permits, and administrative negotiations become the core material of the work.

Across these projects, what emerges is a practice that mobilizes systems—legal, logistical, architectural, and affective—rather than simply representing them. Soft power appears not as a theme but as a method: an influence that moves through trust, invitation, negotiation, and shared responsibility. In Lydia Ourahmane's work, temporary communities and infrastructures often redistribute agency within the institution, asking what it means to inhabit an artwork collectively and what forms of power are activated through such inhabitation.

FC: In *21 Boulevard Mustapha Benboulaïd (entrance)* at the Venice Biennale, the threshold of a domestic space became a geopolitical device. How did relocating and reconstructing this architecture reshape the understanding of home, permission, and mobility?

LO: I think about situations, whether discrete or not, as interferences or insertions. The work passes through an existing infrastructure or re-routes a trajectory. I'm not necessarily interested in criticism, I'm interested in reform. Art for me is about life moving through it, where it becomes a sort of switchboard in real time to ask questions that engage with reality and seamlessly integrate it into a context. If a methodology is interactive, it becomes a collective experience. Soft power is the choreography of this parallel narrative. And the negotiation is how that situation unfolds and refolds reality into itself.

We are contained by identity, where we're born, grow up, and have our bloodlines... but then we have a cultural identity which isn't strictly bound to location. At the same time, I think that birthplace will always hold you accountable to some desire to return, but return to what? That really made me think about return as something purely abstract. The idea of returning has more to do with investing time in a relationship with somewhere that you're somehow

LYDIA OURAHMANE & FABIO CHERSTICH

disconnected from. Return becomes a way of spending time or articulating time through presence, which has nothing to do with going back. It's about going forward. Moving to Algeria in 2018 was really steeped in this desire to remember, spending enough time to register the nuances that would otherwise be invisible. These are the layers to experience, and a domestic space was the only real locale for this thought. In 2018, I rented an apartment on 21 Boulevard Mustapha Benboulaïd as a way to figure out a "home." I think the act of embodying that question creates a powerful lapse in your own ability to discern whether that experience is genuinely lived or rather perceived. The apartment had recently been occupied by my landlady's aunt, who passed away, the family leaving much of her quotidian residue intact. With such a density of material, I felt as though I was thoroughly investigating a life lived in a home I had just adopted. With so much identification left behind, that home became a theatre for vicarious living, through objects and orientations that belonged entirely to someone else's experience, someone else's choices, someone else's way of inhabiting a space. It was fascinating. Very surreal. I would find myself making gestures influenced by different objects in that house, as if they were direct actions from the past. I started to think very seriously about how architecture, space, and objects themselves become a threshold, a conduit for experience. What is home? Where is home? COVID hit a couple of years later, and I got locked out of Algiers for eight months. It was during this period that I felt this pang to go "home," which made me wonder what this longing was for. What did I actually miss?

As part of *Barzakh*, the entrance to the apartment was cut out and moved along with approximately 5,000 objects and furnishings within the apartment to be reconstructed as an installation without walls at Kunsthalle Basel (later travelling to Triangle, Marseille, and SMAK, Ghent). Some objects were mine, but the majority belonged to the previous owner and her family. The work became a powerful summary of how complex layers in Algeria's recent history are embedded in material and architecture itself. How daily contemporary life utilizes material memory and how that behaves on a metaphysical level. The door itself was made of a wooden door bolted into a brick wall in 1901 when the Haussmannian apartment was built by the French during occupation in the center of Algiers, and the second door was added in the 1990s during the Algerian civil war. Together, they held 9 locks, becoming a threshold for safety that elicited fear. They contained a century of violence that ended in the gesture of that cut.

We were granted permission to move the objects during COVID, a time when people themselves were denied mobility. Objects have often had more rights than people, something a lot of my work has thought through. *Barzakh* invited the audience into this liminality, a temporarily suspended home, moved on a carnet ATA, which is also a temporary authorization for the movement of goods destined for eventual return. Two years later, everything except for the door returned to the apartment on 21 Boulevard Mustapha Benboulaïd and was reinstalled as it was. The door stayed in Europe, a return in its own right.

FC: Many of your projects are built through processes of invitation and shared occupation. What does participation mean when it is conceived as an infrastructure rather than a format?

LO: I think participation is quite literally an extension of daily life. I think the fortress of systemic individualism built around the idea of integrity and national identity against-all-else is an ideology produced by these very contemporary conditions, according to which we don't have to interact with our own use of invisible labor and resources. Communities make visible the impossibility of survival alone. So participation is material. This is the case of my previous projects *sync* or *108 Days*. I often extend the invitation to people to collaborate or fully take over an exhibition. When I think about the authorship of an idea, those lines really begin to blur through shared occupation, which puts your own desires at risk, and that's when it gets interesting. Some collaborations merge, and in others, you have to fully trust the chaos and potential, so the work becomes a means for this truth.

FC: *108 Days* at MACBA transformed the museum into a space inhabited by others over time. How did the presence of invited participants alter the distribution of authorship and responsibility within the work?

LO: *108 Days* was a major participatory work that transformed the museum into a space inhabited by 108 participants to whom I had

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extended the invitation. When I was invited to work on an exhibition at MACBA, I was already very immersed in the local context, having recently moved to Barcelona and living 10 minutes away. I had a real quotidian engagement with the dense multiplicity of the community in Raval. Of course, I was also aware of tensions around the museum and wondered how many people in the community had actually stepped inside. And so, the question I began asking was “who is this exhibition for?” I began meeting hundreds of people from the local community, with the help of my project manager, Esther Fernández Cifuentes who had also lived in the area for 15 years. Together with curators Hiuwai Chu and Guim Camps, we mapped out a rolodex of artists, activists, musicians, community-led initiatives, collectives, schools, street performers, scientists, spiritual groups, and so on, and invited them to activate the space in any way they deemed important, each for one day. *108 Days* took over a tower on the front right side of the museum, turning the museum inside out. Each intervention became a whole universe, bringing a different momentum of subject, matter, and audience each day. We had an “unlimited” guest list that lived in a widely circulated Google Doc open on the screens of the front desk staff for people to enter the museum free of charge. I think that was what was such an important element of that exhibition. It really asked the museum to take on a very active role in the community and to question the way it operated. There were a lot of internal discussions, negotiations, and questions around accountability, but I think that any kind of community-driven work is a fragile space because you're working with individuals and groups of people who sometimes are very vulnerable. Also, working within that space requires a certain rigor and a consistent level of practice. Practicing care and supporting whatever each individual situation might require of you. My role as an artist shifted to a sort of producer, curator, organizer, technician, host, etc. *108 Days* was authored by each individual and each intervention. In this sense, I think about it as a framework that anyone can activate.

FC: Your practice frequently engages with bureaucratic and administrative processes. What kinds of agency or resistance can emerge through these systems, and how do they relate to forms of soft power?

LO: Kyle Danciewicz had come to Barcelona to have a meeting about a show at SculptureCenter in New York. That day, cinematographer Alana Mejía González texted me saying she was in town. I was on a delayed flight back from somewhere, so we all ended up at my house talking about the film that never got made. Alana was about to fly to Algiers before COVID hit, and the borders closed in 2020; she ended up being one of the collaborators who went with me to Tassili n'Ajjer two years later. It was Kyle who insisted we try again, and later wrote that my works often begin as large, open-ended propositions that find the edges of possibility within the political, environmental, and metaphysical conditions in which I operate. I thought this was quite precise in the context of Tassili, which was really produced by these conditions.

Tassili n'Ajjer hosts thousands of prehistoric engravings and cave paintings that describe the transformation of life in the Sahara. They are painted on an ancient river bed in a largely inaccessible plateau between Algeria and Libya, “discovered” by the French, and are one of the more undocumented groupings of cave paintings in the world. Tassili had been closed to foreigners for over a decade since tensions arose in the region, with only Algerian nationals allowed to visit escorted by Tuareg guides, many of whom were born on the plateau before the policy of sedentarization in the '80s due to environmental and administrative factors. *Tassili* is a 45-minute film, shot in first-person as a perspective journey through the plateau. It is a wordless meandering that focuses on the route itself and the cave paintings scored in four distinct parts by Nicolas Jaar, felicitá, Yawning Portal, and Segá Bodega. It is shown alongside a large sculptural “eclipse,” an almost 300-piece 3D printed cast of the landscape made in collaboration with Yuma Burgess, who spent the whole trip scanning rocks with an app on my phone.

The parawork was the bureaucratic feat to bring a crew of foreigners, each with different passports, to shoot a film there. Khaled [Bouzidi] worked on the authorizations for months, eventually necessitating permissions from the Ministry of Culture, Tassili n'Ajjer National Park, and the Algerian Military in collaboration with our Tuareg guides. I later realized that the film was actually directed by these authorities, since the route was predetermined by

the Tuareg guides in collaboration with the military and national park, deciding where and what we would shoot. Six months after the work was completed, we heard news that Tassili n'Ajjer was now “open to international tourism, without the need for a visa,” which is not even the case for the rest of Algeria. Khaled and I went back to Tassili this year with a group of international friends, and with Ahmed, our main guide on the film. He eventually told us it was he who used the film in his petition to reopen the plateau to tourism, a way for the Tuareg to reclaim agency over their own homeland.

FC: In durational works such as *sync*, time and co-presence become central materials. How does temporality function as a political and relational force within your work?

LO: *sync* is a live 24-hour composition of heartbeats amplified by contact microphones placed directly on the apex and plugged into a sound system surrounding 1–24 participants, each seated in a chair. Strangers could sit together in the room and listen to each other in continuum. What we hear is the visceral “writing” itself. Working with temporality is an offering to the present moment—you don't know exactly how it will sound or what will happen next, and so the work gives into its conditions. I remember, during the performance at the Venice Biennale in 2024, some people would leave the room overwhelmed, or others because they couldn't hear themselves. Daniel Blumberg, with whom I was collaborating at the time, and James Dunn engineered what was quite a densely technical and beautifully choreographic work, oscillating 8-hour shifts of invigilators and sound technicians to keep the piece live over 24 hours. I think within the work there was a confrontation in relation to co-existence between ourselves and the other. *sync* was about the potential of synchronization, but it also amplified the rhythm of dissonance. I was very interested in myth-making around that time, thinking about permanence as a material and what constitutes memory. Myth is an immaterial defiance to time; the potency of the story becomes an experience that is carried by each person who narrates it. And so there is a “beginning,” but there has to be a witness for the story to bind to time—and that binding is the material. If resonance is a sound enduring its own memory, *sync* approached the possibility of permanence where the amplified heartbeat of each participant was both its proof of life and its carrier.

FC: The communities that form around your projects are often temporary and unstable. What remains after these collective structures dissolve?

LO: Any shared experience or community, whether temporary, long-term, or otherwise, always remains or regenerates in some way. I think temporality can be a praxis for extreme presence, which is potent. As in: we are here for a limited time, and this is what we want to do with it. But when projects end, the debris is a rhizomatic network of relationships and connections, therefore, a means to much, much more...

FC: Across your practice, hospitality and trust appear as recurring conditions. Can these be understood as forms of power? If so, what kind?

LO: I grew up in a culture where hospitality and sharing were about empowering a community. My parents started a commune in the '90s during the Algerian Civil War, which was in part a group of people who were converting to Christianity, but also a group of [hundreds of] people who survived through this community, by sharing, supporting each other, singing, dancing, praying, and eating. The first years of my life were really spent in this utopia, parallel to the civil war. I only registered imminent threat when we had to move, first to a “safe house” in Oran and then eventually to the UK. But these early memories from my childhood rearticulate my understanding of power as resistance through hospitality, community, and the sharing of resources.

FC: Looking ahead, how do you imagine continuing to work with participation and collective presence without allowing them to become fixed methodologies or expectations?

LO: I realize now that my methodology is always to begin with 0. And then, where am I? Who is around? What is happening? What can we do? Because reality is so brutal, you can't have any real expectations. That is the work to master. Right now I'm preparing an exhibition in Venice within which the work is actively participating and circulating within the local context. Working with people and community is political because it challenges any fixed position, so the work becomes a testament to the blunt force of its own lived experience, which can only generate grace.

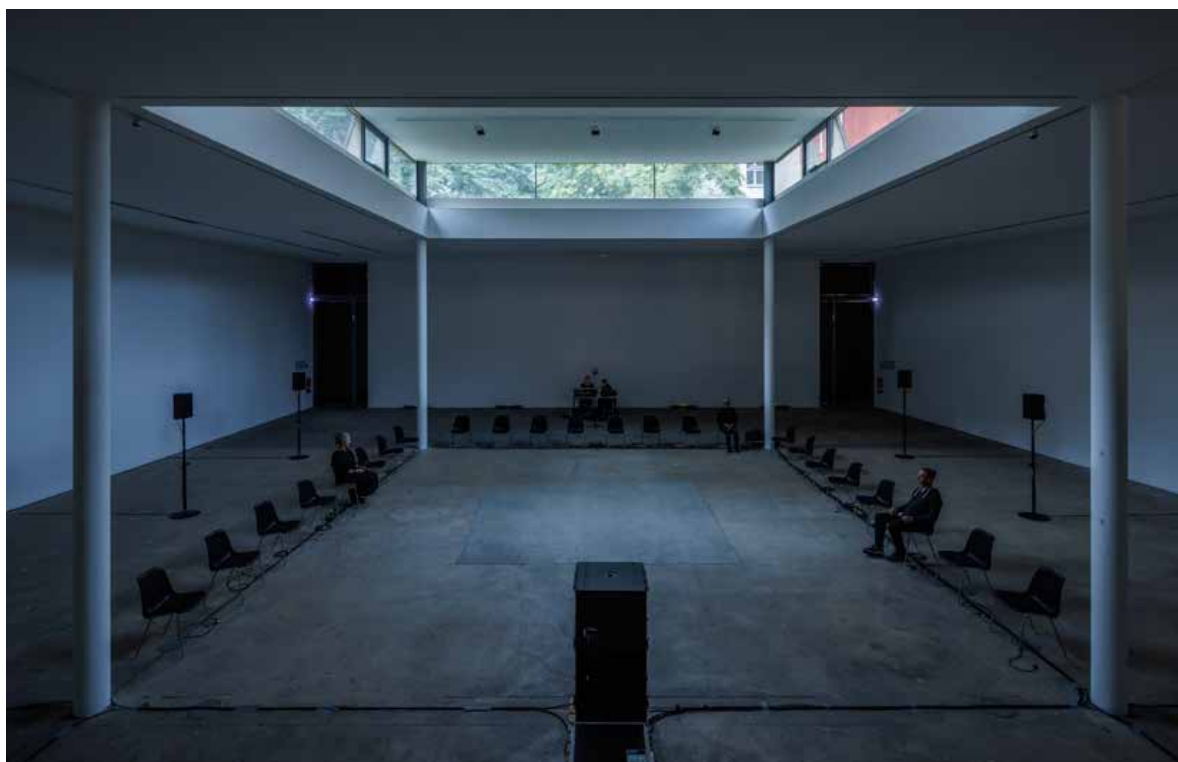
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Pause: Lydia Ourahmane – sync, in collaboration with Daniel Blumberg, live sonic
performance, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2022 Photo: Frank Sperling
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GALERIE
CHANTAL CROUSEL

29-11-2023 11:18:25 1. Meier-0018 C69 Sala Torre



08-12-2023 10:18:00 1. Meier-0018 C69 Sala Torre



08-12-2023 12:08:15 1. Meier-0018 C69 Sala Torre



12-02-2024 13:38:42 1. Meier-0018 C69 Sala Torre



18-12-2023 12:07:19 1. Meier-0018 C69 Sala Torre



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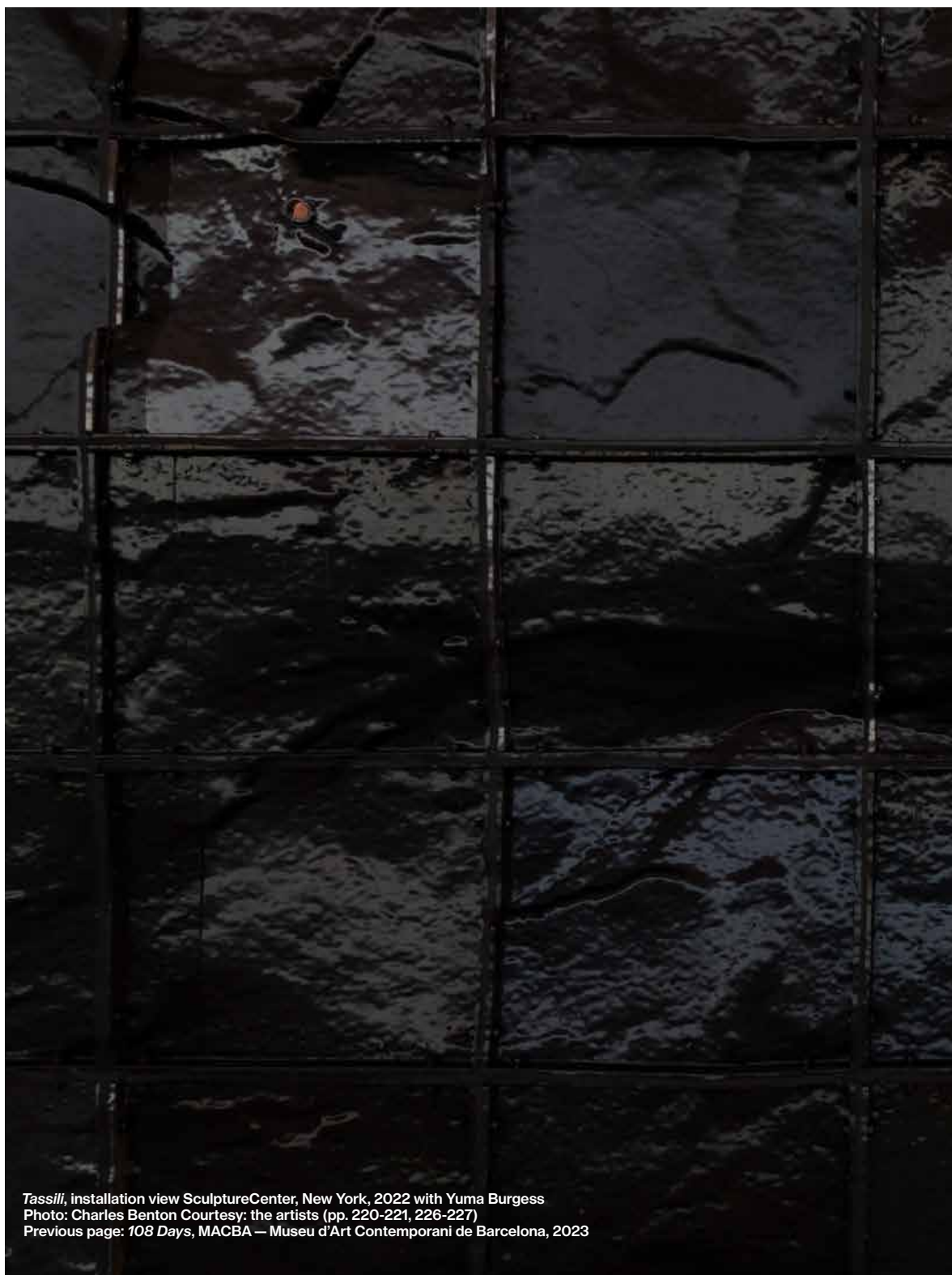
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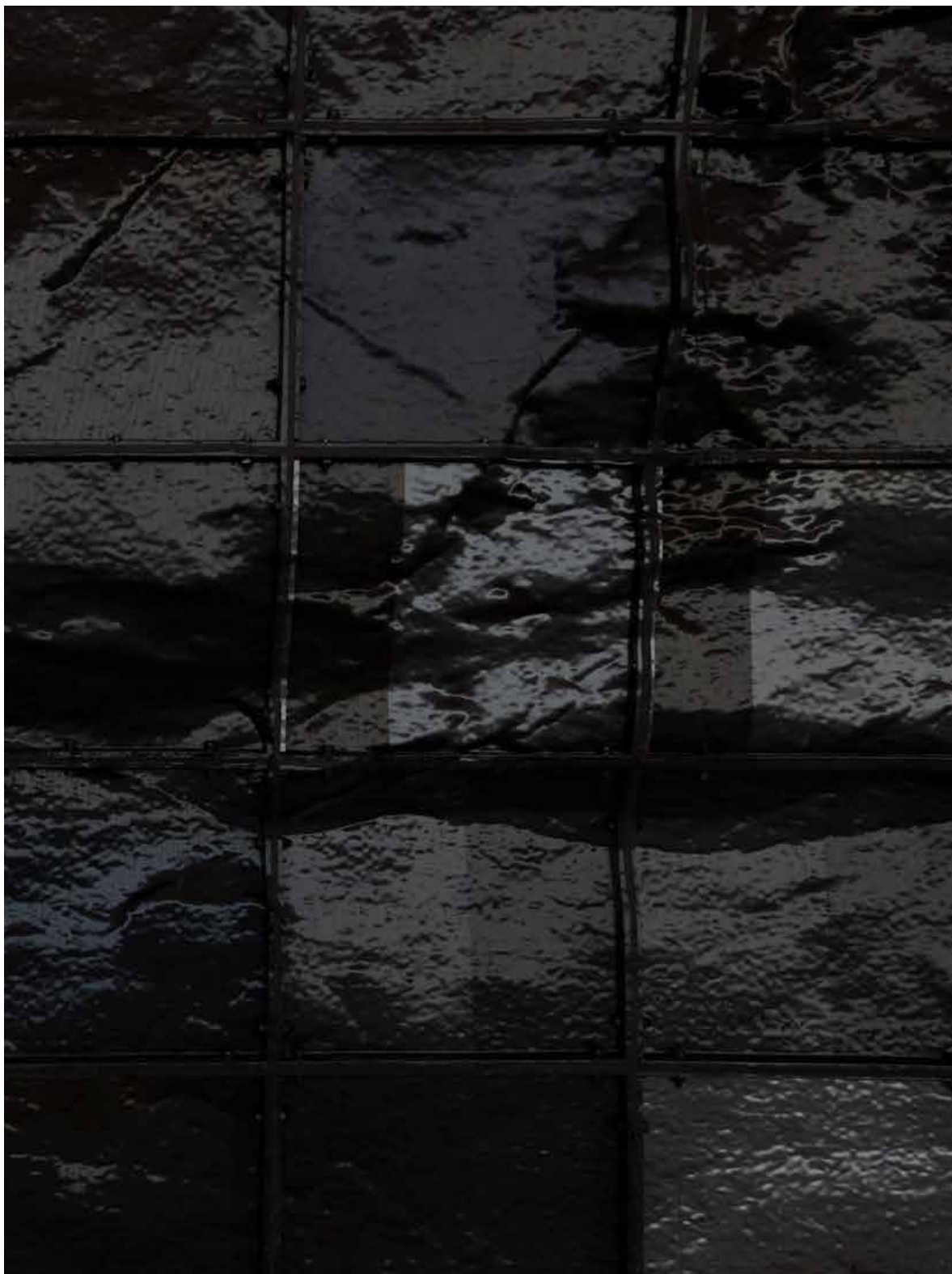
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LYDIA OURAHMANE & FABIO CHERSTICH

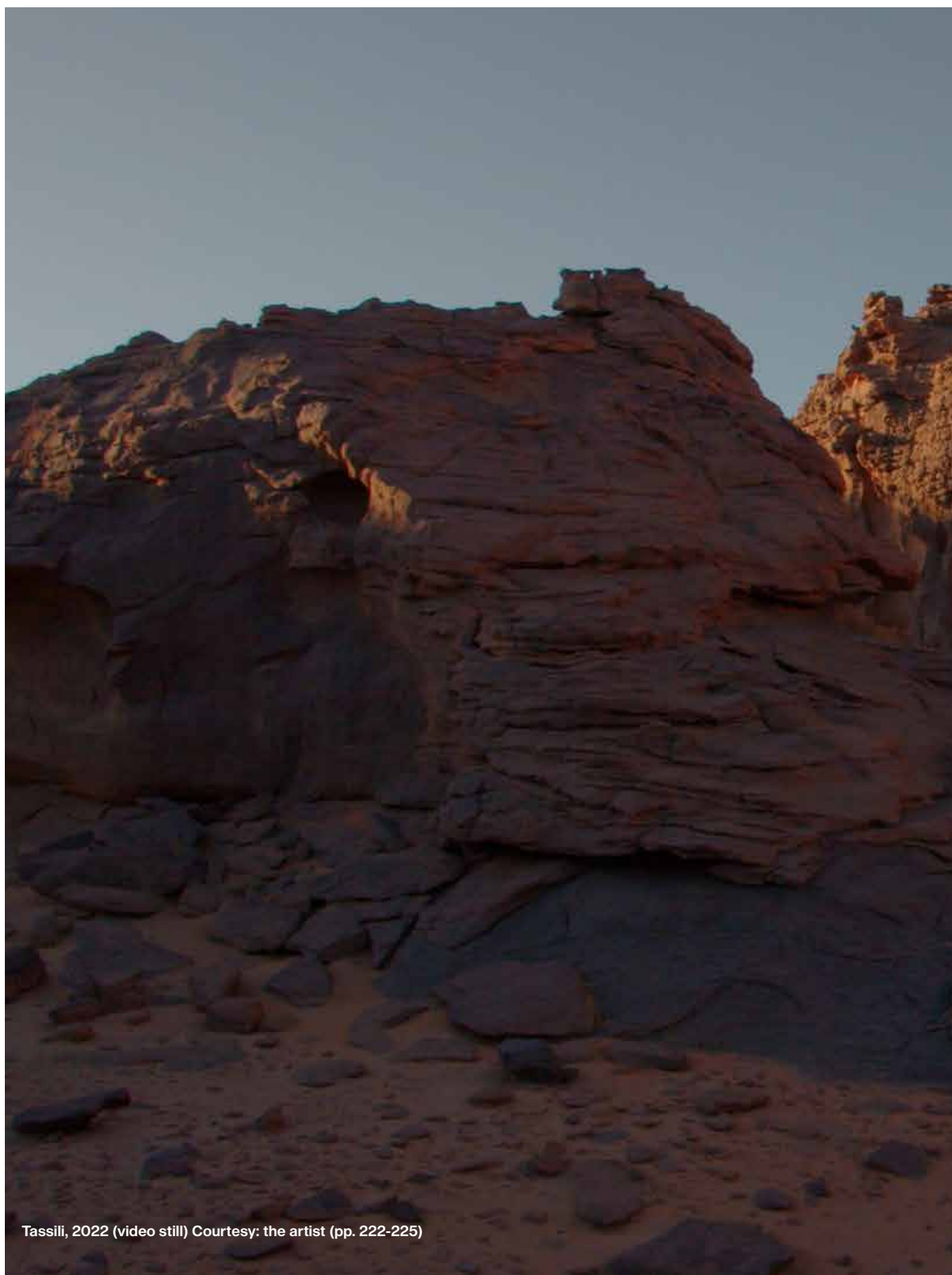


Tassili, installation view SculptureCenter, New York, 2022 with Yuma Burgess
Photo: Charles Benton Courtesy: the artists (pp. 220-221, 226-227)
Previous page: *108 Days*, MACBA — Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2023

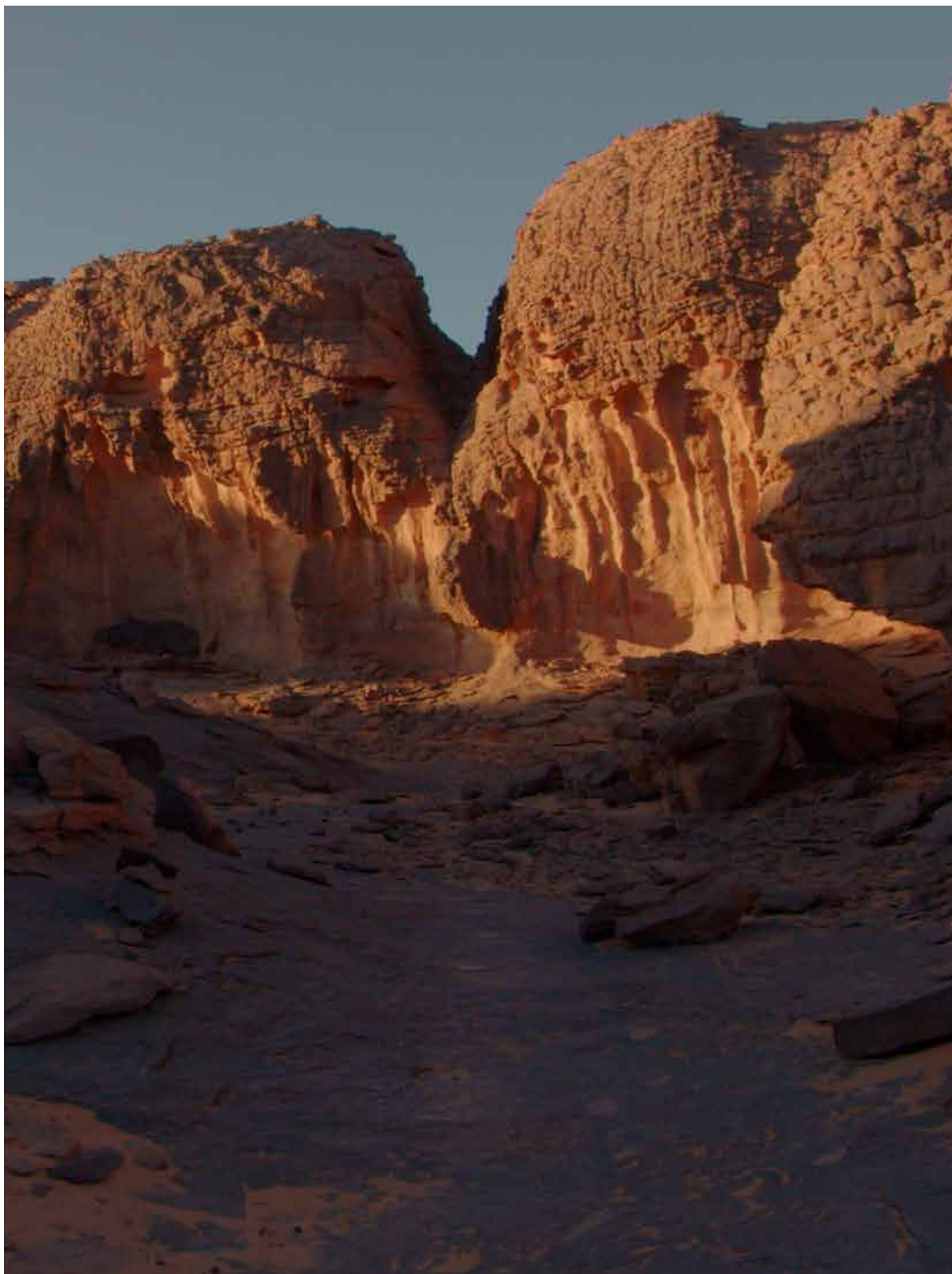








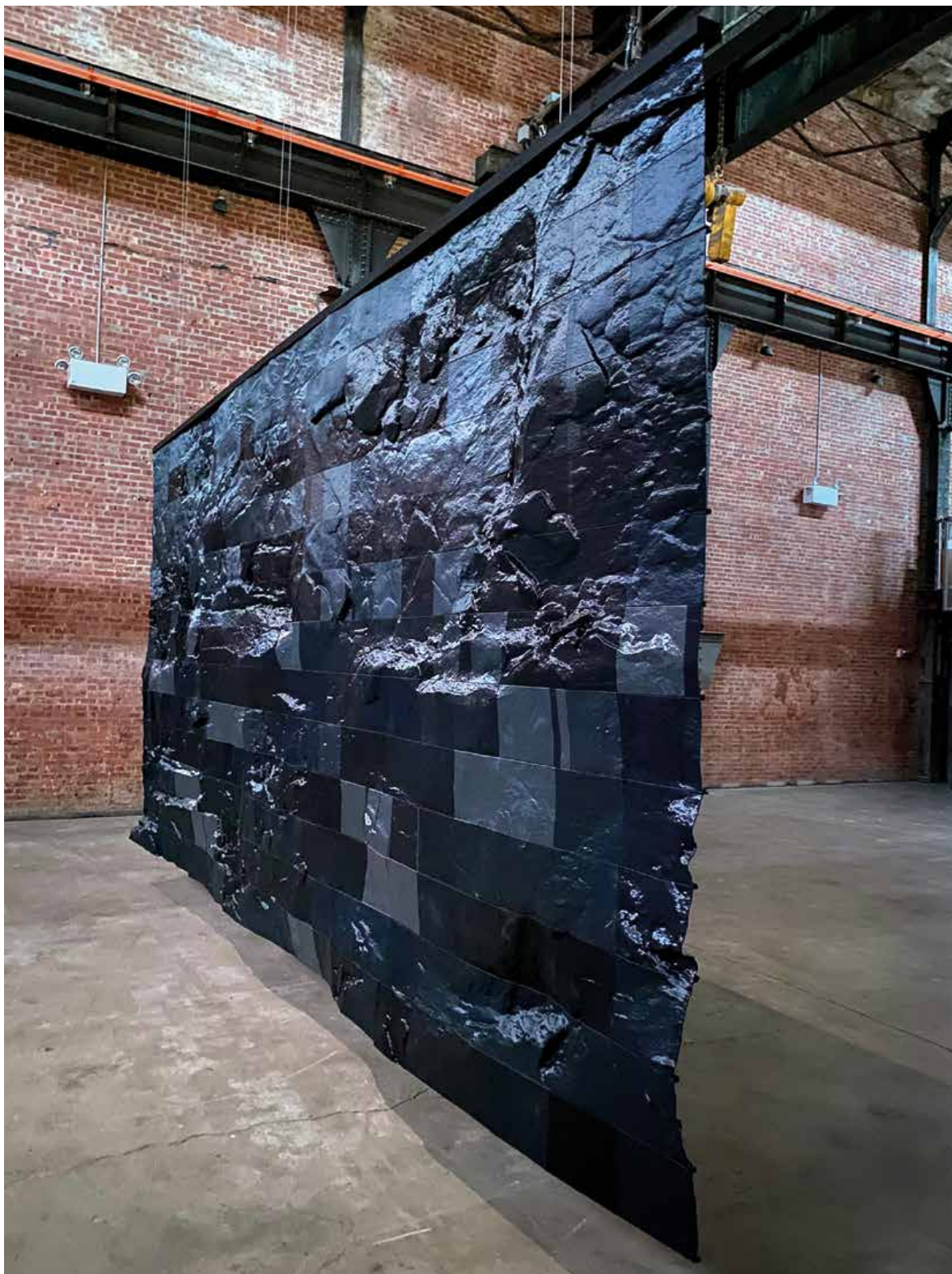
Tassili, 2022 (video still) Courtesy: the artist (pp. 222-225)





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EL PAÍS

Lydia Ourahmane: “No encontré mi voz hasta que empecé a escribir mi tesis sobre la inmigración ilegal proveniente de Argelia a España”

La artista de origen argelino afincada en Barcelona Lydia Ourahmane ha expuesto en la Fundación Louis Vuitton o la Bienal de São Paulo. Ha mostrado el Macba una obra que extiende su rango de acción desde la espiritualidad a la geopolítica, la urdimbre del colonialismo o la migración con un marcado carácter emocional



La artista Lydia Ourahmane.
GREGORI CIVERA

La artista conceptual Lydia Ourahmane (Saïda, Argelia, 32 años) enfrenta los procesos de creación como una indagación que a menudo pone a la propia artista como maquinaria en proceso para llegar a una conclusión lógica o de sentido. El proceso, y no la chispa inicial, es lo que informa de la obra final. Pregunta y responde al espacio, a sí misma, a su entorno, a personas que encuentra, a situaciones vividas hasta encontrar, en una suerte de dialéctica platónica, el armazón de lo que va a ocurrir en una sala. En abril culmina una experiencia expositiva en el Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Barcelona (Macba), [108 Días](#), que si bien podría parecer una revisión al concepto de comisariado artístico, tiene raíces más profundas y una significación de aromas más sutiles.

Ramón Ayala

Lydia Ourahmane: “No encontré mi voz hasta que empecé a escribir mi tesis sobre la inmigración ilegal proveniente de Argelia a España”
El País, March 30, 2024.

<https://urls.fr/-r93F5>

A simple vista es solo un espacio donde la artista invita a personalidades y colectivos a intervenir la torre norte del edificio proyectado por Richard Meier. Pero esta lectura solo lo es a simple vista. Sí, coincide con la idea para el museo que ha traído la cordobesa [Elvira Dyangani Ose](#) como directora de la institución desde 2021: un espacio permeable abierto a la realidad de la ciudad y la diversidad ajena a la historia oficial del arte que refleje lo que ocurre fuera de los muros de la mole de cristal y blanco. Un nuevo paradigma que abre espacios a nuevos discursos y sensibilidades de la práctica artística. Pero hay algo más de fondo.

“No crecí como una artista, en mi familia nunca fuimos a museos ni recibí una educación específica al respecto. Mis padres eran gente muy radical, dedicaron sus vidas al servicio de Dios y los demás. Son personas muy espirituales. Aprendí a moverme por el mundo de ellos, sin ningún tipo de ego. Cuando era muy pequeña recogía gatos callejeros y los llevaba a casa: les daba de comer y los alojaba bajo mi cama”. Desde el momento de encontrarse con Ourahmane sorprende que esté más dispuesta a escuchar que a dar explicaciones o justificar lo que hace. Alta, enérgica y de mirada abierta, interrogativa, inicia el diálogo con un “cuéntame tu historia”. Ha abierto de un modo natural una conversación entre pares donde cada intervención construye sobre la anterior. Sobre el andamiaje, empieza a dar razones: “Soy una artista conceptual, cada proyecto es distinto para mí. Sin embargo, hay ciertas cosas a las que vuelvo. Aun así, cuando el [Macba](#) me invitó a hacer esta exposición era como si no pudiera visualizar nada. Pasaban los meses y empezaba a entrar en pánico. Solo veía el hueco de la torre. Me llegué a obsesionar con el concepto de vacío. Hablé con físicos. Un día hablando con mi madre me dijo: ‘Cómo anda el vacío, ¿lo has llenado ya?’. Pensé que el vacío es imposible y regurgité mis conversaciones con los físicos. Pregunté cuántos días estaría abierta la exposición: 108. ‘Voy a invitar a 108 personas’. Quería usarlo como un espejo. La cuestión del uso era fundamental: qué necesita el espacio, qué necesita la gente ahora mismo, es algo que me pregunto en mi trabajo todo el rato.”

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La artista Lydia Ourahmane, retratada en la torre norte del Macba, donde desde el 28 de noviembre de 2023 está desarrollando su proyecto '108 Días', que culminará el 1 de abril.
GREGORI CIVERA

La argelina pone en relieve la cuestión de cierta urgencia vital y social y qué incisión hace la práctica artística sobre ello: “¿Es esta exposición útil?”, interroga. A pesar de haberse tenido que ganar la confianza de las 108 personas que intervienen, teme que de algún modo su propuesta se haga confusa a miradas superficiales: “El otro día un amigo me llamó y me decía que la gente piensa que me he vuelto activista o ecologista. Creo que para algunos la falta de repetición o continuidad resulta perturbadora”. Tirar del hilo de las etiquetas no va mucho con la artista, algún titular en prensa calificándola de ecofeminista la ha puesto en guardia con las etiquetas. “El 1 de abril, cuando acabe, me gustaría invitar a todo el mundo y que hagan preguntas sobre qué ha pasado realmente en la torre durante estos días. Así se crean los mitos. Después de un tiempo haciendo un trabajo muy físico en distintas obras con materiales muy pesados, física o históricamente no podía lidiar más con objetos. Quise crear una idea en la que pudiéramos vivir y pienso que esta es una de las pocas instituciones en el mundo, de este tamaño, donde generar esta conversación es posible. Cada día el espacio cambia y es una cuestión muy profunda”.

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El momento en que Lydia Ourahmane —que ha expuesto en la [Fundación Louis Vuitton](#) de París, el Kunsthalle de Basilea o la Bienal de São Paulo— empieza a ser la artista que conocemos data de su último año en la escuela Goldsmiths, en la Universidad de Londres. “No encontré mi voz hasta que empecé a escribir mi tesis sobre la inmigración ilegal proveniente de Argelia a España. Conocía a mucha gente que estaba embarcada en hacer ese viaje: amigos, primos. Me vino a la cabeza una imagen, un barril de petróleo de la única compañía local de combustible que hay allí. Quería llevar unos barriles a Europa para que formaran parte de una instalación sonora y que hiciesen el mismo trayecto que los migrantes porque es una compañía que nunca ha salido del país como marca”.



Videoinstalación presentada en Nueva York Tassili, 2022.
CHARLES BENTON

Tras el planteamiento inicial, el proceso de un modo orgánico empezó a tomar otro rumbo. “Se convirtió en un mamut. Porque ¿sabes? Era ilegal exportar arte. Argelia implementó una ley en 1962, cuando ganó la independencia de Francia, para evitar el expolio de patrimonio mientras los franceses se retiraban. Y esa ley me impedía sacar 20 barriles de petróleo del país. Con la agencia de transporte ideamos estrategias como no declarar una intención artística, sino una mudanza. Pero detectaban que no eran muebles ni útiles domésticos. ¿Cómo definir un barril de petróleo como algo doméstico? Son adornos. ¿Si son adornos qué valor tienen? No hay valor cuantificable, es solo sentimental...

Ramón Ayala

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Cada día la burocracia salía con algo. Luego los declaramos como instrumentos musicales... Recopilé 934 documentos al respecto necesarios para trasladar los barriles a Reino Unido. Y fue la primera obra de arte en viajar fuera del país desde 1962. El proceso movilizó a cientos de personas. Fue un retrato, una documentación de cómo vivimos en la sociedad contemporánea. La burocracia no era una herramienta, sino una consecuencia del dolor de los demás”.



Detalle de la instalación 'Barzakh' de la Kunsthalle Basel, 2021.
KUNSTHALLE BASEL

Ramón Ayala

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Minutos antes de la charla, de pie, en medio de la torre, contaba que los retratados de la intervención fotográfica de la activista María Riot sobre el trabajo sexual nunca habían pisado no solo el Macba, en su mismo barrio, ni siquiera un museo. Ante la duda de si hay que ser útil, responde: “La pregunta que sigue es ¿para quién? ¿Es para sentirse útil o serlo de verdad?”. La práctica artística de Ourahmane, que abre paso a través de preguntas al aire y conversaciones amables, es una mano abierta donde cabe todo lo que pueda seguir al gesto gentil de invitación al diálogo. “¿Dónde estamos ahora en la historia de la humanidad? ¿Cuál es este lugar, Barcelona, que he elegido como mi hogar desde hace dos años? Este proyecto fue como si yo intentara buscar una conexión y solidaridad similares”. La artista está presente en la gestualidad de la conceptualización que mira al otro como sujeto igual. Un arte sin élite e igualmente sanador. “La belleza es hacer algo que le importe al otro”.

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FRIEZE

Lydia Ourahmane Journeys Into a Contested Corner of the Sahara

The Algerian-born artist considers the geopolitical demons and prehistoric paintings of the Tassili n'Ajjer in her first exhibition in the country of her birth



Tassili (2022) is Lydia's Ourahmane's mesmerizing high-definition filmic portrait of Tassili n'Ajjer, a landscape of towering sandstone columns and arches wrought by erosion in the southeastern corner of the Algerian Sahara. The UNESCO site, which covers an area roughly the size of Ireland, is home to more than 15,000 prehistoric cave paintings and engravings. *Tassili* follows these agile silhouettes of human forms as they dart across the rock face in pursuit of large game. So elegant and enigmatic were these paintings that upon 'discovering' the site in 1956, French ethnologist Henri Lhote claimed that they were evidence of alien contact.

Ourahmane was born in Saïda, Algeria in 1992 and emigrated to London with her family at the age of 9. After graduating with a BA in Fine Art from Goldsmiths, University of London, she moved back to Algeria in 2018, settling in Algiers and establishing herself in its burgeoning art scene. Making connections has been fundamental to Ourahmane's work for the last five years, particularly those established with the circle around rhizome, the most internationally active contemporary art space in Algiers. The co-founder of rhizome, Khaled Bouzidi, coordinated the 16-person production team that traveled into the Sahara for *Tassili*. After showing the work at the Sculpture Center in New York in 2022, and in Paris and Toronto, rhizome presented *Tassili* in Algiers at Les Ateliers Sauvage in March, the first exhibition of Ourahmane's work in the country of her birth. *Tassili* is now on view in Tunis at B7L9 Art Station.



Lydia Ourahmane, 'Tassili', 2023, exhibition view, Les Ateliers Sauvage, Algiers.
Courtesy: the artist and rhizome, Algiers

As Ourahmane explained to me in the days before the opening, the process of making *Tassili* relied on a man named Ahmed Hamid. Hamid, who is Tuareg – one of the many non-Arab ethnic groups that make up Algerian society – was the film party's lead guide through the desert in February 2022. Born on the Tassili n'Ajjer plateau, Hamid lived in the region until the 1980s, when the Algerian government began a campaign among the nomadic people of the Sahara, pressuring them to adopt sedentarism – the practice of living in a permanent settlement.

The movement of people is a major point of contention in Algeria and has been the conceptual focus for several of Ourahmane's projects. For her graduation show, *The Third Choir* (2014), she had Algerian law amended through a laborious bureaucratic process to permit the export of 20 empty oil barrels: having been designated as an artwork, they fell under export restrictions established in 1962. Part of a sound installation using Samsung phones, the barrels are a symbolic representation of the nation's largest unofficial export, the thousands of young Algerians who risk their lives at sea to make undocumented crossings to Europe. Projects such as this and 'Barzakh' (2021), where the artist had the contents of her apartment in Algiers shipped and displayed at Kunsthalle Basel, then to Marseille and Ghent, displace objects imbued with dense, symbolic value in a way that both magnifies and questions that value. In *Tassili*, she displaces a highly charged geological site onto the screen, a move that grants (visual) access to its contested space.



Lydia Ourahmane during the install of 'Barzakh,' Kunsthalle Basel, 2021.
Courtesy: Kunsthalle Basel; photo: Dominik Asche

The installation also raises questions about Ourahmane's position on the margins of the Algerian artistic diaspora and what it means to constantly rearticulate one's sense of belonging in a place one has been forced to leave. Despite her relative privilege as a member of the diaspora, Ourahmane knows this feeling. Her family was active in Algeria's marginalized Christian community and left for the UK, under duress, in the 1990s. In Algeria, religions other than Islam are discouraged by the government, and proselytizing is illegal. Hamid too has been displaced. Returning as a tour guide to what was once Tuareg territory, his route charts the film's spatial choreography, making *Tassili* a visual rearticulation of his home. 'The guides directed this film,' Ourahmane told me. This impression is underscored by her decision to withhold narration. Instead, the images are accompanied by a four-part musical score composed by Nicolás Jaar, felicita, Yawning Portal and Sega Bodega.



Lydia Ourahmane, 'Tassili', 2023, exhibition view, Les Ateliers Sauvage, Algiers.
Courtesy: the artist and rhizome, Algiers



Lydia Ourahmane, 'Tassili', 2023, exhibition view, Les Ateliers Sauvage, Algiers.
Courtesy: the artist and rhizome, Algiers

I asked Ourahmane to speak about the impact she anticipates from showing *Tassili* in Algiers: 'I'm really glad that Ahmed could come see it,' she replied. 'His is the only opinion that really matters to me, frankly.' She told me that Hamid had asked, 'why didn't you use our music?' To which she replied that she didn't want to engage in ethnography, or approach the site using anthropological language. 'I wanted to see how music could rearticulate a topic in a language outside of the image's terms.' For Ourahmane, Hamid's question reflects the popular belief that sound belongs to the body from which it emanates, which in turn reflects a territorial concept of belonging. 'With electronic music,' she explained, 'you understand that these sounds were not generated through lived experience.' The music comes from beyond the physical realm. Hamid, thoughtful, responded: 'Yes, the images are released from themselves, the site; they could be anywhere. The music liberates the images.'



Installation view, Lydia Ourahmane, 'Barzakh', Kunsthalle Basel, 2021. Courtesy: the artist and Kunsthalle Basel; photo: Philipp Hänger

But what happens to 6,000-year-old cave paintings when they are loosened from overlapping narratives? UNESCO values Tassili n'Ajjer for its geological interest and as a site of prehistoric art; in Tuareg mythology the caves harbour demons; while for the Algerian government, the whole plateau is part of an established smuggling route. Who are these images for if they are untethered from site-specificity and from ideologically motivated reproduction? For Ourahmane, the answers lie in an idea that animates all of her work: her practice makes space for belief, asking viewers to suspend their preconceptions – built on received narratives – in order to experience something that defies rational explanation.

ARTFORUM

A LANGUAGE OF ONE'S OWN

Negar Azimi on the art of Lydia Ourahmane



Lydia Ourahmane, *Finitude*, 2018, ash, chalk, steel, inductor base stereo system. Installation view, New Museum, New York. From the 2018 Triennial. Photo: Maris Hutchinson/EPW Studio.

I HAD HEARD about Lydia Ourahmane long before setting out to write about her curiously affecting art, had heard about her improbable backstory as the child of an Algerian father and a Malaysian Chinese mother who had fallen in love at a school for evangelical Christians in the UK. I'd seen images of her work, too—invitingly minimalist installations perfumed by mystery, chaos, and accident. Our wide-ranging conversations began in the pandemic's second year, and before long I had grown accustomed to the artist's elliptical, zigzag patter. The vibe was both history lesson and séance, a seamless braiding of personal history and politics.

Here are some things I learned over the course of our phone calls, paraphrased from my scribbled notes. *Psychogeography* (the term for a signature concept popularized by the Situationists in 1950s Paris) was actually the coinage of an illiterate man from the Kabyle region of Algeria.

Negar Azimi
A Language of One's Own
Artforum, Summer, 2022.
<https://urls.fr/w-m2Za>

The evangelical Christian movement in 1980s Algeria began with an injured football player's miraculous healing. Ourahmane, who frequently speaks of "energies," has had a facsimile of an ancient warrior girl tattooed on one arm and a gold tooth permanently drilled into her mouth. She has a keen interest in glossolalia, the ecstatic experience of speaking in tongues, though she has not, as yet, had the pleasure. She does not regret her decision, back in the day, to inform her classmates at her new school in London that she'd had a previous life as a child pop star.

To be clear, the pop-star story is apocryphal. Ourahmane was nine years old when her family emigrated from Oran, a gloriously decaying Algerian port city wholly obscure to her British peers. Born in 1992, near the beginning of her country's decade-long civil war—a conflict that pitted an authoritarian military government against Islamist guerrillas—Ourahmane spent her childhood in a series of safe houses that her parents, members of Algeria's persecuted Christian minority, founded and ran. She got used to living alongside perfect strangers. Communal spaces served as rudimentary sets for underground Christian TV and radio broadcasts and ad hoc puppet shows based on Bible tales. Nothing about this decidedly unusual childhood prepared Ourahmane for life at an English middle school. "I was never able to connect my own experience to anyone else's," she says. "I had this feeling that I was always treading water, that I had to renegotiate the terms with every move." Her fictitious pop stardom was an act of self-fashioning. "At some point," she says, "you start writing your own language."



Lydia Ourahmane, *21 Boulevard Mustapha Benboulaïd* (details), 2021, mixed media. Installation views, Kunsthalle Basel. Photo: Philipp Hänger.



Lydia Ourahmane, *In the Absence of our Mothers* (detail), 2015–18, X-ray, text, two 4.45g 18-karat gold teeth. Installation view, Chisenhale Gallery, London, 2018. Photo: Andy Keate.

A language of one's own: That's one way of evoking a multifarious art practice that eludes tidy summary. A typical Ourahmane exhibition is sparse, a psychic ecosystem characterized by the subtle deployment of light and sound, a smattering of talismanic objects that provide few clues as to their origins but end up being vehicles for smuggling in larger histories, many of them connected to Algeria's colonial past and illiberal present. Often the work is haunted by its own imminent obsolescence; *Finitude*, a wall made of ash and chalk crammed into a narrow alcove at the New Museum during its 2018 triennial, crumbled to dust over the course of the exhibition, a process hastened by periodic sonic vibrations. At the entrance to her 2018 show at London's Chisenhale Gallery, Ourahmane treated two large silver doors with black sulfur, which rubbed away in dribs and drabs as grasping hands made contact each day. For an exhibition at the Renaissance Society in Chicago this past winter, after several failed attempts to FedEx mud from the banks of the Nile—an act forbidden by Egyptian law—she and her occasional collaborator Alex Ayed ended up transporting bootleg bottles of river water, which evaporated over time. It could be said that Ourahmane's predilection for the ephemeral is an echo of her early years in clandestine contexts amid the scourge of civil war, when she was painfully aware that at any moment she might have to pack up, move on. "I wake up every morning thinking this could be the last day of my life," she says.

THERE IS ONE Ourahmane artwork that squeezed my heart when I first read about it four years ago. *In the Absence of our Mothers*, 2015–18, hinges on two narratives of escape separated by some seventy years. The earlier involves the artist's grandfather Tayeb Ourahmane, a skilled sniper who spent more than a decade in grudging service to the French Algerian Army. Upon learning, after the outbreak of World War II, that he was to be sent to fight on the eastern front, he decided he wanted out. Mindful that the disabled were exempt from service, he proceeded to have every one of his teeth extracted in a single day. Underscoring the madness of the gesture, Tayeb Ourahmane used no anesthetic. He would go on to lend his military expertise to the cause of the anticolonial FLN (Front de Libération Nationale).

Ourahmane had this kernel of family lore in the back of her mind when, one day in an Oran market, she encountered a boy keen to sell her a gold chain.

She questioned him about its provenance. It was his mother's, he said, and it could be hers for the sum of three hundred euros—the going rate, as it happened, for smuggling one person across the Mediterranean to southern Spain. Ourahmane was no stranger to this desperate traffic. She knew people who were saving up to make the trip, knew people who had tried it. Some had failed; some had paid with their lives. Ourahmane couldn't help but imagine that the boy was planning to use the proceeds to book his own passage. She bought the chain.

One day, recalling the story of her grandfather's defiant automutilation, she decided to have the chain melted down and fashioned into a pair of gold teeth, one of which now resides in the back of her mouth. The other tooth became the centerpiece of her Chisenhale show, jutting out from a white wall like an ancient rock formation in miniature. Presented alongside it were her grandfather's identity card and other bureaucratic ephemera. As a metaphysical transaction and a distillation of metaphor into form, the golden tooth represented a double gesture: both an homage to her grandfather's Dada-esque act of refusal and an acknowledgment of the failures of the state he fought to bring into being, where today the indignities of everyday life compel so many hopeful young people to fling themselves toward the cold heart of the metropole.

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**A typical Ourahmane exhibition is sparse, a
psychic ecosystem characterized by the subtle
deployment of light and sound, a smattering of
talismanic objects that end up being vehicles for
smuggling in larger histories.**

In the Absence of our Mothers built on earlier works by the artist that consider the ways in which colonialism imprints itself on human bodies—how it sets out to conscript, categorize, control. And while Algerian independence was achieved in 1962 after an eight-year guerrilla war, Ourahmane suggests that those imprints have never really disappeared.

If at the core of every colonial regime is a violent separation between settler and native, colonizer and colonized, colonialism's successor states continue to reproduce the sins of the fathers. There are any number of theoreticians of this postcolonial paradox—Mahmood Mamdani and V. S. Naipaul among them—but it should be said that Ourahmane's quietly inspiring art blooms in the cracks and crevices of the postcolony, amid the psychic and emotional debris, the ineffable hum of melancholy, defeat, and, despite everything, hope.



Lydia Ourahmane, *The Third Choir*, 2014, twenty Naftal oil barrels imported from Algeria, CZ-5HE radio transmitter, twenty Samsung E2121B cell phones, audio, 33 1/2" x 9' 10 1/8" x 16' 4 7/8".

For *The Third Choir*, 2014, which she made while still an undergraduate at Goldsmiths, Ourahmane arranged for the migration of twenty empty oil barrels from Algeria to London—a miracle of bureaucratic wrangling and, notably, the first artwork to be legally exported from Algeria since the country's independence. The barrels were arrayed in a diamond shape in the gallery, each containing a cell phone that broadcast an ambient sound piece using a radio transmitter. Alongside the installation, a tsunami of documents inventoried the herculean efforts that had gone into the shipment, from ardent exhortations and groveling supplications to endless customs forms. It could be said that the rusty containers stood in for the bodies of all the people who could only dream of making the same journey. On this as on other occasions, Ourahmane's determined negotiations with and against a parodically opaque bureaucracy constituted a choreographic work in itself.

Another early work explores immigration in a more affective register. The video *HARAGA (The Burning)*, 2014, features a grainy clip of young Algerian men crammed onto a precarious skiff moving toward Spanish waters. You can find still images on Ourahmane's website: a moment of pure jubilation, the ecstasy of success written on exhausted faces. "Brothers, we are in their waters!" exclaims one of the boys. "I wanted people to feel what I had felt when I saw that clip, the way it cut me up," she told me. *Haraga* is Algerian Arabic for "those who burn," a reference to migrants who incinerate their passports before embarking. That all but one of the boys ended up being sent back to Algeria heightens the work's considerable pathos. *HARAGA (The Burning)* was shown as part of Bloomberg New Contemporaries, a coveted showcase for young British artists, the year it was made. Ourahmane's contribution was a tiny placard inviting viewers to log in to a wobbly Wi-Fi network hosting a bespoke website on which only a few people at a time could watch the video. Most walked on by. That didn't bother Ourahmane, who had opted to elide the mass-mediated quality so prevalent in representations of migrants. Making it difficult to see—making the seeing itself intimate—was the point.



Lydia Ourahmane, *HARAGA (The Burning)*, 2014, wireless video transmission, color, sound, 3 minutes 37 seconds.

WHEN I FIRST started speaking to Ourahmane, she had just finished making arrangements to ship the entire contents of her Algiers apartment to the humdrum Swiss town of Basel. She had been living in Algeria's seaside capital when the pandemic struck. Like many of her compatriots, she wilted under the weight of the country's onerous Covid regulations, opportunistically exaggerated to stifle antigovernment protests. In the summer of 2020, she left the country for Europe, thinking she would be back shortly, never imagining that Algeria's borders would be sealed for nearly a year and that she wouldn't be able to return. It was in that interminable window that plans for her upcoming exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel took shape. In Arabic, *Barzakh*, the name she gave to the Basel project, evokes a state of betweenness or limbo, but it carries other connotations, too: a thin strip of land connecting two seas; a refuge; a place where the spirit awaits judgment for earthly deeds.

Ourahmane spent two and a half months working closely with friends in Algiers, calling in every possible favor to ensure the meticulous migration of every last thing to Basel: books, bric-a-brac, clothes, photos, diaries, furniture. But the contents of the apartment were not hers alone.

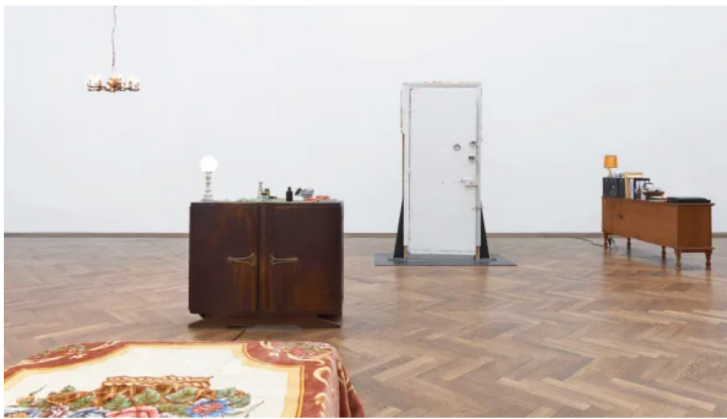
Ourahmane had had a difficult time finding a landlord willing to rent to an unmarried, which is to say unchaste, woman; her French-built fin de siècle apartment was the thirty-fourth flat she had seen when searching for a home in Algiers. The previous owner, since deceased, had lived in Germany before Algerian independence, and the stuff of her life was everywhere. Ourahmane inherited the woman's cumbersome mahogany furniture, her handkerchiefs and sheets, a generic oil painting of an Alpine landscape. She never dreamed of disposing of them, but rather resolved to accommodate the spirit of her predecessor. "It was like having a roommate," she says, with a degree of seriousness that rattles me.



View of "Lydia Ourahmane: *Barzakh*," 2021, Kunsthalle Basel. Photo: Philipp Hänger.



View of "Lydia Ourahmane: *Barzakh*," 2021, Kunsthalle Basel. Photo: Philipp Hänger.



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In Basel, the motley assemblage was spread out across three rooms, a little like items at an estate sale. At the heart of the exhibition was the apartment's front door, or rather doors: the original wooden one from 1901 as well as a metal one, with nine heavy-duty locks that had been added during the civil war in the 1990s. Set slightly ajar, the doors made for a stirring sculpture, a palimpsest of histories. "*Barzakh*" pointed to the many complexities—emotional, political—of "home." Walking through the installation, sitting on the couch, peering into Ourahmane's closet, reading from her private notebooks, one had the sensation of communing with ghosts.

But not all ghosts are friendly. At the entrance to the exhibition, a sign proclaimed WARNING: THIS AREA IS UNDER 24HR SURVEILLANCE. A series of amorphous blown-glass sculptures arrayed throughout the galleries contained microphones that captured ambient sounds. Some of the noises were redistributed through invisible speakers. Phone numbers posted on the kunsthalle's website permitted anyone to listen remotely. Ourahmane called the listening devices "witnesses with no history." Elsewhere, laser beams shot across two rooms, evoking high-end security systems; as people passed through them, their bodies, for a brief moment, interrupted the sonic transmissions in progress. This insistence on viewers' being physically implicated in her work, entangled in a dense mesh of sensuous qua political associations, is an integral element of Ourahmane's practice. Which is to say she disdains the possibility of a disembodied spectator, a detached onlooker.

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Ourahmane's quietly inspiring art blooms in the cracks and crevices of the postcolony, amid the psychic and emotional debris, the ineffable hum of melancholy, defeat, and, despite everything, hope.



View of "Lydia Ourahmane: Barzakh," 2021, Kunsthalle Basel. Photo: Philipp Hänger.



Tear catcher from the collection of Lydia Ourahmane, ca. 400 B.C., blown glass. Installation view, de Appel, Amsterdam, 2021. Photo: Jimena Gabriela Gaiuna.

WHILE OURAHMANE has addressed her own history in this and other exhibitions, there is one subject she long steered clear of: her parents' work in the Christian underground. As a child, she fabricated stories about what they did for a living. As she grew older, she avoided the subject altogether, mindful of the awkward connotations of "missionary work," fearful of trivializing her mother and father's sacrifices. Fearful, too, of drawing attention, as their work remains dangerous. And yet something shifted last year. Ourahmane began to worry that her parents' legacy might be lost. She channeled this feeling into *Survival in the afterlife*, 2021–22, an immersive installation hinging on archives of the various communities her parents have shepherded since the late 1980s. In an exhibition at Frankfurt's Portikus, a carefully curated selection of photographs showed people swimming, sharing food, praying—moments of communion and solidarity. On one wall, Ourahmane hung a "tear catcher," an antique implement (found on eBay) for measuring the duration of grief, a silent sentinel to loss and an evocation of empathy.

The day after the Portikus opening, Ourahmane took me on a tour of the show via FaceTime. We lingered in the upstairs space, a large, gym-like expanse, suffused with red light, that felt like a womb. Handwoven pillows made by the artist and friends were scattered amid colorful floor mats, an invitation to lie down and become mindful of the membrane between the sacred and the profane. An incantatory soundtrack by the collective Yawning Portal, described as "music to levitate to," permeated the space. Ourahmane has spoken of sound as an equalizer, a medium that transcends the awkward barrier of language, and even through our fitful connection, the soundtrack's mystical beat went straight to the gut. A friend described the experience of lying down and listening in the company of others as the closest thing they've had to an ecstatic religious experience.

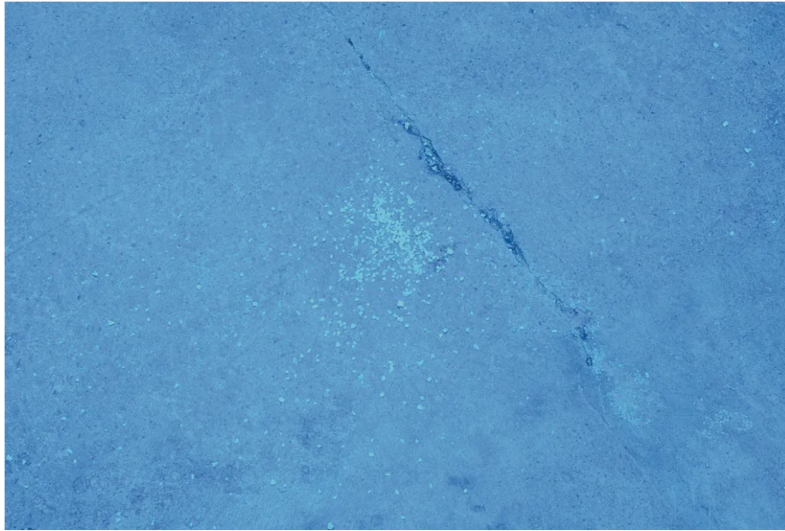
MY LAST CONVERSATION with Ourahmane transpired this past winter, as she returned from what she had come to refer to as "the abyss." At a conference in Delphi three years ago, the artist Sophia Al Maria had passed her a note with the message "Take me to Tassili" written backward, Leonardo da Vinci style. Tassili n'Ajjer is a remote plateau in the Sahara near the borders of Libya, Niger, and Mali, filled with cave paintings, some dating back to 6000 BCE. Notoriously inhospitable, Tassili invites myth, having resisted conquest over the millennia. The expanse was once known for its salt trade—its trade in humans, too. Today, it is home to Tuareg nomads as well as smugglers of arms and other booty. Ourahmane was ensorcelled by the thought of traveling there.



View of "Lydia Ourahmane: Survival in the afterlife," 2021–22, Portikus, Frankfurt. Photo: Ian Waelder.

She made a short trip a few months later, a sort of reconnaissance mission. One outgrowth of that journey was an exhibition at San Francisco's CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, which opened the first week of February 2020. The show's title, "Solar Cry," was drawn from a short text by Georges Bataille that describes the sun as the most abstract of objects, impossible to see directly—its combustible visage liable to strike its viewers blind or mad. Even by Ourahmane's standards, the show was enigmatic: A wall text announced the artist's intention to explore how faith can be registered on the body. (In this way, it felt like a prelude to *Survival in the afterlife*.)

Throughout the Wattis space, which was bathed in blue (the color of "the invisible becoming visible," per Yves Klein), occult instruments played their part. A recording of an opera singer straining to hold a single note for sixty minutes combined unevenly with a recording of the same woman holding a slightly different note, her voice in both tracks cracking with exhaustion, conjuring the human desire to transcend bodily limits. The discordant buzz of a tattoo gun resounded from a video projection of the artist acquiring the tattoo of the warrior girl. A field recording of the immense silence she had experienced in the desert could be "heard" by pressing one's body against a wall in which the recording had been embedded; inaudible vibrations were palpable, if barely. Nearly seven pounds of salt crystals were scattered on the cement floor, transforming the footsteps of audience members into irregular percussion.



Lydia Ourahmane, *3kgs salt*, 2020, crystal salt. Installation view, Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco. Photo: Impart Photography.

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If Ourahmane's previous works have staged
“highly controlled” explorations of serendipity and
circumstance, *Tassili* represents her ambition to
let go—to embrace a place at the edge of
comprehension.



Lydia Ourahmane, *Tassili*, 2022, 4K video, 16 mm transferred to video, digital animation, color, sound, 46 minutes 12 seconds.

Ourahmane fantasized about going back to Tassili to make a film. This past February, she and twelve collaborators set out with a sheaf of permits and fifteen donkeys. Al Maria, who was unable to attend, was represented by a rock that Ourahmane had given to her after her first visit. She realized that she had to return this object, she told me, to respect this geography, “which French archaeologists and so many others had been pilfering for years.” She wasn’t yet sure where the work was going, but she knew that she wanted to communicate the experience of the place “on its own terms,” to convey its boundlessness and infinitude, where one is stripped of the protective carapace of modern life. In the desert, she says, “you’re just a body under the beating sun.” She found inspiration in the work of Ibrahim al-Koni, the Libyan writer, who has described the desert as “an oasis for contemplation, because it is the isthmus between total freedom and existence, between death and life.” The resulting film, presented at New York’s SculptureCenter, is overpowering, a hallucinogenic environment of stone, sand, and sky that fascinates and perplexes in equal measure. An exquisite corpse of scores—Ourahmane has given four different composers free rein—amplifies the work’s transportive powers; each segment feels like a universe of its own. If Ourahmane’s previous works have staged, in her own words, “highly controlled” explorations of serendipity and circumstance, *Tassili* represents her ambition to let go—to embrace a place at the edge of comprehension. Like the plateau itself, which has perennially resisted incorporation into any empire, the film evokes an unassimilated and perhaps unassimilable quality. “I feel hesitant to use the word,” she confessed to me one day, “but every moment in that desert feels like a miracle.”

e-flux

“Spacemaking and Soul Delay”



Lydia Ourahmane and The Great God of Sefar, Tassili n'Ajjer, 2021. Photo by Lydia Ourahmane.

It's been over a month since I went to Amsterdam to see Lydia Ourahmane's "Survival in the afterlife" at de Appel, and I am still feeling the effects. On arrival, I felt a sense of having come to a place of safety after having been far from home for a long time. It was very, well, healing. The show's starting point is the spiritual commune Ourahmane's parents founded during the civil war in Algeria (1991–2002), so perhaps the feeling of peace that washed over me is no coincidence.

Ourahmane's research-driven practice, which often involves sound and installation, explores questions of borders, migration, colonialism, and spirituality. The curved Aula at de Appel felt full-sail with the breath of more people than I'd been around in over a year. Shadows shifted over a vast raft of pattern-clashing mattresses that sprawled across the floor. The ambient incantation *Notice the direction of fires* (2021), composed by Ourahmane and collaborators Yawning Portal, was calming. Hie Tee, Lydia's mother, sang soothingly over the speakers: "my peace, my peace, I give unto you." I went to smoke, where Hie Tee talked to me about the importance of never turning away anyone who is in need and advised me not to smoke. These were good pieces of advice. I hope to take both someday.

In a basement cell filled with photographs and videos produced alongside the House of Hope Christian commune, in which Ourahmane grew up, the artist's sister Sarah was correcting typos in her ring-bound dissertation, also titled *Survival in the Afterlife*. In the kitchen, I found Lydia perched on a stool stirring a cauldron that was far too big for the tiny camper stove it was balanced on. "We have to feed 150 people with these," she said. I asked: "Is that enough?" "There is always enough," Lydia answered.

– *Sophia Al-Maria*

Sophia Al-Maria: Lydia, you and I met in Delphi in the spring of 2019 at a Mophradat conference for Arab and African artists called *Accomplices*. About two days in I found out you were living in Algiers. And at the time I wanted to make a pilgrimage to the rock paintings at Tassili n'Ajjer. I passed you a note with a Bic pen drawing from the caves, and a wish...

Lydia Ourahmane: "Take me to Tassili" written backwards, in true Da Vinci code.

SAM: Yes—and you almost did. One thing I have learned about you is that you love a mission. I feel that a lot of your practice is integrated with chance encounters with people, and I'm curious about how the work springs from that. For example, can you share a little about the trek you took, which followed on from that note?

LO: It was September 2019, and I had become obsessed with Tassili's Neolithic cave paintings ever since you passed me that note at the Oracle. Something about that week and that place made everything feel prophetic, and so I carried that note very seriously. I began digging. I went to the library at the École supérieure des beaux-arts in Algiers, where I'd heard that an old professor used to write papers on the ancient cave paintings. While I was reading late one night, a friend sent me an unreleased album titled *cave paintings*, which felt like another sign.



View of the opening for Lydia Ourahmane's "Survival in the afterlife" at de Appel, Amsterdam, 2021. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo by Jimena Gabriella Gauna.

I was eventually put in touch with Yasmine, a dear friend of a dear friend, who had just returned from a year's hiatus travelling in South Asia. She came to my apartment late one afternoon, she had had trouble parking, it was a Friday, and the streets were filled with police. I made Genmaicha and a spread of fruits and energy biscuits. Yasmine told me about her own mission to Tassili n'Ajjer two years before with a group of anthropologists and researchers. Half an hour into her explanation, I was hooked. I began writing a film in my head. I use this trope to mentally prepare for any sort of creative immersion, even though a film has never been made, yet.

The trip I took a couple of months later became a *recce*, in my mind, for when you and I would eventually make that pilgrimage together. In the time that's elapsed, the journey continues to write itself. We have wind that the trek will eventually happen in early 2022. The military have agreed to let us mount the plateau—the borderline between Algeria and Libya—but they may be coming with us.

SAM: I'll only come if the chain of command ends with you—I'm terrified of military hierarchy. In fact, I associate your work with being horizontal. In 2018, you presented your first solo exhibition, "The you in us," at London's Chisenhale Gallery. It involved the entire floor becoming a raised and embedded speaker, on which the audience was encouraged to lie down. What's your relationship to music?

LO: It is the purest form of communication. I struggle with language, even though I've learned how to articulate my thoughts in a way that is *maybe* comprehensible. Speaking multiple languages can be a source of great freedom. It allows your thoughts to move in a more lateral way. I grew up mixing three languages and have since picked up a couple more, which can feel super chaotic, like constantly looking for a suitable tongue. But there's no chaos in music. I find solace in a way of thinking which is not rooted in concrete fluency.

SAM: Is there a horizon in music?

LO: More like a horizontal vertigo, the feeling that you could go on without mark or measure. It's this ultimate surrender which I seek in music, which makes me a very gracious fan. What was so beautiful about working on the sound piece with Yawning Portal was the way that we developed the piece together in Barcelona. We started with some fragments they had put together, and I immediately had the feeling we could build a world together. Any collaboration is an experiment with foresight. And it turns out that a week staring square into a Logic interface can make you forget that clouds actually move.

We back-and-forthed between three time zones for the next weeks, but ultimately I trusted Joe Ware and Jess Walker's ability to make time tenseless which made the piece as enveloping as it is. It was beautiful to watch that come into the room at de Appel, and for hundreds of people to walk in and feel willing to lie down in that together. After long pangs of physical separation, the gesture itself was very powerful. The piece created an intimate enclosure, a membrane, a kind of sac.

SAM: It was really special to witness and also be part of that collective lying down. I've never had an ecstatic religious experience myself, but it felt a bit like that.



View of the opening for Lydia Ourahmane's "Survival in the afterlife" at de Appel, Amsterdam, 2021. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo by Jimena Gabriella Gauna.

LO: I think you can have a sort of “religious” experience by proxy. Ecstatic confluence is often aligned with those spaces. That’s something that I’ve always been very aware of growing up, immersed in a very active community and spiritual life. I was witnessing it, but I was also understanding and recognizing what it was that brought these people together without ever experiencing an epiphany myself.

Over the past few months, I began compiling the *House of Hope Archives* (1989–ongoing), which comprises unique photographic materials produced during the constitution of an active spiritual movement and Christian community located in the Diocese of Arzew (1988–91), House of Refuge L’Ayaida (1991–ongoing), St. Hubert (1995–96), and the House of Hope (1996–ongoing) in the Western region of Algeria. These materials, which gathered on my family’s shelves and in various dwellings over the years, were predominantly taken by my parents, and document their work and life in the various communities they established during Algeria’s civil war in the early nineties.

It was emotionally laborious to go through each photograph, and organize them into an archival format where they would be seen by others. The material remains sensitive. And I understood that the process of making an archive elevates the material and deems it worthy of recall. So, to take on the perspective of questioning the service of material as proof of existence brought a certain neutrality to a very private place. Which was quite heavy. But I also had to think about images as lacking an ethereal quality, which is a *felt* thing. Can an image describe a stream of elation in a room, for example? How much can we read by facial expressions, or volumes of bodies moving in tandem?

SAM: Your work *In the Absence of our Mothers* (2015–18) involved melting a gold chain into two gold teeth, one of which is implanted into your jaw. It's a convergence of two escape narratives, that of your grandfather who pulled out all his teeth in order to escape military service while Algeria was under French rule and that of a young man whom you met in 2015 who sold you the chain, supposedly belonging to his mother, for the same price as a seat in a clandestine boat headed for Europe. Proxy is an interesting way to put it—the rubbing up against or encountering other people's experiences. This feels embedded in a lot of your work.

LO: I think any kind of collective practice allows for that—dissolving into other people, or bringing them in, or meeting people where they are. It's similar to how I like to listen to music on repeat, until I can get as close as possible to the feeling of the world that song was made in and everything I do is colored by it. Rubbing is interesting because people, their histories and experiences, can integrally change you.

SAM: These epiphanic moments that you were witnessing and which you experienced—how did they manifest?

LO: I witnessed many gatherings where this *rising* was very palpable. Usually, they began with a lot of music and singing: the collective voice coming together, saying the same thing, singing the same melodies. Then rips would start to appear, an elation when *something* would be activated—then it perforates the entire room. I think the conditions that allowed for this kind of community to exist arose from the need to survive what was happening outside. The country was traumatized by an ongoing civil war, and many people were looking for another way, which happened to involve a very radical dissociation from the way in which the majority thinks—to believe in something else. So, naturally, this environment becomes very empathetic. One person's tears are everyone else's.



View of Lydia Ourahmane's "Survival in the afterlife" at de Appel, Amsterdam, 2021. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo by Cassander Eeftink Schattenkerk.

SAM: I took a death doula course last year. I was very conscious of why I wept, and when, because there was a lot of weeping. And I learned that part of the death doula's role is to hold space in which others can cry, but not cry with them. That confused me, because it is such a human urge to empathize and feel what others experience. But you have to hold boundaries in order to not encroach on others' experiences, too. You have to clear space. The space you created at de Appel felt that way.

LO: Yes. I've never experienced an opening like the one that we had in Amsterdam. It was such a joy to work with the whole team at de Appel—it really felt like a wedding, as in a celebration of love. The ordeal of getting my mother over there from Algeria, so many of my closest friends showing up, you and I cooking purgatory beans for 150 people... it was all very surreal.

SAM: Your mother was telling me about how, in your household, if someone—anyone—turns up, you feed them, you let them have a place to sleep. No questions. Like that's a mission in life. It was deeply inspiring to understand that openness in a time when we're literally being forced into these paranoid bubbles of isolation. You were the first person who opened your home to me after a long period of very deep isolation and I wanted to thank you for that generosity of spirit.

LO: I don't know any other way to be.

SAM: Visiting your show felt like a fitting end to a time that began with the closing of borders. One of which, for me, was Algeria and our delayed trip to Tassili n'Ajjer. Would you share more details from your reconnaissance mission to that place, and why you went?

LO: I very quickly realized how elusive this place was. Tassili n'Ajjer is a plateau situated on the now-border of Algeria and Libya containing thousands of prehistoric cave paintings and engravings dating back to 6,000 BC. It is, apparently, one of the few places on earth which has resisted military occupation due to the hostility of the landscape. The feeling is palpable—that you could completely disappear.

You lent me a book by Henri Lhote which documents a mission he conducted in the 1950s, with the aim of making one-to-one copies of hundreds of Neolithic cave paintings for an exhibition at the Musée des arts décoratifs in Paris. But in their attempt to record that space, they destroyed a lot of paintings. Afterwards, Ahmed, who was my guide (and who will also be our guide when we eventually make the trip) told me it was his uncle who led that trip with Lhote. They were up there for 16 months. After a certain point, his uncle was so tired that he just told the Europeans: "There are no more cave paintings. We've seen them all." Which was a partial truth.

That withholding of information saved many paintings that could have also been destroyed, purely because of the techniques that they were using. They were scrubbing the walls, destroying the ecosystem that had protected these paintings for thousands of years. History is often dealt with as a violent excavation, uncovering the past by any means. We don't hold space or allow it to speak for itself. It's about claiming ownership of that discovery and not caring about the consequences, which I think is extremely...

SAM: Fucked up?

LO: Yes. Colonial? And I'm thinking a lot about how we translate spaces without extracting from them, more like mediums carrying information into the future, rather than trying to own it.

SAM: Speaking of translating spaces: your exhibition "Barzakh," first shown at Kunsthalle Basel at the beginning of the year, encompassed the travelling of the entire contents of the flat you were living in during the early stages of the pandemic in Algiers. You placed bugging devices throughout the exhibition, but allowed visitors to go through all of your belongings. I saw my book lying on your desk, open and face-down, when I visited the second iteration of the work at Triangle-Astérides in Marseille. It felt uncanny.



Lydia Ourahmane, *In the Absence of our Mothers*, 2018. X-Ray scan, text, 2 x 4.5g 18kt gold teeth, one of which is permanently installed in Lydia Ourahmane's mouth. Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery. Photo by Andy Keate.

LO: I moved to Algiers in 2018, and subsequently spent most of the pandemic alone in that apartment, pacing between the bed, the kitchen, the table, and back again. We had quite a strict curfew—1 p.m. for the first months—and regional lockdowns which prevented me from going to my parents' in the mountains a couple of hours from Algiers. I started running at six in the morning, in very baggy clothes, sunglasses, and headphones, zipping away any potential for harassment at the beach. In the summer of 2020, I eventually left Algiers because of work commitments in Europe. I didn't know when I would be able to go back. I thought it would be a couple of months at most.

During the seemingly never-ending limbo of the time that followed, I spent a lot of time reflecting on that reality for those who are forced to leave home and may never return. Whilst a lot of people were being confined to domestic spaces, a sense of loss had become superimposed onto the objects I had left behind. I think what was really going on was that I felt rather homeless. It wasn't about the things that you surround yourself with, I realized, but rather a spatial orientation. Domestic environments are routines, formed by the way you're choreographed in a space—whose denial fueled an intense, reflexive need for reunification. Realizing that home is also immaterial, I wondered if I had completely lost my mind in wanting to bring the contents of an apartment out of Algiers—what the implications would be at a time when bodies were not only denied mobility, but further confined, and why objects negated this political incentive.



Lydia Ourahmane, *House of Hope Archives* (detail), 1989–ongoing. 4x6 photographs, 35mm negatives, and diapositive slides, dimensions variable. Photo by Jimena Gabriella Gauna.

The months that followed bled into one another, during which I made a work which encompassed borrowing and moving the entire contents of my furnished, rented apartment in Algiers to Kunsthalle Basel, and then on to Triangle-Astérides in Marseille. This endeavor took on the title “Barzakh,” which means limbo, a state of being in-between, not purgatory but rather a resting point, the land between two seas.

SAM: What happens to that space next?

LO: I recently found out that it will travel to Ghent, which means the process of return is even further delayed. We renegotiated with my landlady and with customs for another year. It won't go back until September 2022, almost exactly two years after I left. It's a long time. Sometimes, when I'm moving around for so long, there's an anxiety about returning. I end up apologizing a lot. Minutes or weeks or months feel no different, but then the soul delay is real. Another potent mood. Desire trying to catch up with the body that left it.

SAM: Yes. For the first time in my life, I identify as a part of a diaspora. The anxiety of return mounts.

LO: I had a conversation with Celine Kopp about "the impossibility of return." We were speaking about how these objects will never be able to return to how they were before because they have moved. They have been touched and handled by so many different people. Things were taken, added. I think of diaspora as a retention that's somehow recognizable, be it in the body or in the space around it. That somehow the air around its subject is different. It's been rubbing elsewhere. And I think about what it is going to mean after two years of the apartment going to various places. How are the objects going to return? I'll go back and it'll be the last time I install the apartment. But I don't know how that's going to feel. For now its cavity lies in wait... ellipses. I'm asking myself: "What have I done?!" But maybe it will be a joyous homecoming. I'll cook vegetables and invite my friends over and we'll dance around, blowing plumes of smoke over the city, toward its ambient hue, spilling secrets into dawn.

SAM: It is a huge relief to hear that another artist feels sometimes: "What have I done?!"

LO: The sun always rises on the other side. But I'm trying to wrap my arms around both.

SAM: I'm going to call you Lydia "the spacemaker" Ourahmane from now on.



View of Lydia Ourahmane's "Barzakh" at Kunsthalle Basel, 2021. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo by Philipp Hänger.

Flash Art

Feature **Intimate** 98-112
**Dislocations: On Lydia
Ourahmane's *Barzakh***



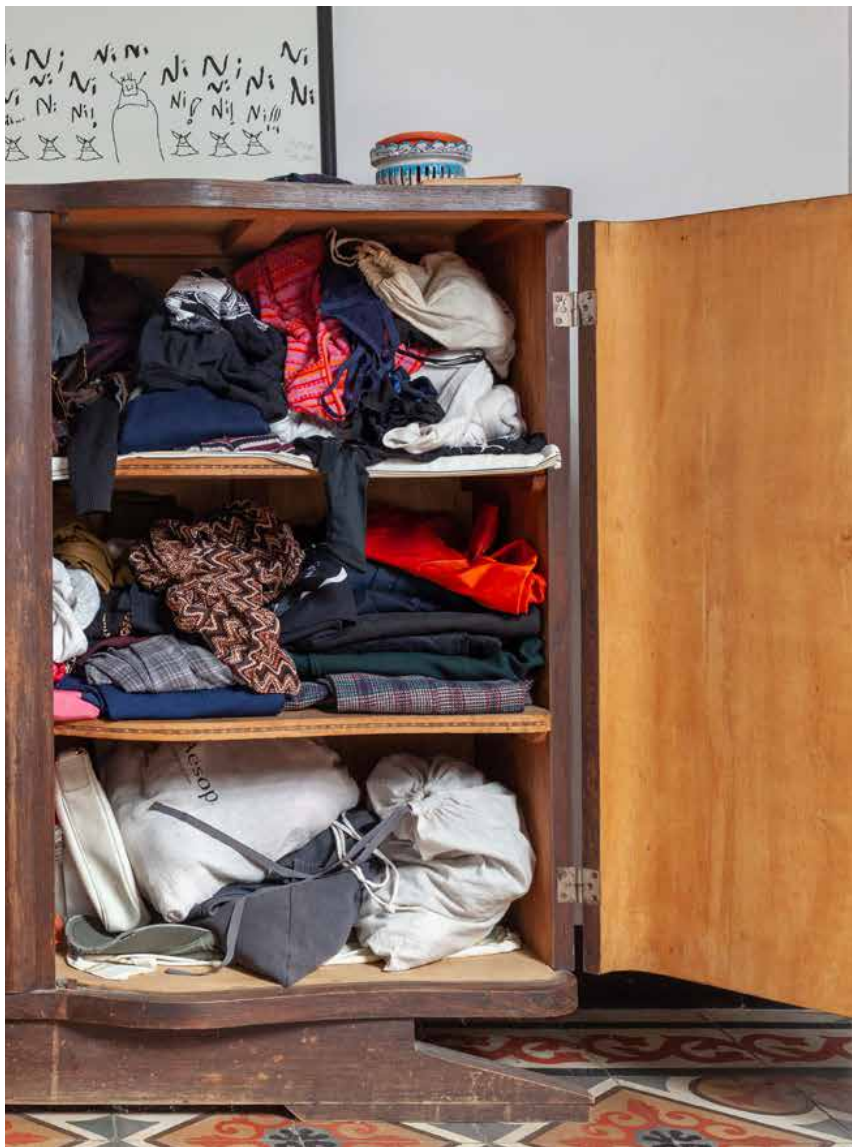
21 Boulevard Mustapha Benboulaïd
(bedroom), 2021. Photography by
Hichem Merouche. Courtesy of the
artist and the family of Mrs. Tissira.

Carlos Kong
Intimate Dislocations: On Lydia Ourahmane's Barzakh
Flash Art, N°335, Summer, 2021, p.98-112.

“Allow me, then, as we part company at this
threshold [barzakh], to break the contract
between one absurdity and another.”¹

— Mahmoud Darwish,

by Carlos Kong *In the Presence of Absence*





In the Absence of our Mothers, 2015-18. X-Ray Scan, Text, 2 × 4.5 g 18kt Gold Teeth – one of which is permanently installed in Lydia Ourahmane's mouth. Photography by Andy Keate. Courtesy of the artist.

NEXT PAGE:
"Barzakh." Exhibition view at Kunsthalle Basel, 2021.
Photography by Philipp Hänger. Courtesy of the artist;
the family of Mrs. Tissira; and Kunsthalle Basel.



Two signs, affixed to the entryway of Kunsthalle Basel's upstairs galleries, set the stage: "WARNING: This area is under 24hr surveillance." Adjacent to the entrance, a laser refracts its beam across the museum's courtyard. Though its function is not yet clear, it portends the unsettling fact that one is being watched upon entering Lydia Ourahmane's *Barzakh* (2021), the Algerian-born artist's largest, most intricate solo exhibition to date. The eerie feeling produced by the supposed presence of continuous surveillance momentarily subsides upon registering the contents of Ourahmane's installation: a fully reconstructed apartment, replete with the warm mahogany tones of old furniture, inviting leather couches, two chandeliers, a bed, kitchen appliances, and cupboards topped with books and filled with the meaningful detritus of everyday life. Yet after traversing the space, making oneself proverbially at home and succumbing to the tacit provocation to open drawers and survey the objects with increasing scrutiny, the sense of uncanniness creeps in.² With no walls separating the domestic environment's evoked rooms, its cozy familiarity is undone at the seams. The viewer becomes a trespasser, at once surveilled by Ourahmane's exhibitionary system but also enacting surveillance by rifling through the inventory of a life seemingly interrupted or left unlivid.

"The house," Gaston Bachelard famously wrote, "is a 'psychic state,' and even when reproduced as it appears from the outside, it bespeaks intimacy."³ Ourahmane's *Barzakh* is an exploration of the psychic states and intimacy associated with the notion of home, engendered by the reproduction of an actual house. To construct *Barzakh*, the artist physically shipped the entire contents of her apartment in Algiers to Basel, where she reassembled it from memory and rigged the installation with two systems of sound-based surveillance. The exhibition follows Ourahmane's singular working method: the artist devises conceptual propositions rooted in concrete contexts and oral histories, most often regarding Algeria. Their site-specific actualizations unleash logistical absurdities and bear profound bodily and geopolitical consequences. The artist's sparse, sensorially arresting installations teem with colonial presences and resound the intimate frequencies of home and exile.

Ourahmane attends to the affects and politics of displacement across space and time as she forcefully decontextualizes the objects that become her artworks. In p.H. 8.7 (2015/2018), for instance, the artist smuggled soil from Algeria and scattered it on gallery floors in Europe. In *The Third Choir* (2014), she assumed the bureaucratic challenge of shipping twenty empty oil barrels from Algeria to Europe — the first artwork to legally exit the country since its independence in 1962. By divesting objects of their quotidian functions, Ourahmane animates them into exerting the durability and pressure of their colonial histories. Coordinated by Ourahmane's friends and fellow artists in Algiers upon her inability to return to Algeria amid its pandemic-induced border closure, the unseen shipping at the heart of *Barzakh* is a monumental act of dislocation in all of its connotations: the disturbance of a proper or original state, the expropriation of location, and the disarticulation of the body. Yet the precarious transformation of an apartment's holdings into an art installation paradoxically heightens its objects' intimate charge by making radically public the physical remains of private lives and sedimented histories.

The apartment that Ourahmane occupied upon returning to her homeland several years ago was built in 1901, one of the first buildings that the French commissioned in their colonial renovation of the center



Carlos Kong
Intimate Dislocations: On Lydia Ourahmane's Barzakh
Flash Art, N°335, Summer, 2021, p.98-112.





of Algiers. In its angularity, symmetry, and fin-de-siècle façade, the apartment exemplifies colonial urban planning's domineering territorial imposition. A century later, its exterior has witnessed the ongoing anti-government protests that have stunned Algeria since 2019, whose revolutionary fervor has outlasted the reactionary banning of street marches in the pandemic present.

The apartment's prior inhabitant was an Algerian woman who previously lived in Germany during her marriage to a German man. Within their divorce settlement, the woman kept the household objects of their postwar German life. Accompanying her return to post-Independence Algeria, these objects were left untouched after her death and furnished the apartment that Ourahmane rented. The woman's inability to part with the domestic interior of her former life forms a striking parallel to the psychic structure of melancholia, whose afflicted subject cannot overcome the loss of an object, person, or nation.⁴ Their unassimilated grief endures. The melancholic remainders into which Ourahmane habituated her everyday abound in *Barzakh* — from half-melted candles and an ancient package of *Frischhaltefolie* (plastic wrap) to the delightfully kitschy painting of an Alpine landscape to which the artist dedicates its own room behind the Kunsthalle's main gallery. Such an image typifies a clichéd Germanic vision of *Heimat*, an idealized national homeland, already irredeemably lost.

In *Barzakh*, the remnants of the woman's life become intimately intermixed with Ourahmane's possessions as the histories encoded in their lives uncannily intersect. The reassembled apartment radiates what the postcolonial theorist Ann Laura Stoler termed "imperial duress" to describe "the

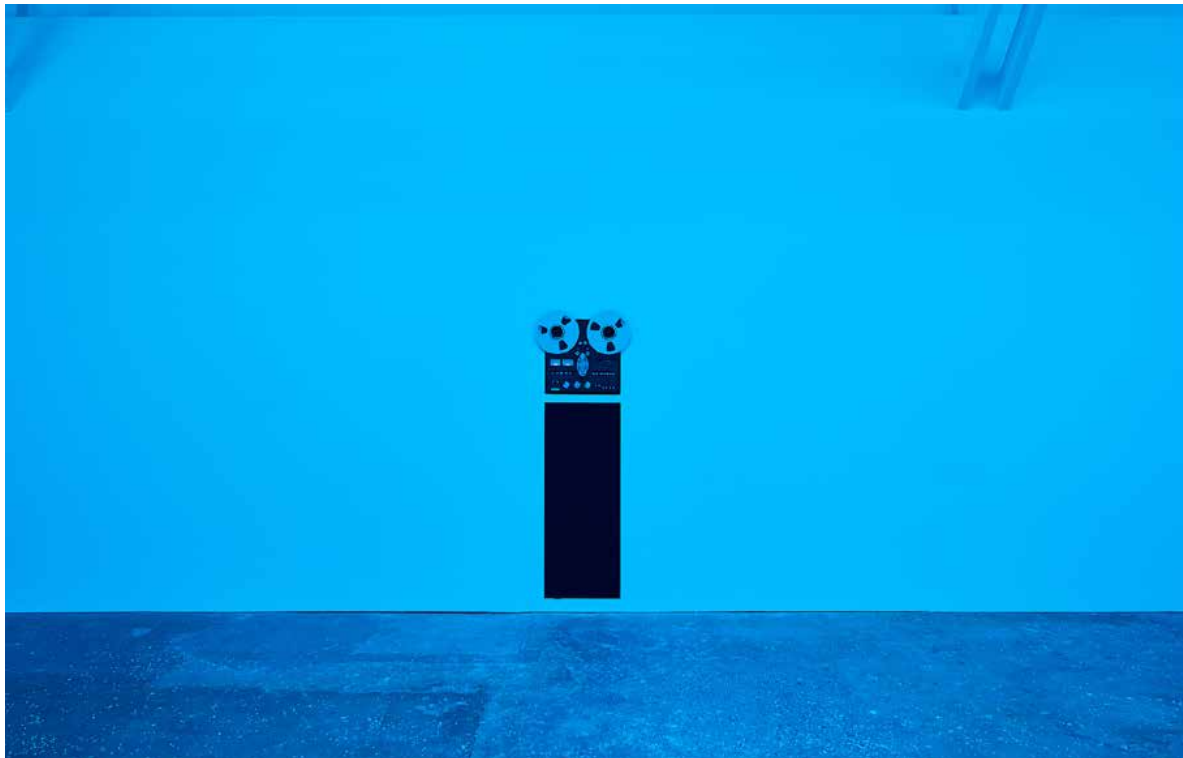
Neolithic Tumulus c.6,000-12,000 b.c., 2020. Polaroid.
7.62 × 10.16 cm. Installation view of "في مَشْرَقِ الخَرْص" Solar
Cry" at The Wattis Institute, San Francisco, 2020.
Photography by Impart Photography. Courtesy of the
artist and The Wattis Institute, San Francisco.

GALERIE
CHANTAL CROUSEL

Ab, Bb, 2020. Sound, tape: 0.63 × 6350 × 25.4 cm. 1h 1' loop. Performed on site by Nikola Printz. Installation view of "نيسميش ةخرص" Solar Cry at The Wattis Institute, San Francisco, 2020. Photography by Impart Photography. Courtesy of the artist and The Wattis Institute, San Francisco.

durability and distribution of colonial entailments that cling ... to the present conditions of people's lives.⁶ Imperial duress, writes Stoler, comprises "the hardened, tenacious qualities of colonial effects; their protracted temporalities ... a pressure exerted, a condition borne in the body."⁶ The objects in *Barzakh* overflow with imperial duress by unhousing specters of indiscrete violence — French colonialism and its traumatic aftermath in Algeria's war of independence, its fervent anticolonial nationalism, the factionalist violence of its Civil War up through present crises of political corruption and migratory exodus. They form an oblique portrait of what Algerian novelist Assia Djébar called "the long and abiding state of morbidity in which Algerian culture has lingered ... a future bled white."⁷ Through the multisensory, quasi-forensic experience of intaking the artist's apartment — gazing at the spines of her myriad of books, sinking into her couch, inhaling the perfumed scent of her bathroom cabinet — the viewer's body becomes intimately implicated in the colonial residues inscribed within the objects themselves. In doing so, Ourahmane dislocates her predecessor's objects of private melancholia into a public scenography of colonial melancholia. Her installation claims a melancholic ethics of refusing the amnesia of coloniality's ongoing damage by reverberating its spectral presence outward onto the unwitting bodies it covertly encounters.⁸

In her book *Algeria Cuts: Women and Representation*, the postcolonial critic Ranjana Khanna centers "the cut" as the privileged figure of colonial violence in the art and literature of modern Algeria.⁹ Khanna foregrounds the cut not only in terms of colonialism's gendered injury and traumatic wounds, but also in its filmic connotations, as an aesthetic device that splices together discrete spaces and

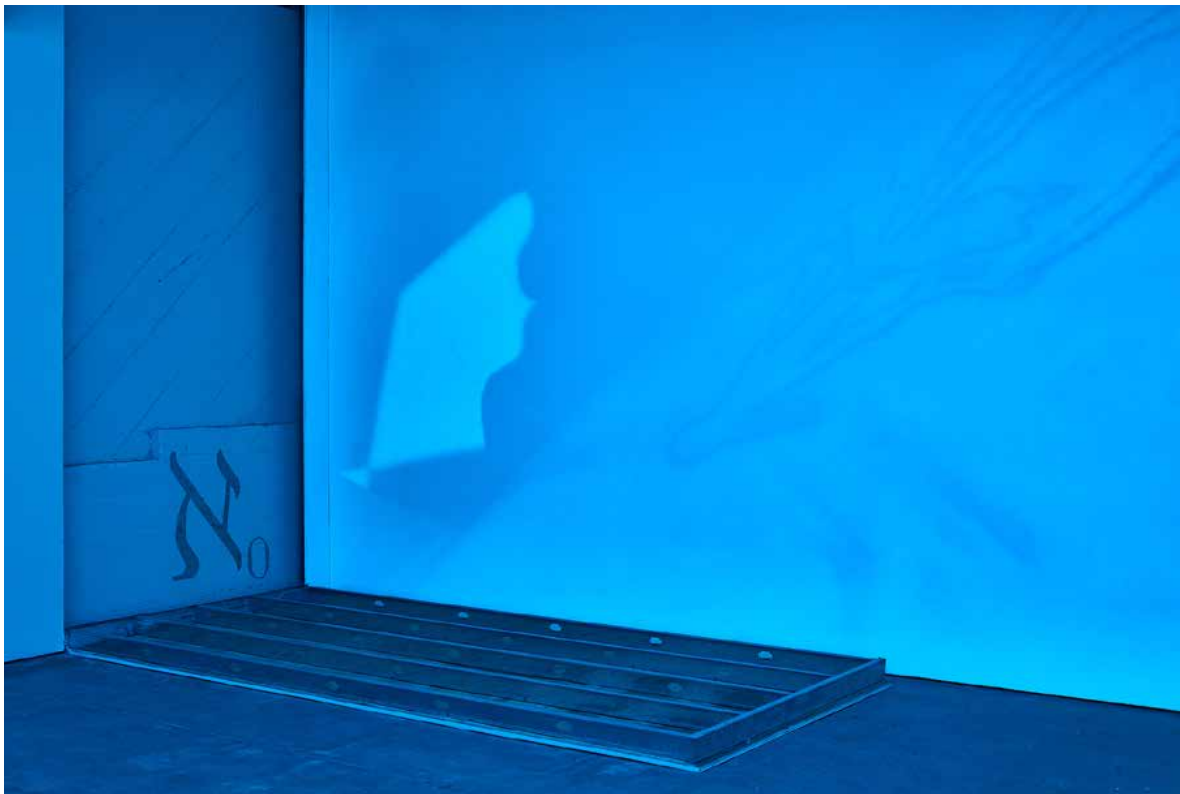


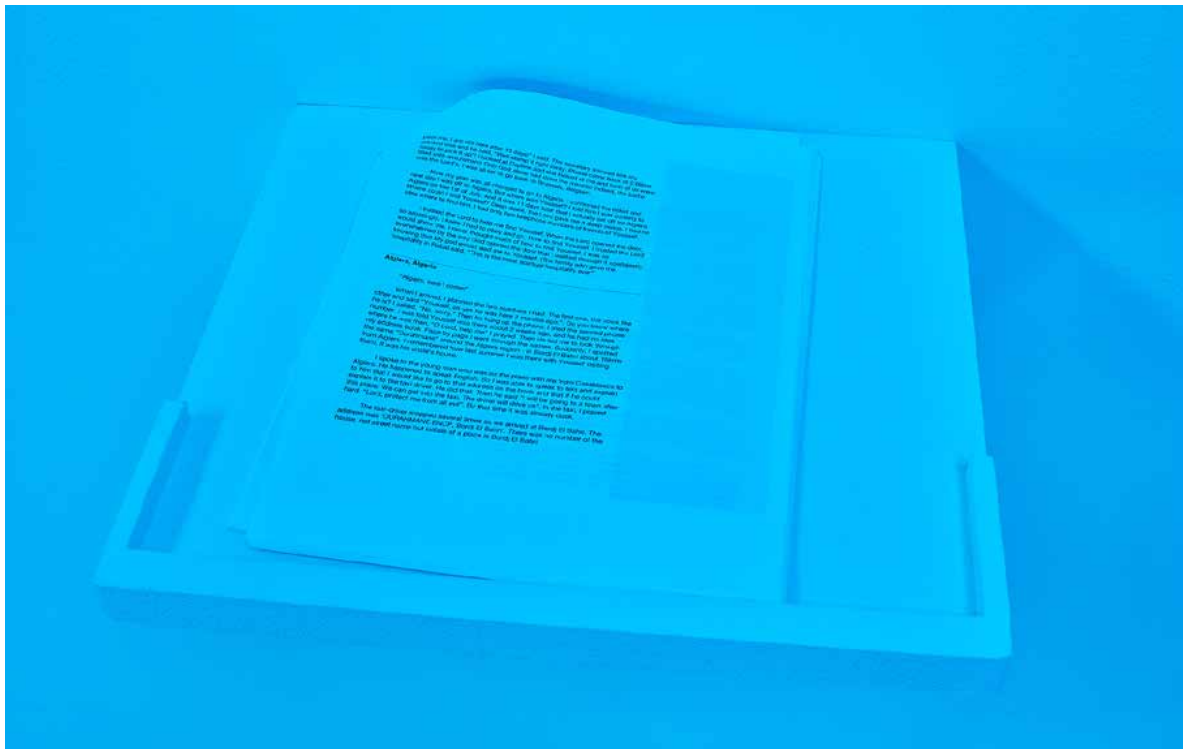
times beyond the frame. The cut repeatedly appears throughout Ourahmane's practice as an inscription of imperial duress, piercing together disparate histories of violence. In *In the Absence of Our Mothers* (2015–18), the artist surgically implanted a gold tooth into an extant gap in her mouth, a gesture that conjoined her family history of anticolonial resistance to contemporary crises of illicit migration. In *1 decade of hair* (2019), the artist cut off her braided hair, releasing the remains of a bodily archive. In *شمس خرس* *Solar Cry* (2020), she tattooed a woman warrior, an image from a Neolithic rock carving in the Algerian Sahara, into her skin. The proliferation of cuts in these former works enable the apartment's dislocation in *Barzakh* to come into view as one momentous incision. They moreover evince what is different in this latest work, that the site of the cut has been displaced from the artist's own body onto the ambivalent spaces of home and nation.

The central focal point of *Barzakh*, the two doors to Ourahmane's apartment forcefully cut across time, adjoin overlaid histories by way of their extraction. The first wooden door is the apartment's colonial original; the second metal door was added in the 1990s to reinforce protection amid the raids and disappearances of the Civil War. The two doors bookend a century of violence and expose "the systematic disposability of bodies in struggles for sovereignty," in both Algeria's colonial and contemporary contexts.¹⁰ The violence of the doors' dislocation is evident in the remains of the brick wall adhered to the doorframe, its chalky red evoking an injurious cut into bodily flesh. The two doors' nine total locks bear witness to an excess of fear and false

warrior girl c.12,000 b.c., 2020. Single-channel digital video, sound. 3' 44". Installation view of "شمس خرس" *Solar Cry* at The Wattis Institute, San Francisco, 2020. Photography by Impart Photography. Courtesy of the artist and The Wattis Institute, San Francisco.

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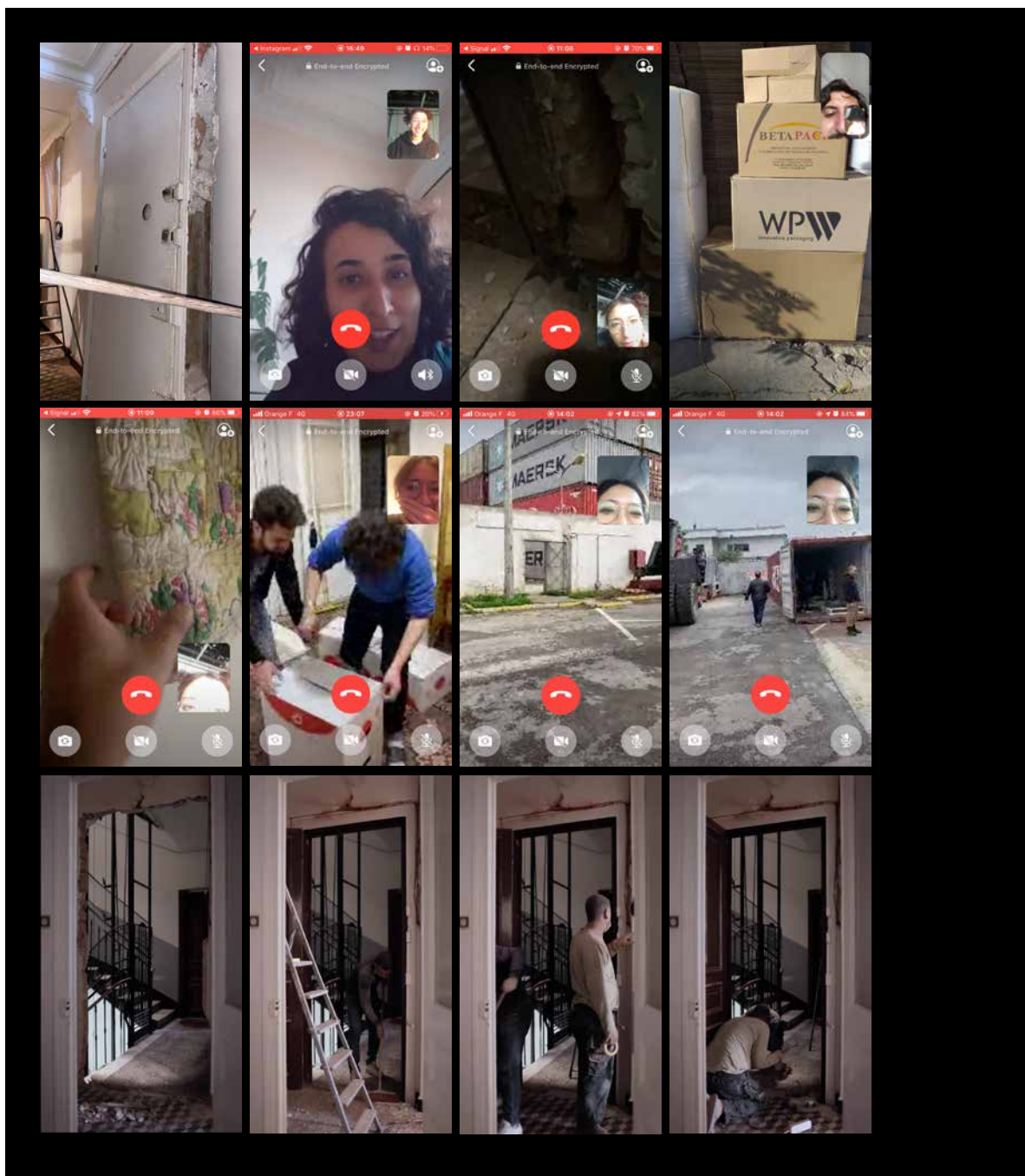
1st draft of my Mother's book "Divine Encounters," 1974-1992. Ink on paper. 42 pages. Installation view of "فخرص / فخرص / فخرص Solar Cry" at The Wattis Institute, San Francisco, 2020. Photography by Impart Photography. Courtesy of the artist and The Wattis Institute, San Francisco.

security against an enduring external threat whose identity changed over time. By extricating the door-pair from its function as the apartment's border and threshold, Ourahmane releases it from the weight of its duress as "an object of fear."¹¹

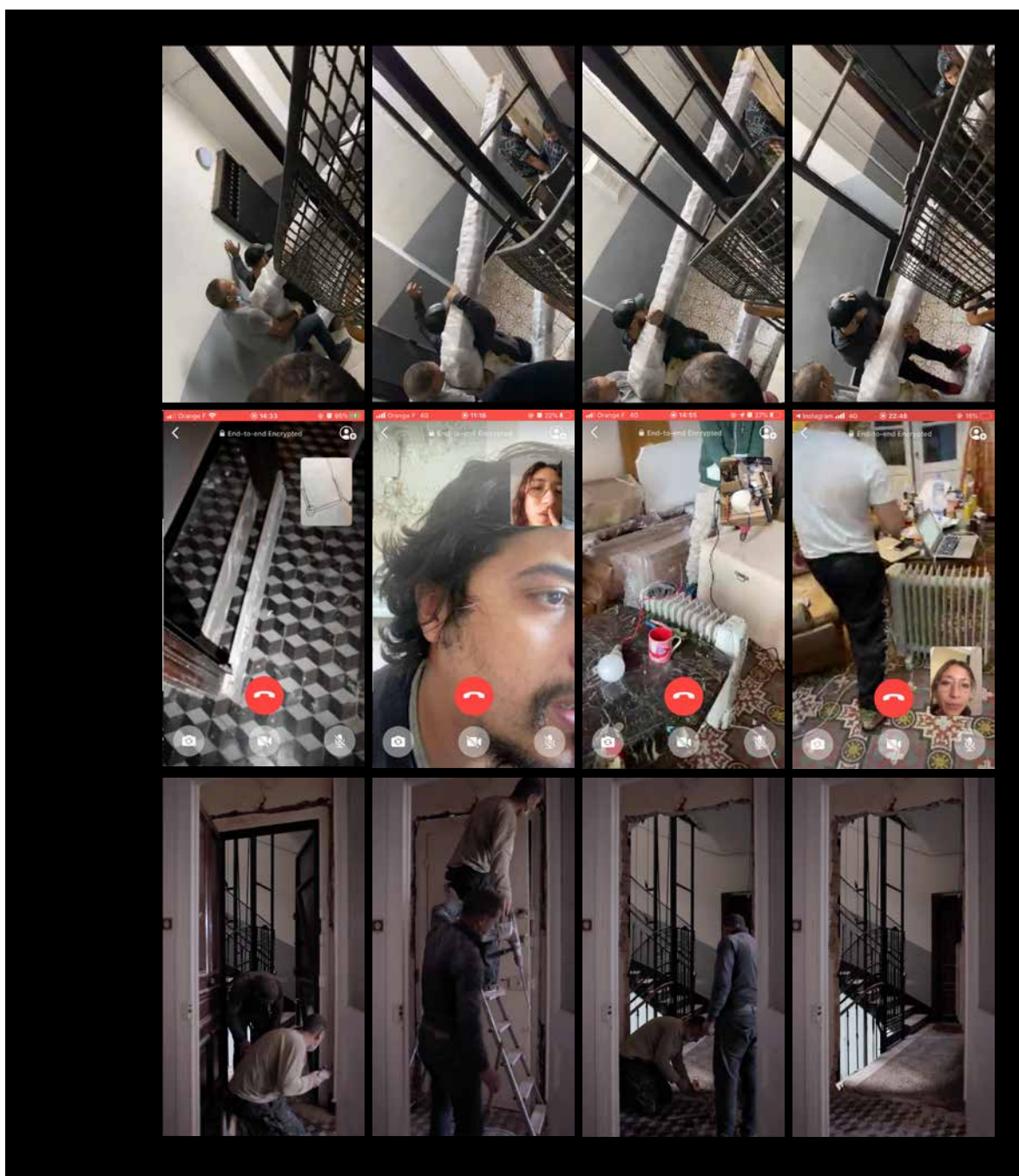
The two technologies of surveillance in *Barzakh* further cut across time. The sheer presence of surveillance harks back to a colonizer's objectifying gaze. Such optical domination was canonically represented in another artwork set in an apartment in Algiers, Eugène Delacroix's *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* (1834), whose art historical specter haunts *Barzakh*. In the orientalist painting, the French painter's voyeuristic surveillance of Algerian women is synchronized with his spatial trespass into and implied erotic conquest of an apartment's concealed harem. Ourahmane's installation counters Delacroix's Algiers apartment by presenting the concrete material remains of the violent system that produced and idealized such orientalist fantasies. Yet the durable presence of surveillance in both reveals the colonial reason through which certain bodies were and remain objectified and targeted, which continue up through today in new border regimes of global "security."

The first system of surveillance in *Barzakh* is comprised of bugging devices. In these uncanny sculptural assemblages, Ourahmane has hidden listening technologies under elongated blown glass covers that noticeably stick out from the furniture on which they rest. The bugs surveil viewers by ominously registering any sound or conversation that takes place in their vicinity. Each one is given the title of a Swiss phone number, and anyone can eavesdrop into the space by calling the number and listening to the sounds that the devices perceive. In the second system, two laser beams are rigged to intercept

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Carlos Kong
Intimate Dislocations: On Lydia Ourahmane's Barzakh
Flash Art, N°335, Summer, 2021, p.98-112.



21 Boulevard Mustapha Benboulaïd (entrance removal), 2021. Video by Hichem Merouche. Courtesy of the artist and the family of Mrs. Tissira.





21 Boulevard Mustapha Benboulaïd (salon), 2021. Photography by Hichem Merouche. Courtesy of the artist and the family of Mrs. Tissira.

OPPOSITE:

Barzakh, 2021. Production shot. Photography by Yanis Ouabadi. Courtesy of the artist and the family of Mrs. Tissira.

atmospheric sound from the museum's exterior. The light beam translates visual disturbances into the installation's soundscape of white noise, which tactilely vibrates from transducers embedded in the apartment's furniture — a technology that the artist repeatedly employs. The surveillance soundscape creates a space of relations as its acoustic vibrations intimately traverse between the furniture and the viewer's body. By staging encounters with surveilled sounds, *Barzakh* unfixes the bodily borders of public and private, forging intimate echoes across the temporal bounds of colonial pasts and securitized presents.¹²

In the name *Barzakh*, Ourahmane recasts her apartment's unhousing across space and time. The Arabic word's many connotations include "barrier," "separation," "threshold," "the grave," and "isthmus," a strip of land between two seas. In its most frequent translation as "limbo," *barzakh* conjures the mystical boundary between humans and spirits, where specters await the judgment of their deeds in life. Through her act of intimate dislocation, cutting the apartment from its historical armature, Ourahmane releases its status of home into a vulnerable state of limbo that resounds its specters of violence in the here and now. Her objects await the judgment of their imperial duress, calling out for justice as we sense, surveil, and break the contract with their colonial presences.

- 1 Mahmoud Darwish, *In the Presence of Absence* (trans. Sinan Antoon), New York: Archipelago Books, 2011, p. 18. For the translator's choice of *Barzakh* as "threshold," see pp. 163–4.
- 2 Freud canonically elaborated how the uncanny (*unheimlich*, literally un-homely) and the homely (*heimlich*) are not opposites, but merge together where the familiar meets the foreign, frightening, or concealed, particularly in the domestic realm. See Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (trans. David McClintock), London: Penguin Books, 2003.
- 3 Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space* (trans. Maria Jolas), Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.
- 4 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning und Melancholia" (trans. James Strachey), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XIV, London: The Hogarth Press, pp. 243–58.
- 5 Laura Ann Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016, p. 25.
- 6 Ibid, p. 7.
- 7 Assia Djebar, "The White of Algeria," *Yale French Studies*, no. 87, 1995, pp. 142–45. For its original version, see Assia Djebar, *Le blanc de l'Algérie*, Paris: A. Michel, 1995, pp. 272–77.
- 8 On "colonial melancholia," see Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
- 9 Ranjana Khanna, *Algeria Cuts: Women and Representation, 1830 to the Present*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007.
- 10 Ibid, p. 26.
- 11 Lydia Ourahmane in conversation with Elena Filipovic, "Home Is Where You Are," *Kunsthalle Basel*, 2021. https://www.kunsthallebasel.ch/wp-content/uploads/EN_Conversation_LydiaOurahmane_ElenaFilipovic_MAR2021.pdf
- 12 I have previously characterized the echo as a privileged figure in Ourahmane's work. See Carlos Kong, "Echo, Echolalia, Echolocation," *SALT Magazine* / Montez Press, issue 10: Glossolalia, 2019, pp. 4–9.



Lydia Ourahmane's "Barzakh" will be presented at Triangle-Astérides, 21 Boulevard Mustapha Benboulaïd (office), 2021. Photography by Hichem Merouche. Courtesy of the artist and the family of Mrs. Tissira.

Centre d'art contemporain, Marseille, from June 5 to October 24, 2021.

Carlos Kong is a writer and art historian based in Berlin.

BOMB



In *Finitude*, Lydia Ourahmane's installation at the 2018 New Museum Triennial, the vibrations of a cacophonous sound cause a wall made of ash, chalk, and steel to shake invisibly. Bits fall to the floor, collecting in a pile of fragments and dust. Over the course of the exhibition, the entire wall will crumble away. Like many of Ourahmane's works, it ends in disappearance. Others are more permanent, like two gold teeth she produced after melting a necklace bought from an Algerian migrant for the price of a seat on a smuggling ship to Spain. One tooth has been implanted in her mouth, an irreversible action she chose in recognition of the countless, often far more extreme actions taken by her countrymen, out of necessity and in order to live on their own terms.

The artist's research-driven practice tests the permeability of boundaries and the state of being in-between. She archives, stages, and animates the many restrictions placed on the freedom of movement of colonized bodies, drawing on stories from her home

country of Algeria—from land made toxic by foreign oil companies and chemical plants to public squares where only fictional protests receive police protection. Born in Saida, she now divides her time between Oran and London.

When BOMB approached Ourahmane about an interview, she suggested as an interlocutor her friend Ben Blackmore, a writer she's known since their days at Goldsmiths, University of London, and with whom she shares an ongoing dialogue about her work. Blackmore and Ourahmane convened in Florence and later London on the occasion of her exhibitions *Crater* at Spazio Veda and *The You in Us* at Chisenhale Gallery.

—Chantal McStay



The Third Choir, 2014, twenty Naftal oil barrels imported from Algeria, CZ-5HE radio transmitter, twenty Samsung E2121B phones, and sound.

BEN BLACKMORE The very first work I saw of yours was your degree show in 2014, *The Third Choir*, and I had only met you a few weeks prior to the opening. Something I came to learn about your creative process, as seen in *The Third Choir*, is that the works often involve an incredibly arduous lead-up, taking months or years. You go away to Algeria to do the base research or begin to develop your work, and you're out there for protracted periods of time. But your work isn't shown in Algeria. It's exhibited mostly in London and on the continent, which fuels a rigmarole of physical process just to get the work to its venue. Why do you do that?

LYDIA OURAHMANE I'm often asked that. I think the materials I use need a certain amount of distance. They're invisible within the context that they're referencing. Because when you live in a particular culture or society you exist within it situationally, and your ability to relate is stifled. Repetition makes everything become mundane. I've always lived between places. My family emigrated from Algeria to the UK when I was a girl. I received my art education in London. And it's only from this distance that I have learned to understand my background.

BB That adds up. You grow complacent toward everyday things because they're familiar, and after a certain point, they're no longer objects in a foreign sense at all; they're just the accepted furnishings of your world. Exporting them is a loaded act because it rids objects of that complacency. So is it the lifting of these commonplace objects from their native state that creates the dialogue you're looking for? Presenting them beyond that realm of context enables a level of discussion that was hitherto denied them.

LO I would say so. By granting the objects a freedom of movement, I make possible for them what is systematically denied humans. It feels as though this leads to the bigger picture, reinforcing the complex social ramifications of immigration.

BB But in relocating these items you're not exoticizing them per se; they're not exalted in the way they're presented. You're explicitly *not* imbuing the object with meaning.

LO Very true, and that's a common misconception. The materials I use often have lived through social, political, or economic tensions, and they do carry that weight. I don't think they can be charged with anything more than what they are. They can't be mounted. I'm interested in the weighted state of objects, but it isn't me that charges them with that state; rather, they become charged through their distribution.

BB Well, in that way what you're doing is more like investigative journalism than any one artistic pursuit. You've

never reduced what you do to a singular definition. Your work has more to do with the question of redefining what we as observers can infer from a closed situation. Does that still hold true in the work you're making today?

LO I've definitely grown more confident in the object's capacity to circumvent its system of language.

BB And yet so too do these objects have the capacity to elude. Your exhibitions often go unaccompanied by any kind of descriptive text. For example, in your current solo show, *The You in Us*, at London's Chisenhale Gallery, the work is incredibly well-travelled. I'm aware of the whole backstory but only because we literally live on two sides of the same Styrofoam wall. How do you expect your audience to comprehend the multiplicity of voices and histories present there?

LO I suppose I can't, but I can try to place the work in the context of its narrative. *In the Absence of Our Mothers* (2015–18) began as a gold chain that I bought from a twenty-three-year-old guy in a market in Oran, Algeria, while researching illegal immigration from Algeria to Europe in 2015. I later found out he sold me that gold chain for the exact price of a seat on a smuggler's boat to Spain. When I asked him where he got it, he said it was his mom's and that she'd asked him to sell it for her.

That gold chain first became part of a show in 2015—it was carried around the room by a performer. He'd hold it or take it out of his pocket every now and then, and eventually it would end up draped over a chair. But I felt like that wasn't the right medium. Then, this past summer when I went to see my uncle he told me all about my grandfather, whom I never met. He died a long time ago. He was a high-ranking sniper in the French-Algerian military, and they kept him on for thirteen years beyond his compulsory military service to train other soldiers.

The French lost 1.4 million soldiers in World War I, including 97,000 colonial soldiers, 26,000 of them Algerians. They continued to pull from the empire for World War II. When my grandfather was called upon to go fight, he knew that if he left, he'd never come back. A friend of his was like, "If you pull out all of your teeth, then you'll be dismissed from the army as physically unfit." So, according to family legend, he pulled them out one by one in a single day, without anesthetic, and only then was dismissed from duty. His military records and French passport feature as annexes to my new work, titled *Droit du Sang* (Blood right) (2018), documenting his dismissal from the army. There are also his identification cards as a resistance fighter in the War for Independence against the French.

He became very active from 1954 until 1962, when Algeria gained its independence. His main job was smuggling arms between the Moroccan and

35 ART — LYDIA OURAHMANE

Algerian borders, which was an extremely risky act. He refused our family name to be formally honored, as he wanted his fight to remain pure. Learning about his dedication was truly humbling, but it also returned me to the story of the gold chain. Both actions are finite and definite: this guy stealing a gold chain from his mom in order to pay for his escape, and my grandfather pulling out his teeth as a means to escape fighting for the French. In that common spirit of defiance, these two stories converge in a pair of gold teeth, made of the gold from the chain I bought, melted down. One tooth is in the Chisenhale exhibition, installed at the exact same height as the other, which has been implanted in my mouth. The tooth implantation procedure permanently altered the structure of my bone, by drilling into it—an action that cannot be reversed. This is a good illustration of how I think about my work.

BB Wow. And yet the tooth carries that story so serenely, just sitting there, mounted on the wall, unadorned and looking indescribably chill. It makes me think about Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in its meditation on the purpose of representational art: The narrator sees this urn as a thing of absolute beauty yet a perfect mystery, a "Sylvan historian" reluctant to divulge its innermost secrets. The work precludes total understanding, and in the end the narrator comes to terms with the fact that he will never be able to know it absolutely.

"What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? / What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?"

LO I've never read it. But I get where you're going with this.

BB Someone could easily walk into the Chisenhale and see these remarkable oxidized silver doors, growing ever more silver by the day, opening onto a large, minimally furnished space with a vibrating wooden floor and that solitary gold tooth mounted on the wall, and think that these three pieces occupy that space together *and* separately. It seems funny to frame a show with so rich and variegated a story as this within a vacuum whereby language is impossible. Well, not entirely impossible. I remember on the opening night people were coming up to you, asking in polite yet highly curious terms if you could possibly explain what this was all about. And you could, of course, and you did, because you are the sole arbiter of that profound narrative, the only person in any way qualified to reconcile these seemingly nebulous works. It puts you in a very powerful position. Is it your intention that your work should *need* you as mediator, not necessarily for completion but as a means of honoring its allegiance to spoken history?

LO I recount stories, as anyone does, as a way of sharing lived experience. It would be very difficult for me to

differentiate my work from the act of me speaking it into existence, or my plotting the trajectory of these stories, which otherwise wouldn't exist.

I've always been interested in oral history as a way of passing on information and recording events within history, which rely on interpretation as meaning and truth. Only recently have we become able to record events, but the idea of proof is also extremely flawed.

BB There's something distinctly old-world in the things you recount, or maybe the manner in which you're telling these stories, which feel to me like folklore, in that they contain all the emblems of myths yet also relate to lore's traditional function, which is the justification of earlier history. It's this stoic and dutiful act of remembrance against the fear of forgetting. I describe your works as palimpsests. You're telling stories that relate to you personally, but there's often this immense generational ache attached. And the way you harness and modernize that arcane ability is speaking from a profound, decidedly national sense of an identity in decline.

LO Totally.

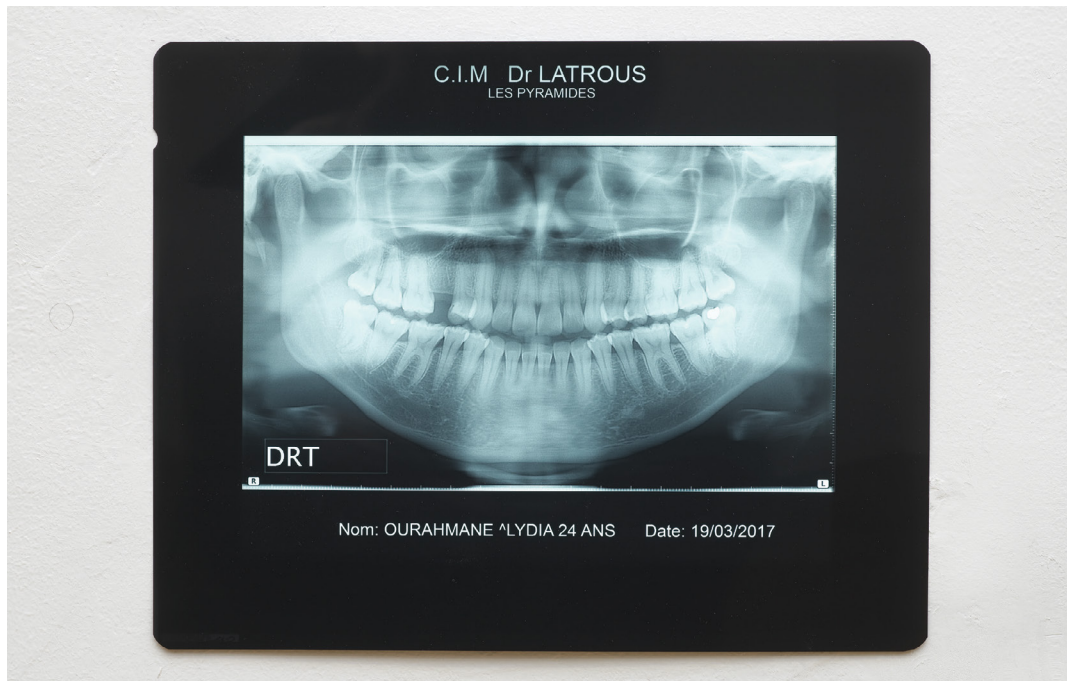
BB Often, your work then counterpoints that chimeric quality with very real, official documentation as a means of legitimizing the experience. Like the usage of receipts as proof. In the case of the former, it's relayed in your grandfather's passport and papers. In *The Third Choir*, it was reams and reams of paperwork documenting your various attempts to export twenty empty oil barrels, which were thwarted over and over by the authorities. It's a process of trial and error. Having witnessed the making of that project, I can't even begin to describe how chaotic it was. The barrels arrived—

LO —on my birthday. I was sobbing. (*laughter*)

BB I was worried for you. But in hindsight that frenzy was also kind of the spark itself, the catalyst that piece needed to achieve completion. It was a very real possibility that the barrels would not arrive in time for the show, and you were creating this contingency plan. Which begs the question: Is showing the work the same as not showing it?

LO Yeah, I came to the conclusion that if the barrels didn't arrive in time, it wouldn't matter because it's not about them being there physically. This process has all happened and it exists. And that's as tangible as it is with the objects being present. It's not even about the objects at all. I would have come up with a different configuration of presentation, which would have been ...nothing! (*laughter*) There's very little that is nothing.

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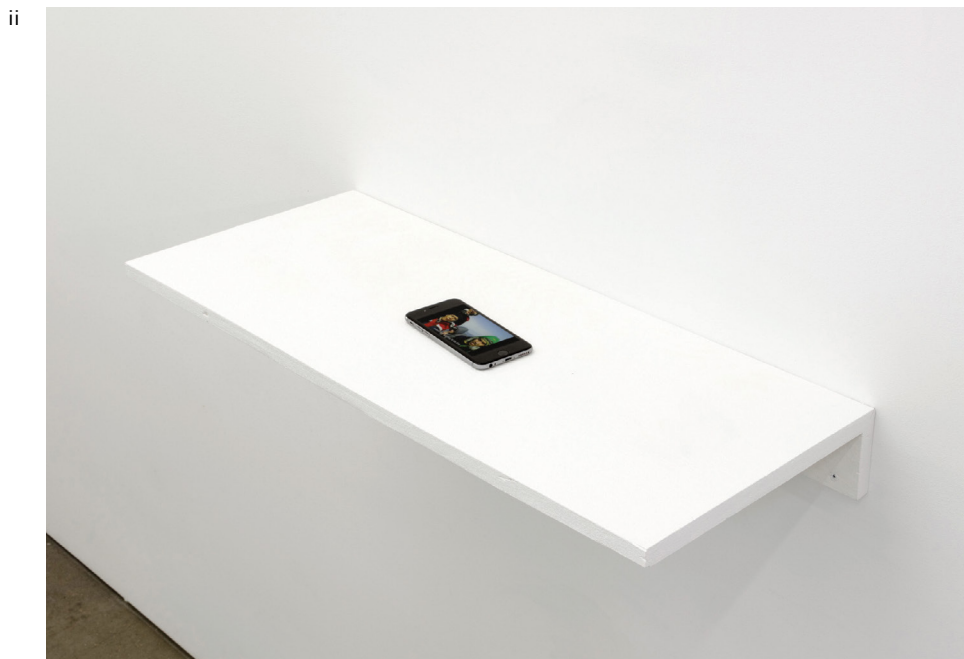
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37 (i, ii, and iii) *In the Absence of Our Mothers*, 2018. Photos by Andy Keate. Courtesy of Chisenhale Gallery, London.



(i and ii) Still from and installation view of *Haraga (The Burning)*, 2014, digital video on iPhone. Photo by Brica Wilcox.
38 Courtesy of the artist and Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles.

BB Was that work driven by a specific visual end product—that quadrant of barrels? It's probably your most aesthetic work to date.

LO Yes, that particular piece was very specific. I knew I wanted to make a sound work using mobile phones inside barrels, where the phones would simultaneously be playing a sound piece relayed through a pirate radio station I made using a radio transmitter. I wanted to use these barrels as a way of discussing their position in reference to the industry they represent. The oil industry is a common point of blame for the economic stagnation and perceived maldistribution of wealth in Algeria. These objects represent a "reason" for the economic migration that has risen from that region. For me, the work always spoke about the movement of people. I wanted the barrels to enact that same journey. The momentum they gathered through becoming an artwork was something I could never have anticipated. Faced with such heavy bureaucratic restrictions, finding ways around that was what created dialogue. There were six declined proposals for custom clearance before they were granted permission by the ministry of culture to pass as a cultural export, and it became the first artwork to be legally moved from the country since 1962.

BB Those tribulations are crucial elements. I sometimes feel (needlessly) defensive of your work because it appears so humbly as the ambassador of something difficult and hard-fought. The artworks themselves are these muted distillations, graceful composites of their ability to endure tragedy and of the emotional rollercoaster you rode with them. I want to give them a voice to speak. But, of course, that would be missing the point. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I worry they will be misinterpreted. Do you worry about that too?

LO I have to accept it. The very act of showing work is to allow the space for misinterpretation or to give the viewer the right to impress their projection upon that object which most satisfies something within them. The reason I make work is for my own understanding.

BB Some people who don't know the backstories might see the objects and assume they're these repurposed, loaded visual cues—

LO But you can feel that they have come from a place.

BB Would you say that sometimes the form a work takes is purely incidental?

LO I really don't like to restrict myself that way—thinking this has to become something. And that's the unfortunate part about having deadlines or set timeframes in which you have to produce something. For me, the

period of research is the most formative part of making the work. I want to immerse myself in the process I'm embarking upon, or in the subject I'm researching. I want to be fully present in that. I don't enjoy the pressure of having to materialize in some form, but that's life. *(laughter)*

BB The pressure to materialize—let's discuss that, because there are times when you've defied gallery convention altogether. By this I'm referring to one of your more intangible works, *Haraga (The Burning)*. You showed this piece at Bloomberg New Contemporaries in 2014, which I remember was a massive deal at the time, a huge opportunity. Many talented young artists were vying for attention, and that opportunism literally materialized in a lot of the work, which in my opinion was quite sensationalized. I can say only that because I'm not an artist myself. *(laughter)*

You opted to show your most tacit work to date, withdrawing from the physical space of the Institute of Contemporary Arts altogether. Your only footprint was an unassuming little card on the wall, no bigger than my fist, which had on it the login details for a Wi-Fi network, entitled *Haraga (The Burning)*. The word *harraga* ("those who burn") is an Arabic term referring to the increasing number of young Algerians who try to emigrate from Algeria by boat to Spain.

As it turns out, the network had the bandwidth of a portalo, and you had to stand on a table to get at it. It was only when one logged into this network that a pop-up appeared on the phone screen, showing grainy footage of young men aboard a small skiff in open water. That short clip traced a very brief part of a long physical journey, but what it chartered on an emotional scale was huge. The viewer observes an extreme progression in these men as they move northward from Algerian into Spanish waters. In one moment, as they pass the border, their fear turns to elation, and they speak of freedom and of the new lives they're about to inherit. They had done it. It was only by speaking to you later that I found out that they were arrested at sea almost immediately afterward, and all except one—who was granted asylum—were detained for forty-five days, then sent home to inevitable jail sentences.

LO That footage was never intended to be seen on a big screen. A twenty-five-year-old migrant named Houari showed it to me on his phone after we'd spoken for about two hours about his journey. And then he proceeded to Bluetooth it to me. I remember leaving his house and watching this on my phone in the car. It was so guttural. Experiencing that information, it pierced into my personal space, through my periphery, in a violent way. And I realized that personal, intimate experience is what's lacking in the way we consume this kind of information. Because refugee imagery is so capriciously thrown around in the media, it's like

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(i) Installation view of *Doors*, 2018. Photo by Andy Keate. Courtesy of Chisenhale Gallery, London. (ii) *All the way up to the Heavens and down to the depths of Hell*, 2017, concrete, steel, water, trumpet solo, 110.25 x 157.5 x 8 inches. Music by Ourahmane and Adam Chatterton and performed by Atakan Altug. Photo by Sahir Uğur Eren.

I recount stories, as anyone does, as a way of sharing lived experience. It would be very difficult for me to differentiate my work from the act of me speaking it into existence, or plotting the trajectory of these stories, which otherwise wouldn't exist.

we're completely numb to what it actually is. So I wanted to try and recreate what I'd felt watching that video on my phone to an audience.

BB That seems in keeping with the discussion we had earlier concerning objects and their relationship to context. You attempted to simulate through formal experimentation the way you felt when you first saw that clip, the manner in which you saw it. And that attempt at replication was at the expense of outward gallery presentation.

LO Yeah, a lot of people didn't actually see it. The Wi-Fi could only support a few viewings simultaneously. And that's fine.

BB Rumor has it that it was best seen from the café, which was sadly closed the entire time. The fact that one *could* miss it, that the work was sort of hiding in the space, felt subversive to me and signaled a kind of negative curation. It existed on a politics of refusal. You had this wealth of physical space allocated to you, yet ultimately the nature of that particular work made it necessary to refuse it. It sounds like I'm circuitously defining what you did or do as minimalism, but that work felt surprisingly substantial, even though you were presenting it invisibly. As though the work was doing everything it could to make itself heard against myriad setbacks.

LO It's a shame the technical aspects of that piece didn't work so well—actually, I don't think it's a shame.

BB That's what I'm trying to say. You speak of it as though the work was a failure, but the sensation evoked was one of verisimilitude. It was responsive and corollary to its own limitations. It owned its imperfections. That made it autotelic. I don't think many people would take such a risk with as fecund a platform as that.

LO Then it worked exactly how it should have.

BB It existed primarily as experience. You had to be there, as it was nontransferable. You couldn't go posting it on Instagram later. Do you actively seek to cultivate that singular notion of subjective experience, inextricable from the present, or would you rather it was something that we could all share?

LO This is why I'm going gray. (*laughter*) How can I translate these periods of time where there is no hierarchy

in events? Often these feelings and observations are very nuanced. Sometimes I wish people could be with me in that. That's why I fantasize about making a documentary or a film. But that's another problem.

I need a medium that puts everyone on the same level or in the same realm of experience. I think sound is the only medium that can do that; it's not bound to language. It also has to be experienced in a very physical way—it's not something you can unlearn.

BB In *The You in Us*, you placed transducers underneath the floorboards, which basically act like resonance speakers. In this case, the floor actually resonates. The sound piece is felt through the body as the audience walks throughout the space.

LO I became obsessed with these transducers because they're intended for sound therapy. They can be placed directly onto the skin, and various sounds or vibrations are played into the body. My sound piece is an hour long, played from underneath the floor into the body of the person walking through the gallery. The sound spreads over eight channels and through twelve separate transducer speakers. You kind of have to be there. (*laughter*)

I'm interested in the idea of respite and in people experiencing the same thing simultaneously; this is the first time I felt I'd facilitated that.

BB Sound here is the great leveler; it breaks down surfaces. The art world mostly fosters an image-based enjoyment of art. But the rapture of experience is inherently something nontransferable. It can't be documented.

Let's talk about the work you did for the Istanbul Biennial last year: *All the way up to the Heavens and down to the depths of Hell*.

LO It's a sculpture, a platform made of concrete and steel. The measurements of the platform—roughly four by four meters—represented the minimum that people have to build on a piece of land in order to claim and secure that land in Algeria. A trumpet solo I wrote activates the sculpture or the space. When I developed this piece, I was working in Arzew, Algeria, an industrial area, close to Oran where I spent the first few years of my life. The area is now home to thirteen chemical plants, which have become noticeably toxic to its inhabitants. People complain about the pollution to no avail. They feel powerless in the

face of these foreign companies that erect plants in such close proximity to towns and villages. How is it acceptable that the right to clean air is being denied? The area has become chaotic; the land is useless, so it's largely ungoverned. You can go there and claim land and build on it. But when people learn about the toxicity, they decide not to live there. These skeletal, unfinished buildings scatter the landscape—my sculpture replicates this structure. And the trumpet calls to a different future.

BB Your recent Polaroid works document landscapes of agricultural ruin, littered with the scattered detritus of civilization. They chronicle the decay consuming these patches of land, yet the Polaroids themselves are also subject to a languorous entropy. Do you like the idea of your works serving as physical allegory for the erasure of collective trauma?

LO Most of my sculptural works are destroyed after they're shown, like that Istanbul Biennial piece, for example. All that remains is the trumpet solo, or the memory of that sound. Memory exists in the realm of interpretation, which also decays over time. And this holds true to what I deem important in the work, which isn't its physical form. My work at the New Museum Triennial considers this.

BB Let's back up for a minute. *Too Late For Ambition* (2015) was the work you produced with the Traveling Award at Goldsmiths. It's an immersive video installation with four projections, one on each of the room's four walls. With the footage in this installation, you seemed to be at your most explicit in making a tableau of a people disenfranchised. In the video, a neon sign reading TOO LATE FOR AMBITION is switched on in the midst of a busy square in Ain El-Turk, Algeria. We see people smashing the sign with rocks. Their position is ambiguous—with their aimless loitering they seem to embody the sentiment of the sign while at the same time adopting violent actions that seek to destroy it.

LO When I made *Too Late For Ambition*, I was interested in the symbolic resistance to that stated sentiment, something that had become commonplace in Algeria. Protests or public gatherings of people are reprimanded, so I had to use the premise of making a film to be granted permission for that riot scene to be acted out. It was amazing to see the police actually protecting the development of that riot.

BB So you achieved it but only through subterfuge. Do you see a solution to this geopolitical nadir?

LO I still can't see a relief to this general feeling of frustration, which is very real in Algeria and has existed for quite a long time. Tension resonates in everything and

colors every interaction or conversation you have. This feeling that people don't know or can't see a future, it's always in the background. I'm not trying to be damning or disrespectful of the struggle that Algeria has gone through in order to reach its independence. I'm energized by the strength of the people. Every country or place has its problems, but I feel particularly connected to the frustration of the Algerian people because it so easily could have been my reality too. But I have a British passport now, so I'm able to move freely. It's something every person wants: freedom of movement. That desire for freedom is driving so much chaos because of the many restrictions. Algeria was subject to colonial rule; why can't that be remediated? So much has been taken from this country; surely it's only fair that it gets balanced out. There's always going to be that "phantom limb" sensation of a pre-established right to Europe: "We have a right to you as you had a right to us," as someone said to me once.

BB I take from what you just said that it's impossible for you to suppress the sense of trauma that permeates your work. It manifests in a kind of loud voicelessness. There's this sense of collective frustration, of a nation in a state of expectant exodus. People are upset and indignant and they cry out in a language that won't betray them. It's heard from the hollow of empty barrels, from the clarion call of a single trumpet, from the fated exultations of people celebrating their passage into Spanish territory. These works converge when they amplify a larger, more deafening choir of helplessness.

LO I do feel very helpless sometimes, but only on bad days. I wrote my thesis on illegal immigration from Algeria to Spain. It was a recurring subject of conversation during that time and still is now with the people I work with. If you ask someone in my neighborhood how many people they know who have crossed, the answer will be thirty, forty, fifty of their friends. They're all getting themselves ready to leave, all of them. It's a real thing that's happening on an everyday basis. So I can't ignore that frustration or not comment on it in anything I'm doing.

BB By harnessing these feelings of abject hopelessness, which are very real for many Algerians, there's a sense of optimism in even showing that because it reads like resistance.

LO I do believe there's another way, or at least another kind of relief. But what is it? We will see.

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Lydia Ourahmane on why she made a work about her grandfather pulling all his teeth out

The Algerian-British artist explores her family's experiences living in the shadow of colonialism



20 Naftal Oil Barrels form part of Ourahmane's installation *The Third Choir* (2015)
The artist.; CZ-SHE Radio Transmitter; Dublin

Lydia Ourahmane's deft, deeply personal approach to exploring major geopolitical issues of our time has prompted international interest in her work. Following on from her appearance in the Istanbul Biennial last year, she has been busy in the early months of 2018, opening a solo show at London's Chisenhale Gallery, and preparing for the New Museum Triennial in New York and a group exhibition at the Ghebaly Gallery in Los Angeles.

Her work is informed by the events in her own life and those of her family, with a strong undercurrent of storytelling allied to a conceptual approach, leading to works in installation, sound, photography, film and text. Born in 1992 in Saïda, Algeria, to an Algerian father and Malaysian mother, Ourahmane now lives between London and Oran, in the north-west of the country. She spent her early years in Algeria and came to live in the UK in 2001; her parents had met in London. She remembers the experience of emigration as a "physically violent process, to be lifted out of a situation, and also a way of understanding how your body exists in a space"—themes that infuse her work today.

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Ourahmane studied at Goldsmiths college in London, graduating in 2014, and has been showing her work internationally ever since. Her projects involve long and often complex periods of research. “I try as much as possible to be present and open to whatever can happen; I don’t have a plan a lot of the time,” she says. “I just see what I feel, and follow what feels right. And this is the way that I think about the production of art or how I make work: I am doing my research and it will just dip into this moment where I show something. It’s like debris that falls off and accumulates at certain points.”

This approach is exemplified by a new work in the Chisenhale show, *Droit de Sang* (Blood Right). The work features documents relating to her paternal grandfather, who was involved in the liberation of Algeria from French colonial rule, and avoided military conscription to the French army by removing all his teeth to be excused on medical grounds. Ironically, as Ourahmane’s work reveals, his documents are now being used by his descendants to claim French citizenship, prompting major ruptures in her family. This complex story of colonialism, political conviction, migration and belonging is typical of Ourahmane’s poetic exploration of history and the present, the personal and the political.

The Art Newspaper: At the core of your Chisenhale show is a sound piece that emerges from beneath a wooden floor. Tell me about that.

Lydia Ourahmane: I was doing all these sound tests with these bodyshaker things, which turn any surface into a speaker. I wanted it to be something that actually is more like a physical experience rather than just a sonic one, something that the audience could feel resonating throughout the space and throughout the body. I have been editing it in waves, so it will be a very spatial experience. The image I have been referencing while I’ve been editing is this image that I took from the outside of my house in Algeria. There’s a corner that often has a group of teenage boys hanging out on it, and I was working with a few of these guys during my time there. I was speaking to [a boy called] Amine, asking what they did on that corner. He said: “We just watch people going up and down the street and talk about them and look at cars that go past.” So, what I wanted to create in the sound work was an atmosphere that embodies that experience of waiting for something to happen. I have been thinking about landscapes that are key to projection.

You mean the projection of an idea?

Yes, or of a feeling. What happens in that space when someone’s waiting for something. And that is very key to this show. It goes back to a lot of my previous works, the idea of escape and departure. It’s something that I couldn’t even try to ignore, because every young person in Algeria talks about leaving all the time; everyone is in a state of waiting to go.

Your subjectivity is crucial, in that you left the country and are talking to or making reference to people who want to leave. How do you characterise your position?

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I can't ignore what my position is. There's no way of hiding that; it is always inherent in me. And that has always been recognised by whoever I am working with. There have been so many occasions where people will ask me to help them leave, because they think that if you have another passport, a British passport, or if you live outside the country, then you have some sort of power to send someone an invitation, to get them a visa.



The artist Lydia Ourahmane

How does the group of people on the corner appear in the work?

When I first found out that I was doing this show, I was in Algeria researching and working on the Istanbul Biennial [in 2017]. And in that time, my two dogs were stolen from my house, while I was there. So that experience was the starting point for this show. And my investigating and trying to find my dogs was how I became introduced to these guys.

Like so much of your work, there is a complex backstory, in this case involving police, identifying possible suspects who might have stolen the dogs and visiting them, feeling intimidated yet trying to establish a relationship with them.

What I found so strange about it was that I couldn't find a physical resolution. For me, the way that I would have seen this resolved was if the dogs had been found, but I guess what I found so interesting in this situation was that, with the people that I came into contact with and tried to forge a relationship with beyond the initial encounter, you can't get away from the fact that the whole time they were suspicious of me, while I was suspicious of them. So it almost felt like a dance, the whole time we were together.

What are the sounds in the work?

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The sounds in this piece are field recordings, mainly of events or periods of time which I, for some reason or another, had felt it necessary to record. There are compositions I have been working on with various friends and musicians; melodies feature in the piece as body to hold the spatial aspect of the work. There are also recordings of music and sounds collected during my time in Algeria. I recorded a Gnawa group; Gnawa is a style of music that is part of Sufi [culture]—a form of worship that features these hour-long trances. The main instrument is the guembri, which is like a guitar. They talked about the guembri having three souls because it is made from three living things: the strings are made from the intestine of a goat, the back is made of wood, and the skin is the neck of a camel. There is a recognition of these materials as living on in a present, spiritual sense.

Tell me about the work with gold teeth in the Chisenhale show.

It's called *In the Absence of Our Mothers*, and it started three years ago when I was doing a lot of research about illegal immigration. In a renowned market in Oran called Medina Jedida there is a section where, so people say, they sell stolen goods. I met a guy who showed me this gold figaro chain, and it looked like an object that he wouldn't have owned. So I asked him where he got it from. He said that it belonged to his mum and that she wanted him to sell it for her. And then when I asked him the price of it, he said the equivalent to €300, which I had found out was how much it cost for people to pay for a seat in a boat that was going to Spain. So in my head when this connection was made, I was thinking that this chain that he potentially stole from his mum is the means for his escape. I bought the chain and I exhibited it in my solo show in Dublin but it didn't feel like that was the right format for it to exist.

So how did you develop the work from there?

Last summer when I was back in Algeria, my uncle told me about my grandfather, whom I never met; he died before I was born. He was in Oujda in Morocco and, at the time, Algeria and Morocco under French occupation were basically one country. Everyone had to do military service for two years but he was kept on for a further seven years because he was an amazing sniper; apparently he would never miss a shot. So they kept him on to train other soldiers and then, in 1945, during the Second World War, he was asked to go and fight. During the First World War, the French lost 1.4 million of their soldiers, so they started pulling from the Empire. He knew that if he left, he probably wouldn't be able to return. He was trying to see how he could get out of the army and his friend told him that if you pull out all of your teeth, then you will be dismissed because you have to be physically fit and have your teeth. So, during his two-week holiday period in April, he pulled out every single one of his teeth on his own. He went back to the military and he was dismissed, obviously. And when I heard that story, I was thinking about the intent of doing something like that, which is irreversible; he had dentures for the rest of his life. I was thinking about that as a means of escape, and when I went back to this idea of this gold chain, the two ideas made sense to me in the form of the work which I am showing here; I have had the chain melted down into two gold teeth, one of which is implanted in my mouth and the other is exhibited in the space.

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So have you had to extract one of your teeth, like your grandfather did back then?

No, I already had a hole. When I went for the initial procedure, the way that they implant a tooth is they drill a hole into your bone and then they put in this screw. You then have to go through a period of integration; the bone has to grow around the screw and accept it, so there's a potential that your bone could reject the foreign object. And I thought that was so beautiful because the word "integration" is used so often in relation to immigration, but on social and economic terms—it almost dehumanises that process.

LYDIA OURAHMANE: THREE KEY WORKS



Lydia Ourahmane: *The Third Choir* (2015)
Frederik Gruyere

The Third Choir (2015)

The physical manifestation of this work consists of 20 empty oil barrels branded with the name of the Algerian oil company Naftal, from which an atmospheric, industrial soundtrack can be heard, relayed through mobile phones at the bottom of each barrel. But the backstory of their shipment from Algeria to Europe across the Mediterranean, and the 934 documents that Ourahmane gathered in the tortuous process of their export, are an important resonance. "It is the same oil that's exported to Chevron, Total, BP, but it never leaves the country under Naftal," she says. Young Algerians blame the oil industry for the country's social and economic problems, prompting their desire for escape. "I wanted to use the barrels for a symbol," Ourahmane says. "As they came under such an intensified bureaucratic procedure in their exportation, they became very human."

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All the way up to the Heavens and down to the depths of Hell (2017)
The artist; Sahir Ugur Eren

All the way up to the Heavens and down to the depths of Hell (2017)

Created for last year's Istanbul Biennial, this work relates to the effects of industrial waste in the town of Arzew, just outside Oran. "The government doesn't care about who lives there, because the land is useless to it; it's an industrial area." At the beginning of her research, she spoke to people in this, her former hometown, who explained that "they knew they were being poisoned but there was no point trying to complain about it because nothing could change", she says. A plaintive trumpet piece informed by military bugle melodies, written by Ourahmane with her trumpeter friend Adam Chatterton, "tries to invoke that sentiment", Ourahmane says. "I thought it also acts as a cleansing."



Corales (2016)
Lydia Ourahmane

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Fleeing Will Save Us (2017)

“Photography is such a huge part of my practice but I never really show the photographs,” Ourahmane says. This work is a rare exception. She has only recently begun to make Polaroids and in this case captured “two images of a cave area that is used as a departure point”, she says. “If you go to the caves, you will see fishing boats tucked into them, but this is an area that is known. They’re photographs of this place, which I was led to by word of mouth.” The images do not include portraits of those who seek to escape, however. “I don’t use people,” she says. Instead, most often, she uses objects “to signify or represent people. Because they drive everything that exists in all of my work.” The photographs were recently acquired by the British Museum in London.

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