

**Features**

**#18**

Lydia

Ourahmane

**April**

**2023**

**Lydia, I know you spend time between Algiers and Barcelona — where are you at the moment? Could you tell me about your working space there?**

Now I'm in Barcelona. I just returned from Algiers, where I opened an exhibition with rhizome hosted at Les Ateliers Sauvages. It was the first time I showed my work in Algeria. I did a talk the day after the opening, where many people attended that I've worked closely with on my past two projects: the film "Tassili" and "Barzakh," an installation that involved moving the entire contents of the apartment I rent in Algiers to Basel, Marseilles, and Ghent then back again. Nadira Laggoune, who used to be the director of the Museum of Modern Art of Algiers and was the reason I moved there in the first place, was also there, so it was an important moment — to spend time with and talk about all the projects that were anchored to and mobilised by that place.

I can work from anywhere... I just need a computer and a phone.

**I can't stop thinking of your exhibition "Barzakh," which addressed themes of displacement, border, territory, and nation-state. The main question was what makes a home. Is it even possible to define that? Is it an imagined construct?**

That question is always unresolved. The attempt to understand what home meant for me gave agency to that work. 'Barzakh' means limbo; it is a state of knowing-unknowing. I have always lived in-between. And by living, it is not about where your body is. Your points of reference are stretched between several places you understand your position through the distances that ground you.

**I'll take you back to 2018, when I first saw your work "In The Absence of Our Mothers" at the Chisenhale Gallery. It was impressive how you managed to 'project' a personal or even localized trauma on a broader, collective level. I'm wondering if the gold tooth is still in your mouth.**

Yeah, it is still there and making itself very present. It's funny because

the process or nature of that work has permanently altered my body. Of course, I knew there would be consequences; a foreign object with an imperfect shape was introduced into my mouth. Then there's a tiny gap between that gold tooth and the tooth in front of it, causing some problems that I must fix now. But, like any gesture — it's about the aftermath.

**Let's return to your most recent project, "Tassili," shot in a Sahara plateau in Algeria. Not a single person is shown in the film, yet it's all about the many forms of life previously known to thrive there. How did you decide to (re)visit such an off-limits location?**

It's actually no longer off-limits since the film was made. In December 2022, it was announced that they've opened the plateau to foreigners. You can fly directly to the closest airport, Djanet, and get a visa on arrival. So there is a monumental change taking place.

Last week, I met Ahmed at my opening; he is the guide who took us to the plateau when I made the work. There was so much bureaucracy in going there and getting the filming permission because nothing had been shot there before. The project was developed upon a collaboration between the Ministry of Culture and the Tassili National Park. Ahmed told me he recently took a group of Swiss tourists to the plateau. So the reality of that space has already changed significantly.

**How do you feel that your work has managed to create that openness?**

I don't think it was me or the work. I can only speculate that through the project, they realized that the plateau could be safe to visit. I suppose the previous restrictions link to the fact that the region borders Libya, where tensions arose a few years ago. Journalists tried to come in and break stories about trafficking alongside it being a migration route between sub-Saharan Africa, the North, and eventually Europe. This frames the work differently in retrospect.

What if the landscape significantly changes due to human intervention from now on? Obviously, it can't be visited en masse because you have to walk there, and only a few people can navigate the region. So it will remain relatively limited in terms of access. I'm thinking about the images we produced on the plateau and how they have now been reframed. These images may be the last of that space as it was.

**It's stimulating how artistic processes can activate such a chain of actions associated with landscape valorization... This show is also on view at Mercer Union in Toronto, while it has traveled to Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris**

**and Nottingham Contemporary, among other institutions.**

**In which ways is the work informed throughout these different contexts?**

For sure, you're dealing with different audiences every time. While it has traveled to predominantly Western institutions, the perception, for example, in Algiers, was distinct because everyone knows what Tassili is, so it needs less contextualisation. But it was still met with the same kind of wonder as in New York, Toronto, Tunis, or Paris, where the audience felt like they were seeing these images of a place for the first time.

Our guide Ahmed was born on the plateau. When he watched the film, he was surprised by the definition of the images: they felt new like they could be anywhere, and at the same time, they felt familiar. He talked about the use of a Western electronic music score and how that oral juxtaposition superimposed a liberation of the images.

**How about your upcoming exhibitions? Is there any new project you would like to share with me?**

I'm preparing a show at Ordet, a Milanese space run by Edoardo Bonaspetti. Edoardo is also the artistic director of Fondazione Henraux, a marble quarry near Carrara. So when he invited me to exhibit in Milan, I immediately thought about the potential of that material. I'm particularly interested in contemporary points of weakness in the material created by methods of extraction. Where chunks are cut out of the mountain, the remaining material puts pressure on itself as it attempts to remain in place. So I am considering this fissure as a starting point.

Lydia Ourahmane  
Installation view: *Barzakh*, Kunsthalle Basel, 2021  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo: Philipp Hanger / Kunsthalle Basel



Lydia Ourahmane  
Installation view: *Barzakh*, Kunsthalle Basel, 2021  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo: Philipp Hanger / Kunsthalle Basel



Lydia Ourahmane

Installation view: *Barzakh*, Triangle - Astérides, centre d'art contemporain,  
Friche la Belle de Mai, Marseille, 2021

Courtesy of the artist

Photo: Aurélien Mole



Lydia Ourahmane  
*In the Absence of our Mothers*  
2018  
X-ray scan, text, two 4,5g 18 karat gold teeth — one of which is permanently  
installed in Lydia Ourahmane's mouth  
Courtesy of the artist and Chisenhale Gallery, London  
Photo: Andy Keate





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Lydia Ourahmane

*Tassili*

2022

4K video, 16mm transferred to video, digital animation, sound

46:12 minutes

Installation view: *Lydia Ourahmane: Tassili*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2022

Courtesy of the artist

Photo: Charles Benton

Commissioned and produced by SculptureCenter, New York; rhizome, Algiers; Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris; Kamel Lazaar Foundation, Tunis; Mercer Union, Toronto; and Nottingham Contemporary.



Lydia Ourahmane and Yuma Burgess

*Untitled* (detail)

2022

Photogrammetry, generative adversarial network, polylactide thermoplastic,  
anodized steel

56,9 x 269,2 cm

Installation view: *Lydia Ourahmane: Tassili*, SculptureCenter, New York,  
2022

Courtesy of the artists

Photo: Charles Benton



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Photo: Charles Benton



## Lydia Ourahmane

Lydia Ourahmane is an artist whose research-driven practice spans spirituality, geopolitics, migration, and colonialism. She incorporates video, sound, performance, sculpture, and installation on an often large or monumental scale that has consequences beyond the walls of her exhibitions. Drawing on personal and collective narratives, Ourahmane challenges broader institutional structures such as surveillance and bureaucratic processes. She has had solo exhibitions at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, SculptureCenter, Fondation Louis Vuitton, Portikus Frankfurt, De Appel, Kunsthalle Basel, Triangle - Astérides, S.M.A.K., CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, and Chisenhale Gallery. Her work was included in the 34th Bienal de São Paulo and the New Museum Triennial.



Photo: Jeano Edwards

**Features is an interview series that explores inspiring artistic and research stories in contemporary culture. Invited artists and practitioners from all over the world — acting within a multitude of initiatives, spaces and contexts — share their creative processes with curator Nicolas Vamvouklis.**

***The opinions expressed in the interviews are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Foundation.***

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