

**SOLO EXHIBITION**  
**06.05 – 10.24.2021**

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**CURATED BY CÉLINE KOPP**

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**TRIANGLE – ASTERIDES**  
**CENTRE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN**

# THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF RETURN

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN LYDIA OURAHMANE AND CÉLINE KOPP

Deeply personal yet remaining on par with major issues of our era, Lydia Ourahmane's practice develops over periods of intense research and experimentation during which she questions the permeability of borders and transient forms of existence. The origins of her projects are often rooted in situations from her personal life, from those close to her, or materials and objects that carry the weight of social, political and economic tensions. Through a conceptual approach and a great variety of media— including installation, sound, photography, film and text— she outlines narrative trajectories where individual lives, bodies and objects grapple with the systems that constrain them. Born in 1992 in Saïda, Algeria, she grew up between the United Kingdom and Spain. In 2014, she graduated from Goldsmiths after exhibiting a sound installation entitled *The Third Choir*. Composed of 20 empty Naftal oil barrels, this was the first artwork legally exported from Algeria since the implementation of restrictions on the circulation of art at the time of Algeria's independence in 1962. Since then, Ourahmane's work has generated increasing international attention. In 2018, for *The You in Us*, she melted a gold necklace purchased from a young man in a market in Oran for the price of a boat trip to Spain. From this gold, two teeth were produced, one of which is implanted in the artist's own mouth in reference not only to her grandfather who removed his own teeth in order to be discharged from the army in 1945, but also to all the irreversible acts provoked by a feeling of helplessness and the desire for a better life. *Barzakh*, the project mentioned below, is the continuation of her practice as it highlights the many restrictions imposed on bodies and subjectivities as well as the structures that condition them.

*The following conversation between Lydia Ourahmane and Céline Kopp took place in June 2021 during the preparation of the exhibition Barzakh at Triangle – Astérides centre d'art contemporain in Marseille, France.*

Céline Kopp : We decided to begin this conversation stating what led to *Barzakh* while describing what currently surrounds us in the exhibition space.

We met for the first time in Algiers in 2019 for the preparation of an exhibition that you participated in at Triangle – Astérides curated by Natasha Marie Llorens. You hosted my colleague Marie de Gaulejac and myself in your apartment located on the Boulevard Moustapha Benboulaïd.

In the summer of 2020, you came to Europe for professional reasons after Algeria announced the sudden and indefinite closure of its borders. You thus found yourself unable to go home to Algiers. You called me and I offered you housing and a studio at Triangle – Astérides in Marseille where you stayed for 8 months, from August 2020 to March 2021. This situation led to the joint invitation by Triangle Astérides and the Kunsthalle Basel for you to create a new project: *Barzakh*.

While in Marseille in the autumn of 2020, you decided to displace the contents of your apartment— meaning all of the furniture, objects and personal belongings of the previous occupant, mixed with your things, as well as the front door of the apartment that you had cut out. With the help of the local artistic community— notably Khaled Bouzidi and Myriam Amroun from rhizome— the contents of the apartment were packed, inventoried, and declared as an artwork to the Algerian Ministry of Culture for a temporary exit request. All of this travelled from Algiers to Marseille by boat, then from Marseille to Basel to be unpacked and installed in the Kunsthalle Basel in January 2021 as the first stage of *Barzakh* as an exhibition. There, you unwrapped your things and reinstalled each piece of furniture, each object following the original layout of the apartment from memory. Added to this are newly produced glass objects and two surveillance devices involving sound and vision. The public that enters this space, exposed to the eyes and ears of all, continues to undo the remains of intimacy.

Repacked, the contents of the apartment left Basel in April 2021 to return to Marseille on its journey home. You thus unpack your “home” a second time here. Administratively mandatory, the

return of these objects to 21 Boulevard Moustapha Benboulaïd in Algiers will take place in the beginning of November 2021 and will constitute the next stage of this project.

CK: *We are here in Marseille surrounded by what is, or what was your “home”. Can you tell us how the idea of this project came to you and why you decided to embark on this process whose administrative and psychological ramifications can be baffling?*

Lydia Ourahmane : I found a floorplan of the apartment that I drew in a sketchbook back in November 2018 shortly after I had moved in, which I now realise was when the work, at least subconsciously, began. I was born in Algeria and lived there until the age of 10 after which I moved to the UK. The years that preceded saw periods of time spent back in Algeria as my parents were still very active in their community in Oran so returning always carried a sense of duty for them which I inherited growing up in- between these two very different cultures. I moved back to Algeria in 2018 after spending the majority of my adult life in the UK. It felt like a very natural progression since my research became more grounded in the context of Algeria. But the desire to return ‘home’, was an attempt to renegotiate the euphoria involved in coming and going, doing projects, leaving again etc which I think condenses and organises experience.

I had all these very romantic notions of what it might feel like to lie down in the same place that taught me about longing. And I needed to ground that somehow, knowing that it would be a period of isolation and meditation. But I realise that the idea of return is often bound to the projection of a future in the past tense.

CK: *So how was that experience of moving “back home” in the beginning ?*

LO: It was lonely. I hardly knew anyone in Algiers at the time, but solitude can become a pressure point. It was about identifying the root of a tension and leaning into it. I recently came across a word which almost came as an afterthought to that initial experience. *Askesis* is a Greek term which refers to the practise of self-discipline. It is about physical, spatial or mental detachment but it demands that there is always a point to isolation. I needed to understand what about this place I was longing for. But entering the life space of another person involves another kind of return...

CK: *That’s right, because the apartment you moved into was fully furnished but to an extent which was surprising. Can you speak about how you, physically or emotionally, carved this space out for*

*yourself in a ‘furnished’ apartment that contained all the objects of the woman who lived there before and had recently passed away?*

LO: It was the 34th apartment I visited as the vast majority wouldn’t rent to me as an unmarried woman. I got a call late one evening from one of the estate agents I was working with who asked me to meet him at this address. When I got there, the son of my (now) landlady explained that the apartment had belonged to his great aunt who had recently passed away. I moved in one week later with one suitcase only to find that they had left the apartment completely furnished; from furniture, kitchenware and bedding to books, photographs, half used candles etc and so naturally, I began using what I needed. Though I was always cautious not to disrupt the order of things, likely I felt that the extent of the apartment’s furnishing signalled toward the continual presence of the previous owner and that she could return at any moment. I learnt that she was married to a man in Germany and lived there until their divorce when she returned back to Algeria with the contents of the household they shared together. I often wondered if being surrounded by the furniture from her previous life disabled her from being able to move on. And this was the pretext that I moved into.

CK: *How does this feeling of “in between” relate to the title of the show? Can you talk about this?*

LO: Barzakh is the limbo, the in-between state. There are many translations which relate it to a space where the spirit awaits; somewhere between life and death, or a physical space; a thin strip of land between two seas, a refuge. But it is also a place of judgement, where a spirit waits while its earthly deeds are counted. It can be associated with the concept of purgatory, the agony of not knowing. I thought a lot about the act of waiting, as in, to remain completely still while in continual motion, and the energy required to sustain that momentum. For your entire body to be braced...

In a way this year has felt like existing in a liminal state, both ambiguous and at times disorientating. I remember sending you an email a few days before I left Algiers, I knew I would be leaving but I did not know when I could return. So the conditions of not being able to go home due to Covid restrictions became the impetus for this work.

CK: *In a city like Marseille, which is a place of passage, many people are waiting. It is such an important part of the experience of immigration, whether legally or illegally... Actually, it might not be a coincidence that you formulated the work while being here. You came in the context of covid, waiting to be able to go home. You just mentioned*

*you seeked isolation in Algiers - you were almost already on a lockdown before the pandemic actually happened.*

LO: In a way, but there is a very stark difference of choice. Confinement imposed by curfews and military presence can hardly be a space of regeneration. I spent much of the first part of last year pacing between each room wondering if I had genuinely lost my mind. Waiting, as in the inability to move, has become a subject I have worked with in many previous works and continue to work through as it becomes increasingly systemic, organised and imposed. At present, the domestic was the only environment that made sense in thinking about how the body adapts to repetition, how it re-articulates itself around what is present or imagined.

CK: *The door of the apartment on 21 Boulevard Moustapha Benboulaïd was literally cut out of the building and presented here, exposing the nine locks encased between two doors and framed by the building's original brickwork. The wooden door is the original door from 1901 and the metal door was added during the 1990's black decade. It is highly symbolic but it also acts as material evidence of the terrible psychological, political and social realities that people have experienced in contemporary Algeria.*

LO: I had so many nightmares which centred around that door and being so acutely aware of its history. There is a psychoactive dimension to history and how historicization can occur in the subconscious. Some have even explored how dreams can represent the present before waking consciousness fully comprehends...which I think is relevant in the context of Algeria. History is at times written and represented through the subconscious, particularly in the psyche of a population who have endured so much trauma.

The reinforcement of the entrance to the home was rooted in the lack of trust. I think the condensation of over a century of violence is embedded in that threshold and so extracting the door, disabling it and laying it out was the attempt to release it as an object of fear.

CK: *In the history of conservation there are many invasive techniques -*

LO: Yes, it's almost surgical.

CK: *We've talked about how you're exposing yourself, but I think the work also exposes people: it brings behaviours that are strange. The impulse to go into someone's stuff...looking, searching also brings up the notion of trust (or the absence of it materialised by the many locks on the door).*

*When I talked to the education team ahead of the exhibition they asked me if they needed to tell people they could touch things and open drawers and look into the cabinets. I said no: people need to decide for themselves. You just don't say anything. Maybe we have to ask: is it invasive?*

LO: There is something uncanny about skin contact. I think allowing touch opens up the question of trust within this sort of anonymous hospitality. When you enter the space, it looks like a home but there are no more walls. You can recognise things which relate directly to a person. So maybe the desire to touch and open everything is rather about searching for a body to locate that intimacy.

CK: *Do you think that there is anything intimate left when the exposure feels so forensic?*

LO: It was previously an intimate space but it's not actually functioning as an intimate space right now. But do you mean forensic as in a question of death?

CK: *It is not just about death. In my mind the word 'forensic' applies to this project for 3 reasons. Exposure, as in this apartment not having any walls, it is fully exposed, the inside of its body is out. The second of course to do with dealing with grief. The third is about wounds or amputation. The psychoanalyst Karima Lazali in her book The Colonial Trauma talks about this in her analysis of trauma in contemporary Algeria. The analogy of phantom limb is about the colonial pact.*

LO: Therefore the work dives into this wound, it is not performing intimacy. Everything has gone through the process of unearthing the violence embedded in the act of their removal. If we think about the weighted state of these objects, we must also consider grief as a multifaceted response to loss. At some point, the experience of moving into a furnished apartment and having to care for the remnants of a life I had no previous connection to makes me question how the process of grief can be undressed. The French colonial imposition of its architecture was about erasure which prioritised the line of vision. For the French it was important for Algeria to first be colonised by way of its facade. And the apartment in question is situated on the 2nd street from the entrance to Algiers by sea. It was part of a Haussmanian blueprint that was lifted and placed onto the city in 1901, which did not take into consideration the geological differences which would otherwise determine the blueprints to be tweaked for comfortable living. Instead we see the space itself as having to make these sacrifices on behalf of its facade. And while the buildings were constricted by the incline of the land, the body became the point of that interrogation. Absence is not about disappearance, it is about erasure. And

so I think about conservation, documentation and foregrounding evidence as a tool for resistance. So therefore can we think about the impossibility of silence because survival will always create the tools necessary to apprehend erasure.

CK: *The question of surveillance was key in your thinking around this show. Can you talk about that?*

LO: Surveillance is the attempt to position accountability. It is about calling the body in question and presenting the terms upon which it is archived. Why do we have our information collected? because that information can be utilised at the will of its receiver. Here, I have placed the entire exhibition under surveillance. There are 5 bugging devices scattered across the room, each device contains a phone number which can be called from anywhere in the world, and the space can be listened into without revealing when this might be taking place. The bugs are figured in transparent glass, so that their mechanisms are displayed but unaccounted for. They act as a medium, with the inability to retain information but rather to pass it on. So in that sense they encapsulate a kind of neutrality that goes against the procedures of surveillance while they are completely foregrounded by their appearance. Rather they are positioned as a reminder that someone might be listening which is conducive to a similar effect. I think surveillance prioritises a line of vision, which is not only a sightline but rather a thought. Here I think about the mystical concept of the third eye which is to do with perception beyond ordinary sight, so how do we act on the potential of information?

CK: *Is this why there are echoes in this exhibition?*

LO: The other function of these devices is that they are able to pick up sounds and echo them across the room by way of a radio transmission. The installation is rigged with receivers, which are embedded inside the furniture so that a sound picked up from one side of the room can be carried elsewhere. This echo is about drawing attention to the movements present in the space.

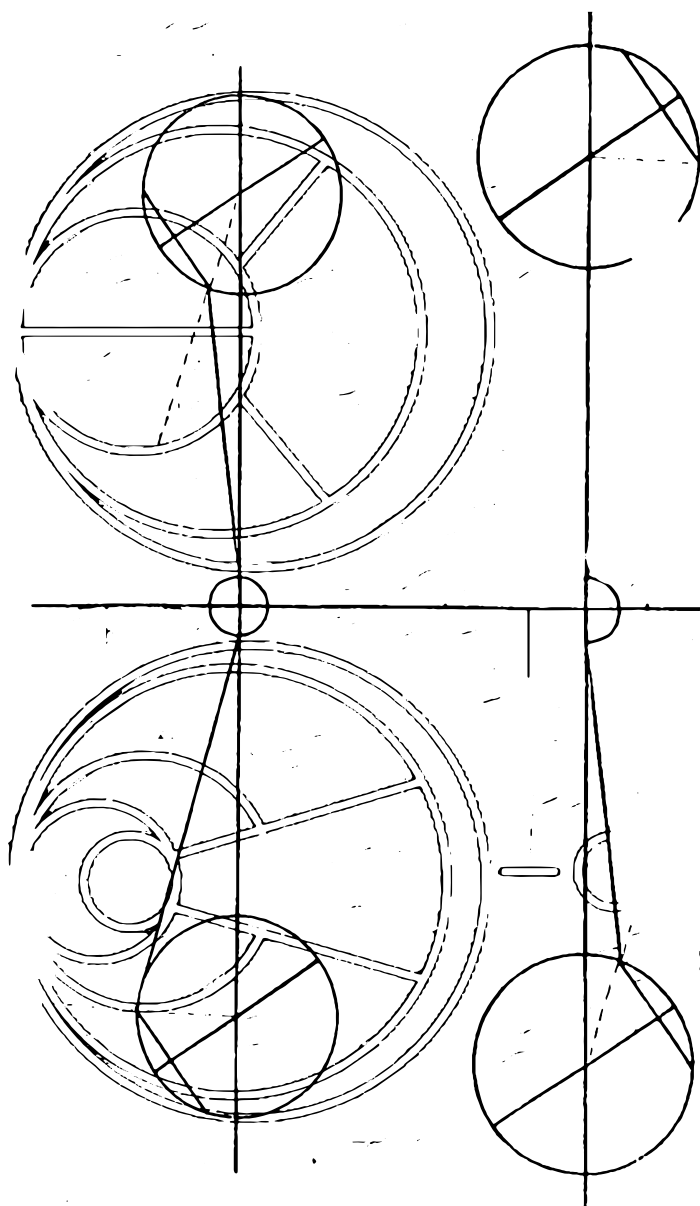
CK: *Right, it also takes us back to the beginning of our conversation where you spoke about the diasporic condition : coming, going, longing. Doesn't that prescribe to a certain kind of echo in the attempt to occupy space?*

LO: When you pluck the string of a harp, the sound doesn't only come from that initial gesture. It is the way you hold the note in the position of your hand which carries the aftermath of that sound. It's not just about echoing, per se, it is about carrying. Being anchored in-between is akin to the disillusion

of space. And so the echo is a shared responsibility.

CK: *Ok, but what about the attempt to return to a place, to Algeria. to break this in betweenness or shared responsibility as you put it ? I think right now, I should ask you a very "down to earth" question in regard to the fact that these objects have to return : what about the aftermath of this project? What about placing back the furniture, putting back objects at places where your former tenant had placed them, opening your home with a replaced door? Do you think there is a way back?*

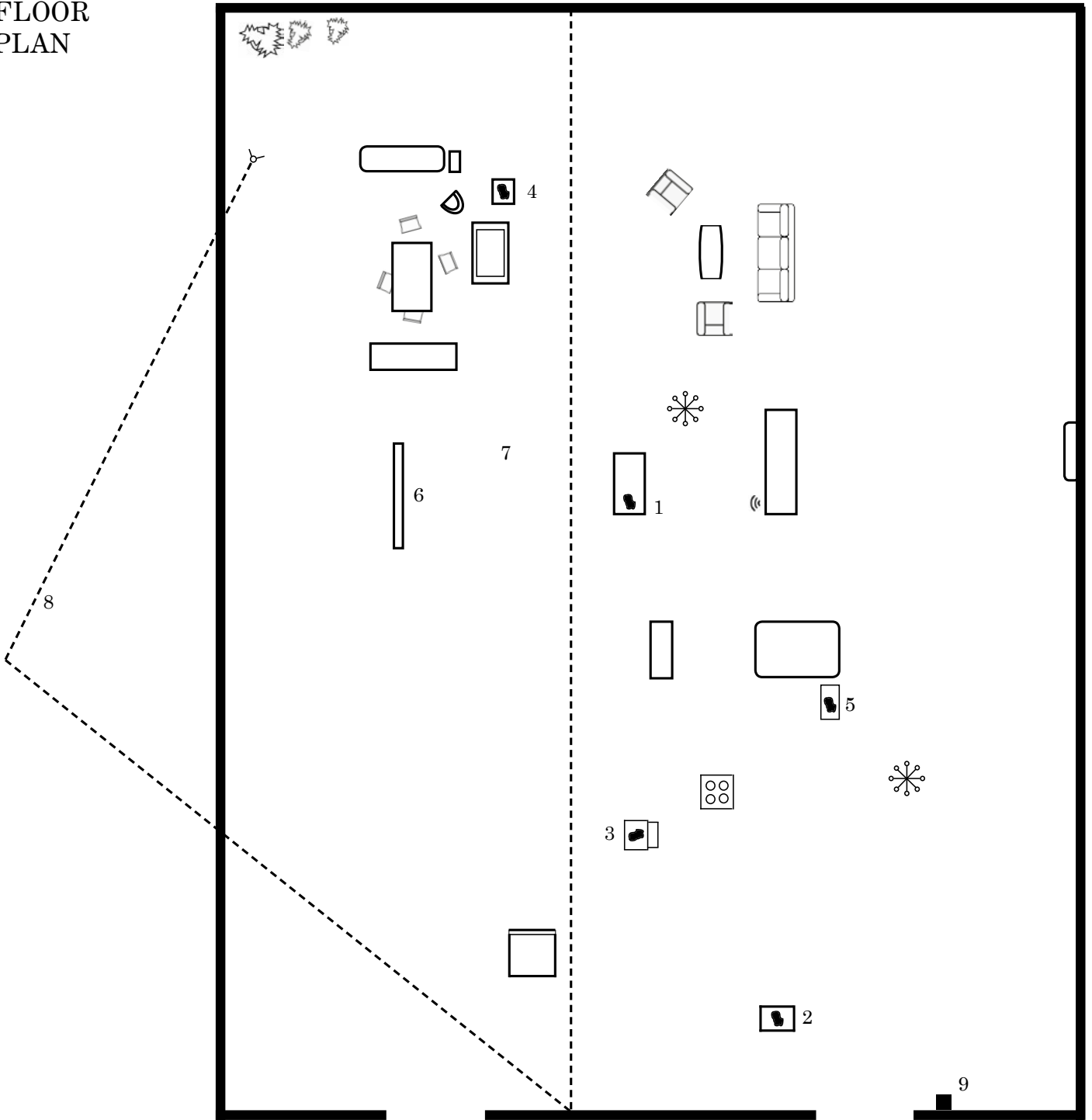
LO: It's going to be weird. There is no amount of preparation to face the potential of loss. But when something is rooted in love, all of its boundaries are dissolved.

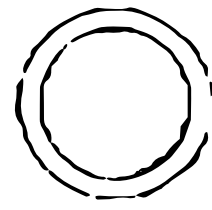
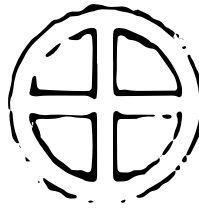
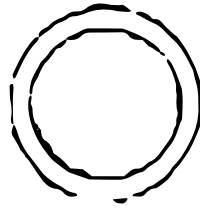


**For more information about the first version of the exhibition *Barzakh* presented at the Kunsthalle Basel, please visit [www.kunsthallebasel.ch](http://www.kunsthallebasel.ch)**

**Access to the conversation between Lydia Ourahmane and Elena Filipovic titled *Home is where you are*.**

FLOOR  
PLAN





1.

+33 7 53 13 07 42

Reactive sound installation

Glass, listening device, microphone, FM transmitter, cell phone module, transducer

Glass, approx. 43 x 25 x 26 cm

Ongoing broadcast and live transmission with variable duration

2.

+33 7 53 22 18 05

Reactive sound installation

Glass, listening device, microphone, FM transmitter, cell phone module, transducer

Glass, approx. 43 x 25 x 26 cm

Ongoing broadcast and live transmission with variable duration

3.

+33 7 51 06 95 97

Reactive sound installation

Glass, listening device, microphone, FM transmitter, cell phone module, transducer

Glass, approx. 43 x 25 x 26 cm

Ongoing broadcast and live transmission with variable duration

4.

+33 7 51 51 85 00

Reactive sound installation

Glass, listening device, microphone, FM transmitter, cell phone module, transducer

Glass, approx. 43 x 25 x 26 cm

Ongoing broadcast and live transmission with variable duration

5.

+33 7 58 91 90 96

Reactive sound installation

Glass, listening device, microphone, FM transmitter, cell phone module, transducer

Glass, approx. 43 x 25 x 26 cm

Ongoing broadcast and live transmission with variable duration

6.

*21 Boulevard Moustapha Benboulaïd (entrance), 1901-2021*

Metal door, wooden door, 9 locks, concrete, plaster, bricks, steel frame

220 x 200 x 16 cm, 350 kg

7.

*21 Boulevard Moustapha Benboulaïd, 2021*

Mixed media

Dimensions variable, approx. 5 000 items

Loan by the family of Mrs. Tissira

8.

*Eye, 2021*

Live sound installation

Laser, mirror, solar cell, transducer, reactive sound

Ongoing

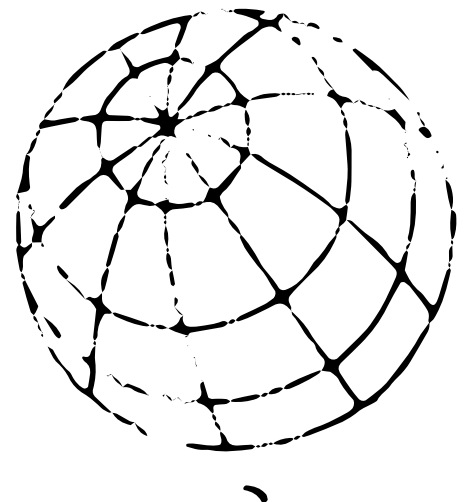
9.

*Home is where you are, 2021*

Night light

21 x 10 cm

All works courtesy of the artist.



# ABOUT TRIANGLE – ASTÉRIDES CENTRE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN

Triangle - Astérides is a 27 years old non-profit contemporary visual art organization based in “Friche la Belle de Mai”, a former tobacco factory in the center of Marseille, where it supports artists and serves diverse and expanding audiences. Triangle France - Astérides develops a yearly program of exhibitions, public events, and new commissions, as well as highly respected residencies and studio programs dedicated to Marseille-based, French, and international artists; supporting artistic research, experimentation and production. Since its founding in 1994, it has established itself as one of France’s most innovative organizations supporting French and international artists who have not yet had wide public exposure or critical acceptance from a broader public, by establishing long-term relationships with them to collaborate in the development, production and presentation of significant new projects. In 27 years, the organization has hosted more than 650 artists in residence and produced more than 130 exhibitions, with a focus on equal representation, open debate, and multiple viewpoints regardless of gender, race, class, or creed. As an active member of Triangle Network, an international network of over 90 arts organizations in 41 countries, it also underlines the positive value of transnational dialog, which constitutes the DNA of its project.

Triangle – Astérides is supported by Ville de Marseille, Ministère de la culture - DRAC Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur, Région Sud, and Département des Bouches-du-Rhône.

Triangle – Astérides is a member of Triangle Network, d.c.a. / association française de développement des centres d’art contemporain, Arts en Résidence, Plein Sud, and Provence Art Contemporain.

## BARZAKH LYDIA OURAHMANE SOLO EXHIBITION CURATED BY CÉLINE KOPP

Commissioned and produced by: Triangle – Astérides, centre d’art contemporain et Kunsthalle Basel.  
Coproductioin: SCIC Friche la Belle de Mai.

In partnership with the gmem - CNCM - Marseille and rhizome, Algiers.

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Warm thanks to:

Triangle – Astérides and its staff : Frédéric Blancart (communication & residency manager), Marie de Gaulejac (curator & residency coordinator), Florence Gosset (administrator), Céline Kopp (director and chief curator), Anne Marchis-Mouren (education manager), Camille Ramanana Rahary (curatorial assistant).

Our partners and their staff: Kunsthalle Basel; gmem - CNCM - Marseille; SCIC Friche la Belle de Mai. The installation team: Jean-Christophe Aubert, Hugo Bonifait, Benoit Frémaux, John Girard, Thomas Meysson, and Vincent Sojic.

Also, for their essential support: Wilfrid Almendra, Myriam Amroun, Fayçal Belattar, Lucas Belhassein, Chakib Bouakline, Khaled Bouzidi, Mehdi Djelil, Florian Donna, Collin Fletcher, Atelier Gamil, Wardia Hamadi, Hichem Merouche, Nik Jaffe, Céline Jarousseau, Zooey Jolivet, Yanis Ouabadi, Amine Ali Pacha, Alexandre Pax, Stephane Pelletier, Katia Porro, Paul Sarraquigne, Christian Sébille, Andrea Abegg Serrano, Martin Stoecklin, and Melina Wilson.

Special thanks to the family of Mrs. Tissira.

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