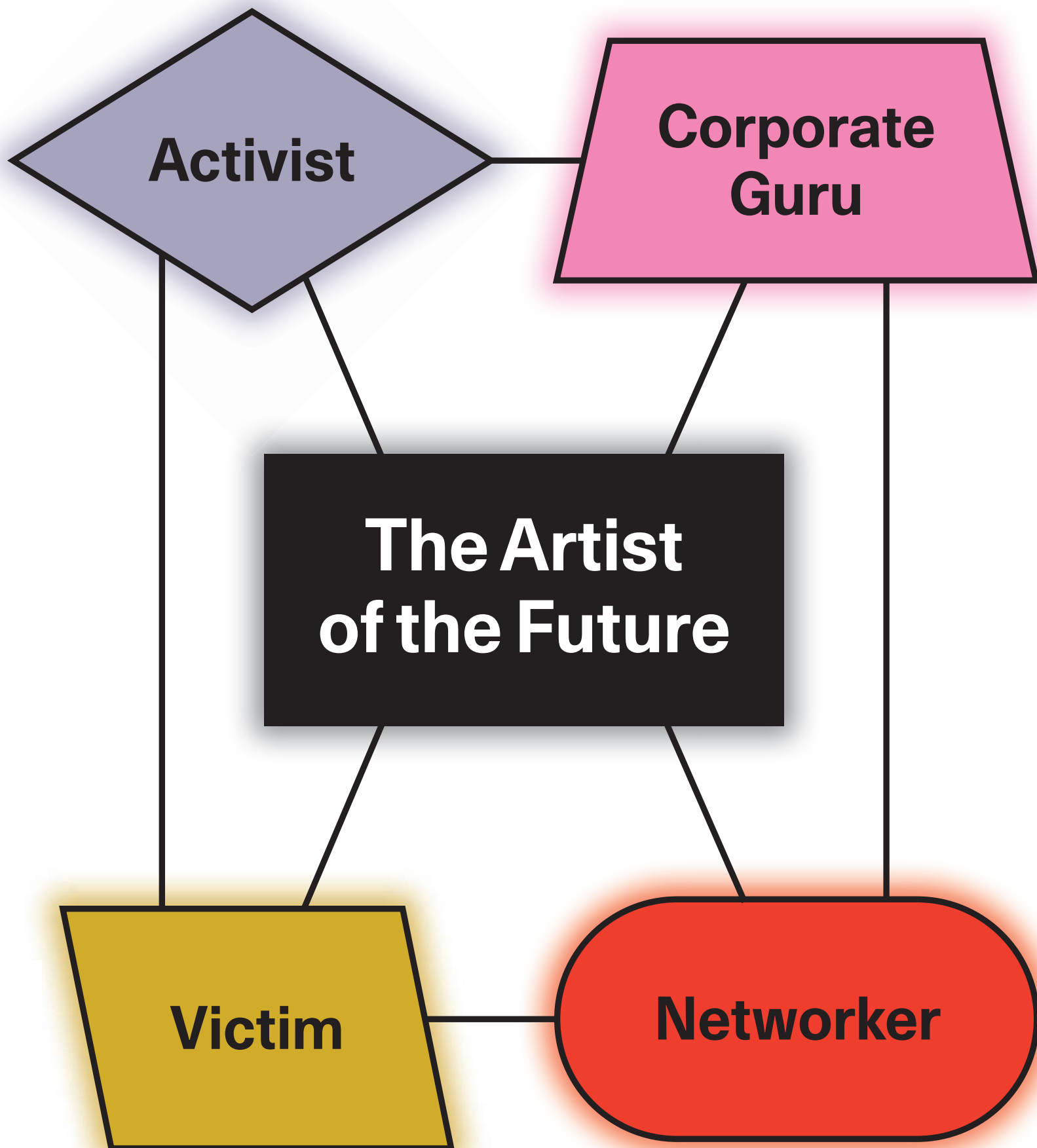


Charting  
the uncharted  
since 1949

# ArtReview



Lydia Ourahmane *Solar Cry*

CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco 6 February – 28 March

There's a haunting sense of immanence at play in Lydia Ourahmane's *Solar Cry* exhibition, a spirit seemingly distilled from biblical immanence and the artist's autobiography. Ourahmane grew up in Algeria during the 1990s, facing persecution as a member of a radical Christian minority. Her family moved from safehouse to safehouse, until finding asylum in London. The chapter in Ourahmane's life presented here concerns her recent relocation back to Algiers. On one hand it is a story of faith, but more involved with the carrier than an immaterial sense of belief.

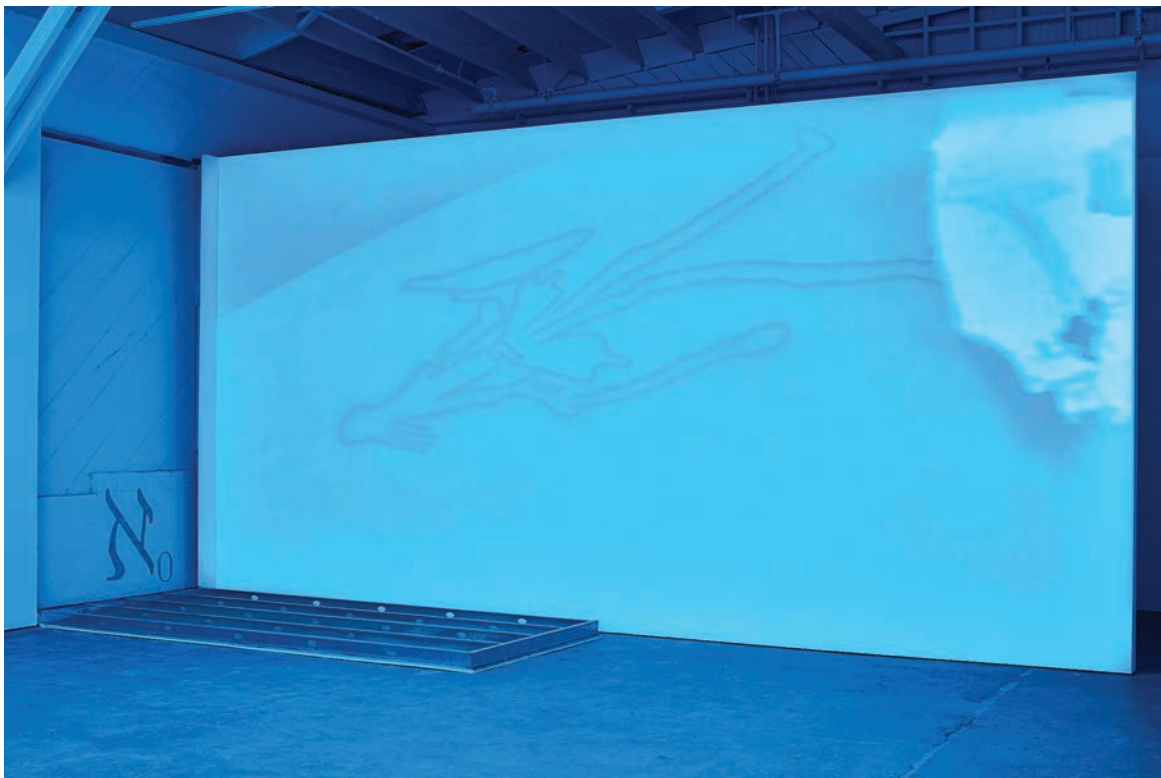
The exhibition centres on an expedition Ourahmane took to Tassili N'Ajjer, a remote region in the Sahara known for cave paintings. Inside an empty cave she left a tape recorder, the overnight recordings from which became the audiowork *Solar Cry* (all works but one 2020). To put this gesture in perspective: she crossed a desert, entrusted herself to strangers and camped out in a remote area known for military raids; and rather than sit in a cave herself, she entrusted the experience to outdated technology. The thing is: do I believe her? I barely noticed the work at first, yet once you become aware of the low thrum emanating from the gallery's walls, you can't unhear

it, forever aware of the resonant emptiness at its heart – a clunky HVAC system of the soul.

Other works similarly address how immaterial factors shape the body. In *warrior girl c.12,000 b.c.* the artist was inspired by a cave drawing depicting the titular symbol of female daring, filming herself getting a copy of it tattooed on her body. In my generation, spiritual tattoos have a certain connotation, but the video nonetheless gives me pause to consider whether the scarcity of questionable tattoos on my body actually demonstrates a lack of conviction. Elsewhere, *3kgs salt* (2020) litters the entire gallery with crunchy rock salt. A nails-on-chalkboard sensation becomes a full-body wrench when I discover Tassili N'Ajjer was once part of a trade route on which slaves were exchanged for the eponymous weight of salt. And there is a certain congruity between the Polaroid *Cave painting of a Woman giving birth c.6,000–12,000 b.c.* and the wall drawing  $\infty$ . For the latter, Ourahmane excavated a section of drywall and pencilled the mathematical figures directly on the concrete. In Judaism, aleph stands for the singularity of God, but here it is multiplied by zero, effectively impregnating the gallery with the equation for infinity's bottom.

$\infty$  is intended as a permanent work: the drywall will be replaced, concealing it. Ourahmane's idea is that memories and rumours will attest to its ongoing presence. I wonder why I am now responsible for this legacy. Further complicating matters is her decision to cover the skylights with lighting gels, casting everything in a crystalline blue. She doesn't call it an artwork, but in a show that attempts to find a material basis for expressing the ineffable – in a way, to name it – why should we take Ourahmane at her word?

Still, with *1st draft of my Mother's book "Divine Encounters"* (1974–92), Ourahmane offers a strong argument for following her on this journey. Documenting the sacrifices her family made for faith, this tale would resonate widely, yet the only copy resides at the gallery. Again, Ourahmane's choices place you at a crossroads. Are you one of the faithful, respecting the artist's intentions for the text? Do you play the apostate, relaying her mother's life story in this review? Or do you simply content yourself with the intimacy of knowing a secret? In Ourahmane's show, faith isn't just a matter of belief. It depends on the strength of your desire. *Sam Korman*



*warrior girl c.12,000 b.c.*, 2020, single-channel digital video, sound, 3 min 44 sec.  
Photo: Impart Photography. Courtesy of the artist