



Title

Making the museum porous

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Making the museum porous

by Nicholas Burman • 29.02.2024

The '108' in the title of this exhibition by Lydia Ourahmane (b.1992) at Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) refers to two things: the duration of the show and the number of practitioners invited to participate. Ourahmane is perhaps best described as a 'producer of situations', to borrow Claire Bishop's phrase, rather than one of 'discrete objects'.¹ As Bishop outlines, in this reimagining, the finite, portable work of art is reconceived as an ongoing or long-term project, and the audience is repositioned, from 'viewer' to 'co-producer or participant'.² Ourahmane's exhibition is not, strictly speaking, a solo exhibition. Nor is it a themed group show. Rather, it is a multimedia collage of work by artist-activists that has unfolded – and continues to unfold – over the course of 108 days. Participants so far have included Sophia Al-Maria (b.1983); the collective **Laboratorio Reversible, whose film explores the Poble-sec neighbourhood in Barcelona, where they are based** [FIG.1](#); the writer and artist Huw Lemmey (b.1986), who displayed a series of alternative Antifa flags [FIG.2](#); the performer and playwright Juan Villegas Antequera, who presented a 'sentimental cabaret memoir' reflecting on the glory days of the city's old Chinatown; and the musician Mark Cunningham, who led a collective sound performance.

The exhibition wall text states that *108 Days* 'engages with the social, political and experiential' contexts of Ourahmane's surroundings, informing visitors that the space is at any one time occupied 'by what each participant deems urgent and incisive'. This resonates with the concurrent exhibition *MACBA Collection: Prelude, Poetic Intention*, which outlines the institution's efforts to forego its 'origins as a colonial apparatus and object-centered institution' in order to 'become more malleable' and allow for 'observation and participation'. Ourahmane's project addresses the specificity of MACBA, while bringing the broader social and artistic landscape of Barcelona into the museum. In doing so, it also subverts the traditional collection-based structure of museums more widely. Recalling the work of the Situationist International (1957–72), the exhibition attempts to collapse the museum's external and internal spaces and undermine its conventions.³ It demonstrates an interest in the material circumstances of the artists, their work, relational aesthetics and sociopolitical conditions, especially regarding the intersection of personal and political memory-making. Ourahmane's vision of the city or museum as a site for intervention and occupation recalls René Boer's *Smooth City: Against Urban Perfection, Towards*

Collective Alternatives (2023), in which the author uses the concept of porosity to imagine a city with ‘small openings’ that is open to influence and synergy.⁴ *108 Days* challenges the museum’s habit of fixing and categorising, and also examines who the city makes space for.



Fig. 1 Still from *veCINES*, by Laboratorio Reversible. 2018. Video, duration 24 minutes. (Courtesy the artists; exh. Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona).

The interventions in *108 Days* alternate between and combine different disciplines, including photography, performance, installation, painting, sound and gastronomy FIG.3. Many of the projects express solidarity with marginalised groups or those who are inadequately acknowledged in cultural history and contemporary society. Take, for example, the installation *Archivo Puta* FIG.4 FIG.5, by the sex worker and activist María Riot (b.1991), which included photographs capturing the daily lives of sex workers, making visible that which is often still stigmatised. In the performance *We are not numbers* FIG.6, the Barcelona-based Palestinian film-maker Samira Badran (b.1954) read aloud the names of Palestinians killed by Israeli forces, which were also printed on a large scroll of paper and spooled out over the museum’s curved walls. Irene Mattarolo’s installation *emdr* FIG.7 explored ways in which individuals attempt to cope with exposure to trauma. A soundtrack of hypnotic, high-pitched synthesised sounds inspired by audio therapy ricocheted off the walls, and the room was sparsely populated with rocks embedded with brands and logos representative of consumer culture. Collectively, these elements indicated an attempt to deal with the past while understanding how its traces are felt in the future. Reflecting on the fleeting nature of the interventions, Ourahmane hosted an end of year ‘burning’ ritual during which visitors were invited to finish what was undone, so as to be unburdened in the new year. Thus, the museum became a place where impermanence, the interpersonal and the experiential took precedence.

Together the interventions push towards not so much a representation of the city, but rather a refracted re-enactment of it. They are more synecdoche than simulacra, and are intended to highlight the city's more radical communities – to question what counts as important to its identity. Notably, there are no references to Catalan modernism or other aspects of the ubiquitous Barcelona 'brand' that is advertised to potential tourists and investors. As a Mediterranean port city, Barcelona has always been a place of new arrivals, even though, as writers such as Robert Hughes have noted, Catalonia has historically been characterised as 'provincial'.⁵ Its inherent internationalism and diverse population is reflected in Ourahmane's selection of artists, and is also investigated in some of the interventions themselves. For example, the Open Cultural Center hosted *Beyond Borders: Voices Reclaiming the Refugee Narrative*, a research-based exhibition that included testimonials, photographs and works of art that aimed to challenge stereotypes of refugees in the city; and an upcoming interactive performance by Xavier Morón, *Ritual of the Mediterranean Triad*, will use 'fundamental' Mediterranean food products to investigate the region's identity.

Although *108 Days* certainly provokes questions about the purpose of the museum, one wonders how well-equipped the clean white spaces of such an institution are as a site for urban (re)imagining. It is not a space in which social relations are flattened; but can any space truly engender this? The more important lessons here are about recentring and changing the narratives that institutions tell and disseminate. Like the city itself, the exhibition provides opportunities to witness the limits of social porosity: what is not in the space. By its nature, *108 Days* relies on constant change, which certainly allows for diversity and fluidity. However, notwithstanding the problematic nature of the canon and the collection, the museum's traditional promise of creating a shared history through a degree of permanency in its displays provides its own pleasures in an era defined by the persistent contemporaneity of platform capitalism. In engaging the public through the performance of 'rituals' and debates, the participatory-activist art interventions in *108 Days* seek to eliminate alienation from the creative process and output. But the show's transience can, at times, seem like a performative recreation of the logic of digital platforms – a logic that many of us try to otherwise mitigate. Arguably, the implication is that the museum is no longer suitable as a site of historical memory-making; here, it instead acts as a midway point, where collaborations and discussion are cultivated, ready to be distributed back out into the city and the wider world.



Fig. 2 Installation view of *Lydia Ourahmane: 108 Days* at Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 23rd December 2023, showing detail of *action*, by Huw Lemmey. 2023. Flag installation. (Courtesy Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona).

Deyan Sudjic has remarked that cities 'are shaped either by those who have a vision of what they might be, or those who see an opportunity'.⁶ Drawing on Barcelona's margins and its sites of resistance, *108 Days* is a testing ground for those who are creating the opportunities that will impact the city's future. This is certainly more the Barcelona associated with Nazario (b.1944) – an Andalusian migrant and painter recognised as the father of the underground comic in post-Franco Spain – than the Barcelona presented by the city council in its branding efforts, including the '22@ Innovation District'. Such redevelopment and economic development programmes have been criticised by the anthropologist Manuel Delgado Ruiz for betraying inhabitants by attempting to turn the city into a homogenous consumer product for the highest bidder.⁷



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Lydia Ourahmane: 108 Days* at Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 28th November 2023, showing *Ninou*, by Laura Ninou. 2023. Installation, dimensions variable. (Courtesy Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona).

108 Days is multiplicitous and hard to define; in this way it very much reflects the city. The exhibition takes as its material the city's social networks and ideas and reframes them, if only briefly, in the context of the museum. It is also an example of a large-scale art institution attempting to evolve and maintain relevancy, which – at least on the face of it – appears to be a genuine bid to engage with critical questions concerning its fundamental purpose. Notably, the museum Director, Elvira Dyangani Ose, hosted a temporary library **FIG.8**, in which readings were staged and visitors were able to make suggestions regarding materials for the upcoming exhibition *Project a Black Planet: The Art and Culture of Panafrica*. This is just one of the many ways that *108 Days* and its constellation of artists and participants will continue to make a mark upon the city and the contemporary art museum for the foreseeable future.

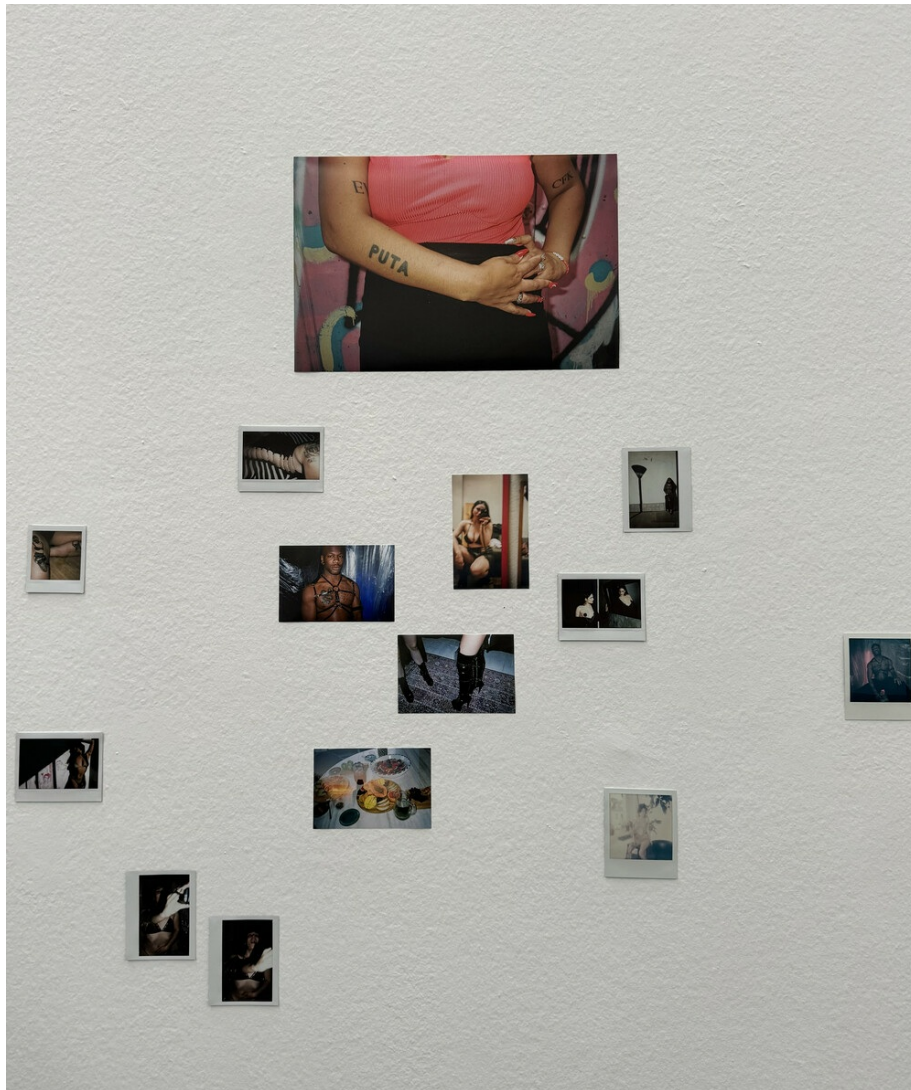


Fig. 4 Installation view of *Lydia Ourahmane: 108 Days* at Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 16th December 2023, showing detail of *Archivo Puta*, by María Ríot. 2023. Photographic installation. (Courtesy Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona).

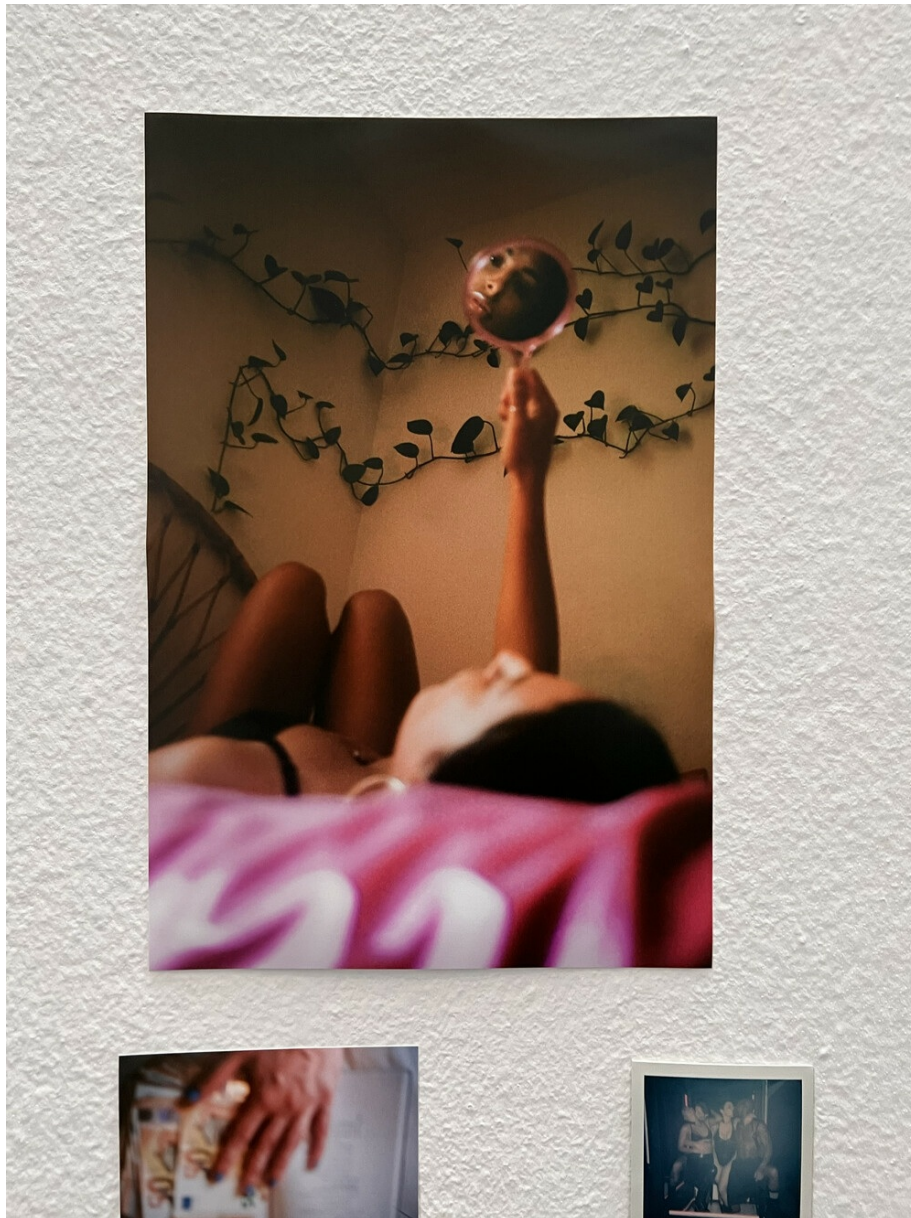


Fig. 5 Installation view of *Lydia Ourahmane: 108 Days* at Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 16th December 2023, showing detail of *Archivo Puta*, by María Riot. 2023. Photographic installation. (Courtesy Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona).



Fig. 6 Installation view of *Lydia Ourahmane: 108 Days* at Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 29th December 2023, showing *We are not numbers*, by Samira Badran. 2023. Performance. (Courtesy Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona).



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Lydia Ourahmane: 108 Days* at Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 20th December 2023, showing detail of *emdr*, by Irene Mattarolo. 2023. Installation. (Courtesy Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona).

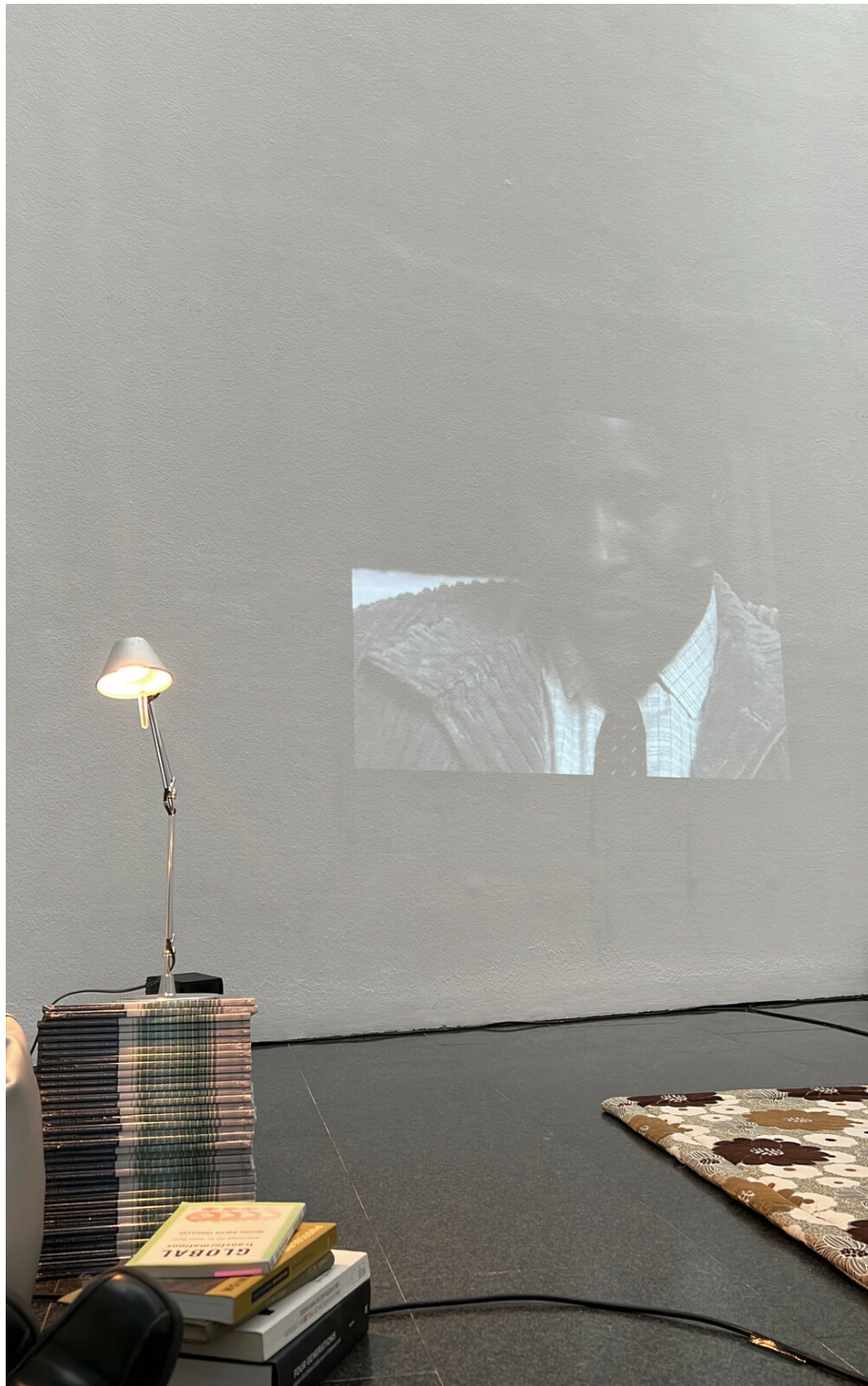


Fig. 8 Installation view of *Lydia Ourahmane: 108 Days* at Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 12th February 2024, showing *Pan africanism as an institution*, by Elvira Dyangani Ose. 2024. Installation and collective action. (Courtesy Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona).

Exhibition details

Lydia Ourahmane: 108 Days

Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona
(MACBA)

28th November 2023–1st April 2024

Footnotes

- 1 C. Bishop: *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London 2012, p.2.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 See, for example, *Labyrinth* at the Stedelijk, Amsterdam, in 1962; see P. Burleigh: 'Ludic Labyrinths: Strategies of Disruption', *Stedelijk Studies* (2018), available at stedelijkstudies.com/journal/ludic-labyrinths-strategies-of-disruption, accessed 21st February 2024.
- 4 R. Boer: *Smooth City: Against Urban Perfection, Towards Collective Alternatives*, Amsterdam 2023, p.161.
- 5 Michael Wood provided an overview of the tensions between provincialism and internationalism in the Catalan context in an extended book review, see M. Wood: 'Homage to the provinces', *London Review of Books* (28th May 1992), available at www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v14/n10/michael-wood/homage-to-the-provinces, accessed 21st February 2024.
- 6 D. Sudjic: *The Language of Cities*, London 2017, p.97.
- 7 '22@' is the official title given to the area around Glòries metro station in the city's Poblenou district, which has undergone dramatic redevelopment in recent years, see: 'The technology and knowledge neighbourhood', Meet Barcelona, available at www.meet.barcelona/en/visit-and-love-it/points-interest-city/el-22-99400387418, accessed 21st February 2024. For Manuel Delgado Ruiz's response, see M. Delgado Ruiz: *La ciudad mentirosa: Fraude y miseria del 'Modelo Barcelona'*, Madrid 2007.

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