

# R

DEC 11, 2021-JAN 30, 2022

## LYDIA OURAHMANE & ALEX AYED LAWS OF CONFUSION

Sealed off from the outside, the gallery space of the Renaissance Society is filled with haze and muted light, becoming a closed environment where objects from disparate places are scattered throughout. These materials-gathered or made by the artists- bring out a number of conceptual undercurrents: blocked or interrupted communications, and hints of ancient pasts and pending futures, embodied in a mix of primordial elements, like water, clay, and wind, or newer technologies.

*Laws of Confusion* is the second collaboration of Lydia Ourahmane and Alex Ayed, whose individual practices converge for this exhibition in a choreography of movements. Taking psychogeography as one of their methods and accepting the hurdles of chance or luck, they see what arises out of journeying together and leaning into unplanned situations. To some degree, everything is always a roll of the dice. The show is the momentary culmination of a sustained, ever-evolving, and at times chaotic process. The artists utilize the mechanisms of failed attempts and present their material traces, the results unfolding and changing almost up to the last minute.

Earlier this year, Ourahmane and Ayed took the surroundings of Cairo in Egypt as a starting point, gathering materials like clay, papyrus hay, and water from the Nile River, along with other things that might carry the long-dissolved knowledge of ancient civilizations. Only a portion of what they found there, however, has actually made it into the exhibition space, such as Nile water contained in a slender glass vessel. Other efforts proved impossible. Organic material was blocked from traveling across borders; other items raised ethical concerns and were abandoned; and others yet met practical limitations.

“The model of a thing is just as good as the thing itself” became a motto for the exhibition and offered Ourahmane and Ayed a way to make “failed objects” appear. Within the show, certain things that weren’t possible to bring to Chicago have been remade—such as soil from the Nile being weighed on a scale for shipping.

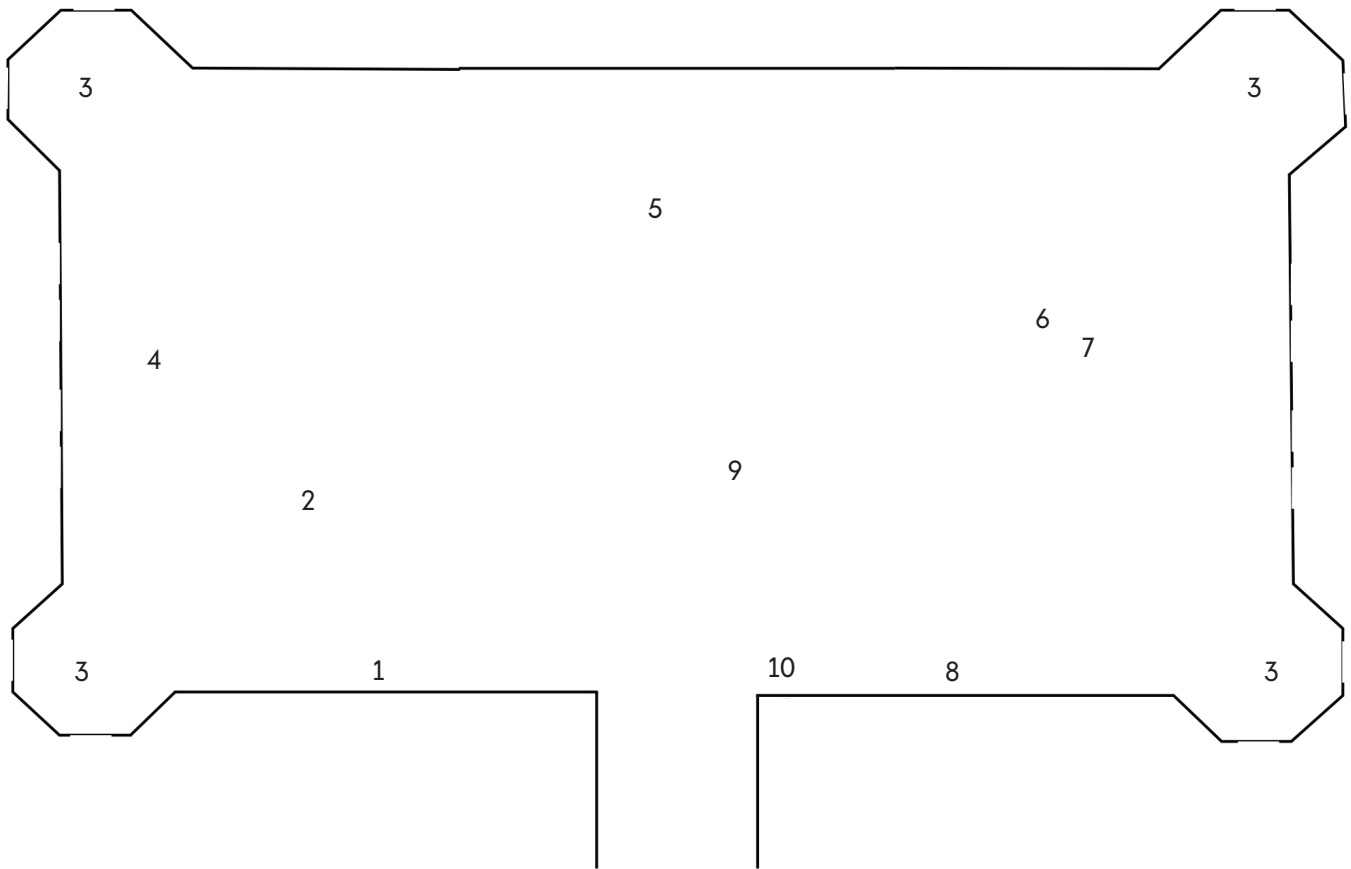
Other elements conjure current states of communication or gesture to the near future. Lithium, a highly reactive metal, is a chemical element capable of efficiently storing energy, widely used in batteries and held out as a key to a green future. And yet it still faces limits around safe usage and sustainability. Within the show, a couple of objects stand in for conversations Ourahmane and Ayed had with a University of Chicago molecular engineering lab that is exploring new forms of these technologies. Here, raw lithium metal appears safely sealed in its original package, joined at a distance by black gloves like the ones used in an argon glove box to manipulate reactive materials in an inert environment.

A number of other interventions in the space disrupt communications in either obtrusive or more invisible ways. On a table, an “ultrasonic microphone defeater” scrambles the sound on any audio or video recordings captured nearby. And every few minutes, four large industrial fans roar to life in the corners of the space, an intermittent distortion field that makes talking difficult and rouses the surrounding air.

In this exhibition, as in much of their collaborative work, Ourahmane and Ayed contend with the friction between individual paths and wider narratives—geopolitical, mystical, speculative, technological. With its rising undercurrents of distortion or confusion, the room is charged with various intangible energies—carried within and beyond these objects—and left with a residue of failure. The materials are haunted by their own potential: what could have happened, or what might happen still.

Curated by Myriam Ben Salah and Karsten Lund.

*Special thanks to the Amanchukwu Laboratory at the University of Chicago; the Arts, Science + Culture Initiative at the University of Chicago; and particularly to Chibueze Amanchukwu, Peiyuan Ma, and Julie Marie Lemon.*



- 1 *Directions*, 2021  
Pen on paper, aluminum tape, frame, wooden stick, LED light
- 2 *Soil shipment on digital scale*, 2021  
Digital scale, soil, paper envelopes, tape
- 3 *Dry leaves*, 2021  
Four industrial fans, dry leaves
- 4 *Rolling ones*, 2021  
Pair of dice
- 5 *River Nile water*, 2021  
Handblown glass, River Nile water
- 6 Table, chairs, microphones. speaker, cables, blue laser, dice, 2021
- 7 *Ultrasonic microphone jammer*, 2021

- 8 *Lithium*, 2021  
Lithium metal, packed in inert liquid and sealed in original shipping box
- 9 *Gloves*, 2021  
9¾ neoprene gloves
- 10 *zoom.wav*, 2021  
Audio recording with microphone jamming distortion (15 min 12 sec)

Hallway vitrine:

*Untitled (Figurine)*  
Clay, papyrus hay

All works courtesy of the artists.